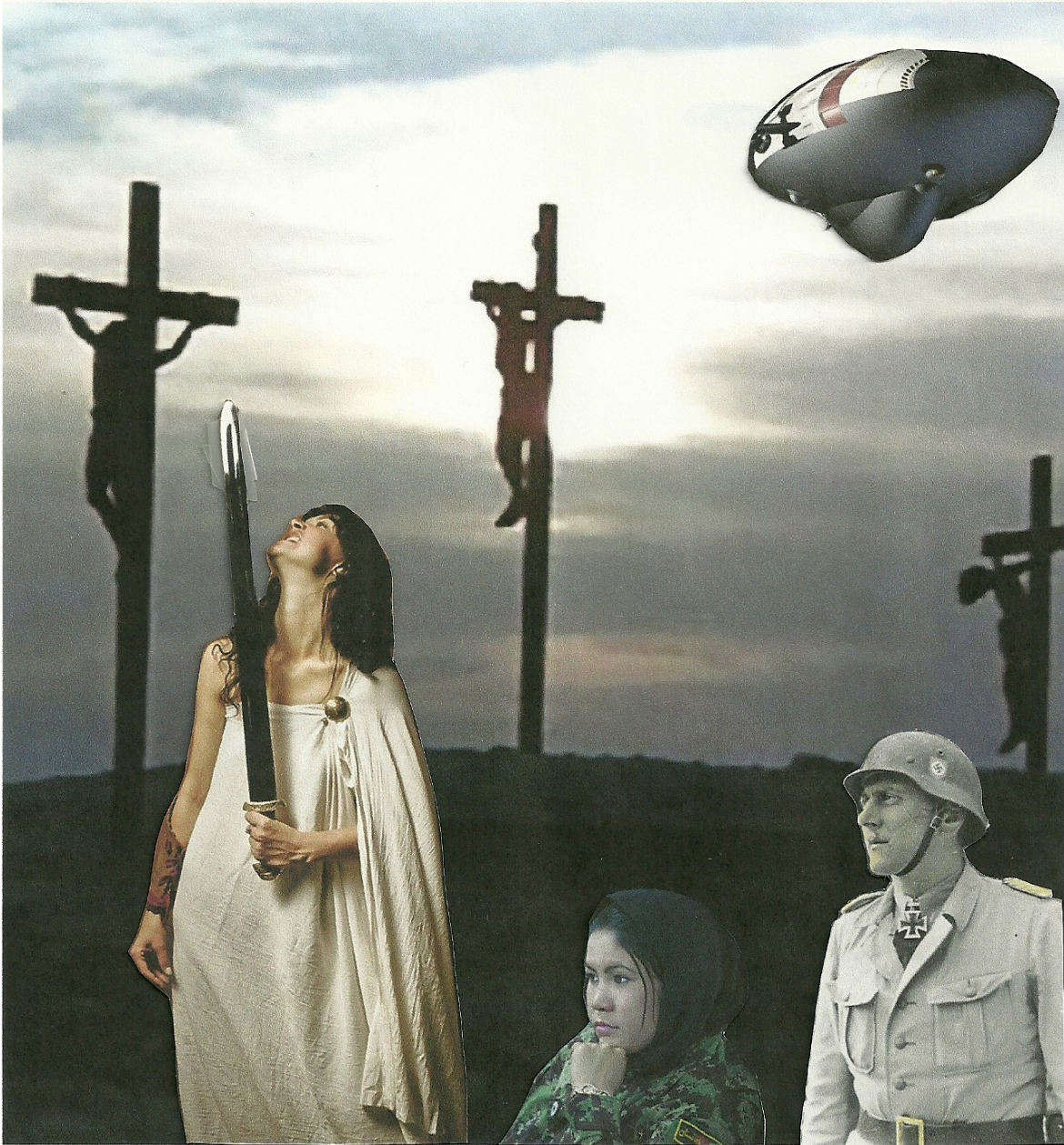


Adventures Through Time



Michel Poulin

ADVENTURES THROUGH TIME

A SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL

BY MICHEL POULIN

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

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

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This science-fiction novel is the second installment in a collection of five novels depicting the adventures through time of Nancy Laplante, a female Canadian war correspondent and reserve army officer from the year 2012. Those novels were written prior to the fictionalized events of the 21st Century depicted in them, and thus should be treated as novels about alternate realities. The third installment in this collection, CHILDREN OF TIME, will be published around early 2013. The year in the dates shown in the headings are followed by the letters 'A', 'B' or 'C', denoting in which timeline the action is happening. Timeline 'A' is the original historical line, while Timeline 'B' is a parallel alternate history created accidentally by Nancy Laplante when she was transported against her will from 2012 to the year 1940 and changed history by her actions. Timeline 'C' will be a second parallel alternate history but is yet to be created.

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CHAPTER 1 – 2012

22:06 (Eastern Standard Time)

Thursday, October 11, 2012 'A'

Lake Manitou, Laurentians area

Province of Québec, Canada

The big gray, ovoid-shaped craft silently landed besides the summer cottage, near the shore of Lake Manitou. Its twenty meter-long dark shape was nearly invisible in the night as it now sat between the log house and the treeline. There were anyway only a few other cottages along the shore of the lake, the nearest of them being a good 300 meters away. A large ramp lowered at the rear of the craft, showing the inside of a wide cargo bay illuminated by red lights. A red Mitsubishi Outlander 2010 then rolled down the ramp and, hitting the long grass of the property's ground, drove around the back of the log house before stopping under a covered parking space. The craft that had brought the car cleared the ground and flew off as soon as its ramp was closed again. Rising silently fifty meters above the cottage, it then disappeared in a brief flash of white light.

A tall woman, measuring 183 centimeters in height and with wide shoulders, got out of the driver's seat after shutting down the V-6 engine, closing the driver's door before going to the rear gate. A big, powerful man and a teenage girl got out of the car as well and helped the driver unload the various boxes and suitcases from the rear compartment. The tall woman then unlocked the side door of the cottage and switched on the inside lights so that they could bring in their belongings.

"Let's put everything first in the lounge, Mike. We will put the things in their proper places later."

"Good idea, Nancy." Said the teenage redhead, a girl of mesmerizing beauty with large blue eyes, repressing a shiver. "The night air is really cold."

Nancy Laplante smiled in amusement at her stepdaughter's remark.

"If you think this is cold, Ingrid, wait until winter comes to this place. The Laurentians can be much colder than Germany."

“Hey, Canada is synonymous with ice box in Europe, don’t you know?”

“It is too in the States, Ingrid.” Cut in Mike Crawford while bringing inside Nancy’s TV/DVD unit. “Thank God that Canadian women are quite warm.”

“What about German women?” Asked Ingrid Weiss sneakily, attracting a frown on Mike’s face.

“Ingrid, you are our adopted daughter. You may be fifteen years old but don’t even think about starting a ménage à trois with us.”

“And I thought that the people in 2012 were sexually more liberal than in 1941.” Replied Ingrid jokingly.

“Incest is still one step too far for me. Massages are the farthest I will go with you. Now, if you want to keep warm, you can help me and Nancy bring in all our stuff.”

“Yes, father.”

“Just Mike will do, you young perverted girl.”

The young German giggled and went to pick up a box from the rear of the car. Between the three of them they emptied the car of its content in less than five minutes, piling their things in the middle of the large lounge of the cottage. Mike and Ingrid then looked around the lounge, eyeing the simple but comfortable furniture and the iron stove.

“Nice place you have here, Nancy.” Said Mike. “The property seemed quite large from the air, and well situated.”

“It covers nearly twenty acres, or eight hectares if you prefer using the metric system.” Replied Nancy. “I inherited it from my parents at the age of sixteen. The lake is quite nice, although the water is too cold now to swim in. I am quite fond of this place, actually. Let me show you around.”

Followed by Mike and Ingrid, Nancy gave them a tour of the cottage, showing the large master bedroom, the guest bedroom, the kitchen and dining room, the laundry room and the bathroom. Mike especially liked the fact that the cottage was equipped to be livable even in the event of a long power outage. Apart of the stove in the lounge, there was another wood stove in the kitchen, besides a modern electric stove, and a hand water pump connected to a well sat in the laundry room. There was also an emergency generator in the small basement of the cottage, next to a fresh storage room stocked with dry and canned food. Once back in the lounge, Ingrid went to the bay windows and admired the lake and the surrounding forest of firs and pines.

“This place is so quiet, so relaxing, especially after living through those years of war in 1940-41.”

“It will be nice to relax a bit, effectively.” Agreed Nancy, sitting with Mike in a sofa. “When I think that, only a few hours ago on this same day, those two scientists from the future kidnapped me with my car right here and dropped me in 1940 England. After ten months of war and two hectic weeks in the 34th century, I am back in my cottage on the same evening, as if nothing had happened.”

“Well, you do have a few scars to prove that you lived through some crazy times.” Suggested Mike. Nancy looked tenderly into his green eyes and kissed him.

“I also have you and Ingrid to remind me that I was there. If for nothing else, finding you two was worth all the trouble and suffering.”

Ingrid sat besides Nancy and hugged her, while Mike did the same. The three of them were silent for a minute, enjoying that moment and caressing each other. Ingrid finally spoke in a soft voice, her head still resting on the shoulder of her much taller stepmother.

“Nancy, my adoption and your marriage to Mike, are they legal in this time period?”

“Not really, Ingrid. Remember your briefing back in 3384: as far as the year 2012 is concerned, you are a German friend of mine visiting Canada. As for Mike, he is my American boyfriend from Montana. You both have valid, albeit well counterfeited passports and other documents and a solid cover story. In both 1941 and 3384, however, you are my legal family. I could always marry officially Mike here, but that would open the possibility that both the Canadian and American government would conduct routine background checks on him. Remember that I am an officer in the Canadian Forces reserves and that, as a captain in Military Intelligence, I hold a high-level security clearance that subjects me to periodic security checks.”

“Don’t you find it confusing to be so many things at once, Nancy? Captain in the Canadian Military Intelligence and military affairs correspondent for a strategic studies magazine in 2012; Chief of Operations and co-founder of the Time Patrol in 3384 and, finally, a disgraced and officially dead Canadian Army brigadier general in the eyes of the British in 1941. To top all that, you went from deadly opponent to merciful angel for many Germans in 1941.”

“Ingrid, I am not an angel.” Replied Nancy, a bit annoyed. “I was healed by a supernatural being and given a few powers back in 1941, but I’m still a woman.”

“A woman that uses telepathy, telekinesis, levitation and touch healing and has the strength of twelve men? A woman that remembers over 9,000 years of past incarnations, along with her past skills and languages?”

“So? You also can remember your past incarnations, going back 7,000 years. As for me, I still have my monthly periods, can stink if I don’t wash and still am fond of sex. Does that sounds like an angel to you?”

“You are to me, Nancy.” Said Mike, smiling. “The angel of my life. So, what do we have on our agenda for the next few days?”

“Well, a lot of rest and quiet times together, along with a lot of sex. On Saturday, I will have to go to my reserve unit in Montreal to formally sign on another operational tour in Afghanistan. If you want, I can bring you with me and let you two visit Montreal while I am at my unit.”

“Yes! I would love that.” Said Ingrid enthusiastically. “Could I do some shopping then?”

“It’s your money. After that, we will still have a good ten days of vacation. Once my report of my trip to Eastern Afghanistan, which I did just prior to being kidnapped and marooned in the past, is submitted to my editor, we will move to my condominium in Boucherville, then go back uptime, so that I can start seriously training you two and the other apprentice agents. From then on, I will periodically switch between the 21st and 34th centuries in order to keep an appearance of a normal life here.”

“Thank God that you got that anti-aging genetic treatment in New Lake City.” Said Mike. “You were going to burn yourself quickly like this, trying to live two lives simultaneously. Now that you can live to past 200 years, you are not going to age on us before your time.”

“Don’t forget that you will also get that treatment, like all the members of the Time Patrol. You may yourself need it, as some of our training and most of our mission time will involve hidden lifetime.”

“When will we go on our first mission in the past, Nancy?” Asked Ingrid, thoughtful.

“Once you complete your training as a field agent and aircrew, in about sixteen months. Since I am somewhat uniquely qualified for the job, my first extended mission in the past will come much sooner. I will then have to use hidden lifetime, in order not to disrupt your training program.”

Mike didn't like that idea much: hidden lifetime was the period of personal time used in either the past or the future of a given departure date and not evident due to the person concerned returning from its trip seconds or minutes only after its original departure time. One could spend literally years in a past time period or parallel timeline, yet return apparently only seconds after leaving for the past. Mike knew that someone separated from its loved ones for months or years ran a real risk of seeing its emotional bonds weaken or even break. Nancy apparently read his mind and gently kissed him.

"Don't worry, Mike: I will never stop loving you or Ingrid, whatever happens. Now, let's go to bed. We all had a long day."

"But I'm still alright." Objected Ingrid. "Do you mind if I watch something on your television?"

"Why not? We are on vacation, after all. I am going to bed, though."

08:41 (Eastern Standard Time)

Saturday, October 13, 2012 'A'

4th Intelligence Company

Longue-Pointe Garrison

Montreal, Canada

"Please sit down, Nancy. This shouldn't take long."

Nancy took the chair offered by Captain Marc Lemire, the operations officer of her reserve intelligence unit. Lemire, unlike Nancy, was a full time regular officer who also acted as the acting commander of the unit at the present time, since quite a few of the unit's personnel were serving in Afghanistan as part of the NATO force there, or were augmenting the depleted ranks of the staff of the regional army headquarters that was also based in Longue-Pointe. Lemire gave her a confused look as he eyed her hair, which was extremely short and gave her a boyish look, and spoke in French, the working language of the unit.

"What happened to your hair, Nancy? Only two months ago, it fell past your neck."

Nancy made a face at that, as if it made her remember an unpleasant episode of her life.

"Let's say that my latest assignment as a war reporter in Afghanistan was a bit rough, Marc. At one time during a battle between an Afghan Army unit and a group of Taliban extremists, someone threw a white phosphorus grenade near me. Some of the

phosphorus fell on my exposed hair and started burning through. Thankfully, an American sergeant serving as a trainer and mentor with the Afghan Army unit reacted quickly and immediately cut off big chunks of my hair, thus getting rid of the phosphorus before it could touch my skull. I then decided to shave completely what was left, so that it could grow again evenly.”

“Wow! You sure have quite a risky civilian job, Nancy. It makes me feel guilty to be here this morning, asking you to do another tour in Afghanistan.”

“That’s alright, Mark. Tell me what happened to prompt this request for me.” Lemire eyed Nancy for a moment before answering her. For a reserve officer, Nancy was extremely qualified and experienced, apart from being a superb linguist, a world-class pistol shooter, an advanced black belt in karate and a true athlete. She already had more time on operations overseas than most regular forces officers in the Army. She was also by far the person with the most experience under fire that Lemire knew personally, this mostly being due to her civilian job as a military affairs correspondent, which saw her cover the situation in war-torn countries all over the world. Her last trip in Afghanistan had resulted in some of her reporting being shown on such popular news channels as CNN and BBC, reporting which Lemire had watched. He just couldn’t think of a better candidate than her for the vacancy in Herat. She also happened to be a very pretty woman with a most sexy body, but that was irrelevant to the matter presently at hand.

“To make a long story short, Captain Lebowsky was acting as a NATO trainer and mentor for an Afghan Army battalion, or kandak to use the Afghan term, under training in Herat, in the Southwest of the country. During a training patrol, a roadside bomb exploded near him, wounding him seriously. He has since been repatriated for medical treatment.”

“Will he be alright?” Asked Nancy, genuinely concerned. Lemire nodded in response.

“He will be and should not suffer long-term effects. He is however out of the picture for many months. Unfortunately, he was one of our very few people in Afghanistan who could speak either Pashto or Dari, the two main local languages. You, with your fluent knowledge of both Dari and Pashto and with your extensive combat experience and knowledge of Afghanistan, would be perfect to take Lebowsky’s place in Herat. There is however a slight catch that Ottawa informed us of only yesterday.”

Nancy frowned then: she had a rather low regard for the desk-bound staffers at National Defense Headquarters in Ottawa. The majority of those officers spent too little time in operational units in her opinion and, as a result, too often lost sight of the realities of combat or became politically-sensitive careerists concerned only with promotions for themselves.

“What kind of catch, Marc?”

“Well, Lebowsky had about two months left to do in his tour before returning to Canada. Since very few officers are as qualified as you for his post, Ottawa is asking that you fill in for his two remaining months...then pile on another nine months as his official replacement, which would make you go on tour for eleven months.”

Lemire gave her an apologetic look as she digested his words, hoping fervently that she wouldn't turn him down now. To his hidden relief, Nancy finally nodded her head.

“Alright, I am ready to take this eleven month tour, on one condition: that my editor at CONFLICTS MAGAZINE agrees to let me go for that long. Ottawa is asking a lot of me by expecting that I drop my civilian job for this long. Things are very tense all over the Middle East and around Iran right now and my editor is very possibly planning to send me there to cover the situation for the next few months.”

“Nancy, I would understand you perfectly well if you refused this tour due to the demands of your civilian job. You already served more time overseas than any of those paper shufflers in Ottawa and they would be poorly placed to criticize you if you decide not to go. When could you know if your editor let's you go or not?”

“In a few minutes, if he answers his phone. May I?”

“Go right ahead, Nancy.”

Nancy then took out her cell phone and composed the private number of her editor, as Lemire sat back and waited patiently while she did her call. Nancy got an answer after two rings.

“Hello?”

“Frank? This is Nancy. I came back home this Thursday and got your message. To answer it, I will be able to send you my full trip report and article within two weeks, as you were asking.”

“Excellent! I sure could use it soon.”

Something in her editor's tone of voice then lit a warning light in Nancy's brain.

“Is there something I should know, Frank?”

This time, there was a distinct moment of hesitation before her editor answered her.

"Uh, no, not really. I'm just having a few problems with some of our other correspondents, who are not pulling their weight in my opinion. Be assured however that I have nothing to say but praise about your work, Nancy."

"Well, you may have something to say about this, Frank: I would need eleven months of unpaid vacation, so that I could go on an operational tour in Afghanistan as part of the NATO forces there."

"AGAIN?! Don't they have other officers in the Canadian Army?"

"Officers that can speak both Pashto and Dari? Maybe two or three others, at the most. I know that this is asking a lot of you, but contributing to the building of a stable Afghanistan would truly mean something to me. Besides, I love nothing more than being able to help pound another nail in the coffin of those Taliban bastards."

There was a rather long silence on the line before her editor spoke in a resigned tone.

"Alright, Nancy. You may go on your eleven month tour in Afghanistan. I will somehow find a way to plug the giant hole this will create at the magazine."

"Thank you from the bottom of my heart, Frank. I will owe you one. I promise to send you my article and trip report quickly."

"That will be appreciated. And Nancy, please be careful over there in Afghanistan."

"Thanks, Frank. You are a nice guy, truly. Have a good day."

Nancy then cut the link and pocketed back her cell phone, smiling at Marc Lemire.

"You are lucky, Marc: my editor proved flexible...again. So, when exactly would I fly out for Afghanistan?"

"I still have to look after that, but you can expect to leave from Trenton in at most three weeks. I hope that your passport is still valid for at least another year."

"It is in fact good for another two years, even though it is starting to be full with entry and exit stamps and visas."

"Good! I have already booked in advance an appointment with the base quartermaster, while hoping for a positive answer from you, to get you new field kit. Your appointment is at one O'clock and the quartermaster was told not to be miserly with you. In the meantime, I have here the paperwork for your tour. Here, first, is your contract for Class 'C' employment in Afghanistan. You will be attached to the Regional Support Command West headquarters in Herat, from which you will be assigned to the kandak that Lebowsky was helping train. The description and number of your position is here. Please read and then sign if you are satisfied with the contract."

Nancy read quickly the employment contract, a standard form for reservists designated to fill full-time positions on overseas operational tours, then signed it. There were a few more forms and messages for her to read or sign before Lemire finally got up and shook her hand.

“Well, you are now in line for your next operational tour, Nancy. Just remind me how many overseas tours you already have.”

“Well, let’s see! First, there was Kosovo in 2004, then Lebanon and Syria in 2005, Haiti in 2006, then my first tour in Afghanistan in 2007, Darfur in 2008, my second tour in Afghanistan in 2010 and, finally, the Libyan operation in 2011. This will thus be my eight operational tour and my third one in Afghanistan.”

“Wow! That’s a lot of combat experience, especially for a reserve officer.”

Nancy smiled at that, thinking about what Lemire would have said if he ever learned that she also had over ten months of combat experience during the Second World War, with two Victoria Crosses and a few more medals to show for it. Thinking back about that, Nancy scratched the part about the medals, as she had returned them to Prime Minister Churchill in 1941, as a protest after she had been unjustly accused of treason.

08:07 (Eastern Standard Time)

Sunday, October 15, 2012 ‘A’

Lake Manitou private cottage

Laurentians region

Ingrid Weiss, having just awakened, walked in the lounge of the log house, still wearing only her panties. She found Nancy sitting at the small work desk in a corner of the lounge, typing on her desktop computer and with a steaming cup of coffee by her side. Ingrid went to her and kissed her on the head, attracting a smile from Nancy.

“Had a good night, Ingrid?”

“Very! Is Mike up?”

“Nope! I think that I burned him out last night.”

Ingrid giggled at that and looked at what Nancy was typing.

“You are doing your article about that trip as a reporter in Afghanistan?”

“Correct! Thank God that I kept backup copies of my recordings and notes on USB flash drives. If not, I would have lost everything about my trip in Afghanistan when I had to ditch my laptop in the sea just before being captured by the Germans.”

That brought back some awful images to Ingrid's mind as she remembered that horrible episode when Nancy had been tortured mercilessly for two days by the German Gestapo, the Nazi secret police, after being captured following a plane accident.

"Well, at least Farah Tolkonen got the authorities of the Global Council to reimburse you for all that you lost in 1941. I suppose that you will buy a new laptop computer soon."

"Damn right you are! For me, it is an essential work tool as a war reporter. That reminds me that I will have to give you courses on how to operate a 2012-era computer. Let's say that the software programs now are quite different from those you learned to use in 3384. For one thing, those 3384 keyboards made for twelve-fingered persons are a bitch to get accustomed to in my mind. By the way, there is still some hot coffee in the pot in the kitchen."

"Aaah! I certainly will get myself a cup then."

Ingrid was back in the lounge with a cup of hot coffee in her hands after two minutes. Her face was now thoughtful as she sat in a sofa near the work desk.

"Nancy, I was thinking about something while getting to sleep last night. Me and Mike are from Timeline 'B', the alternate history you created accidentally out of the original timeline, Timeline 'A', when you were dumped by those two Global Council scientists near London in 1940. You told us as well that me and Mike are basically copies of another Ingrid and another Mike, who lived and died in Timeline 'A' and who never met you. In my case, my timeline twin died officially in 1945 'A' during an allied bombing raid on Berlin, while Mike Crawford 'A' died in 1941 'A' when the plane transporting him from London to Washington crashed in the Atlantic. Up to now, the Time Patrol counts only a grand total of 21 members, including us. Of the lot, you, Farah Tolkonen and her two assistants, Maran Tolvek and Mona Zirel, are the only persons from Timeline 'A'. Me, Mike and the others are all from Timeline 'B' and you said yourself that we will need many more members in order for the Time Patrol to become eventually an effective organization."

Nancy stopped typing for a moment and turned in her chair, looking at Ingrid with interest.

"Go on, Ingrid."

"Well, how about going to save secretly my timeline twin as well as Mike's twin and then enroll them in our Time Patrol? From what I understand, Ingrid Weiss 'A' and

her four comrades were incinerated inside their shelter by an incendiary bomb, while the body of Mike Crawford 'A', or that of any of the other occupants of his plane, was never found. Couldn't we save them in extremis and hide that by substituting anonymous bodies, especially in the case of Ingrid 'A' and of her comrades? If this could work, then there should be quite a few disappeared persons that we could then save secretly and enlist, no?"

"That is actually an excellent idea, Ingrid. Missing and officially dead persons could indeed constitute interesting prospects as potential recruits for the Time Patrol. We would however have to keep to the 20th and 21st Centuries for recruits. Earlier than that and the potential recruits would be too ignorant of modern technology to be really useful to us. Keep your idea in mind until we can talk to Farah about it. If you can think of known disappeared persons that could make good recruits, then note down their names and the general circumstances of their disappearances, so that we could do some research later on about their fate."

"I will certainly do that, Nancy."

Ingrid then fell silent, gazing through the windows of the lounge at Lake Manitou outside, while her mind was on the sad fate of her timeline twin in 1945 'A'. Ingrid 'A' had served like her as a secretly underage female auxiliary of the Luftwaffe, the German air force in World War Two, until killed in 1945 by allied bombs. The story of the present Ingrid had however started to differ drastically from that of Ingrid 'A' in 1941. Ingrid then thought about the first time she had seen Nancy, after having been captured by her British unit, along with the rest of her Luftwaffe fighter division headquarters staff in Wissant, France. Nancy had then brought her to London, to be interned as a prisoner of war with other captured Luftwaffe auxiliaries in the old fortress of the Tower of London. Ingrid, who had been orphaned by the war, had quickly developed a strong bond with Nancy, with the latter ending up secretly adopting her after a few weeks. Both had also started remembering their past incarnations simultaneously at about that time. While Ingrid 'A' had never met Nancy, this Ingrid was sure that she would have also liked the tall Canadian woman instantly. Remembering what Nancy had just asked her, Ingrid then started reviewing mentally what she knew of history, searching for possible recruits for the Time Patrol.

CHAPTER 2 – ARSENAL

12:46 (North America Central Time)

Sunday, August 30, 3384 'A'

Time Patrol headquarters

New Lake City University campus

American Great Lakes area

Nancy waived happily to Farah Tolkonen as she disembarked with Mike and Ingrid from the heavy time shuttle HERMES: the gentle giant was waiting inside the large hangar where the shuttle now lay and was already waving at her. Farah's 220 centimeters of slender frame was the norm with the humans of the 34th century, along with hairless body, bald heads and six-fingered hands. The mixed blood of the Eurasian was also a common trait. It was actually ancestors like Nancy, Mike and Ingrid who stood out with their pure racial features, short statures, body hair and five-fingered hands. That didn't stop Nancy from considering Farah as her best friend, though. The co-founder and chief administrator of the Time Patrol was easily one of the most agreeable person she had ever met, apart of being a kind and caring person. She also happened to be a scientific genius, with degrees in medicine, physics, electronics and computer science. Walking to her, Nancy exchanged a hug and a kiss before looking up into her yellow eyes.

"It is nice to see you, Farah, as always."

"And I am pleased to see the three of you. How was your vacation?"

"Short but nice. Some countryside fresh air was what we needed, along with some quiet time together. How are the others?"

Farah seemed amused by her question. The others Nancy had referred to were fifteen other ancestors brought back from the past by her and who were now members in training of the Time Patrol. They, like Nancy, had been on vacation, adapting to the society of the Global Council and its advanced technology and, for many of them, the shockingly liberal sexual mores of the 34th century.

“Well, you will not be surprised to learn that most of the young women you brought from the past are huge hits with local men here and have been going from party to party. As for the lone man in the group, he is tagging along with the girls.”

Both Nancy and Ingrid giggled, while Mike smiled widely, making Farah’s heart beat faster. The 190 centimeter-tall American may have been small by contemporary standards, but his powerful built, green eyes and handsome face had warmed up Farah from the first day she had seen him.

“Don’t worry too much about them. Besides, everyone starts training tomorrow and they will have little time from then on for pleasure.”

“Don’t be too hard on them, Nancy, unless you want the medias to paint you as being abusive with your people.”

Nancy rolled her eyes in exasperation at that. The most charitable expression a person from the 20th century would have used to describe in general the pacifist giants of the 34th century would be ‘wimps’. Raised in a society where all the hard physical work was done by robots and where contact and extreme sports had disappeared two centuries ago, the average citizen of the Global Council found such energetic ancestors as Nancy and her group of apprentice agents nearly scary. The term ‘barbarians’ was in fact still uttered in low voices from time to time to describe them. Farah spoke before Nancy could make a remark.

“Anyway, they should join us here in fifteen minutes, so that we could all go together visit a model of fast liaison and space exploration ship that could be adequate as a basis for our future patrol ships.”

“Hey, that could be really interesting.” Said Mike, smiling widely, his engineer side awakening. “And where is that ship we are going to visit?”

“In a hangar of the Zeta Alpha orbital city, which is in a geosynchronous orbit around Earth.”

Ingrid’s eyes widened at once with joy.

“We are going to go in space?”

“Yes, and you better get used to it: for our citizens, traveling in space is routine, may it be as tourists or as workers. In fact, nearly twenty percent of Humanity now lives off the Earth, and live quite comfortably, thank you.”

“Ooh, I can’t wait to see Earth from orbit!” Exclaimed Ingrid, jumping with excitement. Her joy warmed Nancy’s heart and she pointed Ingrid to Farah.

“Did you tell her that she is going to be trained as a patrol ship pilot?”

Farah smiled but didn't tell Ingrid that all the members of the Time Patrol would at least receive basic training as pilots. However, only those showing special aptitudes as pilots would be selected to actually become ship flight crews.

"Uh, no. With everything else I have to do, I forgot to tell her."

"YES! I WILL FINALLY BE ABLE TO BECOME A PILOT!" Shouted Ingrid, making the three others grin. Nancy then became serious as Ingrid calmed down and spoke to the giant scientist.

"By the way, Ingrid had an interesting idea about where to find extra new members for our Time Patrol."

She then described Ingrid's idea of going to save secretly Ingrid 'A' and her four Luftwaffe comrades, as well as Mike 'A'. She also told her about the idea to save secretly other people listed as missing in the past. That left Farah thoughtful.

"Hmm, I have to say that the concept is very interesting and could bring us quite a few good people. Saving Ingrid 'A' and her four comrades looks to me to be a simple, straightforward operation. However, saving Mike 'A' raises a serious point: what about the other passengers and the crew of his plane? Will Mike 'A' accept to be saved while abandoning the others in his plane to their fate? From what I know of your Mike Crawford, I doubt it, Nancy. What do you think, Mike?"

"I unfortunately have to concur with you, Farah." Said the big American, his face somber. "If I would be in the place of my timeline twin, I would probably fight rather than let myself be saved while the others are left to die. It would be basically all of us or none of us. Many of the other passengers are probably married, while some may even have children. Unless you are ready to recuperate their families as well, those other passengers and crew would probably refuse to come with us. I am sorry, but I think that we will have to let my twin die in 1941 'A'."

Nancy and Ingrid lowered their heads in sadness, realizing that Mike was probably right. Farah then tried to cheer them back up.

"Hey, Ingrid's idea still has lots of merit. We may however just have to concentrate our efforts mostly on singles. By the way, we have now started to produce in good quantities the space-time transfer probes we used to transport the Luftwaffe girls and Ingrid out of the Tower of London. We will now have the means to grab quickly and safely the people we judge of interest."

"And what if those persons refuse to join us and demand to be returned to their time?" Asked Ingrid. Farah mentally gave her points for solid, logical thinking.

"You know the basic rules we laid for the Time Patrol, Ingrid. Nobody from the past of Timeline 'A' can be allowed to know about the existence or even the possibility of time travel. Once they know, they either stay with us or are returned to experience their fate to the bitter end. That rule especially applies to those declared by history to be officially missing and presumed dead. The same rule will apply to Timeline 'B', but we will be more flexible there, as the passage of Nancy as a time traveler from the year 2012 is widely known. If I may change subject briefly, I have a good news for you: I obtained last week permission from Grand Administrator Kern to gain access to the surviving records and technical data we still have about the last war fought by Humanity, five centuries ago. Those records and data contain detailed information and even complete schematics on the weapons and ships then used in that war, which is why the access to them is so severely restricted. I have found and copied a few files that are going to make our job of building armed ships much easier."

"Like..." Said Nancy, immediately interested, while Mike and Ingrid listened carefully.

"Well, four systems in particular could be of interest to us. One is a high power laser cannon used to arm the ships of the War of World Hegemony of 2890. I also got hold of the plans for its power source. The lasers of 2890 were tunable in frequency and varied in beam power from forty to a hundred megawatts."

"Wow!" Exclaimed Ingrid. "That sounds like the lasers in your film 'Star Wars', Nancy. What other systems did you find, Farah?"

"The second system of interest to us is purely defensive and is a sort of electro-magnetic shield capable of stopping most projectiles and missiles fired at a ship. That shield however does not stop laser beams, which is why laser armament was so common in 2890. The third system is a variant of that shield but works differently and deflects electro-magnetic waves and light rather than solid objects. Essentially, a ship equipped with that masking shield becomes invisible to radar and other sensors, including the human eye. That masking shield was still only in prototype form at the end of the war of 2890 and had no known counter-measures."

"My God!" Exclaimed Mike, truly impressed. "Someone possessing such a masking shield in my time could have conquered the World."

"Effectively!" Replied Farah. "I intend to keep the existence of that masking shield a secret restricted to Time Patrol members only, in order not to alarm the High Council. As for the fourth system of interest to us, it came as a shock to me: it was

already in service at the time of the Nuclear Holocaust of 2052. The cleverness shown in the past in inventing such weapons truly scares me. In this case, it is called a 'rail gun' and uses electro-magnetic forces to propel projectiles to velocities of a few kilometers per second. While mostly of small caliber, the kinetic energy delivered by the various rail guns in service in 2052 was enormous and could reach ninety megajoules for the bigger models. Even the electro-magnetic shields of 2890 could be overloaded by such an impact."

"Ouch!" Said Nancy while making a grimace. "That represents the combined kinetic energy of ten armor-piercing projectiles fired by the best tank guns of my time. Well, apart from guided missiles, I believe that you found most of what we needed for our warships. I will only need on my part to find individual weapons and body armor systems for our agents. By the way, did the High Council accept to produce stun pistols for us?"

"Yes! Stun pistols being non-lethal weapons, it didn't drag its feet too much on that. We received three days ago a first shipment of one hundred pistols, along with spare parts and recharge units. If we need more, we will only have to ask. Uh, do you have an idea of what kind of individual weapons we will use, Nancy, and where we will get them?"

"Not yet, but I know how to find the best ever produced in the 21st Century, and where to find it."

"Hmm, you are scaring me, Nancy. Your time period was decidedly too good at inventing weapons. Ah, here comes the others!"

Nancy turned her head and saw a group of fourteen women and one man enter the hangar. They were easy to recognize as ancestors by their hair and short size compared to the entrance doors. The group was dressed in a variety of modern civilian clothes, the new uniforms for the Time Patrol not being ready yet. Nancy smiled on seeing the happy expressions of her members.

"Well, you certainly seem to have had a good time, my friends." The young Frida Winterer, an appetizing blonde of eighteen, answered her with a wide smile.

"Those two weeks of vacation were just what I needed after two years of war, Nancy."

"I see! I hope that you at least tried to stay in shape in the meantime, because we are starting our training program tomorrow and it is not going to be a vacation."

“Oh, we did a lot of push-ups...in bed.”

That triggered a round of laughs. Farah, doing a quick head count, then nodded her head and spoke up, raising her voice.

“Since everybody is here, let’s board the shuttle for our little space excursion. Let’s keep an orderly file, children.”

Frida Winterer pulled out her tongue at her in response.

Led by Farah Tolkonen, the eighteen ancestors boarded eagerly the heavy shuttle, taking place in the jump seats lining the sides of the cargo bay. Viewing screens lining the inner walls of the cargo bay then came on, letting the passengers see the outside as the craft lifted off the ground silently and started floating out of the hangar, thanks to its directed gravity propulsion system. Once out of the hangar, the occupants were able to see a team of heavy construction robots 300 meters away, busy digging the foundations and underground levels of four future buildings. Farah then activated the intercom to speak to the others as the shuttle overflowed the work sites.

“We are now over the future site of the headquarters of the Time Patrol and of its training center. Apart from the headquarters building itself, the complex will include a sports center, a residential tower and a hangar with technical workshops. The whole complex should be completed in three weeks, thanks to the modular construction methods common in the Global Council. We will now climb to orbit and fly out to the Zeta Alpha orbital city, where we will visit a fast liaison and exploration ship that could become the basic design of our future patrol ships. The goal of this visit is to evaluate the potential of that type of ship to be modified to our needs. Even though you do not yet have the technical knowledge to understand the systems aboard that ship, I will ask you to keep in mind your past military experiences and to feel free to speak up if you see particular points about that ship that should be modified to make it more suitable for combat. Remember that my compatriots have not known war for 500 years now. You are the military experts here, so don’t hesitate to raise points or objections during our visit. With this said, I hope that you will like your excursion.”

Farah then stayed quiet in her seat, letting the ancestors around her appreciate fully their first trip in space and smiling at seeing their joy and excitement. Hanna Reitsch, the ex-German test pilot, seemed particularly fascinated by this experience, something Farah could easily understand. In fact, Farah was counting on Hanna’s long

experience as a test pilot of military planes, as well as on Nancy's extensive knowledge of modern military systems, to give that fast liaison ship a thorough inspection. Allied with the expertise of Mike Crawford as an ordnance engineer and the data recovered from the old files on the War of World Hegemony of 2890, Farah was confident that a truly superior ship design could be made following this inspection trip.

After about twenty minutes of flight, and as the ancestors around Farah were marveling at the beauty of Earth's blue orb as seen from space, a small white dot became visible above and forward of the shuttle. The dot quickly grew in size, becoming a spinning top-like object. Farah then used again the intercom microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are now approaching the Zeta Alpha orbital city, the permanent residence in space for over a million people and also a prime tourist center able to accommodate up to four million visitors per month. The diameter of the central cylinder is three kilometers and its height is fifteen kilometers. Its equatorial belt, which houses ship hangars and construction yards, has a diameter of five kilometers. Zeta Alpha was built in orbit over 300 years ago and is self-sufficient in terms of food production. Despite its age, this orbital city is still at the edge of our technology, being constantly renovated and enlarged. Ships regularly resupply it with water, oxygen and other materials extracted from the main asteroid belt situated between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. Many inhabitants of Zeta Alpha work in nearby orbital yards, which produce both ships and space structures, while others work in the hydroponic gardens of the orbital city and help produce food for the restaurants of Zeta Alpha, which are acclaimed in the whole Solar System. The city also houses many human services industries and technical production plants, including the studios of the biggest news agency in the Global Council, those of the Global News Network, or GNN in short. GNN is the most popular holovision news channel in the Solar System. Your visit on Zeta Alpha may in fact attract the attention of GNN reporters. If you are approached by reporters, I will ask you to let me or Nancy do the talking. The subjects of ancestors and of importing weapons for the Time Patrol are still quite controversial and what may appear to you to be an innocent answer from you may be turned into a negative piece of reporting. Thank you for your attention."

The colossal dimensions of the orbital city soon became evident, attracting exclamations from many as the huge door of a ship airlock slid open and the vertical wall formed by the equatorial belt filled the screens.

“My God!” Said Mike Crawford. “Building such a thing in space is nearly unthinkable.”

Farah nodded her head at that.

“Building Zeta Alpha was effectively a major project in the history of the Global Council. While there are hundreds of other major space installations, Zeta Alpha is still our biggest orbital structure. Only our cities on Mars and on the moons of Jupiter and Saturn are bigger. After inspecting the ship that is interesting us, we will take the rest of the day to visit Zeta Alpha.”

That attracted a concert of cheers and happy screams, making Farah smile: the exuberance and energy of those ancestors contrasted sharply with the nonchalant, slow rhythm of her compatriots from the Global Council, accustomed to a risk and effort-free lifestyle. Only the crewmembers of spaceships, chosen for their taste for adventure, could approach the activity level of the men and women surrounding her now. In fact, since risk and danger levels in a job dictated higher salaries, Farah had had no problems convincing the secretariat of the High Council to grant high salaries to the agents of the Time Patrol.

The HERMES soon entered a large tunnel leading deep into the equatorial belt of the orbital city. After flying in for 600 meters, the heavy shuttle pivoted on the spot and entered a huge airlock which had three large doors along its inner walls. Once the armored door of the airlock was closed, clouds of condensation appeared as it was pressurized. Less than two minutes later, one of the three inner doors of the airlock opened and the heavy shuttle floated inside a hangar big enough for four more similar shuttles. The door of the hangar then closed behind the shuttle as the craft landed in a corner, near what looked like a big bus. Maran Tolvek and Mona Zirel emerged from the cockpit as the rear access ramp started to lower.

“We can get out, people.” Announced Maran. “A bus is waiting outside to bring us to the ship we are going to visit.”

They did not have to repeat their call, as their passengers nearly ran out of the shuttle and to the bus, followed at a more sedate pace by the trio of giants. A large door

opened on the side of the vehicle and Farah pointed the inside of the bus to her companions.

“This bus will bring us to the hangar containing the ship that we will visit. Climb in, ladies and gentlemen.”

Ingrid Weiss got in first and was about to say hello to the driver when she realized with a shock that the driver was in reality a robot that could not be mistaken for a human.

“Uh, good day!”

“And a good day to you, miss.” Answered the robot in a singularly human tone of voice, his two camera lenses fixing Ingrid. “Welcome to Zeta Alpha. If you would please take a seat, we will soon be on our way to your destination.”

A bit intimidated by that unusual encounter, Ingrid took one of the first seats and whispered to Farah when the scientist sat beside her.

“Why isn’t the driver human?”

“Because most of my compatriots find that job too monotonous and boring, which forces in return the use of robots to fill the vacant positions.”

Ingrid gave her a look of incomprehension, shocked by such laziness.

“Farah, without wanting to insult you, I would say that many of your compatriots would be in need of a good kick in the ass. In Germany, volunteers would flock to take such a job and thus make a honest living.”

“I know, Ingrid.” Said Farah in a discouraged tone. Her growing experience with ancestors made more and more evident to her to what level the average citizen of the Global Council was spoiled by the generous social system of her society. The Global Council provided free to all the basic necessities of life, including free health care and education, plus a small stipend, even to individuals who never raised a finger to contribute to society by their work. Nearly a quarter of Humanity now lived in indolence, assured of a work-free life in fair comfort. As Ingrid had just alluded to, such a state of affair would never have been tolerated in the 20th Century. In a sense, the technological and social progress achieved by the Global Council was leading to a spreading decadence. The human population of the space colonies and outposts, a lot more active and daring because of the inherent dangers of living in space, had in fact been complaining about that state of affair for a few decades now, claiming with good reasons that their hard work only helped to support too much dead weight. While relations between Earth and its space colonies were still good, Farah would not be surprised to see real tensions developing in the years to come.

The bus then started to roll smoothly, taking Farah out of her depressing thoughts. The trip was actually quite short, the bus entering another hangar after covering about two kilometers. The eyes of all the passengers then fixed on the ship in the middle of the hangar. Of a length of 45 meters and shaped like a flattened egg with thick cruciform bulges at the rear, the ship was very similar in appearance to an old 20th Century dirigible, but with a smooth, curved body. Ingrid spoke, some disappointment in her voice.

“Damn! I was hoping to see something, uh, more racy.”

Farah replied in a voice strong enough for all to hear her as the bus rolled towards the ship, besides which six persons were waiting.

“This fast liaison ship, of the HURRICANE class, is actually the fastest type of ship in the Global Council. Its ovoid shape is dictated by its directed gravity propulsion system, which uses a very special electro-magnetic field. That field, of spherical shape, necessitates that all the volume of a ship be inside it, which makes long and narrow ship shapes impractical. Despite its mundane lines, the ships of the HURRICANE class are capable of sustained accelerations of up to fifteen Gs, one G being an acceleration equal to that of an object falling under the force of Earth’s gravity. This is even better than our best interplanetary cruise liners, capable of twelve Gs accelerations and considered very fast ships. In comparison, our own shuttle can only make six Gs at maximum power.”

“Fifteen Gs?” Exclaimed Hanna Reitsch, the test pilot. “What I was flying in 1940 would look like turtles in comparison. How come the crew is not flattened like pancakes by such accelerations?”

“Remember your flight in the HERMES, Hanna: you didn’t feel any acceleration during your flight because you and all of us were being accelerated along the rest of the craft. Propulsion by directed gravity makes a ship fall in the direction its pilot chooses. Inside the ship, short-range gravitational fields keeps normal gravity for the crew and passengers. The system is powered in turn by thermonuclear fusion generators. You will in fact study all of this in the months to come. Well, here we are! Let’s go out!”

The 21 passengers of the bus were greeted at the foot of the large rear cargo ramp of the ship by a giant woman with brown eyes and a sympathetic face.

“Welcome to the COMET, ladies and gentlemen. I am First Pilot Virna Landross, Commander of the COMET, and this is Second Pilot Jens Tarl. My crew includes as well our ship engineer, Alvan Kor, our sensors specialist Greg Thorgal, our hostess and purser Natia Mindicor and our rescue paramedic Karen Mirza.”

An exchange of handshakes and presentations followed before Landross pointed the large cargo ramp.

“Well, if you are ready, let’s start the visit.”

Led by Landross, and with her crewmembers mixing up with the visitors, the group climbed the ramp and visited first the large cargo bay, measuring twenty meters long by six meters wide and five meters high, listening all along to the explanations of the pilot. They visited next an airlock and a locker room on the same level than the cargo bay, then went up to the next level, which contained the propulsion and power systems, some laboratories and workshops and the crew quarters. Virna Landross was surprised by the apparently scandalized or disapproving looks on the faces of the visiting ancestors when she proudly showed them the luxurious crew lounge, the sauna and bubble baths and the individual cabins, spaces that occupied an appreciable part of the internal volume of the ship and which were very well equipped and furnished.

“Uh, is something wrong in your eyes, ladies and gentlemen?”

“Yes!” Answered Nancy, her face serious. “All this wastes a lot of precious internal space. Extra generators or larger capacity holds would be more useful. The space taken by the captain’s cabin alone would probably be more than sufficient to house all of the crew facilities we would need.”

“But, we spend weeks, even months in space, miss. The crew facilities have to be comfortable to cope with such long space cruises.”

“Don’t take this as a blame, Miss Landross.” Replied Nancy in a calm tone. “This is appropriate for the present role of this ship, but what we need for our organization will have as tasks armed patrols and expeditions far in the past. Performances, armament and protection will be primordial for our crews, who can easily live without all that comfort.”

Virna, who had only received from the Space Council a simple request for a visit, looked at Farah, confused.

“Armed ships? The High Council approved this?”

“Yes, miss. I we choose to adopt this type of ship as the basis to build the patrol ships of the Time Patrol, it will need to be extensively modified to adapt to it a number of offensive and defensive systems, apart from receiving a space-time distorter drive.”

As Virna looked again at Nancy, the latter gave her a disarming smile.

“Say, miss, wouldn’t you be interested by chance in joining the Time Patrol? We certainly could use an experienced pilot like you.”

16:09 (Universal Time)

Production offices of Global News Network

Zeta Alpha orbital city

Lori Kano frowned as she reviewed the content of the evening news bulletin for tonight: it was rather meager to her taste, even after the addition of a few items that hardly qualified as news. As the star news anchor of GNN, she was going to have to compensate for the lack of content by the quality of her presentation...again. She repeated to herself that it was a small price to pay to live in a near ideal society, but she was too good a reporter not to know that the Global Council was not perfect. Even though they were rare, violent crimes had not completely disappeared, while cases of corruption and theft were signaled every week. Her videophone then buzzed, making her head turn towards the viewing screen on her desk. Pushing the ‘link’ button, she saw the face of a woman working in one of the numerous restaurants of Zeta Alpha appear on the screen. The woman actually provided her from time to time with bits of news gleaned around the orbital city.

“Good day, Mina. Do you have something interesting for me?”

“You can say that, Lori!” Said excitedly the woman. “A group of ancestors is here, on Zeta Alpha. They are having coffee and pastries at a terrace near my restaurant, on Level 231.”

“Ancestors?” Exclaimed Lori, interested at once. “How many?”

“About fifteen, mostly women. That Nancy Laplante that appeared in front of the High Council is with them, along with a few of our own people. They are sitting at the terrace of the COFFEE AND CINNAMON shop.”

“FIFTEEN?! Hell, I’m on my way! Thanks for the tip, Mina. I will owe you one.” Closing the link, Lori then got up from her chair and grabbed a camera headband while shouting at her assistant, sitting three desks away.

“JOSH, GRAB YOUR CAMERA HELMET AND COME WITH ME! WE HAVE A FLASH INTERVIEW TO DO ON LEVEL 231.”

“COMING!” Answered the young man before closing his own computer and grabbing a helmet sporting a battery of cameras and lamps. He had to run to catch up with Lori, who was already walking out of the studios.

16:18 (Universal Time)

Terrace of the COFFEE AND CINNAMON

Level 231 North-East of Zeta Alpha orbital city

“Mein Gott! I would have killed to eat such hot cinnamon pastries like these during our detention time in the Tower of London.” Said with fervor Bertha Reinholdt between two bites. Ingrid Weiss, sitting with her, Susanna Berghof and Frida Winterer at one of the tables of the terrace restaurant, smiled, her mouth full. She took the time to swallow before speaking.

“I think that I would have done the same, Bertha. These people certainly know how to eat well. I will have to watch my waistline here in the 34th Century.” Ingrid then saw a man and a woman approaching quickly. Apart from the fact that the woman was beautiful, even with her bald head, and wore the latest in high fashion clothes, their apparent hurry contrasting with the normally lazy rhythm of the giants around them had attracted Ingrid’s attention. She thus looked at Nancy and Farah, sitting at the next table.

“Heads up, Nancy! I think that someone is coming to see us.” Farah looked in the same direction as Nancy and straightened up.

“Oops! The woman is actually Lori Kano, the star news anchorperson for GNN, which has its offices here on Zeta Alpha.”

“Is she professional or is she the paparazzi type?” Asked Nancy, using French to speak to Farah.

“She is a professional, Nancy. She is quite intelligent and reports news honestly. Anyway, at this stage we still will have little to say about the Time Patrol.”

“Don’t underestimate the capacity of a reporter to get out the most of a source, Farah. Don’t forget that I am also a reporter.”

“A good point. Let me speak at first.”

Farah got up from her chair as Kano and her cameraman slowed their pace and stopped in front of her table, with the cameraman stepping sideways to take a good position for filming the conversation. Kano was the first to speak, offering her right hand.

"Doctor Tolkonen, I am Lori Kano, news anchorperson and reporter with GNN. I am sorry to disturb you like this, you and your friends, but would you accept to be interviewed by me and to be filmed?"

"You are welcomed to interview and film us, Miss Kano. May I present you Nancy Laplante, co-founder with me of the Time Patrol?"

"Pleased to meet you, miss." Said Nancy while shaking hands with the reporter. "Maybe we could discuss later about our common profession."

"You specialized in covering wars, I believe?" Said Lori, tensing up at facing a woman who had publicly acknowledged that she had killed dozens of times. If her interlocutor detected her sudden nervousness, she didn't let it appear.

"Correct, miss. But please, take a seat."

Lori took the chair offered by Nancy and signaled to Josh to start filming.

"Thanks! I have to say that, to meet so many ancestors at once, after seeing none for centuries, is quite special. May I ask from which century your friends come from?"

"They all came from the year 1941, except for Klaus Manheim, who was extracted by me from a hospital bed in 1940."

Lori looked briefly at the man pointed by Nancy, appreciating mentally his athletic physique and his undeniable masculine attractiveness. She also let her eyes examine Mike Crawford, whose smile made her heart race.

"And your friends from the 20th Century, are they all soldiers?"

"Yes, even though most of them were in non-combat support specialties. However, we now consider ourselves as agents of the Time Patrol and citizens of the Global Council. Understand that we are not what could be called mercenaries. We all said goodbye to our original time period and are citizens dedicated to the good of your society. I alone will lead a double life, continuing with my original life in 2012 in order to keep a foothold in that century."

"And what were their motives to take such a heavy decision, Miss Laplante?" Nancy smiled and pointed the men and women around her.

"You may ask them directly, Miss Kano."

Thanking Nancy, Lori chose to sit at the next table, occupied by four young women, of which three of them were of uncommon beauty. Lori smiled first at the tallest of them, who had blond hair and blue eyes and was of extraordinary beauty.

"May I have your name, miss?"

"Certainly, miss. I am Susanna Berghof and I was born in 1917 in Kiel, Germany. I am 23 years old."

"And what was the reason for you to choose to leave your century of origin, Miss Berghof?"

Sadness then appeared on the face of the blonde.

"The realization that my country, Germany, followed the wrong masters and was condemned to destruction. Seeing no worthwhile future for me in that time, I accepted Nancy Laplante's offer to come work for her here in the future. I was also attracted by the possibility of escaping the petty attitudes towards women that were too common in my time, attitudes that severely restricted the dreams of women and relegated them to secondary roles."

"Could you precise what sort of secondary roles, miss?"

"According to the philosophy of the leaders of Germany, and of most countries in my time, women were made to stay home, produce babies, raise children, do the cooking and clean up for their husbands. Because of the urgent needs for extra workers, that policy was relaxed during the war and women worked in large numbers in industrial plants, replacing the men that had gone to the front to fight. Most men of my time were however still resistant to enlarging the role of women, even with the war on."

"And you, miss?" Said Lori, turning towards a teenager of mesmerizing beauty with reddish-brown hair and blue eyes. "What is your name and what were your reasons to leave your century?"

"My name is Ingrid Weiss and I was born in 1925 in Berlin, Germany. I am fifteen years old. The war made me an orphan, with my whole extended family being killed by a bomb. I was also secretly of Jewish faith, something that attracted very harsh treatment in Germany at the time. Despite the fact that I was technically an enemy for her, Nancy came to love me and adopted me with the help of her husband, Mike Crawford."

Lori looked briefly at the powerful man that had made her heart accelerate, then returned her attention on Ingrid as the latter continued.

"I decided to follow Nancy and Mike to the future to be able to live with them and also to escape the oppression and atrocities to which the Jews in Germany were subjected to then."

"What sort of atrocities, miss?"

"The systematic extermination of all the Jews in Europe and the seizure of all their possessions." Replied calmly Ingrid, shocking deeply Lori.

"But, who could do or even justify such a monstrosity?"

"The Nazi Party, which held power in Germany and had triggered the war in Europe in 1939. It followed a policy of racial purity that proclaimed the superiority of the Aryan race. According to that policy, the Jews were a threat to the purity of the race."

"Uh, excuse my ignorance, Miss Weiss, but I don't know what is the Aryan race."

Understanding, Ingrid pointed Susanna Berghof and Frida Winterer to Lori.

"My friends Susanna and Frida are what a Nazi could qualify of being perfect examples of Aryan women. All the other races were considered inferior, to varying degrees, with the Jews at the bottom of the barrel."

"But, you said that being a Jew was a question of faith, not of race. I don't understand."

"That is because there is nothing to understand, Miss Kano. The Nazi ideologues classified the Jews as having distinct blood, even though many had absolutely no Semitic genetic heritage. The Jews had become the scapegoats for the ills of Germany and the Nazis had the German people unified against them. If I would have returned to Germany as a Jew during the war, I would have been arrested, deported to a concentration camp and eventually killed."

Lori, by now seriously shaken by Ingrid's words, then noticed that many of the ancestors around looked sad or embarrassed.

"Uh, are many of you German?"

She was surprised to see fifteen of the 21 ancestors raise a hand, including the four women at her table. She then turned towards Nancy Laplante, an expression of disbelief on her face.

"You chose the majority of the members of your organization among people that were technically your enemies, Miss Laplante? Why?"

"Because I had seen that, individually, these men and women were most decent people, who deserved better than what their country could offer them at the end of the war. I believe passionately in tolerance and compassion, miss. Unfortunately, the

British, who I was fighting for in that war, considered my tolerance as fraternization with the enemy and treated me as a traitor to their cause. I was beaten up by fellow prisoners of war for that reason while interned by the Germans.”

Lori stayed silent for a moment while staring at Nancy. She now realized that she would have to change drastically her views about ancestors in general and this woman in particular. Shaking herself back to her assignment, Lori faced Farah Tolkonen, still sitting besides Nancy and Mike Crawford.

“At what stage is your Time Patrol now, Doctor Tolkonen? Have you already started to patrol the past?”

Farah shook her head in response.

“We won’t be operational for many more months, miss. Our agents need to be trained and educated on our technology, our ships still have to be designed and then built and we don’t have weapons yet. As for our ground infrastructure in New Lake City, they won’t be ready for at least another three weeks.”

“Where will you take your weapons, Doctor? There are none in the Global Council, apart from non-lethal stun pistols?”

Farah gave her a somber look.

“Finding weapons will not be difficult, Miss Kano: the past is full of them.”

Lori concluded her interview twenty minutes later, having collected enough materiel to produce a quality news bulletin. Thanking Farah and her group, Lori then returned with her assistant to the GNN studios, 67 levels above. As they rode an elevator cabin, she thought that this new Time Patrol was certainly worthy of special attention from her, as its potential for generating sensational news was evident to her.

15:10 (London Time)

Tuesday, October 10, 2051 ‘A’

Sales store, Jane’s Publishing Editions

238 City Road, London

Great Britain

“This will make a total of 2,386 pounds and 46 pence, miss.” Said with a professional smile the young woman of Pakistani origin serving behind the cashier of the store. Nancy, a large leather case full of heavy books and magazines and of copies on

laser disks of the latest products made by Jane's Publishing Editions at her side, paid cash the bill. Taking the receipt for her acquisitions from the most renowned publishing house specializing in military affairs, Nancy thanked the sales woman and grabbed her heavy case without apparent effort and left the store. She stopped for a moment on the sidewalk, looking around at the scenery of 2051 'A' London. The city looked little like the London she had known in her time. Many historical buildings had been razed and replaced by steel and glass towers and the vehicle traffic was much quieter compared to that in 2012, most of the vehicles now being propelled by electric motors. The clothing fashion was however as diverse as before, going from the timeless conservative business suit to the most outrageous punk outfit. The racial diversity of the passersby was also greater, with pure Caucasians being actually in the minority.

Her next stop was at a computer store 400 meters away, near the junction with Old Street. Having checked first what type of software was used by her newly acquired laser discs, Nancy bought cash two laptop computers of the latest model, preloaded with the necessary software programs, plus a few accessories and transport bags for the laptops. Going a bit further to a bookstore, Nancy went carefully through its history section, finally selecting and buying a number of books and laser disks covering the history of the first half of the 21st Century. With her big leather case now weighing a good thirty kilos, on top of her two laptop bags, Nancy decided to stop at an Italian restaurant for supper, buying first two newspapers of the day at a nearby kiosk before entering the restaurant. After reading the menu and placing her order, she then quickly read the main titles of her two newspapers and frowned, not liking what she was seeing. The whole Middle East and the Indian sub-continent were real powder kegs, with more than nine countries of the region, including Iran, Saudi Arabia and Syria, possessing or being suspected of possessing nuclear weapons. To make things worse, the known oil reserves of the region, after about 150 years of intensive exploitation, were now nearly exhausted, with many Arab countries and Iran facing bankruptcy in the years to come. In return, this discouraging prospect had made the populations of the Middle East both worried and furious, as they realized a bit late the extent to which the riches from oil extraction had been squandered or even squarely robbed by their elites, monarchs and various leaders. Political and religious extremism were now at record levels, with frequent terrorist attacks around the World. One of the titles in fact recalled one such attack, which had killed eight persons in London less than a week ago. In response to

this, most western countries had increased their military and security expenditures in the last years, if Nancy could believe an editorial she was reading. The nuclear arsenals of the large and medium powers had also grown, with Great Britain now possessing ground-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, on top of her submarine-launched missiles.

Nancy sighed as she put her newspapers in her leather case at the arrival of her meal: it was actually a miracle that a nuclear war had not yet started in those conditions. She unfortunately knew that such a horror was going to happen in only eleven months and would nearly erase the Human race from the surface of the Earth. That cataclysm would however trigger in return the process from which would eventually emerge the society of the Global Council. The Nuclear Holocaust of 2052 was thus an event with which Nancy or the Time Patrol could not interfere with, even if her life depended on it, as it had been declared justly to be a key historical event that could not be manipulated or modified by anybody. Feeling immense sadness as she thought about that, Nancy went at her food without much conviction. She was about to finish eating when a powerful explosion a few hundreds of meters away made her jerk, like the other customers and staff of the restaurant, while the ground shook briefly from a shock wave. While many rushed outside to see what had happened, Nancy stayed at her table, realizing what could that be. One customer then got a call on his cell phone a minute later and spoke in it briefly before closing it and looking around him.

"A bomb has just exploded at the Moorgate subway station. There are dead and wounded but the situation is very confused, according to a friend of mine who is there."

"Those damn Muslim extremists!" Spat another customer, a man in his fifties with red hair and wearing a business suit. "We should nuke the Middle East and get rid for good of that nest of religious fanatics."

"You were happy enough to take their oil during all those decades." Replied a customer with Semitic traits, taking offense at the words of the businessman. The exchange that followed quickly heated up, ending in a scuffle between five customers. Nancy watched the scene, bitter at seeing how full of hatred and intolerance the World was now. It took the arrival of two policemen and the efforts of the employees of the restaurant to separate the combatants and reestablish a semblance of calm. Paying her bill, Nancy grabbed her precious case and bags and left, hailing a taxi to go to a discreet rendezvous point, where Mona Zirel would soon pick her up with a time scooter.

09:44 (North America Central Time)
Monday, September 7, 3384 'A'
Time laboratory, Physics Annex
New Lake City University campus
Great Lakes region, North America
Global Council

"Here you go, Jan!" Said Nancy while putting down a thick pile of books and magazines on the desk of the newly hired chief historian of the Time Patrol. "I also have with me laser disks containing more historical data, but a technician will have first to transfer the data to a medium compatible with Global Council computers."

Jan Bella, a man with a jovial character, shouted with joy as he spread the books and magazines on his desk, which was set up in a corner of the original time laboratory since their future headquarters was still under construction.

"Nancy, I could kiss your ass! Do you realize how incomplete and fragmentary our historical databases are about the history prior to the 25th Century? Just these books would justify the money put into the Time Patrol up to now."

"I know, Jan." Said soberly Nancy before putting on his desk the two newspapers bought in London. "I believe that these newspapers will tell you a lot about the causes of the 2052 Nuclear Holocaust."

The historian, a true speed reader, reviewed quickly the main titles of the newspapers, his face becoming progressively more somber, before looking again at Nancy.

"I see what you mean, Nancy. Be assured that all this will be reproduced and disseminated quickly via the history department of the Science Council."

"Please make sure that you also keep a copy of all this in our own databanks, so that our members can easily access this data. We will very soon need this information for more missions in the 21st Century."

"Oh? What type of missions?"

"To find weapons."

"Oh!" Said simply Bella, knowing how delicate that subject was with the High Council. Excusing herself with Bella, Nancy went next to the desk occupied by Mike Crawford, her case and bags in her hands. Mike was now officially the assistant

operations officer of the Time Patrol and would coordinate the acquisition of weapons and the training of their agents with those weapons, apart from helping Nancy to plan and lead the operations of the organization. She kissed him quickly before opening her big leather case and taking out the heavy books and magazines from Jane's Publishing.

"I have to go see our computer technician to have him transfer the content of a few laser disks on mediums compatible with the Global Council computers. In the meantime, could you start looking at the Jane's 2051 Annual on infantry weapons, to see which weapons would be most appropriate for our needs?"

"I certainly can do that, Nancy." Said Mike, his eyes gleaming. As an ordnance engineer and a qualified gunsmith in 1941, the prospect of learning about what small arms were like in 2051 was making him water at the mouth.

Mike had his nose in the thick book even before Nancy walked out of the lab. Having been an American Army officer, he went first to the United States section on rifles to see what the American Army was using in 2051. What he saw there made him positively salivate. However, as an experienced gunsmith, he knew too well that a weapon could appear excellent at first, to later reveal hidden flaws. That had been the case with the Ross Rifle, produced for the Canadian Army during the 1914-18 Great War in Europe. Although an excellent precision and hunting rifle, the Ross Rifle had quickly revealed itself to be overly sensitive to mud and dust, jamming continuously and forcing its withdrawal from service. Mike thus tempered his enthusiasm and read carefully the comments on the various weapons described in the Jane's book. The books published by Jane's had been widely acknowledge to be impartial and professional in their coverage and Mike thus took note of any negative point described in the pages he was reading. Taking copious notes, he finally set his choice on a family of weapons that had used a concept called 'Metal Storm', which had been designed in Australia but then had been adopted by the American Colt Company. That concept called for many projectiles and their propellant to be loaded one on top of the other inside a single firing tube, to be then ignited electronically. That concept eliminated nearly all moving parts except in the trigger group, allowed the rate of fire to be varied at will and resulted in weapons vastly more simple and significantly lighter than conventional weapons. In the rifle in service with the United States Army and Marine Corps in 2051, the Colt-storm CRGL TERMINATOR, this concept had been combined with another concept, that of telescoped case ammunition, resulting in a compact weapon with a capacity of 120 high

velocity 6mm bullets and three 50mm rifle grenades ready to fire, with a total weight of only five kilos once fully loaded. The 6mm armor-piercing ammunition was contained in twelve steel tubes held together inside a molded polymer block that also helped absorb the high pressures from burning propellant. The block, which could quickly be replaced by a full one, fit behind the block holding the twelve barrels that gave the weapons an excellent precision up to a range of 600 meters. A long grenade-launching tube was positioned under the barrels block and used a pneumatic compensator to minimize recoil. According to Jane's, the CRGL TERMINATOR was giving total satisfaction in service and had no known flaws. Convinced to have found what the Time Patrol needed, Mike took specific notes on this rifle and on the other weapons from the same family, including the location of the plants producing the weapons and the ammunition, then continued his review.

After another half hour of research, Mike stumbled on the description of a Russian assault rifle specifically designed with an integrated silencer and using heavy, subsonic bullets to further cut the firing noise. He thus took notes as well on that AS Val and its 9mm x 39 ammunition. When Nancy came back nearly two hours later, he showed her what he had found, attracting a smile on her face.

"So, those old moronic generals in the Pentagon finally understood and accepted the Metal Storm concept."

"You already knew about that concept in 2012?" Asked Mike, surprised.

"Yes! In 2012, that concept had been in existence for nearly twenty years already, but American generals thought it was too revolutionary to be adopted, despite the successful trial fires of a 40mm grenade-launching system. I suspect that the 'not invented here syndrome' had something to do with their reluctance to adopt this system."

"Yeah! I am too familiar with that mentality. The fact that the Colt Company eventually bought the rights to the Metal Storm concept probably was what decided the Pentagon to adopt it. What do you think of that family of weapons, and of this AS Val?"

"I am actually a firm believer in the Metal Storm concept and I doubt that anything better existed before 2052. This is clearly the best choice for our agents and, eventually, for arming our future combat robots. As for the AS Val, it had been in service since the 1980s with the Russian special forces and I personally had the chance to fire it. It is a very effective weapon and would be ideal for discreet missions by our agents.

It was already nearly out of the inventory in 2051, so I will have to go procure some AS Val rifles and its special ammunition well before 2052.”

“Where and when do you think you will be able to find those AS Val rifles?”

Nancy smiled with malice at that question.

“Don’t forget that I am a war correspondent and that I covered about everything that touched military weapons...including illegal arms trafficking around the World. The Russian and French governments were not calling me ‘The shit disturber’ for nothing.”

11:43 (Ukraine Time)

Sunday, March 1, 1992 ‘A’

Christian Orthodox church

Kiev, Ukraine

Victor Medveyev waited that his bodyguard had exited the church first, so that he could check for any potential threat outside, then walked out towards his car, where another bodyguard waited. With his secret occupation as an arms dealer and with the actual, chaotic situation around the rapidly disintegrating U.S.S.R., anything could happen, mostly bad things in fact. However, that same chaotic situation was presently helping him enormously, with opportunities opening for obtaining previously nearly impossible to acquire weapons. He had even heard about another dealer who had been able to steal three modern T-80 battle tanks from the Soviet Army.

Walking quickly in the frigid air of Kiev, with snow over ten centimeters thick on the ground, Victor made his way among the crowd of worshippers also exiting the church. A tall and beautiful young woman that had also attended the Sunday service then spoke to him in Russian in a low voice without looking at him as she passed near Victor.

“Mister Medveyev, I have a business proposition for you. If you are interested, get in your car and do a tour of the bloc before picking me up at the corner of the next street to the right.”

Victor threw a sharp look at the woman, trying to recognize her. She was however a total unknown to him. Knowing that could possibly be an attempt by the federal police to trap him, as much as being a real proposal, Victor decided to take the risk...for the moment.

"Very well! If I see that we are followed, though..."

"Don't worry!" Simply said the woman before walking away on the sidewalk. Frankly intrigued, Victor got in the back of his car and gave an order to his driver-cum-bodyguard.

"Start the car and do slowly a complete tour of the bloc, Misha: we have a young woman to pick up at the next corner, after our tour."

The driver, a tall and muscular man with a shaved head, nodded and started the engine of the big Mercedes. Rolling slowly, the car soon passed the young woman, who was still walking towards the next corner. Doing a complete tour of the bloc as ordered, the driver then stopped at the designated street corner, where the woman was now waiting. Alex, Victor's senior bodyguard, got out and quickly searched the woman for weapons before letting her sit in the back with Victor. The latter eyed with curiosity the woman, who had quite a lot of sex-appeal despite her rather short black hair.

"May I ask how you know me, Miss...?"

"Just call me Nancy." Said the woman with a very slight accent that sounded French to Victor. "May I call you Victor?"

"All pretty women can call me Victor, Nancy." Replied the arms dealer, who liked to think of himself as a handsome man that attracted women. "Do not talk business right now, until I could verify that you are not carrying a microphone or a tape recorder. Are you French, Nancy?"

The woman smiled back to him and shook an index.

"I am ready to show you my body but not my identity, Victor. If someone asks you about me, I am just an escort girl that you just picked up for some private time."

Victor licked his lips as he admired the ample, firm chest of the said Nancy, who had opened her coat to reveal a short dress with a wide cleavage. Her story was actually a good cover...if she was really a potential client and not a police officer. Opening the small bar in the back of the Mercedes, Victor took out a half-bottle of champagne and two cups, handing the cups to the young woman.

"In that case, we might as well play the game right, Nancy."

Opening the bottle, Victor half filled the cups and replaced the closed bottle in the bar before taking one of the cups and raising it.

"To our mutual health, Nancy."

They knocked their glasses together before taking a sip while eyeing each other. Nancy's left hand then searched for Victor's right hand, to guide it towards her gorgeous legs.

"We should give the appearances as well, Victor, in case someone is watching." She said in a mellow voice. Not believing his luck, Victor felt free to explore the splendid young woman, whose green eyes fascinated him.

By the time that his car arrived at a luxurious residence in an exclusive district of Kiev, Victor was positively on fire. Nancy put back some order in her clothes before stepping out with him once the Mercedes was inside the large garage of the residence. Followed closely by Alex and Misha, Victor escorted Nancy to his private study, keeping his two bodyguards with him as he closed the doors and faced the young woman.

"I believe that now is a good time to prove to me that you are not carrying a microphone or recording device, my dear."

"Fair is fair." She replied with a smile before starting to take off her clothes, handing each piece to the senior bodyguard so that he could check it. She eventually ended up totally naked and turned slowly around to show herself to Victor, who now had a mighty erection.

"As you can see, my dear Victor, I have nothing to hide." Victor, swallowing hard, looked at Alex, who nodded his head once.

"She had nothing abnormal with her, boss, apart from 100,000 American dollars in used bills in a brown envelope. She however had no identity papers on her." Frankly intrigued, Victor eyed the still naked Nancy.

"That is a lot of cash to carry like this, miss. What do you want exactly?"

"Let's sit down first, Victor."

Victor agreed readily to that, sitting with her on his favorite sofa and doing his best not to be distracted by her nudity. She was the one to speak next.

"What I want is sixty AS Val silenced assault rifles in 9 x 39mm caliber, plus 600 20-round magazines and a minimum of 100,000 9 x 39 SP-6 armor piercing bullets. If you could find as well a stock of spare parts for those rifles, the better. If you are successful in finding and getting those rifles, magazines and bullets, you will get another 100,000 dollars, plus one extra dollar per 9 x 39 bullet above the initial 100,000 first ones. You can keep the cash I brought with me as a first payment...if you accept to deal with me."

Victor frowned on hearing her requests.

“AS Val rifles? That type of weapon is used by Spetsnaz¹ special forces units and is only in limited circulation. It won't be easy to find so many of them, my dear.”

“Come on, Victor! A man as competent as you, in the midst of such chaos in Russia? I am sure that you will be able to find all this without much difficulty.”

“And for who are those rifles, if I may ask?”

Nancy smiled but wiggled her left index in front of her.

“You can ask, but I will not answer, my dear Victor. Let's say that my employer likes discretion. When do you think that you could get all this?”

Victor reviewed mentally the contacts he had that could help in this affair. Using the initial 100,000 dollars brought by Nancy to pay his eventual provider, he figured out that it shouldn't be too hard to find a willing intermediate.

“Give me two weeks, Nancy. I should have your things by then. How will I contact you then?”

“Easy: I will pay you a visit here in two weeks as an escort girl, officially to give you a nice, sexy massage session. We will talk then. Oh, one last point: my employer does not want any deaths to be caused by this deal. Dead bodies tend to attract investigations...and problems.”

“Your employer is a sensible person.” Agreed Victor, who tried himself to avoid violence as much as possible in his business. Even if he sold weapons, he did not think of himself as a cruel or merciless man. In fact, he preferred to be described as a simple businessman who dealt in special tools. He then offered his right hand to Nancy, who shook it.

“We have a deal, miss. I will be expecting you in two weeks. My driver will now drive you, if you wish.”

Nancy nodded her head and got up from the sofa.

“In that case, he can drive me back to the church where we met first.”

Victor looked at Misha, who nodded in turn. Nancy took the time to put back her clothes and gave a last smile to Victor as she was leaving.

“See you in two weeks, Victor.”

As the door closed behind her, Victor looked at his senior bodyguard and threw his hands up.

¹ Spetsnaz : ‘Voiska Spetsialnogo Naznacheniya’, Soviet military intelligence special forces.

"Damn! Why can't all my customers look like her?"

"She is effectively very pretty, boss." Replied Alex, who then became serious.
"You don't think that she could have been sent to entrap you, boss?"

"I doubt it. However, it doesn't cost much to be careful: search her carefully when she will return in two weeks."

"Understood, boss."

13:05 (Ukraine Time)

Sunday, March 15, 1992 'A'

Victor Medveyev's residence

Kiev, Ukraine

Alex kept a blank face when he opened the main entrance door to find Nancy waiting, wearing the same wool coat as last time.

"Good day! I come to see Victor, as promised."

"Please come in, miss."

Once the door was closed and locked behind her, Alex made a sign for Nancy not to move.

"Sorry, miss, but I must search you first."

"Go ahead!" Replied calmly Nancy, who then took off her coat and gave it to the bodyguard. Alex carefully searched it, looking for any microphone or miniature transmitter that could have been sown in the lining. The only things he found in the coat were three big envelopes full of American dollars and a pair of gloves. He then methodically searched Nancy all over, but did his best to be polite while still being thorough. Finding nothing suspect, he led her to the same study where she had spoken with Victor, knocking on the door and getting an answer from inside.

"Come in!"

Victor Medveyev got up from behind his work desk and went to meet Nancy with a wide smile as she entered with Alex.

"Good news, my dear! I was able to obtain all that you wanted. The lot arrived in Kiev yesterday and you will be able to take delivery of it...once you pay me, of course."

"How many rounds of ammunition were you able to get, and of what type?"
Asked Nancy while shaking his hand.

"I have your 100,000 armor piercing SP-6 bullets, plus another 40,000 bullets of the standard SP-5 type. I was even able to get you a stock of spare parts, plus a hundred magazine-carrying vests. The rifles, magazines, ammunition and spares are presently in a local warehouse."

"Excellent! There was no blood spilled during the acquisition, I hope?"

"Do not worry, my dear: a false military truck with false orders simply picked up the lot at the TSNII TOCHMASH plant, in Klimovsk, then disappeared."

Nancy smiled, frankly amused: the simplest plans were often the best ones.

"In that case, how about going with you to take delivery of my stuff right now?"

"Like that? Alone?" Said Victor, confused, attracting a malicious smile from Nancy.

"Well, I did park nearby a rented truck. I will just need to get my truck, then you will be able to lead me to your warehouse."

"Uh, why not? The less time these weapons stay in my hands, the better for me. You do have the rest of the payment, I hope?"

Nancy took out the three big envelopes full of dollars and gave two of them to Victor.

"Here are 200,000 dollars for the weapons and the first 100,000 bullets, on top of the 100,000 dollars I already gave you. I will give the last 40,000 dollars once I have checked everything and once it is in my truck."

Victor quickly counted the money before looking at Nancy, satisfied.

"Decidedly, it is a pleasure to deal with you, my dear. Let me do a couple of phone calls first, then we will go. If you could please wait in the hallway for a moment."

"Of course, Victor. Take your time."

Victor let Alex lead Nancy out of the study, then went to his hidden safe once the door was closed, securing the piles of dollars in the safe. His first call was to his two men guarding the warehouse where the weapons and ammunition were hidden, to warn them that he was coming with two cars and a truck. The second call was to his driver, telling him to have four more men and a car ready to escort Nancy's truck and make sure that nobody was following them. Once that was done, Victor left his study and escorted with Alex Nancy to the garage of the residence. Misha was already there with four armed men, who got in a second Mercedes, while Misha, Alex and Nancy took place with Victor in the latter's armored Mercedes.

Three blocks away, Nancy got out with Alex to get in a big box truck wearing the logo of a rental company. With Nancy at the wheel and Alex at her side to make sure she didn't call anyone, the two Mercedes sandwiched the truck as the small convoy started rolling through Kiev. Twelve kilometers further, the convoy arrived at what looked like an abandoned garage at the end of a private road just outside of the city. Victor got out first to talk to his two guards as Nancy turned her truck around to back it inside the garage. Nancy smiled with satisfaction on seeing a large pile of crates hidden by a tarp in a corner of the old garage. Followed closely by Victor and Alex, she went to the crates and, pulling away the tarp, opened one of the weapons crates. Finding four rifles inside, she took one out and inspected it quickly, then disassembled it with an expertise that Victor appreciated. Inspecting its inner mechanism, then reassembling it and putting it back in its crate, Nancy counted the weapons crates as well as the ammunition crates. She last inspected the crates containing the empty magazines, the accessories and the spare parts. Apparently satisfied, she turned around to face Victor.

"Can I ask your men to start loading the crates in the back of my truck? I would however like to have each of the weapons crates opened before being loaded in the truck. For a total of 340,000 dollars, I believe that I have the right to check the merchandise, no?"

"Effectively!" Said Victor, who then looked at his senior bodyguard. "Tell three of our men to come help load the crates, but leave at least one man outside to watch for intruders."

"One moment, Alex!" Said suddenly Nancy as the bodyguard was about to walk away. She counted 8,000 dollars in large bills and gave them to Alex.

"Just a little extra for you and those three men, for their efforts." She explained. Alex grinned and took the money, then walked out of the garage to get his men. Nancy then gave the last 40,000 dollars to Victor.

"Good accounts make good friends. Let's load these crates and complete this deal."

Twenty minutes of work were enough to have all the crates loaded in the back of the rental truck, with Nancy checking each rifle crate, plus a few ammunition crates at random. Once the truck was loaded and its rear doors closed, Nancy faced Victor, who suddenly became nervous. This was the critical moment, when a police team could

swarm the garage and catch him in the act. However, Nancy simply shook hands with him, to his relief.

“Thank you for your services, Victor. Believe it or not but you just made a good deed, in a way: these weapons will help a good cause.”

“Weapons don’t make war, miss: men do!”

“Very true, Victor.”

She then surprised Victor by gluing herself to him to give him a long, sensual kiss while letting his hands roam on her body. She finally parted with him and smiled gently.

“Consider this a last bonus, Victor. Goodbye and be careful: your job is a risky one.”

“Don’t hesitate to come back to Kiev if you ever need something else, Nancy. Hell, you can come back any time, business or no business.”

Victor sighed as the truck rolled out of the garage, Nancy at the wheel. Somehow, he knew that he would never be able to forget her. Taking out the pile of dollars she had given him, he smiled with contentment and promised himself to celebrate this deal in style tonight.

14:51 (North America Central Time)

Wednesday, September 9, 3384 ‘A’

Time laboratory, Physics Annex

New Lake City University campus

Great Lakes region, North America

Mike Crawford took with a smile the AS Val handed to him by Nancy and examined it in detail, while the other members of the Time Patrol stood around to look at the weapons and ammunition just brought from 1992 ‘A’. Farah Tolkonen stood a few paces away with Jan Bella, watching her members examine with enthusiasm the first lethal weapons to be imported in the Global Council in 400 years. Bella then whispered in her ear.

“I must say that I am not too enthusiastic at seeing these weapons here, Farah, even though I realize that they will be essential for the work of the Time Patrol.”

“I understand your feelings, Jan. This is only the beginning. Many more weapons will follow soon.”

“And where will we put all this, especially the ammunition and the explosives?”

"Nancy has already selected a location for them outside of New Lake City, a location that will become our combat and shooting training center. Standard prefabricated modular buildings should be delivered tomorrow and installed in Chicago."

"Chicago? But, the city was utterly destroyed in 2052 and has been deserted ever since. There is nothing left in Chicago except for ruins covered with vegetation and millions of human skeletons."

"That is exactly why Nancy chose that location, Jan." Replied Farah on a sober tone. "If you will excuse me for a second."

Going to Nancy and taking her aside, Farah put one hand on her right shoulder.

"Nancy, I wanted to tell you that I have finished building your special implants and have tested them thoroughly. They are now ready to be grafted into you. When could you be available for the operation."

Nancy gave her a sober look, knowing what those implants represented for her.

"You may schedule the operation any time starting tomorrow, my friend."

09:23 (North America Central Time)
Thursday, September 10, 3384 'A'
New Lake City University Medical Center

Farah, wearing full surgical garb, approached the operating table on which Nancy lay on her back and went near her head, presenting her a steel tray supporting a number of small devices.

"Your special Time Patrol field agent's implants, Nancy. The main piece is the time distorter device, with its computer and its bio-energy collecting wires. It will be grafted on the inside face of your lower vertebrae and will allow you to jump through space-time by yourself, without the need for a time ship or time scooter. Like the other implants, it is nearly transparent to X-rays and will be very difficult to detect by doctors of your time, short of invasive surgery. The device to its left will be grafted near the base of your skull and contains a micro radio transceiver coupled with a mental waves relay and a time waves transceiver. That unit will enable you to send and receive radio and time waves messages mentally, without speaking out loud. It will also allow you to control your time distorter unit and send mental commands to it. The small cylinder beside the cranium implant is a directional microphone, which will be implanted inside your left ear and will allow you to have very sensitive hearing. Lastly, those long wires and tiny chip

will be implanted in the palm of your left hand and fingers and constitute a stun weapon. You will just need to touch someone's head with two of your left fingers and mentally activate this device to send a stun discharge in that person's brain and knock him or her unconscious for long minutes. Once you are implanted with these devices and will have practiced their use, you will be able to write a training program for our other agents, who will eventually all get these implants."

"So, I am about to become a living time travel machine."

"Essentially, yes. Learning to use these devices properly will however take you some time, a few weeks probably."

"It will be time well spent, Farah. These implants may represent the difference between life and death for our agents on a mission. You may start the operation: I am ready."

Quite anxious despite of the fact that she was an experienced surgeon, Farah kissed Nancy gently on her head before signaling to her assistant nurse to activate the pain inhibitor headband that Nancy wore. She then grabbed her laser scalpel and started her delicate surgery work.

03:38 (Eastern Standard Time)

Friday, February 7, 2053 'A'

Ammunition depot, Fort Drum

New York State, United States

"Nothing on the thermal detectors, no campfires or artificial lights, Maran?"

"Nothing within a radius of ten kilometers anyway, Nancy." Answered in a somber voice Maran Tolvek as he scanned with the sensors of the HERMES heavy shuttle the ground under them. "I would need to take some altitude to be able to scan a wider area."

"This will suffice. Mona, land us between those two storage bunkers: they will partially hide us from view. Don't light up any of our ship's light."

"You think that there could be survivors in the area, Nancy?" Asked Mike Crawford, looking over Nancy's shoulders at the sensors screens. The latter tightened her jaws, having been struck hard like the others on the shuttle at the level of devastation and at the conditions they had found all along the American East Coast area. Despite the fact that they had expected to find the United States destroyed by

numerous nuclear weapons strikes, what they had seen up to now had surpassed their worst nightmares.

"I doubt it, Mike, but those that are best adapted to survive in this hell for over five months are the ones who could prove most dangerous for us: soldiers or members of private militias. What exactly are the conditions outside, Maran?"

Maran shook slowly his head as he consulted his instruments.

"The outside ambient temperature is minus 43 degrees centigrade with the wind factor and there is a blanket of snow at least two meter-thick everywhere. The outside radiation level is 75 milligrays per hour, high enough to accumulate a semi-lethal dose in three days. Even with your protective suits, you should not stay outside for more than a total of four hours if you don't want to exceed the maximum authorized annual dosage."

"We will then operate via our remotely controlled probes and our robots, as planned. We will go out only if absolutely necessary." Decided Nancy. "No objections or suggestions, guys?"

Klaus Manheim, Heinrik Braun and Mike Crawford, all present in the cockpit with her, Maran and Mona, had nothing to say then. All of them, except for the two young giants, were armed with stun pistols and AS Val rifles and wore anti-radiation suits.

"Then, let's start! Mona, you did leave one of our radios opened on the international distress frequency?"

"Yes, and it is on the internal loud-speaker. Our radio scanner is also activated. If anyone transmits in this area, we will hear it."

"Perfect! Maran, you can send our first probe inside the closest bunker."

"Here we go!" Announced the young engineer after punching a number of commands on his control panel. "The image from the probe will be visible on screen number three."

All eyes then fixed on the said screen, which now showed the growing image of the armored entrance door of the nearest bunker. Stopping the flying probe just in front of the door, time to calculate a space-time jump, Maran then made the probe jump inside the bunker. The probe then lit up its powerful arc lamp and, guided by Maran, approached a long pile of crates supported on wooden pallets. Nancy concentrated to read the English inscriptions on the crates as the probe slowly went down the line of pallets.

"Hmm, these are mortar bombs... More mortar bombs. Let's review the opposite row of pallets, Maran... No, this bunker contains only mortar bombs and artillery shells. Mike, you are noting down what we find in each bunker?"

Mike, who was holding a photo-map of Fort Drum and a marker pen, nodded his head.

"I'm on top of it, Nancy."

"Good! Maran, you can send the probe in the next bunker."

The first five bunkers proved of little interest to them, containing only artillery, tank gun and mortar ammunition. Inside the sixth bunker, however, Nancy saw something that got her excited.

"BINGO! These are crates full of magazine blocks of 6mm bullets for TERMINATOR assault rifles."

That bunker soon proved to be filled exclusively with 6mm ammunition and with loaded launch tubes for 50mm grenades for TERMINATOR rifles, as did the seven next bunkers. The two next bunkers after that proved to be full of ammunition for machine pistols, plus anti-tank missiles, while three other bunkers were filled to capacity with hand grenades and heavy sniper rifle bullets. Nancy was by now ecstatic.

"Excellent! We have now found more than enough ammunition for our needs. Mike, how many 6mm bullets do you estimate we found in those bunkers to date?"

"Judging from the dimensions of the bunkers and the depth and height of the piles of crates, I would say that we found at the least 24 million rounds of 6mm ammunition for TERMINATOR rifles, along with about 30,000 50mm rifle grenades in their launch tubes. All the bunkers that we visited to date were filled to capacity, and more, which would tend to indicate that the American forces were stocking up for a war. I would however counsel that we finish the inventory of all the bunkers in this ammunition dump, then go inspect the base's weapons vault before starting to load anything in our shuttle."

"That makes sense." Recognized Nancy. "Then, let's complete our inspection of the remaining bunkers, Maran."

They found various types of ammunition in the next four bunkers. However, things changed drastically as the probe entered the third to last bunker, making Mike exclaim in an excited tone.

“WAIT! Those are weapons crates, not ammunition crates. There are thousands of them!”

“But, objected Klaus Manheim, “why keep so many weapons in reserve? The troops on this base should already have had their individual weapons with them, no?”

“You are right, Klaus.” Said calmly Nancy, her eyes riveted on the screen as the probe approached one of the crates to read the markings on it. “As Mike said earlier, the American forces seemed to be preparing for war when this base and others were hit by nuclear weapons. Those weapons were probably destined to equip conscripts following a general mobilization. However, those conscripts never had time to be recruited and brought here. Yes! This crate alone contains four Colt CRGL TERMINATOR combined assault rifles and grenade launchers. Send the probe down the line, Maran... More TERMINATOR crates... Now I see machine pistols crates... Handguns crates... Hell, here are some anti-tank missile launchers as well. We now have found everything we want. However, let’s check the two last bunkers for good measure.”

The second to last bunker proved also full of weapons crates, but the last bunker contained something Nancy had not expected. She did a double take as she read the inscriptions on one of the thousands of boxes stored in that bunker.

“Individual body armor kits and helmets? Why not store them in the base quartermaster warehouse instead of here in the ammunition dump?”

Mike, also intrigued by this, finally proposed something.

“If those armor kits and helmets are as sophisticated as I think they are, they probably are each worth a few thousands of dollars, at the least. That makes for very attractive and expensive kit. Also, the base warehouse may have been too full for storing these kits. Remember: if they really expected thousands of new conscripts to show up, the warehouse would have been overflowing with boxes of uniforms and individual gear.”

“You may be right, Mike. This really interests me. If these armor suits prove good enough, they would be perfect for us. The Global Council does produce good protective suits, but they are of the wrong size...and have six-fingered gloves. I am going to jump inside and check on of these kits out. Maran, give me a safe jump coordinate for me inside the bunker.”

“Uh, as you wish, Nancy. The radiation levels inside the bunker are actually negligible. The coordinates are now showing on the lower left corner of the screen.”

“Thanks! I shouldn’t be long, guys.”

Nancy then disappeared from where she stood, making Mike and the others jump.

“Damn! What Nancy can now do with her new implants nearly boggles my mind.”

Nancy reappeared in the dark bunker between the two opposing lines of boxes and lit up the headlamp of her light helmet, then walked to the pallet nearest to the door, which had only two levels of boxes instead of the four on the other pallets. Opening the top box, she found inside a number of body armor parts carefully sealed in plastic bags and insulated from shocks by plastic foam inserts. Even with what she expected from military technology in 2052, what she saw impressed her. The armor parts were made of a kind of molded composite material that seemed extremely tough, yet was lightweight. Taking out a helmet with full face visor and breathing apparatus, she saw that it could be sealed to filter out toxic chemical agents. The helmet also incorporated a miniature radio set and what looked like a night vision system. Taking the helmet out of its protective bag and putting it on in place of her own helmet, she then faced the reconnaissance probe.

“What do you think, guys?”

“You look great, Nancy.” Replied Mike on the radio. “I would say that it would be well worth it to include this stock of body armor with the other loads we will take to 3384.”

“I concur. This will actually fill quite nicely one of our needs for equipping our field agents. I am now going to jump back to the ship. Mona, take our robot bulldozer out and have it start removing the snow that is blocking the doors of the bunkers. This will also lower appreciably the amount of radioactive particles on which our robot forklift will have to roll to go grab the pallets that interest us.”

“A good idea, Nancy. I am on it.”

“Nancy,” asked Heinrich Braun by radio, “what quantity of weapons and ammunition will we take?”

“We will actually take all the ammunition connected with the weapons that interest us. We will need at most 200 sets of individual weapons for our agents, plus a few spares. However, I have discussed with Farah how to defend the Global Council

against a possible large scale attack. With the small number of our agents, we would be quickly overwhelmed by any mass ground assault. I thus proposed to Farah that we build an army of combat robots that will serve as our ground defense force. The Global Council is already expert at designing and building robots and we needed only to find weapons for them. We will thus carry away as well all the weapons we can use. That will also prevent some post-holocaust militia crazies from arming themselves with all this.”

Nancy was back in the shuttle, while the robot bulldozer had rolled out and was already at work clearing up the snow blocking the entrance of the first bunker, when the radio loud-speaker of the cockpit connected to the international distress frequency suddenly came alive.

“To any station on this frequency, this is the EAGLE International Space Station. Come in, please!”

Nancy and her crew froze for a moment, completely taken by surprise by this. Maran then punched in commands on his control panel as the message, sent in English by a woman with a French accent, repeated itself.

“I have the point of origin of the transmission, Nancy. Our computer is now establishing the parameters of the orbit of that space station.”

“In that case, let’s take off and go save those poor people in orbit. We are their only hope for not dying in space from lack of air, water and food.”

“Not before we have taken everything that interests us here and brought it to New Lake City.” Countered Mona Zirel, attracting a shocked look from Nancy.

“But, those weapons and ammunition could wait, and...”

“And our external hull needs to be decontaminated of radioactive particles, Nancy. If we are to go decontaminate ourselves in New Lake City, then let’s take the time to do first what we came to do.”

“Mona is right, Nancy.” Said softly Mike, a somber expression on his face. “Think also about the potential reaction of the American crewmembers of that station if we show up with our cargo hold full of weapons and ammunition stolen from an American Army base. Let’s take all the time needed to do our work here and at Barksdale Air Force Base. These people will still be in orbit by then.”

Nancy lowered her head in sadness as the woman on the space station repeated her message, her tone nearly supplicant.

"I suppose that you are right, you and Mona. Then, let's get to work here."

17:56 (Universal time)

Sunday, February 9, 2053 'A'

EAGLE International Space Station

Low Earth orbit

James MacDonald took place opposite Rebecca Milner at the small dining table of the station's lounge. His tray of food stayed on the table, thanks to the 0.4 gravity created by the centrifugal force of the twin, contra-rotating carrousels that contained the living facilities of the EAGLE space station. The Canadian life support systems engineer started eating his food in silence, respecting the intimacy of the American redhead. The station's doctor had been brooding a lot lately, which was more than understandable in view of their present situation. The last radio transmission they had intercepted coming from Earth's surface had been three months ago. Now, the planet was silent and cold, enveloped by the dark clouds of radioactive dust thrown in the upper atmosphere by the thousands of nuclear warheads detonated on that faithful month of September of the year 2052. The sensor scans had confirmed as early as last October that a so-called nuclear winter had set in, lowering significantly the temperature on the surface and causing a mass extinction of animal and plant life on Earth. The levels of radiations recorded from orbit were also off the scale nearly everywhere on the surface, with only a few areas in the South Pacific showing less violent levels of contamination. However, the crew of the station knew from the last few radio messages received after the nuclear war that the horrors of both biological and chemical weapons had been added to those of nuclear weapons. Testament to that global holocaust had been an overhead picture of the beached hulk of the aircraft carrier USS HALSEY on the coast of the Arabic Peninsula. The big warship had drifted for weeks before running aground, left to itself by its dead crew, which had died to the last from radiation exposure. No ships traveled the oceans now and no lights from cities were seen at night. If there were survivors on Earth, their future looked very bleak indeed to the seven occupants of the EAGLE space station. The future on the station itself looked no less bleak, with reserves of food, water and air dwindling steadily and with no supply rocket ship to be hoped for from the surface, ever. James MacDonald knew that some members of the station were contemplating suicide. Frankly, he couldn't blame them for that, as they were

condemned to die within a few weeks anyway. James finally threw down his fork in frustration, leaving his plate still half full.

“What’s the point of eating? We are dead anyway!”

Rebecca Milner, who had looked lost in her thoughts up to now, lowered her head and started sobbing at those words. James quickly got up and went to her, passing one arm around her shoulders.

“I...I’m sorry, Rebecca. That was stupid of me to say that.”

“That was not stupid, that was the truth.” Said weakly the civilian doctor in space medicine, still sobbing. “Humanity is finished and we will disappear with it. All that because of our own stupidity.”

“Come on, Rebecca! Only a tiny minority of people is to blame for that monstrous war.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“No, but it may stop you from blaming yourself. You are a good, decent person, Rebecca.”

Rebecca, a tall, pretty woman in her early thirties, wiped her tears away and looked up at James.

“Thanks, James. You were always a nice, kind man.”

She was silent for a moment, then swallowed hard before speaking again.

“Are we still monitoring the radio spectrum?”

“Yes! Commander Stone still insists on having someone on radio watch at all times. Jeanne is on it now, I believe.”

Rebecca nodded her head, then got up from her chair.

“Then I’m going to keep company to her. It is a lonely job and I have nothing to do at the moment.”

“Good idea! Could I come too?”

“And who would stop you anyway?” Replied sarcastically the doctor. “Of course you can come.”

The trip up to the station’s longitudinal axis, around which the carrousel were rotating, then along the central communication shaft to the control room, took only a couple of minutes. They found Jeanne Leclerc, the French geomatics expert, sitting alone in one of the command chairs. Jeanne smiled briefly to them, then activated her headset microphone for the umpteenth time in her watch.

“Any station listening on the international distress frequency, this is the International space station EAGLE, come in please.”

She got nothing but static, like in the last three months. She looked with discouragement at Rebecca and James, who had taken the two nearest seats.

“Nothing...as always! I did just get a routine message from the occupants of Moon Base SELENE, however. Do you think that anyone can survive down on Earth, with all that radiation?”

“I strongly doubt it.” Said Rebecca mournfully. “The contamination is too extensive. Whoever is still alive will eventually die of hunger or disease. Also, any newborn will probably be severely deformed by radiation-induced mutations. Humanity is finished, I’m afraid.”

A beeping alarm then made them all jump in their chairs. James looked at the main control panel and opened his eyes wide before screaming with joy.

“IT’S THE PROXIMITY ALARM! SOMETHING IS APPROACHING US!”

The two others also looked at the radar display: a large object was effectively approaching from the stern of the station.

“Could it be a meteoroid or a space debris?” Said Rebecca. Jeanne shook her head.

“I don’t think so: that thing just altered its trajectory towards us.”

She then activated her microphone with fresh hope.

“Approaching ship, this is the International space station EAGLE, identify yourself, over!”

She nearly jumped out of her chair in excitement when a female voice answered her.

“Space station EAGLE, this is the heavy shuttle HERMES. We will be docking with your station soon.”

“The HERMES? Is this a joke? What nationality are you?”

“The HERMES is a ship of the Time Patrol, an agency of the Global Council. We will have ample time to talk about this later. Over and out!”

Jeanne looked at James.

“Get Commander Stone! Tell him that a ship is about to dock with us.”

“What ship?” Asked anxiously James, who had not heard the answer to Jeanne’s call.

“I’m not sure. Just get him!”

Even though James didn't have a clue about what was really going on, he nonetheless launched himself towards the central communication shaft, floating to the open hatch in the zero gravity of the control room. Once at the junction with the rotation points of the two contra-rotating carrousel, he shouted at the top of his lungs down one of the ladder wells.

“COMMANDER STONE, A SHIP IS APPROACHING THE STATION! THEY INTEND TO DOCK!”

The big navy pilot got out of his cabin and joined James in less than a minute. Thomas Fairbanks, Gunther Braunig and Indira Saduranidrasekar were not far behind the station commander.

“Whose ship is it?”

“I don't know! Jeanne only said that it was called 'HERMES'.”

“Hell! It doesn't matter anyway. It could be our only ticket out of here.”

“Wait!” Shouted Indira Saduranidrasekar, the station's astronomer. Everybody then looked at the lean, dark-skinned Indian woman, who spoke again after a slight hesitation.

“What if this is a trap? It could be a rocket sent to take over this station. Maybe someone wants to escape radiation contamination on Earth by taking refuge here for the next few years. I know that this doesn't sound very plausible, but there must be some very desperate people down on the surface right now. We should at least identify those newcomers first.”

“Hmm, not a bad idea actually.” Said Michael Stone, thoughtful. He then floated to the nearest communications panel and called the control room.

“Jeanne, patch me with that incoming ship. Do you have a visual on it as well?”

He saw on the small video screen of the panel Jeanne fiddle with the controls of one of the external cameras. Her jaw suddenly opened wide as she looked at another screen that was outside Stone's field of vision.

“That...that's impossible!” She said softly, alarming Stone.

“What is it, Jeanne?”

“I...I will let you look for yourself.”

Her face was soon replaced on Stone's screen by the picture of an approaching ship. That ship however had nothing in common with the spaceship designs the systems engineer was familiar with. For one thing, there were no propulsion engines visible on

its smoothly curved body. The ship was also about thirty meter-long and was nearly as big as the space station.

“You are now on line with that ship, Commander.” Said Jeanne over the intercom. Swallowing hard, Stone pressed the ‘send’ button on the panel.

“This is Commander Michael Stone, commander of the International space station EAGLE. Please identify yourself!”

“This is the Time Patrol heavy shuttle HERMES. We come from the future to rescue you and your crew.” Answered a female voice. The six station crewmembers looked at each other with a mix of confusion and disbelief.

“HERMES, or whatever you really are, this is no time for jokes. What is your nationality?”

“We are Humans. In 3384, there is only one government on Earth. I know that this is hard to believe, so one of us will transport into your station, alone and unarmed.”

“3384?” Exclaimed Gunther Braunig, the German metallurgist. “But...time travel is an impossibility!”

“Who says?” Said a voice behind the group, making them all turn around as fast as they could in the zero gravity of the central shaft. They all gasped at the sight of a beautiful and tall woman with black hair and green eyes, floating a few feet away from them. She wore only a cream-colored panty and bra. The stranger grinned at them and spoke in perfect English.

“Hi! I’m Nancy Laplante. I thought that coming like this would prove that I am unarmed.”

“Well, I certainly believe you on that,” replied Stone while eyeing her, “but how the hell did you come inside this station?”

“By performing a short space-time jump directly from my ship.”

“Uh, I don’t see your time machine, Miss Laplante.”

“It’s inside my body, Commander Stone. The technology of 3384 is very advanced, especially in nanotechnology.”

“Could we talk further about that together, miss, when we get a chance?” Asked excitedly Thomas Fairbanks, the station’s computer specialist and a genius in electronics. Nancy smiled at the African-American.

“We will have ample time to do that once you are safely at our base, Mister. I will now ask you to pack your personal belongings and get ready to be transferred to our ship. There will be more explanations once we are all onboard the HERMES.”

“Are you planning to go pick up as well the crew of the international lunar base?”
 Asked James MacDonald, making Nancy look at him with shock and surprise.

“There are Humans alive on the Moon?”

“You didn’t know that a base existed on the Moon, miss? Asked Michael Stone, himself surprised by her ignorance. Nancy shook her head.

“As I said, the historical archives that survived to the 34th Century are very fragmentary. We thought that the base had been evacuated in advance of the war, as it was found deserted in the 28th Century.”

“Then, you will have nine more people to save apart of us, miss.”

That brought a smile on Nancy’s face.

“In that case, we certainly will make a side trip to the Moon after this.”

15:06 (North America Central Time)

Wednesday, September 23, 3384 ‘A’

Landing pad of the New Lake City University campus

Great Lakes area, North America

Global Council

Keiko Miramoto, a small Japanese woman of 34 years of age and a doctor and bio-chemist of renown in 2052, was the third person to get out of the HERMES once the heavy shuttle had landed. Still weak from her long stay in low gravity on the Moon, she was like the eight other members of the lunar base sitting in a wheelchair being pushed by one of their saviors. Still under the shock of having been rescued from a certain death on the Moon base, she looked around her at the crowd of spectators, reporters and dignitaries waiting and watching on one side of the landing pad. Loud-speakers then started playing some kind of national hymn unknown to her as the ones who had rescued her and her comrades led her group towards a group of dignitaries. Nearly everybody in the crowd were bald giants standing over two meters in height. The main dignitary, a handsome bald giant man, said a few words in a language unknown to Keiko, then spoke in English in a solemn tone.

“I am Grand Administrator Boran Kern, head of the Global Council. I am happy to be able to greet you, survivors of the 2052 Nuclear Holocaust, to the year 3384 and to our society.”

Keiko, having lived through months of despair on the Moon, then broke and started crying. Kern, touched by her distress, stepped quickly to her and gently took her in his arms, whispering words of comfort in her ear.

“Do not worry anymore, miss: here, you will now know peace as a new citizen of the Global Council.”

CHAPTER 3 – NEW MEMBERS

19:53 (North Atlantic Time)

Sunday, February 28, 2021 'A'

Nuclear aircraft carrier USS RONALD REAGAN (CVN 76)

North Atlantic

Commander Bob Matheson, standing besides the electronic tactical plot display in the Combat Information Center, or C.I.C. in short, knew what Captain Peter Fowler was going to ask him even before he came close to him. The CAG (Commander of the Air Group) would want to know about that inbound F/A-18E SUPER HORNET that was now making him very worried. Matheson saw that Lieutenant Commander Derek Hamilton, the commander of the squadron to which the inbound aircraft belonged, was tagging along with Fowler. Both naval aviators examined the plot in silence for a moment before the CAG turned towards the operations officer.

“What’s Sanchez’s status?”

“Still on approach and maintaining a constant altitude of 5,000 feet. Her remaining engine is starting to overheat and she will be barely flying on fumes by the time she gets here, if she makes it.”

Hamilton shot a hard look at him.

“She’s my best pilot. She will make it.”

Matheson sighed quietly. His duty was to present facts, not hopes or assumptions.

“Will all due respect to your pilot’s abilities, mister, she will be about out of fuel and flying through this damn winter storm to try a carrier night landing on one overheating engine, while our deck is pitching wildly up and down. I advise that we get her close to one of our escort ships and have her bail out.”

“Do you know how long she will survive in this freezing water, with thirty foot waves lashing at her?” Replied Hamilton angrily. Fowler suddenly raised his hand, signaling Hamilton to calm down. The CAG then lowered his voice.

“Is Sanchez wearing a survival suit, Commander?”

Matheson shook his head sadly. Between a near-suicidal attempt at landing and a jump in the furious North Atlantic, Sanchez’s fate was nearly sealed in advance. He thought

about the last time he had met the young Latino beauty at the officer's club in Norfolk. She was a fantastic woman, apart from being a top-notch combat pilot. The CAG's voice brought him back to reality.

"Commander, prepare for an emergency landing."

20:08 (North Atlantic Time)

US Navy F/A-18E SUPER HORNET fighter-bomber

North Atlantic

Carmen Sanchez nearly had to gulp down her stomach when a fierce downdraft made her lose over 300 meters in seconds, only to be shaken madly by turbulences. Fighting the controls of her F/A-18E, she could barely reestablish a roughly straight flight path. This was by far the meanest storm she had encountered in her career. A quick glance at her instruments panel did nothing to reassure her: she had only ten minutes of fuel remaining and her surviving engine was badly overheating and was in danger of catching fire. Looking through her aircraft's canopy, she could see only a pitch-black night lit at intervals by blinding lightning bolts. Only her heads up display made it possible to avoid total spatial disorientation. She was by now drenched in sweat and more than a little apprehensive. Carmen inhaled deeply, trying to relax a bit, then activated her radio.

"Hen House, this is Blue Fox Five. I have ten minutes of fuel remaining and am at 4,000 feet. My last engine is iffy. I request instructions, over."

The reception was barely comprehensible, being badly affected by the electrical storm she was flying through.

"...se, we have... on rad... cleared for land..."

"Blue Fox Five to Hen House, I acknowledge that I am cleared for landing."

A loud horn suddenly erupted in the cockpit, accompanied by an insistent voice from the aircraft audio warning system.

"Warning, fire! Warning, fire! Warning..."

Carmen felt her hair rise on her head. Looking sharply to her left and rear, she saw flames shooting out of her remaining engine.

"Hen House, Hen House, this is Blue Fox Five. I'm on fire! I say again, I'm on fire! Ejecting now!"

Pulling back her legs close to her seat, she pushed her head against the headrest before grabbing the ejection handle between her legs with both hands and pulling it with desperate strength. Her ejection seat's rocket motor blasted her through the Plexiglas canopy and into the 400 knots relative speed air stream. That felt to her like being kicked hard in the bum before hitting a brick wall. Lashed both by cutting winds and hail, she felt rather than saw her seat separate from her and her parachute deploy. Only a few seconds later she hit the icy cold water, diving deeply feet first before she could unclip frantically her parachute harness and swim towards the surface. Breaking the surface, Carmen barely had time to gulp quickly two breaths before a huge wave came crashing on top of her.

20:14 (North Atlantic Time)

USS RONALD REAGAN

"Say again, Blue Fox Five. Blue Fox Five, this is Hen House, say again your last transmission."

The shouts of the air operations chief in his radio microphone were suddenly covered by an alarmed report from the nearby air traffic controller to Commander Matheson.

"Sir, Blue Fox Five just disappeared from my radar screen."

"Keep looking for it."

Matheson then turned towards the duty officer of the watch.

"Alert the PORT ROYAL! Have it break formation and dash towards Blue Fox Five's last known location. Air Ops Chief, scramble the plane guard OSPREY."

"Aye aye, sir!"

The chief picked up a telephone that connected him directly to the HV-122A OSPREY aircraft on plane guard alert on the deck. A short set of orders quickly had the big vertical take-off search and rescue aircraft lift off and head towards Sanchez's suspected crash spot.

20:15 (North Atlantic Time)

North Atlantic

Carmen reemerged again, her energy nearly spent and starting to suffer already from the onset of hypothermia. She realized that she was not going to live for very long.

Tears of frustration and despair came to her eyes: she wanted so much to live. Another huge wave was gathering above her, ready to send her down to the abyss.

“NOOO!”

Right then, she forgot that she was an elite pilot with a distinguished service and combat record. She was now simply a young woman about to die. Something suddenly grabbed her left leg and pulled her down under the surface. A terrorized Carmen barely had time to think about sharks before something was placed over her mouth. Recognizing the shape of a scuba air regulator, she avidly sucked in air, nearly suffocating by forgetting not to breathe through the nose at the same time. She was soon pulled inside an airlock of some sort, with its hatch sliding in place immediately afterwards. As pressurized air chased out the seawater, Carmen, shaking like a leaf and very close to passing out, looked at the one who had saved her. Her blurred vision could only make out a tall silhouette in some kind of diving suit. Two more people entered the airlock as soon as the water was evacuated, grabbing gently Carmen and carrying her in some kind of locker room before putting her down on the floor. A third person, a woman, then spoke to the two bearers in English.

“Mike, Sean, could you leave for a while? We will have to strip her of those wet clothes.”

The two big men quickly left, leaving Carmen alone with the woman and her rescuer. The Puerto-Rican pilot was quickly stripped of her soggy flight suit and underwear before she was dried with towels and wrapped in an electric blanket. The person in the diving suit then presented a small glass full of an amber liquid to Carmen.

“Drink this: it’s a shot of cognac.”

The voice was clearly that of a woman. Carmen thankfully downed the alcohol, the explosion of warmth in her stomach feeling to her like a revival. A steaming cup of coffee was put next in her hands. By now, Carmen’s vision had returned to normal and she could finally look in detail at the two women providing her comfort. The one in the diving suit, her mask now removed, was a tall woman apparently in her early thirties, with medium-length black hair, green eyes and soft Caucasian features. The other woman, dressed in a dark gray uniform covered with large pockets, was a teenager of great beauty with reddish-brown hair and big blue eyes. Carmen felt better just by looking at her: she looked like the type of person you could get to like instantly. The taller woman grabbed Carmen under one arm.

“Let’s move you to a seat. Ingrid, please help me.”

The tall one had a very slight accent that Carmen could not trace. Once she was installed on a padded bench, Carmen looked up and smiled at the two women, her cup of hot coffee still in her hands.

“Thank you very much for saving me. I was damn close to sinking for good.”

The tall stranger nodded, smiling back at her.

“It was a close call alright, Lieutenant Sanchez.”

Carmen then looked around her with curiosity.

“Which submarine is this? I didn’t know that there were women submariners in the Navy.”

The tall one laughed with good humor.

“Submarines! The last bastion of male chauvinism. Actually, Lieutenant, you are not aboard a submarine. This is the Time Patrol scout ship WALKUREN. My name is Nancy Laplante, Chief of Operations of the Time Patrol, and my friend here is my stepdaughter, Ingrid Weiss.”

A rush of blood to her brain nearly made Carmen pass out.

“The...the Time Patrol?”

“Correct, Lieutenant. You were predestined to disappear at sea today. Learning of your fate from future hindsight, I planned this rescue and jumped to this time. I am afraid that, from now on, you will be reported officially as missing and presumed dead at sea. I can however offer you an exciting second life in the future, as an agent of my organization. I already saved many others who were destined to officially die. In fact, one of those people directly requested that you be saved today, along with another aircraft crew now searching for you.”

“Who are you talking about?”

Instead of answering, Laplante looked towards a nearby steel door and shouted.

“Commander Hamilton, you may come in now.”

“Commander Hamilton?” Said Carmen, stunned, while the door slid open and her squadron leader walked in, wearing the same kind of gray uniform as Ingrid Weiss. Hamilton, walking slowly and laboriously, went to her and kissed her on the forehead. Carmen then noticed that his hair had some gray strands.

“Carmen, you can’t know how happy I am to see you safe and sound.”

“But, you are supposed to be on the RONALD REAGAN. What are you doing here? And you look much older than just yesterday.”

“Another me is presently on our carrier, Carmen. I was saved by Nancy Laplante in the year 2053, while I and eight other astronauts were stranded on the Moon. I then told her about you and she agreed to save you, on the condition that you disappeared from this time period.”

Carmen looked suspiciously at him.

“This is somewhat hard to believe, sir. What happened to you anyway? You look very weak, apart from being older.”

Hamilton smiled down to her.

“A normal consequence of spending over a year in low gravity on the Moon. I and the others have had only two weeks since our rescue to recuperate. In fact, the others are still back in the future, under medical care. I came so that you and the others would know that you are not being captured by hostile persons.”

“Others? What others?”

“The crew of the search and rescue OSPREY that is now searching for you. They crashed and disappeared tonight, like you.”

20:34 (North Atlantic Time)

HV-122A OSPREY search and rescue VTOL aircraft

North Atlantic

The OSPREY combat search and rescue aircraft slowed down while its two wingtip engines pivoted to near vertical, letting it fly low and slow over the furious sea, its crew frantically searching in the dark for any trace of Sanchez or of her aircraft. The copilot, Sub-Lieutenant Angie Wells, suddenly yelled over the din of the two giant propellers.

“I have something on the FLIR²! Looks like fuel and debris on the water at two O'clock, distance 600 yards.”

“Good work, Angie!” Replied the pilot, Lieutenant Richard Berkowitz. The OSPREY II was soon over the spot designated by Wells, all its lights on and with four pairs of eyes scanning the surface of the water. Berkowitz sent a short message to the RONALD REAGAN to announce their find, then started an area search pattern. After

² FLIR: Forward Looking Infra-Red

five tense minutes, a scream from the loadmaster, Warrant Mack Turner, made their hearts accelerate.

“Parachute on the surface at nine O’clock!”

“I see it!” Replied the pilot on the intercom. “We may yet get Lieutenant Sanchez out of this cold soup. Petty Officer Crawford, be ready to jump in.”

“Aye, sir!” Responded the S.E.A.L. combat diver, who then quickly put on his scuba gear as Berkowitz maneuvered his aircraft over the white parachute floating on the surface of the stormy sea. Mack Turner looked down at the giant waves and shook his head at Jack Crawford.

“The sea is too strong. Jumping in would be nearly suicidal.”

“So? You want us to turn tail and let Sanchez in there? If I have to jump, I’ll go.” Berkowitz’s voice cut short the argument.

“There is no sign of Sanchez around. She may be trapped under the parachute. Petty Officer Crawford, I’ll have to ask you to go and check it out.”

“I’m ready, sir. Just get a bit lower, so that I can jump.”

“Alright! By the way, we will soon get some help: the cruiser PORT ROYAL will be here in ten minutes.”

“Super! We certainly can use some backup.”

Crawford, after another look down at the sea, yelled again in his intercom.

“Hold it right there, sir. Warrant, be ready with that hoist. I...”

Concentrating their attention on the parachute in the water, the crew of the OSPREY did not see a monstrous wave rise nearby. It crashed down over the right wing and engine nacelle, pulling down the aircraft and shearing away the propeller blades off the left engine. The blades became deadly missiles, with one cutting through the fuselage and cockpit. Jack Crawford, holding on desperately to a structural frame, saw with horror the blade cut Warrant Turner in half before beheading Lieutenant Berkowitz. The OSPREY then hit the water hard and started sinking immediately. Jack, half stunned by the crash, rushed towards the cockpit as water started filling the cabin. He found Angie Wells unconscious, collapsed over her controls and with blood coming from a head wound. Pushing the quick release knob of her seat harness, he dragged her out of the cockpit as quickly as he could. He barely had time to exit the fuselage, still pulling her limp body, before the aircraft sank out of sight. His next move was to inflate her flotation vest, his hands already starting to feel cold despite of his neoprene gloves: Angie was not going to survive more than ten minutes maximum in that icy water. To make matters worse, a

wave came crashing on top of them, separating Jack from Angie. Resurfacing quickly, a desperate Jack searched around for the copilot, without success. Another wave sent him down again. Only the combined buoyancy of his diving suit and of his flotation vest made him resurface again. The furious sea was sapping his energy quickly.

“ANGIE!”

The anguished S.E.A.L. then realized that a large, dark shape now floated overhead in the sky, hiding the stars.

20:55 (North Atlantic Time)

TICONDEROGA Class cruiser USS PORT ROYAL

Captain Purnell had to hold tight to the tactical plot table in order not to be thrown on the deck of his bridge. The ride in this stormy sea was bone jarring, with the whole of the 9,466 tons cruiser shaking as it pounded its way through the waves at the maximum speed possible. He could not see how anybody could survive more than a few minutes in this sea. He however had been ordered to the crash site and would do his best to find the lost pilot. Purnell's executive officer, in constant intercom contact with the ship's C.I.C., suddenly raised his head from the radar scope he was watching.

“We just lost contact with the OSPREY, sir. It is no longer on the radar screen.” Before Purnell could get to the radar scope, the operator manning the forward FLIR sensor yelled in alarm.

“Contact dead ahead! I have a large flying object 4,500 yards away. It is hovering just above the waves, sir.”

“How large is it?” Asked Purnell. The operator hesitated slightly before answering.

“Much larger than our OSPREY, sir. It also has a weird shape to it.” Running to the FLIR station, Purnell looked at the video screen for a moment, then contacted the C.I.C. via the intercom.

“Ops, this is the captain! We have a large, unidentified aircraft hovering over the crash site. Transmit the picture from our forward FLIR to the RONALD REAGAN via data link and record everything from now on.”

Purnell then turned towards his executive officer.

“Commander Mitchell, sound battle stations. We have lost two aircraft already over that spot. Also, challenge that contact by radio and order him to identify himself.”

After two nerve-wracking minutes, the signals officer reported via the intercom.

“Nothing, Captain! They either are not listening, which would be very surprising, or they are clamming up.”

“Very well! Advise the RONALD REAGAN that the unknown contact is refusing to identify itself. Radar, how come we don’t see that thing on our radar screens?”

“I don’t know, sir! It must be using highly effective stealth technology, sir.”

Mitchell, having looked at the FLIR screen, approached Purnell.

“I’ve never seen anything like this, Captain. I advise extreme caution.”

“I agree! This customer has no obvious business here and is sitting over the grave of two of our aircraft. Lock all weapons on this contact, but wait for my command to fire.”

The signals officer then reported again.

“Captain, Admiral Curtiss is ordering the task force to go to ‘Weapons Free’ status. We are to fire warning shots to force the contact to identify itself, then shoot it down if we don’t get an answer.”

Purnell jumped on the intercom right away.

“Ops, fire a warning shot on the unknown contact with the forward five inch gun.”

Seconds later, a bright flash and a loud detonation announced the first shot of the encounter. The reaction of the unknown contact was swift.

“Sir, we are being jammed on all radar and radio frequencies. We can’t get through it but it is coming from the contact.”

Purnell digested that report for a few seconds, then nodded his head.

“Alright, they leave us no choice. Link the forward five-inch gun to the FLIR director and fire at will. Fire two SM-3 missiles from the aft magazine on home-on-jam mode.”

21:06 (North Atlantic Time)

Crash site, North Atlantic

Jack Crawford, his hands and face now numb, was still being trashed around on the surface of the sea when a flash and a loud explosion nearby caught him by surprise. Similar explosions soon followed every three seconds, telling him that the unknown craft above him was being shot at by a five-inch gun. However, the shells were detonating just short of the craft, as if stopped by an invisible wall. A blinding blue-green beam of

light suddenly sizzled from the craft, followed closely by a second beam. Two distant explosions were then heard. Jack gulped down hard as he stared at the massive craft above him.

“Damn, these buggers have high power lasers.”

His attention was suddenly attracted to a light approaching from above. Somebody was coming for him.

“HERE! I’M HERE!”

Someone splashed in the water besides him, then started fitting some kind of harness on him. A female voice came from the now visible shape in a diving suit glued to him.

“Just let yourself go, sailor. I will drag you up to safety as soon as this harness is in place.”

“Who are you? What is that craft above?”

“I’ll explain later. Your female shipmate is already on board of my ship and is being treated. She will make it. We also saved Lieutenant Sanchez.”

Jack felt immense relief at those words.

“Thank you, whoever you are.”

“Don’t thank me yet, sailor.” Was the woman’s curt reply. Jack suddenly felt himself lifting out of the water, his rescuer still glued to his back.

21:08 (North Atlantic Time)

USS PORT ROYAL

“These bastards have high power lasers!” Exclaimed Commander Mitchell.
“They were able to shoot down our missiles.”

Purnell, now very uneasy, turned towards the FLIR operator.

“Is our gunfire having any effect?”

“No, sir! Our shells are exploding short of the target, as if they are hitting an invisible wall.”

“Damn! Are we fighting off the fucking Starship ENTERPRISE or what? Is all of this being recorded?”

“Yes sir!”

“Keep it on! Commander Mitchell, I want saturation missile fire on that thing.”

“Aye, sir!”

More missiles soon erupted from the aft magazine, but at a rate of one missile every three seconds this time. Purnell and the rest of the bridge crew clearly saw straight rods of blue-green light stab repeatedly the night sky, intercepting and detonating the STANDARD SM-3 surface-to-air missiles of the PORT ROYAL. Fired at a dizzying cadence, the laser beams got closer and closer to the cruiser, with the exploding missiles soon rocking the ship. One exploding missile blew up close enough to send fragments that shattered a few bridge viewing ports.

“CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE! We are going to blow ourselves up at this rate.”

Before Purnell could give another order, a blinding beam struck the ship directly above the bridge. The forward FLIR operator jumped out of his seat.

“SIR, THEY JUST SHOT OUT OUR FORWARD FLIR DIRECTOR!”

21:10 (North Atlantic Time)

Time Patrol scoutship WALKUREN

North Atlantic

Jack Crawford and his rescuer finally flew in the craft through a wide rear cargo ramp, ending inside a fairly large cargo bay lit by combat red lights. Jack could see three women busy stripping an inert Angie Wells of her wet clothes, while a fourth one was applying a bandage to her bleeding head. He also saw with a jump of his heart Lieutenant Sanchez, wrapped in a blanket and sitting on one of the jump seats lining the sides of the cargo bay, a man by her side. All the strangers wore dark gray uniforms unfamiliar to Jack. He and his rescuer touched down near the group taking care of Angie Wells. Forgetting about his frozen hands, Jack went to the OSPREY copilot, eyeing her anxiously. One of the women attending her, a young woman with blond hair, looked up at him and smiled reassuringly.

“Don’t worry about your shipmate: she is unconscious but breathing regularly and her head wound is not actually serious. She will be better once warmed up.”

“Thank you, miss.”

Jack couldn’t help stare as Angie was stripped of all her clothes before being dried and wrapped in a blanket: the male pilots on the RONALD REAGAN were tripping over themselves to date the tall, beautiful California blonde. Jack, now reassured about Angie, went to Carmen Sanchez, who got up from her seat. Someone had given her a gray uniform similar to that worn by the man standing beside her. That man immediately

caught Jack's undivided attention: he had a strong family resemblance to him and was also staring back, surprise and wonderment on his face.

"Do I know you, sir?" Asked Jack hesitantly.

"I doubt so. My name is Mike Crawford. And you are?"

"Petty Officer Second Class Jack Crawford, U.S. Navy S.E.A.L.s."

The big stranger, standing even taller than Jack's 188 centimeters frame, swallowed hard while still staring.

"Who...who was your paternal grandfather?"

"Er, Patrick. Why?"

"And what was the first name of your paternal great grandfather?"

Totally confused by now, Jack answered without thinking.

"John, I believe. Yeah, his name was John. He died on our family ranch in Havre, Montana, when I was still young."

To Jack's and Sanchez's utter surprise, the stranger in front of them broke down in tears and hugged Jack.

"Jack, your great grandfather John was my brother. You are my great grand-nephew."

Jack's rescuer, a tall woman with black hair and green eyes, stared at him with her mouth wide open, then smiled at Mike Crawford.

"Well, I'll be damned! This mission is an even bigger success than I hoped for."

"What mission?" Exploded Jack. "Who are you anyway?"

Mike Crawford patted his shoulder, grinning from ear to ear.

"It's a long story, Jack. Once you take off this diving suit, we will have a long talk together."

07:11 (Eastern Standard Time)

Friday, March 5, 2021 'A'

Married Quarters, U.S. Navy base

Norfolk, Virginia

United States

Lynda Crawford picked up the local base newspaper from the mailbox of her small, modest military house and went back inside, the cold March wind making her shiver in her bathrobe. She went back to the kitchen, where three year-old Steve was

eating his porridge in his high chair. Her son glanced at her as she sat down in her rocking chair, then went back at playing with his breakfast. Lynda was too depressed to call him to order. Unfolding the newspaper, she scanned quickly the titles. One article was briefly recapitulating what was called officially a tragic accident that had claimed five navy lives. From the embarrassed looks and evasive explanations from Jack's comrades, whose carrier had returned early to port two days ago, Lynda had guessed that there was a lot more to it than the official story said. For one thing, she had heard a number of gossips at the base hairstyling salon, where she was working, about navy yard workers having to repair some kind of battle damage to the cruiser PORT ROYAL. Even more troubling was the rumor that over twenty of its anti-aircraft missiles had been fired in anger. Turning the pages of the newspaper, Lynda found the obituary section, where five small pictures were accompanied by brief texts. She couldn't restraint her tears as she looked at the picture of Jack, taken years ago in his dress uniform, an impressive row of medals on his chest. Putting down the paper, she thought gloomily about what she would do with her life now. The most important thing was to provide as normal a life as possible to little Steve, who was still too young to realize the extent of his loss. One thing was clear to Lynda: she was not going to stay on this base. It would only remind her of Jack's loss. Besides, while polite and supportive for the moment, Lynda knew that it would take only weeks before the base administration started treating her like a burden and forced her out of her military housing, in order to make place for another Navy family. Her father-in-law, Daniel Crawford, had already called to offer her to move to the Crawford's family farm near Havre, Montana. The more she thought about it, the more she was tempted to accept that offer.

09:11 (Eastern Standard Time)

Monday, March 8, 2021 'A'

Married Quarters, U.S. Navy base

Norfolk, Virginia

"Where are we going, Mommy?" Asked for the tenth time Steve as Lynda strapped him to his car safety seat.

"We are going to visit grandpa's farm, dear. There are a lot of horses there, along with cows and chickens."

"Will I be able to play with them, Mommy?"

“Of course you will. Now, be patient while I talk to our visitor.”

Closing the front right door of her old Pontiac Sunfire, she turned to face the Navy petty officer sent by the base to collect the keys to her house. The man saluted her after accepting the keys.

“Have a good trip, maam. If you have any problems with the moving truck, don’t hesitate to call us. Again, I’m truly sorry for your loss, maam.”

“Thank you! Have a good day.”

Lynda then got in her car and drove off, not bothering to look back at what had been their house for three years.

19:28 (Eastern Standard Time)

Thirty kilometers West of Huntington

West Virginia

Lynda promised herself to find a motel once in Huntington, on the state border with Kentucky: she was dead tired from the long day of driving, it was pitch dark and a cold rain made the driving even more difficult and treacherous. Thankfully, little Steve was sleeping in his safety seat, sparing her more stress. She was approaching a bridge spanning a small river when the headlights illuminated someone standing on the side of the road. Lynda quickly rejected the idea of picking up the hitchhiker: she was alone with an infant at night in a place she didn’t know. Her car was about to pass by the hitchhiker when she applied brutally the brakes, her heart jumping in her chest: the hitchhiker was her husband Jack! The braking woke up Steve, who started whining as the car stopped.

“Mommy, I want to get out.”

Lynda did not answer, looking aft instead. Jack was running towards them and was nearly to the car. She could see that she had not been mistaken. As impossible as it seemed, it was really Jack out there. Opening her door and stepping out, Lynda ran to meet him, throwing herself in his arms and covering him with kisses. He kissed her back while hugging her.

“Jack, how could you be alive? I was told that you went missing at sea.”

“It’s a long story, Lynda. I will tell you everything soon. First, let me see Steve.”

Jack, Lynda behind him, went to their Pontiac Sunfire and opened the front passenger door.

“DADDY!”

Taking his little son out of his seat, Jack hugged him for long seconds, both ignoring the rain that was still falling. A tall woman wearing a gray uniform and a black helmet then walked out of the woods bordering the road and joined the small family by the side of the car. Lynda tensed up at her sight.

“Jack, who is that woman?”

Her husband smiled reassuringly as he pointed the stranger.

“Lynda, this is Nancy Laplante, the one who saved my life at sea. She also saved two of the four others who officially died with me.”

“Jack, you don’t make much sense. Why didn’t you simply return to the base in Norfolk?”

“Because your husband is officially dead according to history, Misses Crawford.” Answered the woman. “He would actually be really dead if I had not traveled through time to save him and the others. I offered him a brand new life for your family in the future and Jack accepted. I know that this is the kind of decision best taken as a couple, but dead men normally have little choice in their destiny. It was that or a life of sad solitude for you. Before you ask, the Navy has nothing to do with this.”

“Then, who do you work for?” Said an overwhelmed Lynda.

“I am Chief of Operations of the Time Patrol, which operates from the year 3384. I also happen to be married to Mike Crawford, Jack’s great grand-uncle. He also works for me. Now, we have to complete the disappearing act of your family. Jack, please take out your wife’s luggage from the car.”

Watched by a confused Lynda, to whom Jack had given back Steve, her husband quickly took out the four suitcases and three boxes filling the trunk and the backseat of the car. A sort of metallic crate then appeared out of nowhere near the car, making Lynda gasp in shock. Nancy Laplante opened it and took out of it a collection of used suitcases, which Jack then put in the trunk. Laplante then put Lynda’s luggage inside the crate and closed it. The crate vanished in a flash of white light a few seconds later. With the trunk left open, Laplante took place behind the steering wheel of the car and drove off before Lynda could protest. To Lynda’s horror, the car sped towards the bridge but veered off the road just before getting on it and fell down the steep slope of the riverbank, splashing in the river. It then sank in seconds. Lynda didn’t see Laplante come out of it.

“My god! Was she mad? Why did she kill herself?”

“Don’t worry about me, Misses Crawford. I am fine.”

Laplante’s voice in her back made Lynda turn around abruptly to look with incomprehension at her.

“How...”

“I will explain later, once we are out of this cold rain. Follow me, please.”

Just as Laplante said that, a big craft appeared out of nowhere, twenty meters away on the road. Lynda couldn’t help stop, stunned by this. Jack patted gently her shoulder.

“Don’t be afraid, Lynda. You will love this new life of ours.”

20:36 (Berlin Time)

Monday, June 30, 1941 ‘B’

Room 217, senior prisoners quarters

Colditz Castle, Germany

William Anderson was writing a letter to his wife Kathleen, sitting at the old table of his room with Mark Lindsay, who was reading a book, when someone behind him put a hand on his left shoulder. Taken by surprise, like Lindsay, Anderson nearly jumped out of his chair and looked behind. His eyes popped wide open at the sight of Nancy Laplante, dressed in a sort of gray uniform and wearing a complicated-looking black helmet.

“Hello, Major. I need to speak to you and Squadron Leader Lindsay, if you don’t mind.”

“What are you doing here, Brigadier? You are supposed to be in Berlin.”

“I was...for a few hours. I will explain later. Now, we have an emergency at hand and we must move fast. Colditz is about to be bombed to rubble, with both the prisoners and all the Germans around due to be killed in the incoming raid. I traveled through time to save as many people as possible in the time we have left.”

Anderson glanced at the shoulder patch on Nancy’s uniform, reading the words ‘Time Patrol’ on it before looking back at her and swallowing hard.

“You are serious, are you?”

“Deadly serious. I must start evacuating everybody discreetly and without delay. Hold on to this firmly.”

She gave him a cylindrical object the size of a grenade, then passed another one to Lindsay.

“I will see you in a short while, both of you.”

Before either man could speak, they disappeared from where they sat. Nancy started heading for the door of the room, but nearly bumped into Lieutenant Colonel Robertson as he entered the room. Anger and hatred flashed in the eyes of the British on seeing her.

“YOU, HERE? WHAT THE DEVIL...”

He couldn't finish his sentence, as Nancy grabbed him by the collar and, lifting him clear off the floor, slammed him hard against the wall, holding him up there.

“Listen, you moron! I am here to save lives, not to waste time listening to your stupid accusations. I should leave you here to die for all the wrongs you did to me, but I will save you anyway.”

She then touched his forehead with two fingers of her left hand. Robertson jerked once, then became limp. Putting him down on the floor, Nancy then laid a transit probe on his belly and activated it. The man disappeared after a few seconds. Nancy's next step was to go to Jim Milner's room, ignoring the incredulous looks of the three prisoners she met in the hallway. She found Milner absorbed in a poker game with Samuel Goldman, Sven Larsen, Fernand Brunet and Jan Nierman. All five men looked up at her as if she was a witch. She held up an authoritative hand before they could say anything.

“Hold on to your questions, guys. We have an emergency and I must evacuate you as quickly as possible before this place is bombed to rubble in less than half a hour by the RAF.”

Nancy then took five transit probes from the carrying pouch slung across one shoulder and distributed them, activating them as each man got one of the probes.

“Hold on to these: they will transport you to safety.”

“But I want to go with you.” Said Milner sheepishly, making Nancy smile.

“You will, Jim.” She said just before the American disappeared, followed shortly by the others. Next, Nancy went up to the top floor, where Jean Bigras and the other junior rank prisoners were accommodated. She found the Frenchman besides his bunk bed, shining his boots. Silence fell in the room as she approached the young man, who looked at her as if she was an angel.

“You are here to take me with you, Madame?”

“I am, Jean. You are coming with me to the future. Take this.”

A concert of exclamations from the two dozen other prisoners greeted the disappearance of Bigras. Nancy went to a nearby table and signaled the prisoners to gather around her, then spoke in her helmet microphone.

“Send a box of transit probes to my location. Set them for London.”

Her next words were for the prisoners around her.

“Listen up carefully and please keep quiet. Your lives may depend on it. Colditz is about to be flattened by a fleet of British bombers and I am here to evacuate you to safety. I will soon distribute to each of you a small object that you will have to hang on to until it has transported you out of here, the same way you saw Corporal Bigras go. You will find yourselves in London, England, but two days in the future.”

“Why two days, maam?” Asked a British RAF flight sergeant, as exclamations ran around the large room.

“So as to avoid a time paradox with other events about to unfold. Once you find yourselves in London, step away from your emergence point and let go the probe I will give you, unless you want to experience an electric shock. You will then be free to report back to your respective commands...and your families.”

Big grins and cheers greeted those last words. She repeated her instructions in Dutch, French and Polish for good measure. By the time she was finished, a metallic container had appeared in midair, floating down silently to land on top of the table. Opening the container, Nancy made the prisoners line up in order to distribute the transit probes, making sure that each prisoner stepped away from the others before activating his probe and disappearing. In mere minutes, all the prisoners were gone, leaving Nancy alone with the container and seven leftover probes. Those were quickly distributed to other prisoners on the next floor down. Sending the container back repeatedly to have it refilled with probes, Nancy methodically emptied the building of its occupants in less than fifteen minutes. Her next stop was the castle's infirmary, where she appeared in front of a few sick prisoners and of one German medic. The German immediately fell on his knees before her, awe on his face.

“You are back, Brigadier! We were hoping that you would.”

“Thank you, Obergefreiter Hirsh. Your faith is touching. I will actually need your help in order to save the lives of your comrades.”

“Ask anything of me, Brigadier”

Smiling down gently to the man, Nancy spent a minute giving him instructions, then handed him a probe.

“Remember: you must advise and orient the people as they will appear in the open field. They will be disoriented and confused and will need reassurance, especially the old ones and the children.”

“I will do my best, Brigadier.” Said the German softly, getting a nod from Nancy, who spoke this time in her helmet microphone.

“Probe 49 to coordinates Delta. Activate now!”

Once the German medic was gone, Nancy took care of the sick prisoners, sending them on their way to London. The last patient had just disappeared when she received a radio message.

“HERMES to Nancy: the British bombers are approaching. We may have about six more minutes before they are on top of Colditz.”

“Damn! I am far from finished here. How are you doing with the citizens of the town?”

“We have safely transferred over 1,359 persons up to now. Our probe controllers are working as fast as they possibly can, but we would need more time to get everyone out.”

“Keep at it as long as possible. I will take care of the castle’s garrison. Send me a full container of probes.”

“On its way.”

As promised, a container materialized beside her less than a minute later. Grabbing the container’s carrying handle, Nancy lifted it and walked out in the inner courtyard. Luck was with her, as she saw Colonel Schmidt crossing the lit courtyard, doing his usual pre-curfew inspection with two soldiers. Deciding that she had to take some risk at this point if she wanted to accomplish at least part of her goals, Nancy walked resolutely towards Schmidt, crossing the open space of the courtyard in full view of the roof sentries manning machineguns.

“COLONEL SCHMIDT, I NEED TO SPEAK TO YOU URGENTLY!”

The commandant turned around and stared in utter surprise at Nancy.

“Brigadier Laplante? But, you are supposed to be in Berlin. What...”

Schmidt then noticed the pistols on her belt and the weird shape of her helmet. His hand went for his own pistol, while the two soldiers escorting him started pointing their rifles. Nancy held one hand up while still walking towards them.

“I am here to save your men’s lives, Colonel. Hear me out, please! We have very little time before a fleet of British bombers arrives to flatten Colditz.”

Hesitating for a moment, Schmidt then ordered his soldiers to lower their rifles.

“Bombers? What are you talking about?”

“I am talking about the bombers the British sent here with the mission to kill me, so that I couldn’t give away their precious secrets. I traveled through time to come here and to save as many lives as I can tonight. I can help save your men, but you will have to show blind confidence in me.”

“What tells me that this is not a trick to help break the prisoners out?”

“I could have sent them away without needing to expose myself like this, Colonel. In fact, the prisoners have already been evacuated by some friends of mine, along with close to 1,400 of the town’s inhabitants. The evacuation of civilians is continuing as we speak, using remotely-controlled time machines.”

Schmidt’s face hardened when she said that the prisoners were gone.

“And how am I supposed to explain to Berlin that I let all my prisoners escape just on the strength of your story, Brigadier? They will want to know why I didn’t even try to arrest you.”

“You can tell them that any attempt to take me or to kill me would have resulted in your precious Führer finding himself transported instantly to London.”

Nancy then disappeared from where she stood, reappearing a few meters behind Schmidt and the soldiers.

“Just like this, Colonel.”

The three Germans jumped and turned around, staring at her with disbelief.

“How did you do that?” Exclaimed Schmidt.

“The same way I intend to transport your men to safety. Can’t you hear the British bombers now? I assure you that they will leave nothing standing in Colditz by the time they are finished, Colonel.”

Schmidt listened for a moment and effectively heard the faint buzz of hundreds of aircraft piston engines approaching. Looking back at Nancy, he nodded his head once.

“Alright, I believe you. How do you want to proceed?”

“Have one man gather as quickly as possible your garrison in the outer courtyard, from where they will be transported to safety via time transfer probes. They must get out at once, even if they are in the showers, naked: their lives will depend on that.”

Schmidt immediately looked at one of the soldiers standing beside him.

“Gefreiter Wankel, do as Brigadier Laplante said! I want everybody out in the outer courtyard without delay.”

“Yawol, Herr Colonel!” Replied the soldier, saluting before leaving at a dead run. Nancy then handed a probe to the remaining soldier.

“Press the red button on top of this object, soldier.”

The German did so and disappeared from where he stood two seconds later. Schmidt, fighting off his bewilderment, called to him the two sentries present in the inner courtyard, so that Nancy could give them transit probes. Once those two men were gone, Nancy and Schmidt ran to the main gate of the courtyard, where the German officer shouted urgently at the outside sentry to open the door. That sentry and another German standing along the parapet were next to disappear. Standing next to the door of the guardhouse flanking the main gate, Nancy handed out transit probes as the German soldiers inside ran out, urged on by Schmidt. Nine more Germans were sent to safety before Nancy, followed by Schmidt, ran towards the gate giving access to the outer courtyard. By that time, the noise of dozens of heavy bombers approaching fast now filled the evening sky. Handing a probe to the sentry standing at the outer gate, Nancy ran inside the outer courtyard, to find about twenty German soldiers milling around in utter confusion, with more soldiers rushing out every second. She saw old Feldwebel Buhlingen, who was trying to put some order in the growing group of soldiers, and ran to him. German anti-aircraft batteries around the castle were now firing away for all their worth. Looking at her first with surprise, then with happiness, Buhlingen saluted Nancy crisply as she braked to a halt in front of him.

“Brigadier, it is nice to see you here again...”

“Thanks, Feldwebel, but we have only seconds left before the British start bombing this place to rubble. Take this and hold on to it until you are transported to safety.”

Nancy pressed herself the activation button of a probe before handing it to Buhlingen. She was already handing another probe to a young soldier as the feldwebel disappeared. Handing out probes at a feverish pace, she emptied her container in less than half a minute. That left however two soldiers and Colonel Schmidt still standing beside her. Swearing to herself, she called the HERMES via radio.

“HERMES, I am out of probes, with three men still to transport. Send me more probes right away!”

The voice of Mona Zirel, sounding urgent, answered her.

“We are out of time, Nancy. The first bombs are on their way. Get out, now!”

“I’m not leaving anyone behind.” Replied Nancy before looking at Schmidt and the two soldiers. “Hug me, quickly!”

“What?” Said Schmidt, astonished.

“Hug me, now, all of you!”

The three Germans did so, too surprised to argue further. Not even knowing if her implanted time distorter had the power to transport such a mass, Nancy concentrated while pressing the three men against her. She managed to levitate slowly off the ground before giving the mental order to her implanted computer to jump to coordinates Delta. The four of them disappeared barely a half second before the first bomb detonated inside the castle’s walls.

03:31 (Berlin Time)

Wednesday, July 2, 1941 ‘B’

Open field, six kilometers South of Colditz

Germany

They reappeared in the middle of an open field, still in the dark of the night. Floating down to the ground, Nancy then released her grip on the three Germans. Schmidt sucked air in while holding his ribs.

“Himmel! You are incredibly strong, Brigadier.”

He then looked around and saw hundreds of other people, mostly civilians, milling around in the dark and talking in German to each other in the middle of what looked like a farmer’s field.

“Where are we, Brigadier?”

“In a field about six kilometers south of Colditz. This is the early morning of Wednesday, July 2, 1941. We jumped ahead in time by thirty hours, to avoid creating a time paradox.”

“And Colditz?”

Nancy pointed North, where fires were still visible in the distance.

“What little is left of the town is still burning. As for the castle, there is nothing left of it but smoldering rubble. Berlin still thinks that everyone here in this field is dead, cremated in the ruins of Colditz. Dawn will come in about two hours, at which time you

will be able to collect the survivors and lead them back to the town. Luftwaffe troops are still fighting off the fires there and will be able to assist you.”

Nancy looked around at the civilians and soldiers in the field and shook her head in sadness.

“We were not able to save even the majority of the population of Colditz. Thousands died because of me.”

Schmidt patted her shoulder gently.

“Don’t be so rough on yourself, Brigadier: the British are to blame, not you. Any other prisoner but you wouldn’t have given even a second thought about the citizens of Colditz, let alone about my men. I am in your debt, like all the other Germans here now.”

“I only did the decent thing to do, Herr Schmidt. It still wasn’t enough. How about organizing those people before panic sets in?”

“Good idea! Let me do that.”

Nancy, drained by her last rescue, stood and watched as Schmidt started yelling orders, assembling his soldiers and giving directives to the civilians, the great majority of whom were women and children. After five minutes, Schmidt had the lot moved to the side of the secondary road running North-South alongside the field. Nancy approached him then.

“Colonel, I would actually have a favor to ask from you, if you don’t mind.”

“We owe you our lives, Brigadier. You would have the right to ask anything, actually.”

Nancy smiled weakly, lowering her head for a moment before looking back at him.

“This may sound strange, but I would like to speak to one of your soldiers: Schütze³ Michel Hofmann.”

“Hofmann?” Said Schmidt, clearly surprised. “But he is my youngest, least experienced soldier. Why are you interested in him?”

“Because he is young actually, apart from being an intelligent and caring person. To tell the truth, I have started recruiting young people with potential for my own organization, both Germans and non-Germans. Those people will in turn go to the future with me and help me preserve and protect history.”

Schmidt thought that over for a long moment. Young Private Hofmann had been one of his soldiers wounded in the first British raid on Colditz and had been healed by Laplante.

³ Schütze : Private

As his commander, Schmidt knew the young man as a shy, reserved teenager whose cultured tastes were more typical of those found in a university than in a Wehrmacht unit. He also knew from reports from Feldwebel Buhlingen that Hofmann was in awe of Nancy Laplante, something not very surprising or even uncommon in light of the events of the last few days.

“I suppose that you want to recruit my soldier into your organization, Brigadier?”

“Correct, Colonel. One less soldier won’t be a big thing for you, but he could mean a lot to me.”

“Letting him go could brand me as a traitor, Brigadier.”

“Welcome to the club, Colonel. Look, you could declare him missing during the bombing. This is a chance for a new, exciting life for him, a life where he would be able to help all of Humanity through time.”

“Alright, you can have a talk with him, in private.”

“Thank you, Colonel. You are a nice man.”

“And you are...hell, I don’t even know anymore what you are, except that you are both brave and most decent.”

“I am a woman, nothing more.”

Schmidt bowed his head in respect, then called in Feldwebel Buhlingen to tell him to find and bring discreetly Private Hofmann to him. The old soldier was soon back with the teenager, who saluted both Schmidt and Nancy crisply.

“Private Hofmann, reporting as ordered, sir!”

“At ease, Private. Brigadier Laplante wished to speak to you. Listen to her, then you may do as you wish. Do you understand?”

“Er, yes sir!” Said hesitantly the blond teenager. He stared at Nancy in silence as Schmidt and Buhlingen walked away, leaving them alone. She looked in turn at the handsome, tall blue-eyed boy, and smiled.

“You told me once that you would like to be able to go to the future with me, Private. This is your chance. Colonel Schmidt has agreed to let you go and will declare you missing and presumed killed in the bombing. The decision is now yours. If this could help you, I can tell you that a number of other Germans, both men and women, have already enlisted in my organization. There are also a number of non-Germans in my group. So, what is your decision?”

The young man swallowed hard, overwhelmed by all the recent events. He however had dreamed too much about such a moment to say no to her offer.

"I want to go with you, Brigadier."

"Good! From now on, call me Nancy, Michel."

"Yes, Brig...I mean, Nancy."

"Alright, go give your rifle and web gear to Feldwebel Buhlingen, then come back to me."

As the teenager ran away, Nancy called the HERMES through a time relay probe positioned above the nearby field.

"HERMES, this is Nancy. I am at coordinates Delta. I request a pickup for me and one passenger."

"Nancy, thank the stars! We thought that you had been killed. Are you alright?"

"Of course I am. Feel free to bring the HERMES to my location. By the way, give my appreciations to our probe controllers: they did a first rate job."

"The word will be passed. We will be there shortly."

Following that conversation, Nancy went to Schmidt, where she was joined by Michel Hoffmann, and shook hands with the senior officer.

"I sincerely hope that you and your men survive this war and get to enjoy peace again, Colonel Schmidt. You were always the perfect gentleman."

"And you the perfect angel, Brigadier."

"A more accurate title would be 'The Hand of The One', Colonel. I only promote his word on this sad world. Before Private Hoffmann and I go, could I ask you to tell your men to hold their fire for a while? My ship is going to pick us up shortly."

"Count on me, miss."

Schmidt then faced Hoffmann and shook his hand.

"Good luck in your new life, Private Hoffmann. I truly envy you."

"Thank you, sir!"

Nancy and the young soldier then walked away, following the road south for a while before going off it and walking in the farmer's field. Stopping about fifty meters from the road, Nancy then activated the time beacon transmitter integrated to her helmet. The large, thirty meter-long ovoid shape of the heavy time shuttle HERMES appeared in a flash of white light 30 seconds later over their heads. The ship then landed silently twenty meters from them, its navigational lights illuminating its markings on its gray hull. A cargo ramp wide enough for two trucks lowered to the ground at the rear, revealing a cargo bay lit by red lights. Nancy pointed the opening to Hoffmann.

"After you, Michel."

The teenager didn't have to be told twice, nearly running to the ship in excitement. Going up the ramp at a trot, they were met in the cargo bay by Mona Zirel. The young, beautiful giant looked down in appreciation at the blond-haired young German, who in turn eyed her with fascination.

"Decidedly, Nancy, you have good tastes. This ancestor's hair does add character to your people, too."

"Thanks! May I present you Michel Hoffmann, our newest recruit. Michel, this is Mona Zirel, an engineer from the year 3384. Don't worry about her height: all the people of the 34th century are bald giants."

Michel, eyeing discreetly the shapely body of Mona, shook hands with her before following Nancy deeper inside the cargo bay. The eight workstations in the forward part of the cargo bay were unmanned, but eight men were waiting besides them, escorted by Mike Crawford. Mike was armed with a stun pistol, just in case trouble flared up. Michel Hoffmann hesitated at the sight of the eight ex-prisoners from Colditz, who in turn eyed him with some suspicion.

"Come on, guys!" Said Nancy in a friendly tone. "You all know that Private Hoffmann is a decent fellow. Besides, the war is finished for him."

"What about us?" Asked Mark Lindsay, still not knowing what Nancy's plans for them were. "Are you returning us to England?"

"It will depend on you, actually. Michel has accepted to come to the future to work for me. I was hoping that you would do the same and start a new, exciting life in the year 3384. I can guarantee good pay, excellent benefits, top-notch equipment and lots of danger."

"Sounds like what I want out of life." Replied Jim Milner, smiling. "Are there lots of girls available too?"

"Tons, especially if you don't mind German women."

"Hey, I'm not a racist."

"Good! If you turn out to be one, I would then be forced to boot you back to 1941. That applies to all of you and is a very serious point with me. I selected you as possible recruits because you proved to be tolerant and intelligent people, up to now. If you accept to work for me, you will then live in a society where racism, intolerance and brutality are not accepted. You will have to adapt and to accept things that you may find questionable in normal time, like open sexuality and lack of belief in any religion. If you think that this is not for you, tell me now and I will drop you with the others in London. I

know that you are all either single men or widowers, except for William Anderson, so family ties are probably not a serious factor. As for you, William, know that I will be happy to bring your family to the future if you and your wife wish so. What do you say, guys?”

“Count me in!” Said Milner without hesitation, closely followed by Jean Bigras, Sven Larsen, Jan Nierman and Samuel Goldman. After some thinking, Fernand Brunet and Mark Lindsay also said yes. William Anderson’s decision was a much tougher one to take.

“Nancy, your offer is extremely tempting, but I don’t know what my wife Kathleen will say about this. I also have a daughter and a son to think about. What will happen to them if I decide to go to the future?”

“They will keep going to school and live a normal life, but in a place where war has not been known for 500 years. They will also have a chance to do things that no children in 1941 could even dream of doing, like visiting the outer planets of the Solar System. Think of their future as much as of yours, William.”

“Damn, I would say yes if I would be alone. I will need to talk with my wife about that before taking a decision, though.”

“You will have a chance to do that soon, I promise. Now, let’s go forward to the passengers lounge, where we will be more comfortable.”

The heavy shuttle, its rear cargo ramp now closed, was lifting off as they entered the lounge. The fifteen persons inside took their eyes from the video screens lining the walls that had been showing them the outside world and examined the newcomers. Ingrid Weiss and Johanna Fink immediately made a place between them for Michel Hoffmann to sit down, smiling invitingly at him. The eight Allied ex-prisoners were greeted with polite reserve, though, and sat opposite the Germans. Nancy didn’t sit with either group, standing instead in the middle of the lounge so that everyone could see her plainly. Mona Zirel joined her there, towering over her by two heads.

“For your information, this ship is about to go to London. After seeing if the family of Major Anderson accepts to come with us, we will collect a few more agents from this century, then call it a day and depart for the future. While I am on the ground, you will be able to follow the action on the wall video screens of this lounge. If you need anything in the meantime, just ask my friend Mona here.”

Having said that in German, she then repeated herself in English and French before leaving the lounge yet again, going up via a spiral staircase this time. Seconds later, a

flash of light permeated the lounge for an instant. The view on the screens changed abruptly from the darkness of the countryside near Colditz to a high altitude daylight view of London. Mark Lindsay waited nervously for the black clouds from exploding anti-aircraft shells to appear but nothing came, prompting him to look questioningly at Mona.

“How come the London defenses are not reacting to us, miss?”

“Because they can’t detect us, mister. This ship is invisible to radar and is too high up to be seen with the naked eye. The pictures you will soon see from the ground will be relayed via a miniature spy probe.”

12:06 (GMT)

Tuesday, July 1, 1941 ‘B’

Rented apartment

Sutherland Avenue, Paddington District

London

The small woman in her early thirties opened her mouth in stunned surprise at the sight of the visitor at her door, then threw herself in the man’s arms.

“WILLIAM! You’re free at last!”

“I am, Kathleen.” Said William Anderson, sobs of joy choking his voice. “Are the kids home?”

“Yes, they are. We were about to have lunch. God, they are going to be so happy. Come!”

Closing the door behind him, William crossed the short hallway and entered the dining room, which also served as a kitchen. The twelve year-old girl and ten year-old boy sitting at the table looked at him as if he was a ghost.

“FATHER!” Shouted in unison Carolyn and Michael before jumping out of their seats and throwing themselves in William’s arms. He savored that moment for a long time, kissing and holding them, before guiding them back to the table, where he himself took a seat. Kathleen looked at him expectantly while holding an empty plate.

“Are you hungry? We were having some potatoes and corned beef.”

“I will have some with pleasure, dear.”

Kathleen quickly served him, then sat beside him. The four of them ate in silence for a few seconds before Kathleen spoke to William.

“So, how did you get out of Colditz? Did you escape or did they do a prisoner exchange?”

“I escaped with the help of Brigadier Laplante, along with many others.”

That got both his wife and his children excited.

“Nancy Laplante raided Colditz?” Asked Carolyn, bringing an embarrassed smile on her father’s face.

“Actually, Nancy Laplante was captured by the Germans a week ago and sent to Colditz. Then, something happened and the Germans decided to send her back to Berlin. From there, she escaped to the future and returned with a time ship, which she used to take me and others away from Colditz.”

“A time ship?” Said softly Kathleen, awed. “How did she get back to the future in the first place?”

“Some people from the far future came to take her back to her time. She has however decided to work for these people and has started an organization called the Time Patrol, which will patrol time and protect history from illegal manipulations.”

“Sounds like a fine idea to me. One would not want some lunatics to rewrite history whichever way they wanted.” Said Kathleen.

“Father, what happened in Colditz to make the Germans send Nancy Laplante back to Berlin? It was not to hurt her, I hope?” Cut in Carolyn.

William looked down fondly at his daughter. She was a bright girl with long black hair and promised to become a beautiful woman in a few years.

“No, Carolyn. The Germans in Colditz were actually very respectful of her. What happened is that a miracle happened a few days ago in Colditz.”

William then took a good five minutes to tell his astonished family what had happened in the last five days. He then concluded with his big surprise.

“Nancy Laplante has asked me to work for her in the future, in the year 3384 to be more exact. I told her that it would depend on you.”

“I want to go!” Shouted immediately Michael, imitated by Carolyn. Kathleen was however much less enthusiastic.

“What about our friends and relatives here? Wouldn’t you also be considered a deserter for leaving like this in the middle of the war?”

“Maybe, but I could be so much more useful to the whole of Humanity as part of the Time Patrol. This would also be a chance to offer a fantastic new life to our children, Kathleen. Please, don’t dismiss this offer too quickly.”

“Come on, Mother, say yes!” Pleaded Carolyn, nearly jumping from excitement. Kathleen still hesitated.

“Could you tell me more about this, William? This is a very big decision to take, after all.”

“It is, dear. The people of 3384 are technologically and socially very advanced, but they are also utter pacifists with no military skills whatsoever. They are also bald giants who would stick out like a sore thumb in most time periods. Nancy Laplante is thus recruiting people from various places and time periods as field agents and ship crewmembers. The pay, benefits and living conditions are to be vastly superior to anything we could hope for if I stayed in the British Army. The job will be risky, of course, but no more so than now, and would involve myself traveling through various time periods while under disguise. This would be a brand new life for all of us, Kathleen, a life others could only dream about. No more postings every two or three years; no more transfers to backwater garrisons and rundown married quarters.”

Kathleen looked around the dining room and at what she could see of the small lounge of their apartment while thinking over what William had said. The flat they were living in since the start of the war was a cramped one, furnished with old furniture that belonged to the owner. Apart of their clothes, cutlery and dishes, they owned little in the apartment. The pay of an army major, while greatly superior to that of a simple soldier, was noting to shout about, especially when raising two children. William could not count on some family fortune to supplement his pay, the way many senior officers coming from the aristocracy did. The only luxury they owned was a well used Morris, four-door sedan car.

“What about the children? Where will they go to school?”

“They will study with all the other children of 3384 and be able to learn things we can’t even imagine. As an example, Nancy told me that everybody would be going tomorrow on a recreational visit to a space city.”

Carolyn and Michael gasped in wonderment, while Kathleen herself couldn’t help try to imagine what that would be like. She finally gave in to his arguments.

“Alright, dear. The future it is. What do we do now?”

“We pack our clothes and our personal souvenirs and leave after writing letters for our respective relatives. Everything we will need to live will be provided free to us in 3384. I will talk to the landlady and pay three months rent, so that she doesn’t make a fuss about us leaving. Don’t worry about the money: Nancy provided me with enough to

cover our moving expenses. A cash enlistment bonus is also waiting for me in 3384, so that we can live comfortably until my first pay and do some shopping for luxuries.”

“That is certainly better than what the Army has accustomed me to.” Replied Kathleen, remembering some of the transfers they had to go through before the war. “What about our car?”

“We bring it with us. We won’t really use it in 3384, as most travel is by air vehicles, but Nancy told me that it will be useful to teach driving to some of her agents. She will reimburse us for the car, of course.”

“Talking of those agents, what kind of people are they like?” William smiled in embarrassment, trying to find words that would not antagonize his wife.

“As I said, Nancy is recruiting people from all over the place, as long as they are intelligent, resourceful, brave and open-minded, so that they could cope with traveling through various time periods and cultures. We are due to recruit more people in two days, but she has already a few British, French, Americans, a Dutchman, a Norwegian... and a few Germans.”

“GERMANS?” Shouted Kathleen, shocked. “What the hell is Laplante doing with Germans?”

“Please, Kathleen. I met those Germans and they are not at all what you think. They are not fanatics or even Nazis. Nancy even adopted one of them, a sixteen year-old girl who was a war orphan. Those Germans are actually nice, decent people.”

“Germans...” said Kathleen with a sigh. “I hope that you know what you are getting us into, William.”

William patted gently her shoulder while smiling in encouragement.

“I do, dear. You know me!”

10:32 (Central Pacific Time)

Friday, July 2, 1937 ‘A’

Patrol ship WALKUREN

Southeast Marshall Islands

Pacific Ocean

All eyes were on the video screens of the shuttle’s passenger lounge, where a small, twin-engine aircraft could be seen flying at medium altitude over the Pacific Ocean. Hanna Reitsch ‘B’ was at the controls of the WALKUREN, with Ingrid Weiss ‘B’

as copilot and Bertha Beinholdt 'B' and Ilsa Bauman 'B' acting as sensors and weapons operators. Maran Tolvek 'B' was on his part serving as the flight engineer of the scoutship, while Nancy sat in the seat left free in the cockpit.

"A Lockheed 10-E ELECTRA. It's registry number corresponds to that of Amelia Earhart's plane." Said Hanna Reitsch, making Nancy nod her head.

"Very well! Follow it discreetly until it runs out of fuel, then grab the plane with our tractor beam, time for us to transfer Earhart and Noonan aboard. In the meantime, I will go see how our other passengers are doing in the cargo bay."

Going to the rear of the cockpit and climbing down the staircase leading to the crew quarters, Nancy then took a second staircase down to an airlock giving access to the cargo bay of the patrol ship. The airlock was actually meant to allow access to the cargo bay even when it was open to the vacuum of space. It also had an armored door giving directly to the outside. Crossing the airlock, Nancy then set foot in the cargo bay, twenty meters long and six meters wide. A good forty persons occupied the cargo bay, including nine uniformed members of the Time Patrol., while a large padded mattress sat in the middle. Nancy smiled while passing by Mike Crawford, who was with what she called 'the Crawford Clan'. Apart from Mike, the clan counted Jack Crawford and his wife and son, as well as the parents of Jack and his kid sister, a young widow with a baby. Nancy was however preoccupied by two other groups of persons in the compartment, groups that kept separated and were watched carefully by her agents. Samuel Goldman 'B', an American Jew born in Russia, was talking with one of those groups, formed of two young women wearing the uniforms of Soviet aviators. Frida Winterer 'B' and Johanna Fink 'B' were on their part talking with the second group, which was made of five young German women wearing dirty anti-aircraft defense Luftwaffe auxiliaries uniforms. That group actually included three examples of what the Time Patrol called 'timeline twins'. Ingrid Weiss 'A', Frida Winterer 'A' and Johanna Fink 'A' had been saved from certain death in their Berlin shelter in February of 1945, as they were about to be incinerated by an American incendiary bomb in the company of Lisa Gerhardt 'A' and Martha Brumbach 'A'. With only charred bodies found afterwards in their shelter, and with their personnel files closed the next day with the mention 'killed in action', the Time Patrol had found it easy to pick them up by transit probes, then replace them with the bodies of five young women from 1945 that were already dead. Saving Lieutenants Lidiya Litvyak 'A' and Katya Budanova 'A' in 1943 had however been a bit

more complicated, with the two fighter pilots having to be extracted in flight from their burning, doomed Yak-1 fighter planes.

Nancy presented herself first in Russian to Lidiya Litvyak and Katya Budanova, who were eating with gusto a meal just served up by Natia Mindicor 'A', newly enrolled in the Time Patrol as a stewardess and purser.

"I hope that you approve of the hospitality shown on this ship, Lieutenants. We should arrive at our base in a few hours, after recuperating two other persons and observing a key event in Humanity's history. We will then be able to speak at length." Lidiya Litvyak, more commonly known as 'Lilya' by her friends, was a small but beautiful young blonde with curly hair and piercing blue eyes. She eyed Nancy with reservation.

"Your food is certainly vastly superior to the rations of the Red Army, Miss Laplante, but you don't keep very good company. Why did you save those five Nazis? The others and can understand and approve, but them..." Nancy didn't get angry at that and answered her calmly.

"Because these women, while Germans, are not Nazis and are decent persons, Lieutenant. Would you say that all Soviets are members of the NKVD?" Litvyak hesitated, then lowered her head, recognizing her point.

"I can see what you mean, miss. I must say however that I am still somewhat overwhelmed by what happened to me. One moment, I was falling in my burning fighter, strafed by eight German fighters, then I find myself here by magic. Can I ask if the two other persons you want to save are Germans?"

"They are Americans, Lieutenant. In fact, you may have heard about them six years ago. They should appear soon in the cargo bay. Continue to enjoy your meal in the meantime."

Nancy then went to the group of five German women. Those five, apart from being still under the shock of their recent experience, were clearly marked by more than five long years of war, looking both exhausted and famished. They were definitely going to need weeks of recuperation time before starting their training as members of the Time Patrol. Nancy smiled tenderly at Ingrid Weiss 'A', even though she had never met her before, as the German girl devoured her meal.

"How is the morale of your squad, Truppenführerin Weiss?" Asked Nancy in German.

“Better but still confused, Miss Laplante.”

“Please, call me simply Nancy. We will return in a few hours to our base in 3384, where you will be able to wash yourselves and go to sleep in a real bed.”

“That will be nice indeed, miss.” Said Martha Brumbach ‘A’, the oldest of the lot at 26 and a strongly-built woman that could not be called pretty. “My nerves already feel better from not hearing bombs explode anymore.”

She then opened a pocket of her grey coverall and took out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Nancy however gently took the pack from her before she could light a cigarette.

“I am sorry, Helferin Brumbach, but the use of tobacco is strictly forbidden in the society of the Global Council, for public health reasons. KEIKO, CAN YOU COME HERE FOR A MOMENT?”

Keiko Miramoto, who had briefly examined each person after their arrival on the ship, hurried to Nancy with her medical kit. Nancy then spoke gently to the German women as Keiko was joining her.

“I will have to ask you to give me all the tobacco products you have on you. In exchange, Doctor Miramoto will give you nicotine patches that will help you wear off progressively your tobacco dependency. I have to warn you that the rules on public health are quite strict in the Global Council.”

The five Germans, including Ingrid Weiss ‘A’, obeyed her somewhat reluctantly and gave her their cigarettes, while Keiko asked them about their level of tobacco usage in order to calculate the strength of nicotine patches needed for them. As Nancy was throwing the packs of cigarettes in the nearest garbage chute, the voice of Hanna Reitsch came out of the loud-speakers of the cargo bay.

“The Lockheed ELECTRA has entered a final dive. The first passenger will arrive in twenty seconds.”

Nancy, as well as Rebecca Milner, Mike Crawford and Klaus Manheim, took place at once at each corner of the mattress sitting in the middle of the hold, which was surrounded by a set of space-time beacons that would help the transit probes jump with precision to the cargo bay.

Fred Noonan, the navigator of the Lockheed ELECTRA, was the first to appear above the mattress, a transfer probe still glued to his back. He fell for less than a meter on the mattress, then sat up there for a moment, totally disoriented and confused. Mike and Klaus then hurried to him and pulled him off the mattress, to make place for Amelia

Earhart. Noonan, a thin man of medium height, was still looking around him when a woman with curly blond hair cut short and freckles on her face appeared over the mattress and fell on it. This time, it was Nancy who went to pull her off, smiling to the famous aviatrix.

“Miss Earhart, welcome aboard the Time Patrol scout ship WALKUREN. I am sorry that your World tour was cut short like this, but history declared you missing over the Pacific today. My name is Nancy Laplante, Chief of Operations of the Time Patrol, based in the year 3384.”

Amelia Earhart hesitated a moment before taking Nancy's offered hand and letting her pull her back on her feet. She looked quickly at Noonan, checking that he was alright, before eyeing Nancy, who stood a good head higher than her.

“The Time Patrol? I don't understand. And how did you take me out of my plane?”

“The how is technically complicated, Miss Earhart. Let's say that the 34th Century's science allows us to do things that would look like magic to you. Your disappearance near Howland Island will become a famous chapter of the 20th Century. We thus decided to save you and Mister Noonan rather than let you die as history dictated. You will not however be able to return to the United States, as it would change history, possibly with unpredictable consequences.”

“And why did you save me then, if you are not planning to return me to the United States?” Replied Earhart, becoming angry. She then notice Keiko Miramoto and shot an angry look at Nancy.

“Don't tell me that you are working for the Japanese.”

Nancy shook her head sadly, disappointed by that reaction.

“Miss Earhart, nobody in the 20th Century knows anything about time travel. Doctor Keiko Miramoto is a Japanese, yes, but she comes from the year 2053, when we saved her from certain death, the same way we saved many others from various time periods. The Time Patrol represents and defends the interests of the whole of Humanity, and not only those of some countries in particular. Come and meet a few more Americans that we saved.”

Nancy then led her by the hand towards the Crawford clan, where Angie Wells and Carmen Sanchez were also sitting with members of their own families. The two Navy pilots got up at their approach and eyed Earhart with reverence.

"Miss Earhart, it is a true honor to be able to meet such a famous aviatrix as you. I am Navy Lieutenant Carmen Sanchez."

"And I am Sub-Lieutenant Angie Wells, based like Carmen on the carrier USS RONALD REAGAN."

Amelia could not help smile in amusement at the mention of the carrier's name.

"The USS RONALD REAGAN? You are joking, right?"

"Not at all, Miss Earhart." Replied Angie, serious. "For you, Ronald Reagan may only be a radio host and a starting actor, but he will eventually become the 40th President of the United States and will serve two terms, from 1981 to 1989."

Amelia paled, then examined the modern flight suits worn by the two young pilots, with their unit and rank insignias. She then looked at the Crawford's, who were wearing civilian clothes from the 21st Century and who went in age from fourteen months to 57 years.

"My God! I really am in a time machine."

"More than a simple time machine, Miss Earhart." Corrected Nancy. "This is a ship able to travel through space and go to the other planets of the Solar System. Please follow me to the cockpit: I have someone to show you that you will probably recognize."

Frankly intrigued now, Amelia let Nancy guide her up to the cockpit. Her eyes widened when the pilot turned her head and smiled to her.

"Hanna Reitsch, the German high altitude gliding champion?"

"Correction: World gliding champion." Replied Hanna before presenting her right hand. "It is a true pleasure to have been able to help save your life, Miss Earhart."

Amelia shook her hand before looking, fascinated, at the holographic image of the outside projected around the platform supporting the crew positions.

"This technology is incredible! Piloting such a ship must be like a dream."

"If you join us, Miss Earhart, you will be able to realize that dream." Said softly Nancy. "Our mission is to protect the integrity of history from illegal time travel and manipulations, plus documenting in detail the history of Humanity. This brings us to our next stop. Hanna, jump to Earth low orbit, above the American East Coast, at three O'clock in the morning of September 8, 2052 'A'."

"Got it!"

A few seconds later, a brief flash of white light filled the cockpit, surprising Amelia. The view of the outside then changed drastically, showing the American East Coast at night from space. Amelia admired in silence for long seconds the view of Earth, with the North American land mass covering over a third of the screens. After two minutes, a brief but searing point of light appeared for a few seconds over the location of New York City, followed soon by two more points of lights. A fourth point of light, this time over Washington, appeared, making Amelia look in confusion at Nancy. She was then surprised to see her cry silently while watching the screens.

“What are those points of light, miss?”

“The explosions of thermonuclear warheads, each with a destructive power equivalent to a few hundred thousand tons of explosives. Each point of light represents the destruction of a city or of a military base or industrial center. September 8 of 2052 is the date when Humanity nearly erased itself from the surface of the Earth, killing with it the great majority of all the animal and vegetal species. Of the more than seven billion humans living on Earth in 2052, less than a million will still be alive a year after.”

Amelia looked again at the screens, horror now in her eyes, as thousands of points of light flashed around the surface of the planet. Dozens of points of lights suddenly appeared in the same area of Montana, in the United States, tightly grouped together.

“My God! What was there in Montana to warrant such a level of destruction?”

“The Air force base of Malmstrom, home to the launch silos of 200 American intercontinental ballistic nuclear missiles.” Answered Nancy, her voice half strangled by tears. “Malmstrom, like two more missile bases in Minot, North Dakota, and in Warren, Wyoming, constituted priority targets for anyone attacking the United States and who wished to avoid nuclear retaliation. However, most of the missile silos that are now being destroyed are already empty, their missiles already launched and on their way to their own targets. The Montana and the rest of the Midwest will become as a result one of the most violently radioactive regions on Earth for the decades to come. The Crawford family lived on a farm in Montana and were condemned to die within days following this nuclear exchange. Since one of our new members was from that clan, we saved the Crawford’s’ from certain death, plus we evacuated to the future via another time ship a herd of horses, which became extinct after 2052.”

“How could Humanity commit such a monstrous act of stupidity?” Nearly yelled Amelia, upset and near tears by now.

“One of the goals of the Time Patrol will be to find an answer to that question, Amelia. You can join us and help find the answer, or you can start a new life in the 34th Century. It’s your choice.”

Amelia looked again at the screens, where points of light kept bursting around the Earth, before facing Nancy.

“You can count on me, Miss Laplante, as long as I am not forced to kill anyone. I am an avowed pacifist.”

“I know, Amelia. We have a number of positions to fill as pilots of unarmed ships and shuttles. We certainly can and will use your services.”

**10:22 (North America Central Time)
Thursday, December 3, 3384 ‘A’
Headquarters building of the Time Patrol
New Lake City University campus
Great Lakes region, North America
Global Council**

Farah Tolkonen nodded her head, satisfied, as Nancy finished debriefing her on the results of her recruiting mission.

“We thus have 21 new recruits ready to be trained and educated. We will now be ready to start the formal training of our agents, on top of the general education they had been getting. I must say that I didn’t realize at first how much preparations the formation of our organization demanded.”

“I must recognize that the last three months were quite busy, Farah.” Replied Nancy, sitting in a chair facing Farah’s work desk. “However, our members from the two first groups didn’t waste any time. With my help, they were able to explore and remember their past incarnations, which brought them invaluable knowledge and life experiences and also gave them much more maturity individually. They also learned quite quickly about the technology of the Global Council. The performance of the crew of the WALKUREN during this last mission was exemplary. Even Maran Tolvek was surprised by their efficiency at operating our scout ship prototype.”

“I must say that the equipment and craft of the Global Council are made to be easy to operate, Nancy, contrary to the equipment of the 20th Century. I still remember

the reactions of the instructor pilots at the space piloting school in New Lake City Astroport, when Hanna Reitsch basically flew circles around them after only three practice sessions in flight simulators.'

Nancy couldn't help grin as she remembered that moment.

"Farah, don't forget that Hanna was an experienced test pilot in 1941 and had tested some of the most dangerous, unstable planes ever built. Also, a pre-2052 pilot had to endure high G loads of six Gs or more while keeping manual control of its plane, something no pilot of the Global Council ever had to endure."

"True! Talking of recruits, a new possible candidate has arrived here thirty minutes ago...under police escort. I told him briefly what we did and the reasons why we wanted his services and he appeared interested. I would however like you to meet him, so that you could give me your opinion on him as a potential member of the Time Patrol. He is presently waiting in the visitors' lounge, with Heinrich Braun and Sean Brady to watch over him."

"Remind me of his name, Farah."

"Baran Maslik. I have to say that he seems to be an interesting man, quite atypical from others in the Global Council."

"Baran Maslik... Well, I should be able to give you my opinion on him in the coming hour."

10:29 (North America Central Time)

Visitors' lounge, Time Patrol headquarters

Despite being 74 years old, Baran Maslik had the appearance of a man of thirty, something that was common for the citizens of the Global Council, who received genetic longevity treatment as part of their standard health care. His young appearance however hid a vast experience, apart from a level of ambition and ego far above the norm in his society. Maslik was also a man who enjoyed taking on challenges. Unfortunately, the Global Council had practically eliminated everything that could present a challenge, either by automating systems or by using robots for the jobs considered too dangerous or risky. He thus had decided over twenty years ago to create his own challenges. One of those challenges was to show the officers of the Public Security Service for the incompetent idiots they were, notably by going around the computer security protocols of the government's systems, with the goal of altering the

information in the government's databanks. Maslik was not an anarchist or a nihilist, however, and did nothing without a reason. Instead, he used his genius for imagery and computer technologies to create for himself a clandestine source of extra revenues, revenues that helped him buy luxury goods and services that his small printing shop in Milan could not offer him normally. There were a plethora of people in the Global Council who liked luxury but were too lazy or too incompetent to earn honestly enough money to pay for such luxuries. Maslik courted those people by promising, in exchange of a reasonable fee, to alter the various government files concerning them and thus making them eligible for supplementary benefits or premiums that they should not get. All had gone well for years, until three years ago, when a new Public Security Service investigator had proved more intelligent than Maslik had thought, catching him in the act and sending him to jail. He had spent 34 long, boring months there in relative comfort and would still be there for another five years if not for that miraculous offer of a pardon in exchange for working for the Time Patrol. He had seen news reports about that new organization during his jail time and had to say that the idea of working for them attracted him. The two armed men standing behind his chair, despite being much shorter than him, however made him nervous, apart from making him give a second thought about working with these ancestors.

A young and beautiful ancestor woman suddenly entered the lounge, with Maslik eyeing her at once. He was normally a good judge of character and decided quickly that this woman should probably be taken very seriously. She was also armed and was quite muscular. She smiled to him and presented her right hand, which he shook. He found out at the same time that she was incredibly strong for her size.

"I am truly happy to meet you, Mister Maslik. I am Nancy Laplante, Chief of Operations of the Time Patrol. I believe that you were informed already about the kind of work you could do for us?"

Maslik nodded his head while hiding the fear that her name had awakened in him: he was presently shaking hands with a certified killer with more than a hundred persons on her score sheet, if he could believe the news bulletin he had seen on her.

"Doctor Tolkonen did tell me about the job, miss. You basically want someone capable of producing high quality forged identity documents, and this for various time periods. I must however tell you that I know little about the techniques used to make documents prior to the 2052 Nuclear Holocaust."

"I am certain that you will learn fast, Mister Maslik. We will provide you with authentic examples of identity papers and official documents from various time periods, which you will be able to study at length. I am however more interested to learn about your motivations for accepting to do such work. Why do you want to work with us?"

"Uh, I must honestly tell you that I find that life in the Global Council presents precious few challenges worthy of my talents, Miss Laplante. On the other hand, your organization departs quite a lot from other government agencies, starting with your use of weapons."

"Would you be ready to work from a time ship that could be attacked, or even destroyed?"

Maslik hesitated only briefly before answering.

"Yes! I can't reasonably expect to be able to infiltrate a computer network in the past, to erase or add files, while sitting here. I have taken my share of risks in the past...and paid the price for it. I am still ready today to take risks."

"We will do our best to minimize the risks to you, Mister Maslik. Understand however that my agents will depend on your work to avoid arrest, then possibly torture and execution, during their missions in the past. Their lives will be in your hands."

Maslik nodded in understanding, his face somber.

"Miss, my society may have labeled me as a criminal, but I never wished ill to anyone or wanted to be the cause of someone's death or pain. I like luxury, I must confess, and the salary offered by the Time Patrol is very attractive. However, what interests me the most in your offer is the challenge that it will represent for me."

The young woman smiled again at those words.

"Well said, mister! I believe that you are most suitable for the job. You will be able to go sign your employment contract after this. Welcome to the Time Patrol!"

As Maslik got up and shook hands with her, Nancy looked him straight in the eyes. He then heard her voice directly inside his head, although her lips had not moved.

"By the way, Mister Maslik, I am a telepath."

CHAPTER 4 – OP ATTENTION

13:49 (Afghanistan Time)

Saturday, October 27, 2012 ‘A’

Herat International Airport

Afghanistan

Nancy was dog tired after nearly three days of air travel and three stopovers as she was finally able to disembark with her kit and weapons from the C-27J twin propeller transport aircraft that had brought her from Kabul to Herat. She was however resolved to make this third and last operational tour for her in Afghanistan count, rather than simply going through the motions, like too many did. Even though only two weeks had officially gone by since she had accepted to serve another tour in Afghanistan, she was in reality back from a full four months spent training her new Time Patrol members in 3384 and chasing after new recruits. Added to the ten months she had spent fighting in World War Two and to the fact that she was now fully trained in the use of her special implants and mastered her supernatural powers as a Chosen of The One, it all made her a vastly more experienced and effective soldier than she already had been before. She was fully committed to use that experience to the maximum to help train the recruits of the Afghan National Army, or ANA, who were due to assume in a bit over a year the full responsibility for defending their country from the Taliban extremists.

Carrying her big military backpack, a kit bag, her guitar case, her tactical vest, Kevlar helmet, C7 rifle and her personal GLOCK 17L pistol in its leg holster, she walked towards the nearby air terminal, which was guarded by a mix of Afghan policemen and NATO soldiers. She was met inside the terminal by a Canadian master corporal who presented himself to her while saluting her.

“Captain Laplante, I’m Master Corporal MacDonald, sent by Major Parr to bring you to Camp Arena. I have a vehicle waiting outside.”

“Thanks, Master Corporal.” Said Nancy, saluting back. “Lead on!”
MacDonald was about to take her kit bag from her to help her but she shook her head.

“I’ll carry my stuff, Master Corporal: one man, one kit.”

MacDonald smiled in appreciation at seeing she was not one of those paper-shuffling staff officers who had to be pampered and took their privileges very seriously. Not saying another word, he then led Nancy through the terminal building, to an armored G-WAGON light vehicle parked on the other side, with a corporal waiting behind the wheel. After short presentations with her driver, Nancy piled her kit in the back of the vehicle before taking place on the rear bench seat. The driver then started his engine and started rolling away from the terminal, heading south on the main Herat-Kandahar highway. Nancy took that time to examine the local terrain: it was arid, like much of Afghanistan, with the city of Herat and its surrounding villages to the north of the airport forming a green oasis in the middle of the brown landscape. The main Herat-Kandahar road they were following south towards Camp Arena was on a flat plain but large mountains dominated the terrain to the Southwest and Southeast of Herat. Camp Arena itself was situated eight kilometers south of the airport and 700 meters off of the highway. It was quite a large facility, with close to fifty buildings of various sizes surrounded by a defensive perimeter wall one kilometer to the side and further protected by watch towers spaced regularly around the wall. Nancy knew that it was home to the headquarters of NATO's Regional Command – West and of the Italian contingent in Afghanistan, which had responsibility for the western provinces of the country. That was where she was going to replace the unfortunate Captain Lebowsky as the second most senior Canadian trainer of Afghan Army recruits in Herat. Things were however not going well in Afghanistan and she knew it too well. Due to a series of unfortunate incidents involving American soldiers during the last year, relations between the Afghan people and NATO troops, especially American troops, were very tense. This was going to greatly increase the difficulty of her new job. However, she would enjoy a distinct advantage over everybody by having an advanced hindsight of what was to come, thanks to having been able to review historical reports from the future before coming here.

The G-WAGON soon turned east off the highway, following a straight road leading into Camp Arena. It had to stop at the western entrance to the camp, where Italian soldiers were supervising Afghan soldiers guarding the gate. The Canadian vehicle was however quickly waved through and it drove towards a series of prefabricated white buildings, finally stopping in front of one of them. Master Corporal MacDonald got out with Nancy and pointed the entrance of the building.

"This is the building housing the offices of the Canadian training team in Herat, Captain. Major Parr is going to see you right away."

"I'm not going to even have the time to drop my kit first at my quarters, Master Corporal?" Asked Nancy, surprised. MacDonald seemed embarrassed as he answered her.

"My understanding is that you are not going to stay in Camp Arena, Captain. In fact, I was told to wait here with my vehicle to drive you off after your meeting with Major Parr."

Now getting angry, Nancy however didn't bark at MacDonald, who obviously had little say in whatever was going on.

"Very well, Master Corporal. Show me to Major Parr's office."

Making sure first she had her travel and mission orders on her, Nancy followed the junior NCO inside the building. She was soon introduced into a cramped office where a Canadian Army major with a balding head was sitting behind a desk. The major got up and saluted Nancy back when she presented herself in military fashion, then walked around his desk to shake hands with her.

"Captain Laplante, welcome to Herat! I'm Major Rick Parr, head of the Canadian training team at RMTC-West."

"Sir, let's cut the small talk and go to the main point, if you will allow me. I was just told that I was not going to stay here in Camp Arena. What is going on, sir?"

Parr seemed short on words at first, evidently embarrassed. Nancy noticed that his eyes avoided her eyes as he answered her.

"A decision was taken just two days ago by the commander of RMTC-West, Colonel Westwood, to assign you as a mentor to a group of female Afghan Border Police recruits due soon to start training at the Shouz police training center, instead of working here."

"Why, sir?" Asked Nancy in a hard tone, taking out her travel and mission orders and showing them to Parr. "I was asked to replace on an emergency basis Captain Lebowsky here in Herat. I took an unpaid leave period of eleven months from my civilian job in order to be here, thinking that my services were urgently needed to train Afghan soldiers. Now you are telling me that some American colonel decided on his own to ignore my mission orders from Ottawa and to reassign me to a post normally fit for a sergeant? Who the hell is that Colonel Westwood and what right does he have to treat me like this?"

"As I said, Captain Laplante, Colonel Westwood is the commander of the NATO training organization for Western Afghanistan and he is from the United States Army. He decided that having a female officer train Afghan soldiers for combat was not appropriate."

"WHAT? AND YOU LET HIM DO THAT, SIR?" Shouted Nancy, enraged. Parr didn't rebuke her for that, a sign that he realized how wrong the situation was. He simply shrugged his shoulders while answering her in a subdued tone.

"I did protest his decision, but to no avail, Captain. Furthermore, he is supported by Lieutenant General Partridge, the overall commander of the NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan."

"Is that because of Afghan sensitivities or because the U.S. Army still refuses the right to its female soldiers to be part of combat units, sir? If it is for the second reason, then I would ask by what goddamned right they are imposing American domestic prejudices on a NATO joint mission? Did you pass on a protest to Ottawa, which just spent thousands of dollars flying me in on an emergency basis?"

"I have sent emails up the chain of command to Ottawa, but it could be a while before I get a reply, Captain. Anyway, your new position in Shouz will be an important one, as training female Afghan police officers has a high priority right now."

Nancy stared hard at Parr, not impressed by his answer.

"Major, I have already done two of my past seven overseas operational tours in Afghanistan and was decorated for bravery on the battlefield while in Kandahar Province in 2007. I speak fluently both Pashto and Dari, am a 5th Dan black belt in karate and am a World-class combat pistol shooter. I also am a war correspondent and have seen more wars than that Colonel Westwood could ever see in his whole career. I find his decision not only to be illegal and unjust, but also to be stupid and an insult to me and the Canadian Army. If you deem that you can't help reverse this arbitrary and highly questionable decision, then I will live with it and give my best in Shouz, but know that I will lodge an official protest through my regional headquarters in Montreal and that I will pursue it all the way to the Chief of the Defense Staff if need be. Right now, I will need a written confirmation that my position in Afghanistan was changed, and on whose official authority. I am not going to leave for Shouz simply on the strength of a verbal order that could be rephrased at will for future purposes, sir."

This time, Parr tensed up at her calculated insult. He however knew too well that she was right to be incensed and that Westwood was in the wrong. Taking a file on his 'in'

basket, he opened it and sifted through it, then pulled out three pages and showed them to Nancy.

"These are the emails pertaining to your change of position, Captain. I will now go make copies of them for your use. I won't be long."

While Parr was gone from the office, Nancy did her best to calm down and order her thoughts. This was a very bitter pill to swallow, especially considering the long pause to her civilian career she had taken voluntarily so that she could come on this tour, thinking rightly that her talents were truly needed here. On the other hand, she still could do some good in Shouz, if she was not dropped there simply like an unannounced fifth wheel. By the time Parr returned in the office and handed her three pages, she had mostly resigned herself to that move.

"What position exactly will I fill in Shouz, sir?"

"I already discussed that with Lieutenant Colonel Rugieri, the deputy commander of RMTTC-West. You will be the senior NATO mentoring officer for the training of female Afghan police recruits who follow an eight-week basic patrolman course in Shouz. The female training staff there was seriously under strength there and certainly could use you, Captain. You will have with you as fellow NATO trainers an Italian Carabinieri lieutenant and an American Military Police sergeant, while the Afghan course staff had only one senior lieutenant and two sergeants. A female patrolman course loaded up to now with 28 recruits is scheduled to start on Monday, November fifth, in a week. Master Corporal MacDonald and Corporal Reed are standing by to transport you this afternoon to Shouz. Do you need anything before you leave, Captain?"

"Yes, sir! I will need to top up on ammunition and will also need some local maps. Are there modern NATO portable radios in Shouz that I will be able to use?"

"Uh, I don't believe that they have much there in terms of modern radios. You can however sign for a handheld encrypted set here before departure. You will be able to get ammunition and maps at the same time. Master Corporal MacDonald will guide you to the quartermaster before leaving with you for Shouz. Do you have any more questions before you go?"

"Not at this time, sir."

"Very well, then. Go get your ammunition, radio and maps and good luck in Shouz, Captain."

Nancy then saluted Parr, who saluted back, and left his office. She found Master Corporal MacDonald still waiting outside, near the G-WAGON. Nancy pointed him.

“We have to stop by the quartermaster for a few things, Master Corporal. Then we will leave for Shouz.”

“Understood, Captain.”

16:25 (Afghanistan Time)

Office of the female training staff

Afghan Border Police training center

Shouz, Herat Province

Afghanistan

Carabinieri Lieutenant Maria Garibaldi was reviewing the training schedule for the impending course, to be started in a week, when one of the Afghan female instructors, Sergeant Aziza Kaker, entered the office and went to speak excitedly in Dari with Senior Lieutenant Maryam Shirzai. The two of them then left the office in a hurry, leaving Sergeant Jennifer Cummings to look with puzzlement at Maria Garibaldi.

“Gee, I wonder what got those two excited like that, Lieutenant.”

Maria, who didn't speak Dari any more than the American sergeant did, could only shrug while getting up from her chair.

“There is only one way to know, Sergeant: let's go see by ourselves.”

Cummings also got up and followed Maria outside of the prefabricated building. There, they saw Senior Lieutenant Shirzai shake hands with a tall female officer who seemed to have just arrived in the camp, judging by her kit on the ground besides a Canadian vehicle. Maria smiled on seeing the Canadian officer.

“Ah, that should be the Captain Laplante that we were told about earlier this morning. If she really can speak Dari and Pashto, then we sure could use her help here for the next course. Let's go meet her, Sergeant.”

Nancy was still exchanging pleasantries in Dari with the senior Afghan female instructor in Shouz when she saw two more women approach her. One was an Italian lieutenant of medium height but with a very sexy body and a stunningly beautiful face and eyes framed by black hair. The other was a tall, solidly built American sergeant with a baby face and short blond hair. Nancy finished her exchange with Shirzai before

facing the two newcomers, who stopped two paces from her and saluted her. She saluted back, then shook hands with them, speaking first in Italian, then repeating herself in English.

“Hi! Captain Nancy Laplante, freshly arrived from Montreal.”

“Lieutenant Maria Garibaldi, of the Carabinieri.”

“Sergeant Jennifer Cummings, 701st MP Battalion.”

Nancy then put back on her big backpack and grabbed her kit bag and guitar case.

“Would you know by chance where I am supposed to lodge here, Lieutenant Garibaldi?”

“Yes, Captain: you are in fact going to share my cabin. I will guide you to it. It is actually quite comfortable and is equipped with air conditioning, although we are more in need of heating now.”

“I’ll be with you in a second, Lieutenant.” Said Nancy before turning again to face Maryam Shirzai and Aziza Kaker to speak to them in Dari. “I would be pleased to have tea with you and the other instructors after supper, Lieutenant Shirzai. We need to get to know each other if we are to work together.”

“It will be a pleasure for me and my two sergeants to attend, Captain.” Said the Afghan woman, pleased at seeing that Nancy was completely fluent in Dari, a rarity among NATO instructors and mentors in Afghanistan. Nancy then went to follow Maria Garibaldi, with Jennifer Cummings tagging along. Maria spoke to her in good but accented English as she guided Nancy towards a small prefabricated building about fifty meters away.

“You seem to be quite fluent in Dari, Captain. Are you also as fluent in Pashto?”

“I am, Lieutenant. I also speaks fluently Italian, Spanish, German, Russian, French, Arabic, Urdu and Serbo-Croat, plus notions of a few more languages.”

Maria nearly stopped dead in her tracks then, while Jennifer’s jaw dropped wide open.

“That...that’s incredible! You must have a special talent for languages, Captain.”

“I do, Lieutenant. I also have a knack for ending up in the most insane places around the World.”

Jennifer Cummings laughed at that.

“Well, you certainly ended in another one this time, Captain.”

“And how insane exactly is this place right now?”

Maria understood from her changed tone that Nancy was now serious and alluding to the local security situation. She thus lowered her voice as she answered.

"The local area around this camp is reasonably calm for the moment, but the Taliban have a solid network of informants and spies all around, while Farah Province, to our immediate South, has gotten quite dangerous in the last months. The Taliban are trying to take back that province, especially in the district of Bala Buluk next to us. Unfortunately, the American Marine battalion that was based in Farah Province was recently withdrawn, creating quite a hole in the security situation there that the Afghan army and police are now trying desperately to plug. However, the Afghan security forces are losing a lot of people there, and about everywhere else in the country."

"Is it due to deficient training, deficient equipment, deficient morale or lack of popular support?"

"A mix of everything, really. However, the Afghan recruits we have been getting in the last months can't be faulted for not being motivated. If properly supported, they will fight, and fight hard."

"And the female Afghan recruits?"

"They are the most motivated of all, Captain, since they have the most to lose if the Taliban return to power. They also have often to face the hostility and incomprehension of much of the population, which looks negatively at women going around in public while unescorted or accompanied by men not from their families."

Nancy nodded her head: she already knew all that but had wanted to see if her new subalterns really understood the present situation. That Italian lieutenant certainly seemed to be on top of things. As for the American sergeant, she was still an unknown quantity. They were soon at the entrance of the cabin assigned to her. Letting Maria enter first, Nancy then dropped her kit in the middle of the small bedroom shown to her by the Italian. She next sat wearily on the bed.

"God! All these changes of time zones muddled my brain. I would have liked to discuss right now the situation concerning the training here, but I am afraid that I would not sound too coherent."

"Maybe you should have a short nap, Captain." Suggested Maria Garibaldi. "I can come back in one hour, so that you can have supper."

"A good plan, Lieutenant. Please do that. By the way, who is the camp commandant here?"

"Colonel Najibullah Amin, of the Afghan Border Police, Captain. The senior NATO officer is Major Vincente Rambaldi, of the Carabinieri."

"Then, could you tell both of them that I will go pay my respects to them at supper time."

"With pleasure, Captain. I will be back in one hour."

Maria then left the cabin with Jennifer, to go back to the office building occupied by the international staff. As they walked together, Jennifer Cummings glanced at Maria.

"So, what do you think of this Captain Laplante, Lieutenant?"

"Well, she certainly is an incredible linguist, something we could use to good effect here. She also seems to believe in this mission, contrary to some of the civilian contractors here that are only interested in their fat paychecks."

Jennifer didn't contradict Maria on that, knowing herself how true that was.

At precisely five thirty, Maria returned to her cabin to wake up Nancy, only to find her already sitting on the edge of her bed, rubbing her eyes. Nancy gave her an apologetic smile.

"I had set up my watch' alarm, just in case. Just give me five minutes to dress, then I will follow you to the mess."

As Nancy, who was wearing only her bra and panties, got up and turned to grab her combat uniform, Maria was able to see how muscular she was for a woman. Then, she saw a number of what looked like scars from old wounds over her buttocks and legs, plus a bullet scar on her left upper arm.

"My God! What happened to you? You are covered with scars."

"I am a war correspondent in civilian life: it can be quite a dangerous job most of the time. If you want, I can talk further about that during supper."

"That would certainly interest me, Captain."

Nancy then smiled to her as she was putting on her trousers.

"Please, call me simply 'Nancy' when in private. Can I call you 'Maria'?"

"Please do, Nancy. We Italians are not very big about strict military discipline."

"Thanks, Maria. Do the Afghan staff eat at the same mess as the international staff?"

"Actually, no, for practical reasons: the Afghan and international kitchens are separate, so not to risk contamination of Afghan rations by un-Islamic products like pork. I have to say that I am partial to ham myself."

"Me too! I also am a big fan of bacon in the morning. Then, we will visit the Afghan mess before we eat, so that I can first present my respects to Colonel Amin. I am already overdue for that."

"Colonel Amin will understand the delay, Nancy. The Afghans themselves are not exactly models of punctuality."

"Still! I would rather start here on the right footing."

Once dressed, Nancy left her rifle locked in the special locker made to secure weapons that was fixed to a wall of her bedroom, keeping only her pistol with her. Going out of the cabin with Maria, she let the Italian woman point to her the various installations of interest in the camp, which was contained within a defensive perimeter wall that was roughly 500 meters to a side and was made of a thick earthen berm topped by barbed wire. They walked past the building used by the international staff, heading towards those used by Afghans and finally entering one extremity of a long building. Maria spoke to Nancy as they got through the door and entered a relatively small room.

"We are now in the Afghan officers mess. Colonel Amin is sitting at the head of the table to our right."

"Thank you! Just wait near the door: I won't be long."

All the Afghans present had now fallen silent, looking at the newcomers. Nancy noted quickly that a small table in a far corner was used by Senior Lieutenant Shirzai, who seemed to be the only female Afghan officer in the camp. Walking to the officers' table, Nancy stopped three paces from Colonel Amin, a short but solidly-built man with a short beard, and saluted him, speaking in Dari.

"Captain Nancy Laplante, Canadian Army, newly assigned as mentoring staff to the female recruit patrolman course, Colonel. I am sorry that I didn't present myself earlier, sir."

Amin, agreeably surprised to see a NATO officer show him proper respect, got up from his chair and saluted back. Nancy did not offer her hand for a shake, knowing that Afghan customs dictated that women were not supposed to initiate physical contact with unrelated men. She also noticed at that time that a man sitting near Amin wore the insignias of a military imam and was closely examining her with a reserved expression. Amin did not shake hands with her but smiled as a greeting.

"Thank you for coming, Captain Laplante. I was told only today about your coming. You do speak a good Dari, I must say."

"I can also speak fluently Pashto, Urdu, Arabic and a few more languages, Colonel. This is my third operational tour in Afghanistan. I am also a war correspondent in civilian life and did many trips to your country to do reports in the past years. As well, I happen to be an expert in martial arts and in pistol shooting. I will be happy to help train your female recruits to the best of my abilities, Colonel."

"And your help will certainly be appreciated here, Captain Laplante. Canada has always proved to be a steadfast and respectful friend of Afghanistan. Welcome to Shouz. May I present you my officers and aides, starting with our Imam, Wahid Nayeddin?"

Nancy bowed the Islamic way to salute the Imam.

"Salaam, Imam Wahid!"

"Salaam, Captain Laplante!" Replied politely Wahid. After the round of presentations was completed and Nancy had left the mess with Maria, Wahid looked at Najibullah Amin.

"I must say that this woman seems well versed in the proper customs of Islam, Colonel. She is also the first foreigner I have seen here that can speak both Dari and Pashto."

"She certainly is out of the norm...and more respectful to us than most other foreign staff."

Amin did not need to mention names, as Wahid and the other Afghan officers present knew well which international staff member truly respected them and which ones didn't.

Going back to the group of buildings reserved for the international staff, Maria guided Nancy to a large rectangular, prefabricated white building.

"This is the combined mess, cafeteria and kitchen for all the international staff of the camp. One word of caution before we go in the cafeteria: watch out for Captain Gino Vinetti, another Carabinieri officer on tour here. He is an incorrigible playboy and likes to think that he is irresistible to women."

That made Nancy grin widely.

"Is he good-looking?"

"Like a young Marcello Mastroianni, but even better."

"Oooh! I will definitely have to meet him, then."

Maria laughed at that, then opened the door of the cafeteria for Nancy. They entered a good sized room half filled with tables, at which about thirty men and women were sitting

and eating. Jennifer Cummings was there as well, eating her supper in the company of three other women and two men in American uniforms. Maria, after waving and smiling at Jennifer, then led Nancy to one of the tables, where five male Italian officers and NCOs were eating. She whispered to Nancy as they were still a few meters from the table.

“Captain Vinetti is the first one on the left, facing us, while Major Rambaldi is next to him on his left.”

“Target acquired and locked on!” Replied Nancy, who could see that Vinetti was already smiling while eyeing her from head to toe. This time, Maria opened the presentations, speaking in Italian to Major Rambaldi, a tall but thin man in his early forties.

“Major Rambaldi, may I present you Captain Nancy Laplante, newly arrived in the camp to take over the female patrolman course.”

Rambaldi got up and bent over to shake hands with Nancy over the table.

“Welcome to Shouz, Captain.” He said in English, to which she replied in fluent Italian.

“Thank you, Major. I have to say that I was supposed at first to serve in Herat, but I will certainly give my best here.”

“I have heard about what happened in Herat concerning your assignment, Captain. I must say that you were treated by some in a rather cavalier way. However, their loss is my gain, judging from your linguistic talents. You do speak Italian with a rather quaint accent from the North, Captain.”

Nancy smiled at that: Rambaldi definitely had a good ear, having detected her Milan accent, where her past incarnation as Karl Beck, a German mercenary chieftain of the 17th Century, had learned his Italian.

“My Italian teacher was from Milan, sir. He was also a bit old-fashioned.”

“I see! But please, have supper with us, Captain.”

“With pleasure, Major.”

Going with Maria to the service counter, Nancy grabbed a tray and a plate and got served some veal with potatoes and carrots before returning to the Carabinieri's table. To the delight of Captain Vinetti, she sat opposite him, with Maria sitting facing Rambaldi. Nancy had to concede that Vinetti was a truly handsome man, with looks worthy of an Italian movie star. She thus smiled warmly to him.

"While I do not wear an alliance, I have to warn you that I do have a boyfriend of a rather impressive stature, Captain. Feel free however to give me your best shot during my tour in Shouz."

While Vinetti broke in a grin, Maria giggled at her words, like a few others around her.

"Well, this tour certainly just got more interesting, Captain Laplante."

"Please, call me 'Nancy'."

"And call me simply Gino, Nancy." Said Vinetti, now the image of suavity. At a neighboring table, two Italian NCOs exchanged knowing looks.

"A week, tops!" Whispered one of the Italian, making the other shake his head.

"I say two days at most. A bottle of Chianti on this."

"Deal!"

At Jennifer Cummings' table, one of the female army clerks eating with her bent forward to ask her a question in a low voice.

"Isn't she the reporter that we saw about a month ago on CNN during a news report from Afghanistan?"

"It could well be, Louise. I will know more about her tonight: she wants me to have tea with her, Lieutenant Garibaldi and the Afghan female trainers, so that we could get to know each other better. She can speak tons of languages, including Dari, Pashto and Arabic."

"An egghead?" Said a male MP staff sergeant in a derisive tone. "Why waste all that time learning other languages when English is already the standard worldwide?"

Jennifer gave him a dubious look: she was of the firm opinion that it had been a mistake to send John Wainwright here, or anywhere in Afghanistan. The army was however short of personnel for overseas tours and had overlooked, or ignored, the fact that Wainwright was a certified redneck with barely hidden contempt for Afghans, or any other non-westerner. He also firmly believed that women didn't belong in combat, or even in the army. He was however of a higher rank than her and she could not openly rebuke him for his views. Wainwright then noticed the way she was looking at him and made a mean smile.

"What's the matter, Cummings? You don't like what I say?"

"No, and I suspect that neither will Captain Laplante."

"I don't work for her, so screw her opinion."

A civilian police trainer eating at a nearby table heard that and eyed him with reprobation.

“Sergeant Wainwright, you’re talking shit again. She is an officer and you will pay the proper respect due to her, or I will report your attitude to Lieutenant Hooper. I happen to have met Captain Laplante before, at a combat pistol shooting competition near Dallas three years ago, and she cleaned my clock then, taking second position overall. As a war correspondent, she has seen more of war than you will ever see, so cut your crap!”

Wainwright glared at the civilian but didn’t reply. Gerald Morton was a big, tough and highly experienced police officer from Texas that had been a SWAT team member for years. He also was the head international instructor on police techniques and combat shooting and had the power to have Wainwright removed as an instructor, something that would definitely look bad in his personnel file and may even cut any possibilities for future promotions.

19:57 (Afghanistan Time)

Female instructors staff office

Shouz Afghan Border Police training center

Senior Lieutenant Maryam Shirzai had her two NCOs, Sergeants Aziza Kaker and Jamilla Noori, sit on extra chairs already brought in the small office, then sat at her desk, facing Maria Garibaldi and Jennifer Cummings. Nancy Laplante was not in the office, however, prompting her to look at Maria and ask in her laborious English.

“Where is Captain Laplante? This is the agreed time, no?”

“She went to get a tea service. She should be back anytime now.”

“But, she could have asked a servant to bring it from the kitchen?”

“I thought so myself, but she replied to me that she wanted to do it the proper way, according to Afghan customs.”

Impressed, Maryam translated that to her two police sergeants. She was just finishing speaking when Nancy entered the office, a large tray with a steaming tea pot and six cups on it. She put the tray on top of Maria’s desk and bowed in succession to each of the other five women, speaking in Dari, then in Italian and English.

“Let’s have tea together in the traditional way, so that we can talk together in friendship.”

She then served herself each woman, starting with Maryam Shirzai and ending with herself. With a cup of hot tea in hand, she sat on the last empty chair and waited for all to have taken their first sip of tea. She then spoke in Dari, looking at the three Afghan women.

“I may be senior in rank here, but this is an Afghan facility in your country, while me, Lieutenant Garibaldi and Sergeant Cummings are here to support you, not to tell you what to do. Senior Lieutenant Shirzai, I acknowledge you as the sole commander of this course.”

She repeated herself in English as the Afghan women exchanged stunned glances: up to now, the international staff had assumed itself to be in effective control of how training was to be conducted, often showing a paternalistic attitude towards the Afghan training staff. On their part, Maria Garibaldi and Jennifer Cummings were equally surprised but did not object as Nancy spoke again to Maryam.

“I have just reviewed quickly the course schedule and the required curriculum from the Afghan Border Police program. What I propose to you is that we respect the present curriculum but also that we improve in depth various course training points, with our help. I am a high-level master in a martial art technique called karate, as well as in combat shooting techniques, especially with pistols. Lieutenant Garibaldi is an expert in police investigative procedures and arrest techniques, while Sergeant Cummings is well trained in the use of a police baton. If you wish so, you could use us to actually give the instruction in those specialties, which would allow you and your two sergeants to teach the points touching specifically Afghan law, border and checkpoint procedures and how to handle family and women-related crimes. This way, you will be able to minimize the use of male instructors with your recruits, especially in the matters of unarmed combat and weapons training, which require actual physical contact between instructors and recruits. I am sure that Imam Wahid would appreciate that last point.”

“He certainly would, Captain.” Replied Maryam, her mind racing through what Nancy had said. “I am sure that he would approve of such changes and recommend them to Colonel Amin. Just this would be a huge improvement in my mind. I will speak to both Imam Wahid and Colonel Amin about this tomorrow.”

Nancy nodded her head, then translated what had been said for the benefit of Maria and Jennifer before returning to Dari.

“I have identified a number of time periods that could be used for extra shooting practices. In the present situation in Afghanistan, shooting proficiency is unfortunately

becoming more and more critical for the survival of your police officers. I will try on my part to obtain extra ammunition for those extra practice sessions. If you would permit me, I would also like to inspect in what state the weapons allotted to your recruits are and, if possible, improve on them, as I am quite knowledgeable in weapons.”

“I see no problems with that, Captain. In fact, obtaining sufficient ammunition for our police officers is never easy. If you can find a way to improve on that, I would be most grateful and so would Colonel Amin.”

“Thank you, Senior Lieutenant Shirzai. Would you like us to review together the course schedule in detail now, with the input of all present here?”

Maryam felt like a breath of fresh air had blown through the office: this was turning to be so different from the way past courses had been conducted.

“I would love to, Captain.”

20:34 (Afghanistan Time)

Sunday, November 4, 2012 ‘A’

Female instructors office

Shouz Afghan Border Police training center

Watching Maryam Shirzai as she answered her telephone, Maria Garibaldi knew at once that it was some bad news. After a few clipped phrases, the Afghan police woman slowly put down the receiver and looked at Maria with sadness.

“Soldiers have found our missing recruit: she was murdered by the Taliban while on her way to Shouz. I...I’m going to inform Nancy and Colonel Amin of this.”

Maria then felt as well sadness come to her as Maryam left the small office: it was a cruel end for the dreams of a young and brave young woman who had gone against the prejudices of most of her compatriots in order to serve her country. Out of the 31 female recruits that had been expected at first, three had changed their minds at the last moment, most probably because of threats against them or their families, and one was now confirmed dead. That left 27 recruits, who had already arrived in Shouz. It wasn’t much but, for a country like Afghanistan, with its misogynist rules and the terror spread by the Taliban, it said a lot about the courage of those 27 women. They would start their eight-week course tomorrow and Maria, like the other female instructors, was resolved to give the best of herself for them. The six days since the arrival of Nancy Laplante had brought many changes and improvements to the course preparation, including the arrival

two days ago of a stock of extra ammunition for rifle and pistol practices, thanks to some contacts Nancy said she had with some higher NATO staff left unnamed. By sharing some of that extra ammunition with Colonel Amin, for the use of his male recruits, Nancy had ensured that the ammunition for female recruits would not simply be seized by other instructors and had gained even further Amin's support. Even Imam Wahid was approving of her initiatives, as they would ensure that minimal physical contact would be made between male instructors and female recruits, a very sensitive subject in a country where extremely strict, not to say sexist rules governed the interaction between men and women. Wahid had also been impressed by the respect shown by Nancy to Islamic customs and practices and by her deep knowledge of those customs, in sharp contrast with the attitude of many of the other international staff members. That however did not mean that Nancy had played the subservient female, far from it.

Deciding to call it a night, Maria got up from her chair and put her desk in order before leaving the office and going to her cabin, intent on taking a shower before going to bed. She found Nancy sitting cross-legged on the floor of her bedroom, her eyes closed and in a classic meditation pose. She still wore her white karate practice suit, complete with black belt with the five golden bars denoting a fifth Dan master. Everybody in the camp was by now accustomed to see her practice daily her karate routine late in the evening. The incredible agility and speed shown during those practices had in turn helped convince many doubters and detractors to treat her seriously as a fighter. Nancy then opened her eyes and looked at Maria.

"In case you were going to ask, Maryam did inform me about our missing recruit. I was praying for her soul."

Maria nodded, then went to get a set of clean clothes, her soap box and her towel. Seeing that, Nancy got up from the floor and went for her own things.

"If you are going to the showers, then I will go with you: I had quite a rigorous practice tonight. Don't forget your pistol: you know the camp rules."

"Yeah, yeah! Is that to keep the Taliban away or to stop Gino Vinetti from spying on us in the showers?"

"Both!" Replied Nancy as she grabbed her own pistol and slid it in her karate suit's belt.

Walking out of the cabin together, the two women lazily walked towards the showers building, situated in one corner of the square occupied by the facilities of the international staff.

"The American presidential elections are in two days. Who do you think will win, Nancy? Obama or Romney?"

"It's a hard call right now, Maria. They are nearly nose to nose right now. Unfortunately, the Republicans still have a good chance to win: voters' memories are so fickle these days, plus there are about as many religious nuts in the United States as here in Afghanistan. What can you expect from a crowd that still believes that the Earth is only a few thousand years old?"

"I have to recognize that some of those American politicians and preachers can be quite extreme in their opinions. And what do you think will happen with Iran?"

"That will depend on what the Israelis will do, actually. They have refrained up to now from striking Iran, but if Romney is elected President, they might just see that as a green light for getting the support of the..."

Seeing Nancy suddenly fix her eyes in one direction, Maria looked that way, but saw nothing unusual at first.

"What is it, Nancy?"

"That Afghan soldier walking towards the female recruits' barrack: he keeps looking left and right and is walking quickly, as if he doesn't want to be seen."

Now noticing in the semi-obscurity of the camp the said soldier, still a good fifty meters away, Maria had to quickly agree with Nancy.

"He effectively is acting suspiciously. Maybe he's a voyeur who wants to go spy on our recruits."

"I don't think so, Maria." Said Nancy while grabbing her pistol. "Get your pistol ready, just in case: we are going to check that man out."

Grabbing her Beretta 92 pistol, Maria pulled its slide, loading a 9mm bullet in the chamber, then followed Nancy, who was now hurrying towards the female recruits barrack. That barrack had been set apart from the other Afghan barracks, on the edge of the square occupied by the international staff, to keep the women as widely separated from the Afghan men as possible. Maria and Nancy were still about thirty meters away from the Afghan soldier, who was now at one of the entrance door of the female barracks, when the man noticed them coming towards him. Instead of running away, as Maria would expect from a voyeur caught in the act, the soldier instead opened the door

of the barrack and, holding it open with his body, grabbed something at his belt and brought it to his mouth, as if to bite in it. Nancy then stopped cold in her track and raised her pistol while shouting in alarm.

“GRENADE!”

She then shot twice with her GLOCK 17L. Hit first in the torso, the man staggered and dropped what he had in his right hand. The second bullet hit him in the heart, making him crumble face down on the ground. Nancy then forced Maria to get down just before an explosion from under the soldier made his body jump in the air a good meter. While Maria hesitated then, Nancy got up and resumed her run, getting to the mangled body in a few seconds, then moving gently something on the ground with one foot while shouting something in Dari at the female recruits now screaming inside the barrack. Regaining her courage, Maria resumed her run and joined Nancy, her pistol at the ready. She then saw that a grenade, with its safety pin still in place, was near Nancy’s feet.

“He had two grenades with him?”

“Yes!” Answered Nancy, her jaws tight. “He was going to throw them inside the barrack, one after the other, which is why he was using his teeth to pull out their safety pins. If he would have succeeded, he could have caused a real carnage among our female recruits. Stay here and watch that grenade: I will go inside to reassure our recruits.”

Nancy then entered the female barrack, leaving Maria alone near the mangled body of the attacker and its unexploded grenade. By now, shouts of alarms were resonating around the camp and a number of men were coming out of various buildings, weapons at the ready. Gerald Morton, the civilian senior police advisor, was the first to arrive, a GLOCK pistol in his right hand.

“WHAT HAPPENED HERE?”

“Me and Nancy saw a marauder near the female barrack and went to check him out, Mister Morton. He was about to throw a grenade inside the barrack when Nancy shot him. He then fell on his primed grenade and was blown up. He had with him a second grenade, which is here, still with its safety pin in place.”

Morton looked down at the body and at the grenade, then swore.

“Fuck! That bastard is one of our male recruits. He must have been a Taliban infiltrator. God knows how many more there could be in this camp.”

He then knelt beside the grenade and, after carefully examining it visually, picked it up and showed it to Maria.

"Don't worry: it is still safe. This is a Pakistani-made 84-P2A1 hand grenade, a type frequently used by the Taliban. It has a lethal radius of about twenty meters. With two such grenades, that bastard could have butchered your female recruits."

After excitement, then fear, anger and hatred came next to Maria, who kicked with one booted foot the head of the dead infiltrator.

"The filthy, cowardly bastard! How could these Taliban pretend to do God's work? I wish that they would all drop dead."

More armed instructors were by now arriving on the scene, including Major Rambaldi and Senior Lieutenant Shirzai. Maria repeated her story to them, causing many jaws to tighten at the implications of the failed attack. Nancy was coming out of the female barrack as Colonel Amin and Imam Wahid Nayeddin were arriving at a run. She took on her to brief the Afghan commander, making him look down with anger at the dead attacker.

"An infiltrator! I will order an immediate search by my instructors of the male recruits' barracks, to look for more grenades or explosives. You have just averted a horrible bloodbath, Captain Laplante. Well done!"

"Thank you, sir. If you don't mind, I will resume my trip to the showers with Lieutenant Garibaldi."

"Go ahead, Captain. My men will take care of the rest."

Nancy was about to leave the scene when Maryam Shirzai touched her arm, making her stop and look at her.

"Thank you for saving my recruits, Nancy."

In response, Nancy smiled down gently at the Afghan woman.

"It was a pleasure, Maryam. I calmed them down, but they still could use some more comforting words from you. I will see you again tomorrow morning, at the welcoming parade."

That parade, which Nancy attended on the sidelines with Maria Garibaldi and Jennifer Cummings, to let the spotlight on the Afghan staff, was a standard affair, with a number of speeches from senior officers and the passing of basic information about the course. The 27 female recruits were then led by Maryam Shirzai and her two sergeants to the quartermaster, to be kitted out in uniforms and field kit, then to the infirmary, for a quick medical check. At lunch hour, however, Nancy started applying another novelty of hers, going to eat with Maria Garibaldi and Jennifer Cummings in the company of the

recruits and their Afghan female staff, in order to reinforce group cohesion. While Maryam Shirzai welcomed that move, it surprised to no small degree the recruits, while a few of the international staff, on hearing about this, made snide comments about Nancy 'turning native'.

The second novelty Nancy did that day was a public demonstration of a high-level karate kata routine in the middle of the camp's parade square. Watched by all the Afghan recruits and most of the staff, Nancy, dressed in her white Ji ⁴, did the routine that had earned her her fifth dan, complete with high kicks and lightning-quick punches. She completed that routine with a plank and brick breaking demonstration, attracting a concert of disbelieving exclamations when she broke in two a concrete block with her fist while letting out a paralyzing kiai scream, then smashed in succession through two thick wood planks, one with her fist and the other with her left foot. More than a few around the parade square were left with their jaws hanging down, while others, notably the women present, cheered her on as she bowed to salute the crowd at the end of her demonstration. Many men went afterwards to check how solid the planks and brick she had broken were in reality, with a few hurting their knuckles by trying themselves to punch them.

07:01 (Afghanistan Time) / 21:01 (Washington Time)

Wednesday, November 7, 2012 'A' / Tuesday, November 6

Afghan mess hall, Shouz

Nancy was with the other female staff, eating at a table next to the long table used by the female recruits, when a piece of news from the Kabul Central Radio Station echoed around the mess hall. Listening carefully to the words in Dari, she finally threw up her arms in triumph, prompting a question from Maria Garibaldi.

"What? What is going on?"

"Barak Obama was just proclaimed the winner of the United States presidential elections, by a hair. Well, Jennifer, if you are a Democrat, now is a good time to cheer up."

The American MP replied by doing a thumbs up signal.

⁴ Ji : Two piece loose outfit used for martial arts practice.

“Right on! I will have to drink to that tonight.”

Maryam Shirzai listened to them, not sure what to make of it.

“Uh, is this man being elected President of the United States good for Afghanistan?”

Nancy replied to that with a wry smile.

“Well, he is certainly better in that respect than his opponent, Mitt Romney. For one thing, Romney and his party were much more partisan of attacking Iran if it didn't put a stop to its nuclear program than Obama was. However, even with Obama in place, the chances that Israel will now attack Iran to destroy its nuclear installations are still high, since the Israelis hope that such an attack by them will push the United States into backing them up militarily. Now, guess what country borders Iran and is hosting a sizeable number of American troops? One hint: American troops have left Iraq nearly a year ago.”

As Jennifer Cummings swore, thankfully in English, Maryam Shirzai frowned as she thought that over.

“I see! Do you think that the Iranians would attack the Americans in Afghanistan?”

“Not unless they are attacked first. The Iranian leaders may be radicals, but they are not stupid. They know that they would have a hard time simply defending their airspace against any resolute Israeli or American airstrikes. Defending their borders would be even more problematic, since about every Sunni Muslim country around them is hostile to Iran. They won't try to invade Afghanistan if they are attacked, but I expect them to spread mayhem among their enemies by letting loose surrogate groups, like Hezbollah, and supporting other groups opposed to Israel and the United States.”

Nancy could have said a lot more but didn't, as it would have touched the subject of the possible reactions of the American forces based in Afghanistan and of the other NATO forces in the country, and she didn't want to discuss that in front of Afghans. Either way, the picture of things to come could be ugly. In fact, she knew from having seen historical data from the future that it WAS going to turn ugly, and very much so.

That she was not alone in that train of thoughts was proven that night at the cantina used by the international staff, when about everyone present discussed the election results and speculated on what could be next. Jennifer Cummings, looking

quite worried, went to her as Nancy was watching with Maria Garibaldi and others the CNN news channel, retransmitted via satellite to the television set of the cantina.

"Nancy, I have a bad feeling about Iran and what is to come." She said in a low voice.

"And you should, Jennifer." Replied Nancy, also in a low voice so that they could not be heard, except by Maria Garibaldi. "An Israeli strike on Iran, with possible direct American military support, is still very possible."

"And what could happen to us here, then?"

Nancy didn't even have to use her future hindsight to answer her, as she had analyzed and predicted such a scenario for months now as a war correspondent.

"At the minimum, I expect parts or all of the American forces in Afghanistan to be ordered to regroup and form a defensive barrier along the Afghan-Iranian border...if an air attack on Iran occurs or is imminent. At the worst, they could be ordered to launch strikes against Iran from Afghanistan, using airpower and special forces troops."

"But," objected at once Maria Garibaldi, "the rest of NATO would not go along with that, especially if Iran is attacked first. Too many people in Europe remember the supposed weapons of mass destruction that had been claimed by Washington to be in Iraq, claims that were used to start a war that we now know to have been unjustified."

"You are right, Maria, and this could have the potential to blow apart the NATO mission in Afghanistan, unfortunately."

Maria's face darkened as she saw how ugly this could become.

"Nancy, I sincerely hope that you are wrong about this."

"I wish so too, Maria." Replied Nancy gloomily. "I am not a warmonger and never will be. I saw too much of war in my life to wish it on anyone. However, wishful thinking is of no use where international affairs are concerned."

Jennifer Cummings looked at Nancy with near dread.

"And the Israelis? How likely are they to attack Iran?"

"Very, unfortunately. Their leaders have been anxious for months to attack the Iranian nuclear facilities before the Iranians could produce a bomb. That they have not yet done so is a near miracle. Polls in Israel have been showing for months that the Israeli electorate, while averse to a first strike on Iran if not supported by the United States, would be squarely in favor of a strike if assured of American support. Further, the successes of their 'Iron Dome' anti-rocket defense system against rockets fired by Hamas from Gaza have given them what I would call a false sense of invulnerability from

Iranian and Hezbollah rockets. All this is to say that things are now hanging by a thread, a very thin thread.”

Maria then realized something that she didn't like at all.

“But, the Afghans? What will become of them?”

Nancy closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath before answering.

“They will have to deal with the Taliban alone, or with the support of whichever members of the NATO mission in Afghanistan are left in country after the balloon goes up. That is why our present job has become even more critical and urgent.”

15:10 (Afghanistan Time)

Friday, November 30, 2012 'A'

Rifle range, Shouz Afghan Border Police training center

Nancy examined the target at which one of the female Afghan recruits had been shooting with her AK-47 assault rifle from a distance of fifty meters, then patted her shoulder in encouragement, speaking to her in Pashto.

“Well done, Lailoma! You are making quick progress: all your bullets are now in the target. Continue to control your trigger pull and your breathing and you will do great. You may patch up your target.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Answered the small woman, smiling with pride. Nancy then went to the next recruit, standing in front of her target. Nancy took a few minutes to finish inspecting the results for all the 27 apprentice shooters, seeing in general encouraging progress compared to a week ago. She then had the recruits return to their firing positions in order to shoot another ten rounds of slow, deliberate fire. With NATO troops, she would have gone more quickly to practicing rapid firing, but she knew how green those women were. She would rather use the limited training ammunition available to teach them how to be accurate in slow, semi-automatic fire mode, rather than do like some other instructors who had their students fire half of the time in automatic mode. That may have been fun for the recruits, but Nancy eyed that as being only a waste of ammunition that also encouraged poor firing discipline.

Finally, with the Sun low on the horizon and due to disappear in one hour, she concluded the shooting session and had her recruits dismantle and clean their rifles on folding tables, under the supervision of their female Afghan instructors. Forty minutes

later, everything had been packed away in their lone truck, with both the instructors and recruits walking back in two ranks to the nearby camp. She found Maria Garibaldi waiting for her near the recruits' barrack. Even though Nancy already knew what was up, she made a show of appearing content as she went to her.

"We had a good practice session today, Maria: the girls are doing some good progress."

Maria nodded but did not smile.

"Nancy, Kabul Radio has just announced that a number of Iranian nuclear facilities have been attacked from the air. The news are still fragmentary, however, and it is not clear who did it, or what is the extent of the damage. I'm afraid that it is all starting to unravel."

"We will see, Maria. For the moment, and until we get more detailed news, let's continue concentrating on teaching our recruits. We will see tonight what CNN news has to say about that."

Nancy and Maria were not alone in listening to the CNN channel on the television at the cantina that evening. In fact, about every member of the international staff came to the cantina to listen to the news. What finally became known for sure was that a large air flotilla of Israeli combat aircraft had attacked at least half a dozen Iranian nuclear sites, causing significant damages and killing many Iranian nuclear technicians and scientists. While spokesmen at the White House and Pentagon were denying any prior knowledge of the Israeli strike and refused to comment about possible American reactions to this new crisis, the Iranian leaders had been much less timid in their answers to reporters, announcing that 'Israel would disappear under a rain of Iranian missiles and that its ally, the United States, would also pay for its support of the Jewish state. Understandably, that made a number of American staff members in Shouz either nervous or apprehensive about the near future. Jennifer Cummings, who remembered Nancy's predictions, was particularly upset by the news, storming out of the cantina while raging about 'another stupid fucking war'. Lieutenant Denis Hooper, the senior American officer in Shouz, got up to go after her but Nancy blocked his way firmly, staring hard at him.

"Let her be, Hooper! Sergeant Cummings has ample reasons to be upset about this latest stupidity."

“Stupidity?” Exclaimed the Military Police officer in an aggressive tone. “What the hell would you know or understand about this? She’s my business anyway.” He then tried to push her out of his way, only to find himself bouncing back violently against the wall of the cantina with a resounding ‘THUD’. Nancy then glared at him.

“Wrong, Hooper! She’s under me here, which makes her my business. We are part of a NATO assistance joint mission here, and not of some American battle formation. As for understanding what is going on concerning Iran, I have a masters degree in international relations and nine years spent either covering or fighting wars that are telling me that this is one war that didn’t need to happen.”

Hooper, still reeling from the brutal slamming and stunned by her monstrous strength, saw that all the non-Americans, along with a couple of American civilians in the cantina, were eyeing him with reprobation. Not wanting to lose face publicly like this, he tried to posture further and shook an angry finger at Nancy.

“My superiors will hear about your interference in this matter, Laplante.” In response, Nancy showed him the miniature Canadian flag on her shoulder.

“I don’t give a hoot about what your American superiors would think about this. I’m a Canadian officer, part of a NATO team helping to train Afghan policemen, and I was protecting a member of my team from being harassed. In case you didn’t understand yet, the other countries that are part of NATO are the allies of the United States in this mission, not its servants. Now, you will fucking sit back in your chair and try to educate yourself further about World affairs, Lieutenant. Maria, can you change the channel to the BBC News, so we can get a more balanced coverage?”

Maria Garibaldi grabbed at once the television’s remote control unit and switched channels, putting on the BBC, which unsurprisingly was also talking about the Israeli strike on Iran and the possible fallouts from it. Realizing now that he was both outnumbered and outranked, with Major Rambaldi being present and having done nothing to stop Nancy Laplante, Hooper sat back reluctantly while avoiding the eyes of the others around him.

14:52 (Afghanistan Time)

Sunday, December 2, 2012 ‘A’

Office of the female training staff

Afghan Border Police training center

Shouz

Nancy, who was working on requisition forms for the female course while the recruits were attending a Dari literacy class under the supervision of Maryam Shirzai, looked up from her paperwork, then got up at attention when Major Rambaldi entered the office. To Nancy's and Maria's surprise, Rambaldi closed the door of the office before speaking, looking upset.

"I was just notified by encrypted message from NTM-A headquarters in Kabul of a most unsettling directive: all the American military personnel attached to the various branches and training teams of the NTM-A are being ordered to pack up and join up with the American combat units engaged in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM in Afghanistan. In the case of the American soldiers in Shouz, a helicopter will come pick them up tonight at eight O'clock, to fly them to the American base in Herat, where they will be reassigned to Task Force Raider West."

Nancy's face hardened, while Maria protested, indignant.

"But they can't do that, sir! This is a NATO joint mission. For the Americans to pull out like this will mean that many Afghan police and army units will lose their mentoring teams. It could unravel the whole training and mentoring program."

"I know and I agree, Lieutenant. However, it seems that there is nothing we can do to reverse this decision."

"Does that mean that the American lieutenant general that was in command of NTM-A had the decency to pass his command to his NATO deputy commander, after ordering such a gutting up of the mission, sir, or are the Americans pretending to stay in charge of NTM-A?" Asked Nancy in a bitter tone. Rambaldi shook his head at that.

"I don't know about that. As soon as all the American military staff has been advised by me, I will place an urgent call to NTM-A West headquarters. However, I suspect like you do that this will create quite a political stinker in the various NATO capitals."

"Maybe you should ask Colonel Amin afterwards what the Afghan government thinks of this, sir." Suggested Nancy. "Maybe he could inform us of the reaction of his government on this."

"A good idea actually, Captain. Now, where is Sergeant Cummings?"

"At the quartermaster, sir, drawing the equipment for a class on baton handling she was due to give in half an hour."

"Then I will inform her directly of her new orders. Will you be able to take over her class from her?"

"I will do it, sir." Volunteered Maria. "I'm trained on baton techniques, but Nancy isn't."

"Excellent! Until further notice, we will do our best to go on without our American military personnel. Thankfully, our American civilian contractors were not ordered out as well. I would have hated to lose Mister Morton as well."

"Oh, I'm sure that Gerald will have a few choice words to say about this." Predicted Nancy with a wry smile. Rambaldi looked at her, hesitant, before asking her a question.

"Captain Laplante, you are a trained intelligence analyst and an experienced war correspondent. What do you think will happen next?"

"In and around Iran, plenty, sir. However, what we have to worry about here is what the American pullout towards the Iranian border will mean for the internal security situation in Afghanistan. This is the second time that the Americans will have dropped the Afghanistan mission in mid-stride to go fight a useless war, after leaving once to go invade Iraq. The Taliban would be stupid not to use that golden opportunity to retake some lost ground. When they do, it will be the Afghan soldiers and policemen that will pay for the Americans' myopia."

Rambaldi's shoulders sagged in discouragement at those words. Without saying another word, he then left the office, followed by Maria Garibaldi.

Nancy, Maria and the other international staff members, along with Colonel Amin and his officers, were standing around the limits of the parade square when the American heavy helicopter sent from Herat landed. As the dozen or so American soldiers due to board the helicopter were getting ready to walk to it, Nancy went with Maria to go exchange a last handshake with Jennifer Cummings.

"Good luck and be careful, Jennifer. We will miss you."

"I will miss you too, Nancy. And you too, Maria. Promise me that you will write me. You do still have my home address, I hope?"

"As well as your email address, Jennifer. I will keep it precious. Don't forget to send me emails as well."

"I will." Said Jennifer, near tears, before kissing each of them on the cheeks. She then had to pick up her kit and follow the others into the helicopter. Four minutes

later, the big machine took off in a whirlwind of dust, soon disappearing in the night sky. Nancy made a silent prayer to The One for the safety of Jennifer before returning with Maria to their cabin, her heart heavy.

17:09 (Afghanistan Time)

Monday, December 3, 2012 'A'

Office of the female training staff

Nancy was greeted by a happy smile from Maria when she entered their office, back from directing a pistol shooting practice for their recruits. Maria then waved a message in her right hand.

"There are some good news, Nancy. Read this!"

Grabbing the message, Nancy saw that it had been sent by the NTM-A headquarters in Kabul, addressed to all the NTM-A branches and sub-units in Afghanistan. It didn't take long before she whooped with approval at the content of the message.

"NTM-A is now under the command of its former deputy commander, a Canadian major general. He says to go on with the mission and to persevere with professionalism and dedication. YES! That is what I wanted to hear. If I wasn't under a dry policy, I would go drink to that at the cantina tonight."

Maria gave her a malicious smile then.

"And you think that WE Italians are on a dry policy? We wouldn't be caught dead without at least one bottle of Chianti in our kit. Maybe we could celebrate this discreetly in our cabin, along with a few more people."

Nancy smile turned into a grin.

"Will Gino be there too?"

"Gino would never miss a little party, Nancy, especially one where there are women."

"Then, count me in." Said Nancy, before becoming serious again. "Any news about the situation around Iran?"

"Yes, and they are mostly bad." Replied Maria, her smile disappearing as well. "If I can believe BBC International Radio, Israel has started to be bombarded by thousands of long range rockets fired by the Hezbollah from Lebanon, while shorter range rockets have been fired by Hamas from Gaza. There are unconfirmed reports that Iran fired some heavy long range missiles towards Israel, but the Israelis claim to have

been able to shoot them down. However, independent reports state that casualties and damages are increasingly rapidly inside Israel, while Lebanon has been hit by heavy Israeli airstrikes.”

“What about the Persian Gulf and the Americans?”

“Despite saying that he was saddened to see that a war could not be averted, President Obama has put all the American forces in the Middle East area and in the Indian Ocean on full alert and has ordered the U.S. Navy to ensure that the Strait of Hormuz stays open to tanker traffic. For the moment, however, there are still no words about any American airstrikes on Iran.”

“Hmm, that’s about on par with what I expected for the first phase of this war.”

“The first phase?” Said Maria, suddenly alarmed.

“Yep! This is only the beginning of this war, Maria. From now on, it may evolve in a way nearly impossible to predict accurately, depending on every move, counter-move, mistake and misunderstanding made on one side or the other as the war goes on. It may escalate eventually all the way to nuclear strikes on Iran, or it could die down in a couple of weeks and turn into prolonged underground hostilities via terrorist attacks and covert special forces strikes. The one thing that I can predict with some assurance is that there will be no real winners in this, only losers.”

“You are not exactly reassuring, Nancy.” Said Maria, pouting, making Nancy shrug and smile.

“Welcome to conflict analysis, Maria.”

15:28 (Afghanistan Time)

Thursday, December 13, 2012 ‘A’

Parade square of the Afghan Border Police training center

Shouz, Herat Province

Colonel Najibullah Amin looked worried as he watched the 27 female recruits load up with their weapons and backpacks in two of his trucks. In fact, thought Nancy, Amin had been looking worried ever since the American military mentors had pulled out eleven days ago. He however had many good reasons to worry constantly. With all the American forces in Afghanistan now massed along the Iranian border, Taliban attacks around the rest of the country had multiplied and become increasingly bolder. That was especially true in the northeastern provinces adjacent to the Pakistani border and in the

South, in Kandahar province, where the Americans' departure had created huge holes in the security network. It had not helped that many of the European countries that were part of the NATO mission had refused to redeploy their troops to fill those holes, citing national restrictions on the employment of their troops in Afghanistan. Some, like the German contingent, already known for its timid rules of engagement, had in fact started quietly to pack up their heavy equipment and ship it back home, despite the cajoling and protests from other contingents and NATO capitals. Only a few of the NATO contingents, notably the British and Canadian ones, had readily responded to the calls for help from beleaguered Afghan army and police units, keeping their mentoring staff embedded with Afghan units involved in fighting the Taliban. Some others, like the Italians, had refused to redeploy but, at least, continued to fight the Taliban in their assigned sectors.

Nancy, accompanied by Maryam Shirzai and Maria Garibaldi, went to Colonel Amin as the recruits were finished loading, coming to attention in front of Amin and saluting him. Nancy however let Maryam Shirzai report to the colonel.

"We are ready to leave for our practice night patrol march, Colonel. We should be in Bala Buluk by next morning, where we will practice roadblock and checkpoint procedures with the local police contingent."

"You have advised the Bala Buluk police chief and the district police chief that you will be in their sector tonight, Lieutenant Shirzai?"

"Yes sir! In return, Chief Khudaydad and Major Basir have promised to keep discreet about our night patrol, to avoid any security leaks that could warn the Taliban of our presence. All of us are wearing steel helmets, to differentiate us from the turbaned Taliban and avoid fratricidal shootings. The area we will be marching through at night is anyway deserted, with very few isolated houses and farms in our path until we actually approach Bala Buluk. Captain Laplante and Lieutenant Garibaldi will help the recruits with their map navigation and have night vision goggles, while I and Captain Laplante have radios to stay in contact with the camp, or contact the Bala Buluk police station if need be."

"Very well, Lieutenant. May Allah be with you and your recruits during your march."

"Thank you, sir."

The three women then saluted Amin again and turned around to go to the two waiting trucks. Amin still felt worry as the trucks started rolling and left the camp, turning south on the nearby Kandahar-Herat highway to head towards the nearby district of Bala Buluk, which was part of Farah province. His daughter Lailoma was part of the 27 recruits, and so were the daughters of Major Basir and of Chief Khudaydad. Amin finally returned to his command post as the Sun was close to setting down and as the two trucks were now out of sight.

Nancy, sitting in the cab of the second truck, kept a watchful eye around as they rolled on the highway at a good speed, watching for any telltale sign of a hidden roadside bomb. There was little traffic on the road, one of the consequences of the renewed Taliban offensive and precarious security situation. Nancy had advised Maryam Shirzai not to overload her recruits, but also to carry a good amount of ammunition and water, plus rations for a day, mindful of the average fitness level of their recruits. Nancy and Maria had given the example, carrying only their body armor vests, small patrol packs and their Kevlar helmets with night vision goggles, plus of course their weapons. Nancy also carried a reserve of parachute flare launch tubes and signal flares, in case night illumination or visual signals were needed during the night march, plus two radios.

The first part of their move was completed without incident and the 27 female recruits and their five female instructors got out of the two trucks after a drive of thirty kilometers that brought them inside the district of Bala Buluk and about 25 kilometers north of the town of the same name, their final destination. They would now have to walk the rest of the distance, mostly along dry riverbeds and flat, arid plains. Nancy went to Maryam as she was organizing her recruits in a single file.

“Lieutenant Shirzai, the Sun is going to set soon. If you wish so, we could take some distance from the road, then stop for evening prayers at Sunset. Me and Lieutenant Garibaldi will then keep watch during your prayers.”

Maryam smiled in approval, happy that Nancy proved yet again her understanding and respect of Islamic customs and practices.

“That sounds like a good plan, Captain. Thank you for the offer of watching.”

She let her two sergeants complete a check of their recruits, then led the platoon of women westward, away from the road for about 200 meters before stopping once in the middle of a dry riverbed.

"Alright, girls! The section leaders will now examine their maps and establish our current position. Me and Captain Laplante will then check your findings. I want everybody to know and understand where we are now and where we are going before we resume our march. No use of white lights will be made from now on."

The map checks took about ten minutes, most of the recruits being quite new at the art of map reading and field navigation, with many being mostly illiterate on top. Finally, with both Nancy and Maryam satisfied that the designated section leaders had the correct heading set on their compasses and knew where they were and where they were going, the Afghan women lined up and turned towards the Mecca before kneeling for the evening prayers. Nancy used the prayer time to scan visually the region around them before the Sun disappeared for good under the horizon. The ground was arid, with hardly any vegetation visible anywhere, and was quite flat, except for a mountain mass to the West and another to the South. From her position, she could see no artificial lights at all and not a single house. This night was a new Moon, thus was going to be very dark, something that would make the march more difficult for the recruits. The air, already fresh, was cooling rapidly and temperatures this night promised to be close to the freezing point. That didn't bother Nancy as a Canadian, but Maria was already shivering in her Italian combat coat. The impending march would however warm her up. The Afghan women then finished their prayers and lined up again for the march. Seeing that it was going to be very dark soon, Maryam Shirzai ordered her recruits to hold the backpack of the person in front of each of them, then gave the command to march. Maryam, to whom Nancy had loaned her personal handheld night vision scope, was in second position in the column, just behind the Afghan woman holding a compass and a map and doing the field navigation. Maria Garibaldi, who had both a set of night vision goggles and a rifle night sight on her Beretta SC-70/90 carbine, had the tail position, where she would be able to check for any possible followers and to ensure that none of the recruits accidentally went astray. As for Nancy, she took a position fifty meters to the front and left of the column, scouting on the flank nearest to the highway, where any threat was most likely to come from. Her C7A2 assault rifle, a Canadian-made improved variant of the American M16, had been customized by her before leaving Canada, using

parts bought a few years ago on the civilian market in the United States. The main things she had changed were the forward hand guards, which had been replaced with commercial models equipped with picatinni rails that allowed for the fitting of more varied sights than the standard rails provided with the C7A2. Tonight, to supplement the AN/PVS-14 night vision monocular goggles attached to her helmet, she had removed the usual Elcan 3.4X optical sight and had installed on the rails of her rifle hand guards a holographic sight on the top rail, a PAQ-4C infra-red laser dot sight on the right side rail, a SureFire tactical rifle flashlight on the bottom rail and an EOTech red dot sight on the left side rail. To top this, Nancy had added on the muzzle of her rifle a sound suppressor bought in Texas. Contrary to what many neophytes would believe, the goal of such a suppressor was not to make it silent, far from it, but it made it much more difficult for an enemy to spot her from the flash and the bang of her rifle. Apart from all this, she wore a headset under her helmet that was connected to the small radio tuned to the frequency used by the patrol, plus had a second, bigger radio tucked inside her small backpack, tuned to the general frequency of the Afghan police in the Bala Buluk district. Her personal handheld radio scanner unit and a GPS satellite navigation handheld unit completed her electronic equipment. Thus equipped, Nancy started walking at an easy pace, mindful of the fact that the Afghan recruits had no night vision equipment and could barely see past a few paces in front of them.

Because of the darkness and of the inexperience of the recruits, the march was slower than expected and they took a good ninety minutes to cover the first five kilometers, despite the fact that the ground was mostly flat. Maryam Shirzai then called a short halt, time to change the woman in charge of map navigation and letting the others rest a bit. With no farm, house or other people encountered yet on their way, the column resumed its advance after fifteen minutes, continuing south towards Bala Buluk. They did a total of four such five kilometer stages, changing the navigators and resting a bit at each stop, before stopping around midnight as planned about four kilometers north of Bala Buluk, in view of the few lights from the villages surrounding the town. The goal was to let the recruits have a few hours of sleep before crossing the mostly dry Farah River, which ran East-West and formed the northern boundary of Bala Buluk. They would then enter the town at Sunrise and arrive at the district police station, where they would help the local police to run checkpoints during the day. No campfires were

allowed and the women, after eating a ration cold, went to sleep rolled in wool blankets, while Nancy and Sergeant Jamilla Noori stood the first watch.

02:46 (Afghanistan Time)

Friday, December 14, 2012 'A'

Patrol bivouac site, four kilometers north of Bala Buluk

The time to wake up Maria Garibaldi and Sergeant Aziza Kaker, so that they could take the second watch, was approaching when the sight of multiple lines of tracer bullets in the night sky over Bala Buluk caught the attention of Nancy. Patting the shoulder of Sergeant Noori to show her the tracers, Nancy then made sure that her larger radio set, tuned to the frequency used by the district police force, was on and functioning properly. By now she could hear the faint but distinct noise from a heavy exchange of fire coming from the town. A flash and a boom after a few seconds then told her that someone was using as well a mortar or a rocket launcher. Now sure that something bad was happening in Bala Buluk, Nancy walked to Maryam Shirzai, still sleeping among her recruits, and shook her gently to wake her up. The Afghan woman woke up with a startle when touched, but calmed down on seeing Nancy bent over her in the darkness.

"Uh, is it time to go already?"

"No, it is only two forty-five in the morning, but a heavy firefight just started inside the town."

"In Bala Buluk?" Asked Maryam, waking up fully and throwing away her wool blanket to get up. She then watched and listened to the firefight for a few seconds with Nancy and Sergeant Noori before giving a worried look at Nancy.

"It seems to come from the area of the district police station. The Taliban must be attacking it and it looks like they are in strength. Did the Bala Buluk police station send a radio call?"

"Not yet. Do you want me to try to raise them on the radio?"

"Please do."

"Then, in the meantime, I suggest that you get hold of our three recruits that are from the Bala Buluk district, apart from waking the others up as well: they may be able to give us some details about the setup and location of the police station in town."

"A good idea, actually. Tell me as soon as you could contact the police station."

Nancy had to do repeated calls in Dari on her backpack HF radio before a male voice answered her in an unsettled voice.

"This is the Bala Buluk station. Who is calling, over?"

"I say again, this is Patrol Shirzai, from Shouz. We are presently north of your location and can see a fire inside Bala Buluk. What is your situation, over?"

"We are under heavy attack by at least 200 Taliban armed with machine guns, RPGs and mortars. Our compound perimeter is still secure but we are receiving very heavy fire and are sustaining a growing number of casualties. Can you help us, over?"

"Wait one, Bala Buluk!" Said Nancy before turning her head and shouting towards Maryam Shirzai. "Lieutenant Shirzai, the Bala Buluk police station is under heavy attack by at least 200 Taliban armed with heavy weapons and is asking for our help."

Maryam Shirzai was suddenly confronted with a most difficult decision. She had only a total of 32 armed women with her, including herself, most of them inexperienced and only partially trained, to go fight an enemy vastly superior in numbers and also more experienced. However, if she decided not to intervene and withdraw, that would leave the policemen in Bala Buluk alone to face a grim fate if overwhelmed and captured. She then turned towards Fatima Malyar, Hanifa Khudaydad and Mohammadezai Basir, the three recruits originating from the Bala Buluk district.

"What can you tell me about the district police station and the force inside it?"

Mohammadezai Basir was the first to answer, stepping forward.

"My father, Major Abdul Basir, is the district police chief, Lieutenant. I know the police station well: it is surrounded by a high concrete brick wall and has four corner watch towers, also made of concrete bricks. The last time I was there a few weeks ago, the station held about seventy policemen, plus three foreign police advisors, one Canadian and two Italians."

"What surrounds the police station? Is it in the open or in the middle of the town?"

"It is near the eastern extremity of the town, just besides the road leading through town to the city of Farah, to the West. Mud houses and compounds surround it but there is an open space of between 200 and 500 meters between the wall of the station and the other buildings, except on its north side, where houses stand on the opposite side of the street. If I may add, Lieutenant, I can tell you as well that the river

we have to cross to get in town is nearly completely dry at this time of the year. It will start to fill up in only about a month, with the Winter rains. I can guide the patrol to a fording point I know well.”

“Excellent!” Said Maryam before looking back at Nancy, who had approached her. “What do you think, Captain? Would we be able to help the police station with our patrol?”

“If we don’t help the police station, then it will most probably fall to the Taliban, with its garrison then massacred. The Taliban know that most of the forces that could have reacted to help the station are now gone, sitting along the Iranian border, thus they will attack relentlessly and may even put siege to the station until it falls. If we do go and help, we may sustain heavy casualties, in view of the inexperience of our recruits, unless we are very crafty about our attack plan and can take the Taliban by surprise. The girls will however have to show strong fire discipline and use only slow fire, both to be more accurate and to save their limited ammunition. We just can’t go rushing in and simply hope for the best.”

“Shouldn’t we call Shouz to ask permission first, Lieutenant?” Asked Sergeant Kaker. Maryam didn’t get angry at her for that, as Kaker was correct according to normal command procedures. She however shook her head.

“We will advise them, so that they could in turn try to get help from the helicopters based in Herat, but I am resolved to go help the police station, unless Colonel Amin formally orders me not to intervene. Any relief column sent from Shouz would arrive too late and could as well be ambushed by the Taliban with roadside bombs.”

“Make that last point a probability, Lieutenant.” Said Nancy, grim. “Such a large Taliban force as the one attacking Bala Buluk right now would have set up at least a couple of ambush points along the main highway, to catch and delay any relief column. The Taliban may be intolerant bastards, but they are not stupid.”

“Point taken, Captain. Tell Bala Buluk that we will come to their aid and do what we can. Then call Shouz and advise them of the situation. In the meantime, I will prepare the patrol for combat.”

“You got it, Lieutenant.” Said Nancy before resuming in Italian for the benefit of Maria Garibaldi what had been said in Dari. The Carabinieri woman’s eyes suddenly widened as she remembered something.

"Oh my God! Brigadiere Falcone: he's in Bala Buluk. He was one of my instructors at the military academy."

Nancy nodded once in understanding.

"Then, we all have good reasons to go help the police station in town, Maria. Your rifle night sight is zeroed in, I hope?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then you will certainly have plenty of opportunities to use it tonight. I will now have to make a couple of radio calls."

02:53 (Afghanistan Time)

Bala Buluk district police station

"MAJOR! MAJOR! A POLICE PATROL FROM SHOUZ IS ON ITS WAY!"

Major Abdul Basir, the police chief for the Bala Buluk district, snapped his head around to look at his excited radio operator, who had just run out of the command post.

"How big a patrol and when can they be here?" Asked Basir, who had been running towards a hard-pressed section of their perimeter wall.

"They are of platoon size, sir, and said that they should be here in about two hours. Uh, there is something else, sir."

"Yes?" Asked Basir, getting impatient with his radio operator.

"They have women with them, sir. One of them was the one talking on the radio."

For a moment, Basir was frozen by the surprise of hearing this. He however regained his composure quickly, pressed on by the urgency of the situation.

"That detail is not important, Corporal. Return to your radio and keep an ear for that patrol."

Basir then resumed his running, soon climbing a set of narrow stairs and setting foot on the walkway used by the defenders of the police station to fire from the top of the wall at the Taliban fighters. There, he found one of his foreign advisors, a Canadian policeman, busy exchanging fire with the extremists hidden along the mud houses on the opposite side of the street, and patted his shoulder in encouragement.

"Good news, Corporal Blake: help is on the way. Spare your ammunition, though: they will be here only in about two hours."

As Basir went off to go see his men and pass the news, William Blake made a grimace while ducking under the wall parapet to avoid a spray of bullets: the enemy certainly didn't show any sign of running out of ammunition.

North of the town, which actually was more like a very big village, with cultivated fields attached to nearly every mud house, Nancy had now taken the lead of the patrol, in order to go faster in the total darkness with the help of her night vision goggles. She however kept her pace measured and moderate: the last thing she wanted was for the policewomen to enter a fight in an exhausted state, when they were already heavily outnumbered and outgunned. The Afghan women, knowing full well what was at stake and also fueled by their hatred of the Taliban, didn't complain about the accelerated pace and kept up with Nancy. Despite the darkness, they did good time, arriving on the north bank of the Farah River after only a bit more than one hour of march. As promised, Mohammadezai Basir was able to guide the patrol across the mostly dry Farah River at a point where water came up at most to their calves. Nancy then drew a bearing on the departure flashes and detonations from the enemy mortar firing at intervals from the eastern extremity of the town on the police station. Careful not to approach any house and having Maryam Shirzai enforce noise discipline along the file of Afghan policewomen following her, Nancy cautiously covered the last kilometer to the enemy position. The near total darkness, helped by the constant noise from the firefight around the police station, now played fully in the patrol's favor. With visibility from the naked eye reduced to mere meters and with the Taliban notoriously lacking in night sights, Nancy possessed a huge advantage on the enemy with her night vision goggles and various electronic rifle sights.

At about four thirty in the morning, with Sunrise still two and a half hours away, the patrol finally came to the main road passing East-West through the town. What Nancy saw through her night goggles less than one hundred meters away to their right made her pause. Parked rather haphazardly in a dirt field behind a group of mud houses were over thirty pickup trucks of the kind the Taliban favored to travel around. With a load of about ten men per truck, that meant an even bigger enemy force than the one they had expected. Also behind the mud houses on the other side of the road, she could see an enemy mortar crew of five men around a single medium caliber mortar, plus a group of bearded and turbaned armed men discussing besides the corner of a

house. She could see as well four more Taliban lying on their belly on the roof of the same house, manning and firing what looked and sounded to her like two PKM medium machineguns. Returning her attention on the group discussing behind the house's corner, Nancy had the distinct impression that she was looking at Taliban commanders with their bodyguards. In fact, two of the Taliban were armed with sub-compact AKSU-74 assault rifles, a type that was often the weapon of choice of Taliban commanders. Scanning carefully the pickup trucks parked behind the house, she could see only two enemy sentries who seemed rather relaxed and chatted between themselves. Turning towards Maryam Shirzai, who was crouched near her, Nancy described to her what she had just seen, making her grimace.

"Over 300 Taliban fighters here? That's a lot for the few of us, Nancy."

"Not if we can engage them separately in manageable groups and while using the effect of surprise. Just taking out that mortar and two machineguns would already help tremendously our men in the police station. Killing those suspected commanders would also be nice. I have a plan to propose to you."

"Go ahead, Nancy."

Nancy spoke for a minute, with Maria Garibaldi and Maryam's two sergeants listening as well. At the end, Nancy got a collection of head nods, while Maryam spoke with more assurance now.

"This sounds like a good plan. Alright, Nancy, start your covert approach while I lead the patrol into firing position. May Allah be with you, my friend."

"And may Allah be with you all." Replied Nancy before disappearing in the night, running in a crouch.

Nancy actually cheated a bit while she was approaching the two Taliban sentries watching over the parked fleet of pickup trucks: she used her power of levitation to silently float above the ground while advancing. The two men never heard or saw her before one was stunned by a touch of her left hand, while the other was then stabbed in the throat by Nancy's commando knife. She then gave the coup de grace to the two men with her knife. Now walking normally but still hiding between the trucks, she made her way to one pickup truck which was parked with its headlights pointed directly at the Taliban fighters behind the mud house. Quietly opening the driver's door, she looked inside and smiled: as she had expected, the ignition key had been left in the contact.

Reaching out, she turned partially the key in the ignition, opening the electrical circuits of the truck, then spoke with a low voice in her patrol radio.

“Nancy to Maryam: I am in position and ready.”

“Understood. I will need another minute to finish positioning our girls.”

“Okay! Advise me when ready. Remember: semi-automatic fire only and aimed shots, to conserve our ammunition. I will take care of the machine gunners on the roof of the house.”

After some tense waiting, Nancy finally got the word from Maryam that she was ready to open fire. Acknowledging that, Nancy then turned on the headlights of her pickup truck, switching them as well to high beam. The Taliban fighters behind the house, now bathed in intense white light, instinctively covered their eyes or turned their heads away at first, frozen in place like a group of deers caught in the beams of an oncoming car while crossing a road. Now presented with perfect targets at less than forty meters of distance, the 31 women of the patrol opened fire with one massive volley on the fourteen Taliban standing behind the house. While some of the women still managed to miss their intended targets, all of the extremists went down with that volley. At the same time as the policewomen opened fire, Nancy got out of the pickup truck and aimed her rifle at the four Taliban on the house roof, who were partially illuminated, using her holographic sight. Placing the red reticule of the holographic sight on the chest of one of the machine gunners, who was getting up to see what was happening, she fired once, dropping the man. She then fired three more bullets in quick succession, killing or wounding the four men on the roof. In the meantime, the patrolwomen fired a second volley, aiming at the Taliban fighters who were still moving on the ground and finishing them off without mercy. With all the extremists now down, Nancy reached again inside the truck she was leaning against and closed its headlights before speaking on her radio.

“Enemy all down! Run to the house and secure the grounds.”

She then went herself at a run towards the house, but went towards one pickup truck parked alongside the rear wall of the building, using it like a stepping platform to jump on the rooftop in three steps. She found two of her targets still moving and crying in pain. Without remorse, she finished them with bullets to the head: with lots more Taliban to fight, the patrol could not afford to get encumbered with prisoners at this stage of the fight. Looking around the rooftop, she saw two PKM Russian-made medium machineguns resting on their bipods along the western parapet of the roof, with many

ammunition boxes near them and more boxes, empty, discarded on the roof. That pleased Nancy, as the PKM was a good, dependable weapon capable of providing heavy, sustained support fire that could become crucial for the police patrol in this fight. She thus grabbed the two machineguns by their carrying handles and brought them to the eastern edge of the rooftop, where the patrolwomen could grab them after climbing in the back of the parked truck. She did a few more trips to carry as well the still full ammunition boxes, then searched the four dead gunners, taking their rifle magazines and their grenades. With her pockets full, Nancy returned to the eastern edge and jumped in the back of the truck pulled alongside the house, then transferred the captured machineguns and ammunition down from the roof. As discussed previously with Nancy, Maryam and her policewomen were also busy gathering the captured enemy weapons and ammunition, filling at the same time their pockets with AK-47 rifle magazines and all the grenades they could find. Maryam, in a happy mood, came to see Nancy as the latter was stepping down from the pickup truck with a PKM.

“Your plan worked perfectly, Nancy. We did not suffer any casualties. I also believe that we killed somebody important. Come with me.”

Following Maryam, Nancy soon was looking down at the bodies of what she had taken to be a command group. Using a flashlight, she examined the dead faces of the two men armed with AKSU-74 sub-compact rifles, then smiled with contentment.

“Well well well, isn’t this that old bastard of Mullah Hayatullah Khan, the Taliban military commander for the Farah province? And besides him is that old fart of Mullah Sultan, the ex-Taliban governor of the province.”

“Are you sure?” Asked Maryam, not believing their luck. Nancy nodded slowly her head.

“I did two previous tours in Afghanistan as a military intelligence officer and have seen numerous times the wanted list of top Taliban commanders, Maryam. These are Mullah Khan and Mullah Sultan alright. Their presence here tonight makes sense, in view of the unprecedented scale of this Taliban attack. The Taliban were probably aiming to seize back control of this district tonight, profiting from the withdrawal of the American forces from Farah province. We should load those two corpses in a truck, so that no retreating Taliban could make them disappear afterwards. This could be a big propaganda coup against the Taliban, Maryam, and I will make sure that your women will be credited for it...without being named publicly, of course.”

Maryam nodded her head at that, reassured. She knew too well what could happen to a policewoman that would be publicly identified...or to her family.

"Thank you for thinking about that, Nancy. What do we do next?"

"We should use two or three of those captured trucks and load into them all the ammunition and water we can find here or in other trucks, so that we could bring them afterwards to the police station. The Taliban must have kept their ammo reserves here, with their fire support group. If you find boxes of grenades, keep them close and handy: they could make a big difference in the coming fighting. Remove also the keys from the ignition of the trucks we won't use and hide them under the rubber carpets of each vehicle, so that the Taliban won't be able to quickly flee into them. In the meantime, me and Maria will go stand watch on the roof, in case some Taliban start wondering about what happened to their commanders. Oh, you better hold on to this as well."

Nancy, bending down, grabbed a handheld radio that had been hooked to Mullah Khan's web gear and gave it to Maryam.

"By listening on the enemy command frequency, you may be able to know in advance what to expect, Maryam."

"A good idea again, Nancy. Decidedly, you think of everything, don't you?"

Nancy smiled in the darkness, showing the white of her teeth.

"Let's say that I have seen a lot of wars in my life. Well, you better get your girls to work: the Taliban attacking the fort may react soon to us."

"Right!"

As Maryam gathered her policewomen to pass her orders, Nancy signaled to Maria Garibaldi to approach her. The Italian, who had just fought her first ever battle, was still flush with excitement.

"This did go even better than I hoped, Nancy. What do we do next?"

"We both go on the rooftop to watch the Taliban while Maryam's girls gather the captured ammunition in two trucks. I suspect that the extremists attacking the police station will soon wonder why they are not receiving orders by radio anymore."

Using the parked truck as a stepping platform, Nancy and Maria went to take lying positions along the western edge of the roof and used their night vision goggles to observe the battle around the police station, 600 meters away. While it was evident that the policemen inside the station were still resisting, the Taliban fire had slackened noticeably, prompting a remark from Nancy.

"The enemy must be wondering what happened here. We probably can expect soon a large patrol or even a counter-attack force to head this way. You watch the road while I watch the houses bordering the road on its northern side."

"Got it!"

About ten minutes later, Maryam's voice came on the patrol radio frequency.

"Nancy, this is Maryam: a Taliban commander has just ordered one of his subordinates to come check out our position."

"Understood, Maryam. Keep most of your girls working on the loading and transfer of ammunition and water, but send Sergeant Kaker and five girls take position along the main road with the two captured machineguns. Me and Maria will stay on the rooftop and snipe at the enemy and fire illumination flares as needed to help our machine gunners."

Nancy then resumed her watch with Maria. It took another fourteen minutes before she saw some movement behind houses bordering the northern side of the road, about 250 meters away.

"I see them, Maria. A group is advancing behind the cover of the houses on the north side of the road, 250 meters to our front. They will now have to advance in the open, however: there are no more houses between them and us. I will advise Maryam, then fire a paraflare."

"I am ready for them, Nancy." Replied the Italian woman, pointing her Beretta SC-70/90 and looking through its night sight. On her part, Nancy called Maryam by radio and alerted her about the advancing Taliban force, then waited two more minutes, time for the Taliban group of about fifty fighters to be completely in the open, before preparing a parachute flare. Opening both ends of the thin tube and pointing it up at a 45 degree angle, she pulled on the launch chord, firing off the small rocket with a loud 'POP'. Maria then fired her first shot in the still dark night, downing the Taliban fighter at the tail of the enemy column. Three seconds later, an intense point of white light lit up high in the sky, just above and slightly behind the advancing Taliban. Now well silhouetted in open terrain, the Taliban fighters found themselves suddenly the targets of a withering machinegun crossfire. Over a half dozen Taliban fell under the hail of bullets, the others then hastily going down in the dirt to find any cover available. Their response fire proved however totally ineffective, not seeing where precisely the machinegun fire came from. Nancy then joined the firefight, taking calm, slow aim at a

Taliban and killing him with a bullet to the head. She and Maria had time to kill or wound four more extremists, while Sergeant Kaker's two machineguns shot down another eight Taliban, before the paraflare burned out, returning the area to obscurity. Nancy waited until the surviving Taliban fighters decided to withdraw and got back up to run away, then fired a second paraflare. The extremists threw themselves to the ground again, but not quickly enough to avoid another machinegun burst that downed four of them. Nancy and Maria then resumed their sniping fire, while the PKMs kept firing short bursts to keep the Taliban fighters down. With their numbers dwindling steadily, some of the Taliban panicked and got up to sprint towards the cover of the nearest houses, only to be shot down by the machinegun fire. The second paraflare then burned out but no Taliban dared get up this time, staying in the shallow ditch alongside the main road.

A minute later, Maryam's voice came back on the radio.

"Maryam to Nancy. That Taliban reconnaissance party just called for help from their main force. The Taliban commander near the police station is going to send a strong force in a hook around our right flank, staying behind the cover of the houses along our flank. I am now going to reposition my girls to cover that flank."

"A good move, Maryam. Have them take position as much as possible on rooftops, from where they will have better fields of fire and can better throw grenades at the enemy. Make sure they have plenty of grenades with them. Me and Maria will reposition ourselves as well."

Once this was said, Nancy got up from her prone position on the rooftop and signaled Maria to follow her.

"The enemy is going to attempt a right flank attack against us in a few minutes. We are moving out to new positions. You're okay, Maria?"

"I'm fine, Nancy. I now have a total of six Taliban fighters on my score sheet. And you?"

"I stopped counting a long time ago." Replied Nancy. "Follow me!"
Coming down from their rooftop, the two women then ran in a crouch towards the main road, invisible to the Taliban in the obscurity. Stopping first by the position occupied by Sergeant Kaker and her two machineguns, Nancy patted the shoulder of the Afghan NCO.

"Well done, Sergeant. We are going to take position on our right flank but will continue to watch your front and fire paraflares as needed. Your job is to cover this road and stop any Taliban advance along its axis."

"Understood, Captain Laplante."

Leaving the six policewomen, Nancy crossed the road with Maria, soon finding Maryam Shirzai as the latter was busy placing her policewomen on the rooftops of the houses on their right flank, where they would be able to cover the 200 meters of open terrain separating them from the next row of mud houses.

"Ah, Nancy! Where are you going to put yourself this time?"

"Where the enemy will not expect us, Maryam: on the roof of one of those houses across from these open fields. From there, we will be able to snipe at the enemy and, hopefully, catch him in the rear as he tries to assault your force. I would need four of your girls to accompany us, with as many grenades as they can carry."

"You got them!" Replied Maryam before turning around and raising her voice. "Sergeant Noori, send me four women with two crates of grenades."

Maryam then smiled at Nancy.

"As you had predicted, the parked trucks contained the ammunition, water and food reserves of the Taliban, including dozens of crates full of grenades and dozens of RPG rockets. We will have enough to create a nasty rain for those Taliban bastards."

"That's the spirit, Maryam." Replied Nancy, smiling as well.

As soon as the four women selected by Sergeant Noori had joined them, carrying between them two wooden crates, Nancy led her small team across the open ground, using an irrigation ditch as cover. As they were approaching the next row of houses, Maria spoke up with alarm.

"Nancy, I can see with my goggles some movement to our left, about 200 meters away. The enemy is already advancing along this row of houses."

"The bastards reacted quickly enough, I have to give them that." Said Nancy while still advancing in a crouch. "Let's pick up the pace a bit, so that we could take position before they are here."

Hurrying up, she covered the last thirty meters before the first house, followed closely by the five other women. She however ignored that house and walked to the next one, which was the most westerly of this group of houses. Once at that mud house, Nancy made one of the policewomen go down on her hands and knees, while another

policewoman was told to lean with her back to the mud wall and to join her hands in front of her belly. Nancy stepped on the first woman's back, then put one foot in the joined hands of the second woman before climbing on her right shoulder and reach the roof, pulling herself up. Once on the roof, she offered her hand down.

"Your turn, Maria."

Maria followed her example and was soon besides Nancy on the rooftop. Both then grabbed in succession the two crates of grenades and the four Afghan policewomen, pulling them up to the rooftop. Nancy then hurried to the western edge of the roof, in time to see in her night vision goggles a long column of Taliban fighters approaching cautiously along the rows of houses.

"Damn! They are already less than 150 meters away. Let's open these crates of grenades as quietly as possible."

That was less easily said than done, the crates being secured by sturdy steel wires twisted and sealed together. Nancy had barely the time to distribute grenades to the four Afghan policewomen while giving them quick instructions before they had to lay prone and be silent in order not to be located. Covering her mouth and radio microphone with one hand, she spoke in a low voice while activating her radio set.

"Nancy to Maryam. The enemy is already at the foot of the house we are using. My group will first throw grenades, then I will fire a paraflare when I will judge the enemy to be in an ideal position for us to shoot."

"Got it! Good luck, Nancy."

Nancy did not reply to that, instead cautiously raising her head to look with her night vision goggles above the parapet. Her heart accelerated at the sight of the swarm of Taliban fighters now massing right under her, with a Taliban chieftain giving orders to his men and sending them forward along two irrigation ditches. That Taliban however stayed in hiding near the house, keeping as well with him a group of four men armed with RPG-7 anti-tank grenade launchers, plus one man armed with a light machinegun. Careful not to make any noise, Nancy backed off from the parapet and joined Maria and the four Afghan women, whispering instructions to them in Dari, then in Italian.

"Bibi, Zakia, you get ready to throw grenades at the two columns that have started advancing towards the main road. Carmela, Lailoma, you will throw grenades on my command at the Taliban on my side of the roof. Maria will then start sniping in the back of the advancing columns while I fire a paraflare. Don't be cheap with the

grenades, unless I tell you to stop throwing them away. Any questions? No? Then take positions along the parapets.”

The six women then cautiously crawled back in two separate groups to the parapets, bringing along their crates of grenades. Once back in position, Nancy prepared in advance for launch a paraflare and laid two grenades in front of her, then raised her head to check on the enemy. The Taliban assault columns were now well on their way along the ditches, their tail already ten meters away from the house, while the RPGs and light machinegun group had taken position behind a low earthen wall maybe five meters from the house. Meanwhile, the noise and flashes from the fight around the police station continued. She then looked at Carmelia and Lailoma, speaking to them in a whisper.

“Two grenades each in succession, to our front and five meters away. Pull the pins out but hold on to the spoons until you see me let go my own grenade spoon, then throw your grenades.”

Grabbing a grenade, Nancy rolled on her back and raised high her hand holding the grenade as a signal to the three other women to get ready. When six arms were up with grenades, Nancy made a deliberate move and pulled the safety pin out, then let fly the spoon and threw away her grenade, imitated by the others. As the first grenades were still flying in the air, Nancy grabbed quickly her second grenade, pulling out its pin and throwing it. The first grenade was exploding below her as she grabbed her paraflare tube and pointed it skyward at a slight southward angle. The ‘POP’ of the launch was nearly inaudible in the middle of the grenade explosions and the screams from men being mauled by the blasts and fragments. As the four policewomen kept priming and throwing grenades, Nancy raised her rifle and shot the nearest Taliban still up when her paraflare lit up the sky. Maryam and the rest of the patrol then opened fire as well, targeting the two advancing columns of Taliban, which were now caught in the open and plainly visible. Enemy losses climbed quickly under the deluge of bullets and grenades, with the Taliban unable on their part to locate exactly the positions of the police patrol in the dark. Many of them didn’t understand that Nancy’s group was in their back until the detonations from Maria’s assault rifle were heard. Nancy’s suppressed rifle was for its part much harder to locate, giving her a deadly edge over the Taliban fighters. After emptying a first magazine in semi-automatic mode and reloading quickly, Nancy could not see any more surviving Taliban on her side of the house, where the ground was strewn with dead or gravely wounded men. She thus told Carmelia and Lailoma to

follow her at a crouch to the southern parapet, where Maria, Bibi and Zakia were engaged in a ferocious fight with the tail of the two Taliban assault columns. Seeing that her paraflare was about to die out, Nancy prepared and launched a second paraflare, while Carmelia and Lailoma started using their rifles, saving the grenades they still had left for the moment. With bullets being fired haphazardly in their direction by the trapped Taliban fighters, Nancy used again her rifle to reply, using her holographic sight and concentrating on any extremist that tried to flee by leaving the ditches and running across the field.

The patrol suffered its first casualty a minute later, when Bibi Nayebaba got up to be able to throw her grenades farther and was hit just after throwing a grenade. Nancy was however engaged at that moment in a mad firefight with a group of Taliban trying to rush back towards the mud house and could not help the policewoman. A flash followed by a loud explosion against the wall of the house then told her that a RPG gunner was now targeting them. Looking in the direction the flash had come from, she soon found the said gunner, who was frantically reloading his rocket launcher. A carefully aimed shot killed the man at a distance of a hundred meters. Then another Taliban ran to the rocket launcher, intent on using it. Nancy shot him as well, along with the two men who also tried to grab the RPG-7. The second paraflare then died out, returning the field of battle to obscurity. Nancy was however out of paraflares. Flipping down her night vision goggles, she shouted an order in Dari to the Afghan policewomen of her group, followed by words in Italian.

“GO BACK TO THROWING GRENADES, LADIES. ME AND MARIA WILL DO THE RIFLE SHOOTING. MARIA, USE YOUR NIGHT SIGHT FROM NOW ON.”

Giving the example, Nancy switched on her infra-red laser dot sight, which projected a green dot invisible to the naked eye but very much visible through her light intensification goggles. Then lining up the green dot on a Taliban running towards the house, she shot him in the chest, dropping him. The next minutes went on for seemingly an eternity, with Nancy tense as a steel bar and ignoring the bullets flying past her head while shooting Taliban after Taliban. On her side, Maria was no slouch either, her night sight having more range and accuracy than Nancy's laser dot sight and allowing her more distant shots. The Italian woman had just shot down her eight enemy when two pairs of vehicle headlights appeared at the southern end of the field, where Maryam and her patrol were,

and switched to high beam, illuminating again the Taliban caught in the middle of the field. Maria understood at once who it was and shouted with joy.

“WELL DONE, AZIZA!”

With the light now provided by the two trucks brought forward by Sergeant Kaker and one of her policewomen, Maryam Shirzai's group was able to resume accurate fire on the back of the Taliban. Their fire was then dramatically augmented by the two PKM machineguns of Sergeant Kaker's section, which were firing from the back of the two pickup trucks driven to the edge of the field. Their situation now an impossible one, trapped in the open from two sides, the Taliban survivors gave up the fight and started fleeing left and right in utter disorder. Neither Nancy nor the Afghan policewomen were however ready to show mercy to men who were willing to mutilate or kill little girls for the supposed crime of attending school. They kept up their fire until they had no more targets in their sights, with only a handful of Taliban escaping their wrath.

With that fight now over, Nancy was free to go check on Bibi, lying in the middle of the rooftop. Checking for a pulse, Nancy closed her eyes when she found none. She was soon joined near Bibi's body by Maria and the three surviving Afghan policewomen, who could only cry over their dead friend and comrade. They were still grieving when Nancy received a radio call from Maryam Shirzai.

“Maryam to Nancy. The Taliban have fled the field. How are you doing at your end?”

“This is Nancy. We have lost Bibi, but the rest of us are okay. How about your group?”

There was a moment of silence before Maryam replied in a subdued voice.

“We have sustained two wounded at our end, thankfully not critical cases. However, the police station is still under attack and in danger of falling. I believe that we should go lend more help there, even after this victory here.”

“I concur! However, there is no point in rushing into what could turn into an ambush, without knowing where the enemy is precisely. I am going to send back to you my four remaining women, who will also carry back the body of Bibi. In the meantime, load your women into a few trucks and take with you the trucks full of ammunition and water, along with the bodies of the two dead mullahs, then wait for me to report back by radio. I am going on foot alone to go do a reconnaissance of the area around the police station.”

"Alone? But, that's too dangerous, Nancy."

"On the contrary, Maryam: I will be more effective like that, with my night goggles and sights. Trust me, my friend. I will see you later."

Nancy then looked at Maria Garibaldi.

"Take Bibi's body with you and return with Carmela, Zakia and Lailoma to Maryam's group. She will prepare a truck convoy to go towards the police station, while I go on foot reconnaissance. Please don't object: I know perfectly what I am doing. I will keep in touch by radio."

Nancy then took the time to pocket some extra grenades before jumping off the roof and disappearing into the night in the direction of the police station. Carmelia Ghousdin watched her go with near religious fervor.

"What an incredible woman. I hope that she stays safe."

Retracing the route taken by the now decimated Taliban counter-attack force, Nancy went at a near run, using to the maximum the advantage given by her night goggles. At one point, one Taliban survivor from the fight actually crossed path with her and, thinking she was another surviving comrade, waited for her, even calling to her in Pashto.

"Are any others with you?"

"Just me and judgment day." Replied Nancy before shooting the man dead with her suppressed rifle. She took a few seconds to collect more grenades from the dead man before continuing on towards the police station. Fifteen minutes later, she was approaching the main road, with the police station 200 meters to the West. She had now only a few dispersed farms and the houses lining the main road between her and the station, but she could also tell that she was getting very close to the main enemy force, judging from where the firing came from. She would have to be very cautious from now on, especially when considering that stray fire from the police station would be as dangerous to her as it was to the Taliban. At least, the policemen inside the station were not showing any sign of giving up. Using again her powers of Chosen of The One, Nancy silently levitated up to the rooftop level of the building she was close to, ready to fire on any Taliban that came in sight of her. That roof proved empty. Walking silently across the roof while crouched, she looked cautiously down over the parapet to check the alley between her and the next compound. What she saw there was a group of maybe fifteen Taliban fighters, resting, smoking and drinking water while sheltered from

the fire from the police station. Putting down her rifle, Nancy took out two grenades and pulled their safety pins out with her teeth while holding the spoons in place. Letting the spoons fly off, she then counted three seconds before dropping the grenades down in the alley, with ten meters between the grenades. Pulling away her head and covering her ears, she waited for the two grenades to explode, then grabbed her rifle and flew across the alley, landing on the next roof and ignoring the screams of pain from below. While that rooftop was also deserted, the same could not be said of the courtyard of the compound the house was part of. One quick look with her night vision goggles showed her a long row of bodies, their heads and torsos covered by wool blankets, lined up in the courtyard, with a pile of weapons stacked nearby. It was now evident to her that the fierce resistance of the policemen in the nearby station had cost a lot of casualties to the Taliban. Nancy saw as well in a corner of the courtyard what looked like an Afghan family, with four adults and seven children huddled in a corner under the guard of two Taliban fighters. Nancy understood why they were outside and not in their house when two extremists carried out of the house the body of a comrade, to then place it at one end of the line of corpses and do a short prayer over it before covering it. The Taliban must be using this house as a first aid station for their wounded. The flash from the back blast of a RPG-7 firing its rocket at the police station then briefly illuminated the area. One of the children of the Afghan family, a small boy, was looking up at that moment and suddenly pointed towards Nancy's position while shouting to his parents.

"Hey, who's that?"

Nancy withdrew quickly from the parapet, swearing at her bad luck, but she was too late: the two guards watching the family had looked up at the boy's exclamation and had seen her, as they next shouted alarm cries to their comrades. Not having much choice left now, Nancy activated her implanted time distorter and went into phase shift, basically creating her own bubble of accelerated time around her. Now all but invisible to others around her and moving a thousand time faster than normal, Nancy flew off the roof she was on and went westward for 200 meters, past the last of the Taliban attack force, before landing on the roof of a mud house bordering the main road. Crouching down behind the eastern parapet, she came out of phase shift and cautiously looked towards the police station and the houses nearest to it. The roofs of those houses were all occupied by Taliban fighters pouring continuous fire at the station but what alarmed Nancy was the sight of a large group of extremists that had covertly approached the station and was lined up directly against the foot of the perimeter wall. Two of the

extremists were seemingly busy setting up what looked like a large explosive charge against the wall, probably to blow an entry hole in it. Making her mind quickly, Nancy lined up one of the two men working on the charge in her sights, placing an infra-red green dot on his back before pressing the trigger of her rifle. The suppressed noise from her shot was lost in the earsplitting firefight between the Taliban and the policemen, but her aim proved true, with her target collapsing in the dirt. Before the second man working on the charge could get over his shock, Nancy shot him as well, then started methodically shooting down the Taliban fighters lined against the wall, starting with the tail end ones. Some of the Taliban finally caught on what was happening and frantically looked around to try to locate the sniper murdering their group. Nancy then changed tactics and grabbed two of her grenades, pulling their safety pins out with her teeth and then throwing them towards the Taliban assault group. Thrown with inhuman strength, the grenades flew for 120 meters before rolling on the ground at the feet of the horrified Taliban fighters. They however exploded before they could react, slaughtering half of the assault force. Two more grenades followed, causing yet more casualties to that group. Now decimated and missing their leader and their explosives experts, the survivors broke ranks and ran across the main road, to the relative safety of the houses on the northern side. The policemen manning the walls of the station saw them and were able to shoot down a few of the fleeing Taliban fighters before they could disappear in the narrow alleys, leaving behind over twenty of their own dead or gravely wounded.

The reports from the survivors of the assault force, along with the panicked stories from the mere handful of fighters from the counter-attack force that had returned, made the sub-commander left in charge of the Taliban in Bala Buluk contemplate grimly his options. His three superiors were now dead or missing, he had lost his mortar support and his force, numbering originally close to 400 fighters, was now down to a mere 160 men. Worse, he knew next to nothing about the new enemy force that had appeared from the East, apart from the fact that some enemy soldiers apparently equipped with night vision devices were roaming his immediate area, killing methodically his men with near impunity. Added to that was the fact that the police station was still resisting and it made for a grim picture for him and his men. His big problem was that, even if he decided to withdraw now, he would have to do it on foot, the enemy having apparently captured their fleet of pickup trucks. That option was however less than satisfactory: they had crossed over forty kilometers of desert countryside from their

departure base to come here and capture this district. On foot and in this frigid weather, his retreating column would suffer heavily, both from the weather and from enemy air attacks. The Afghan Air Force now had a number of armed helicopters based in nearby Shindand that could cause him no end of grief. Another option was to disperse his men around the houses of Bala Buluk and lay low for a few days. That, however, would rob him of any way to keep control of his surviving men and would allow time to the enemy to bring in reinforcements and do a detailed cordon and search operation to find his men one by one. The sub-commander finally decided that he needed to take back his trucks, so that he would at least have a reasonable chance to save what was left of his force. He had time to give a series of short orders around before a grenade rolled at his feet, coming from a nearby rooftop. It exploded before he could throw himself down, shredding him to pieces, along with his two bodyguards.

Now leaderless, the surviving Taliban fighters decided to follow their last received order: to take back by force their trucks at the East end of the town. Unfortunately for them, Nancy was still hiding among them and warned Maryam Shirzai by radio of the Taliban intentions. The Border Police patrol thus had time to reorganize and reposition itself to face the incoming Taliban advance. With a dozen pickup trucks brought forward between houses to illuminate on command the 600 meters of open ground between the police station and their position, the policewomen greeted the disorganized Taliban assault with a murderous fire. The jubilant policemen inside the district police station, seeing the extremists caught in plain view of the station, added the fire from their machineguns to that from the policewomen. A smaller group of Taliban fighters that had decided more wisely to do a flanking move along the northern side of the main road was followed covertly by Nancy, who shot down one by one the extremists of that group, appearing only long enough to shoot, then disappearing into the night. The last Taliban from that group died before he could get near the truck park defended by the policewomen. As for the survivors now trapped in the middle of an open field, they finally surrendered as Sunrise came, out of ammunition and completely dispirited. Their shock and rage at seeing that mere women had been fighting them nearly convinced them to continue the fight, but the shooting of the loudest mouths by Nancy calmed them down long enough for the policemen from the station to come arrest them and tie them up. A detailed search for bodies and weapons later that day turned out a total of 291 Taliban fighters dead and another 65 wounded. Only 31 Taliban survived intact to be

taken prisoners, while hundreds of weapons were seized, along with impressive quantities of ammunition and explosives and 34 pickup trucks.

Nancy and Maria were present when the Afghan policewomen of the patrol joined up at last with the Afghan policemen of the police station. While the district police chief and deputy police chief, along with the city police chief, whose daughters were part of the patrol, greeted the policewomen with open arms, the other Afghan policemen were decidedly cooler in their welcome. Nancy, fuming about that, understood that those policemen felt somewhat shameful that women had saved them, something that would hurt their manly image. At least, she and Maria were welcomed warmly enough by the three foreign police advisors inside the police station. Maria in particular was hugged tightly by Brigadiere Umberto Falcone and Caporete Rinaldo Vecchio, while Corporal William Blake of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police vigorously shook hands with Nancy, a big grin on his face.

"Captain Laplante, we owe you and those women our lives. Your patrol did a fantastic job. I still have a hard time believing that such a small group as yours could do so much damage to the Taliban."

"Correction, Corporal Blake: this was Lieutenant Shirzai's patrol, not mine. Me and Maria were just there to assist and advise her."

"Well, it certainly wasn't a bad thing that you were around, Captain. God, this is going to hurt the Taliban seriously, especially since you killed Mullah Khan and Mullah Sultan."

"Those were effectively important Taliban commanders. A lot of justice was done today. With luck, this could hurt badly the reputation of the Taliban and discourage many from helping them here in Bala Buluk."

"That would certainly be nice to see, Captain. I just hope that this battle won't mark you as a special target for the Taliban."

"That would be typical of those intolerant cowards indeed: If you can't kill someone in combat, murder him or her with a bomb or an assassin's bullet. I promise you to be vigilant at all times, if that could reassure you."

"It does, Captain." Said gravely Blake while looking into her eyes.

It didn't take very long before the story of the battle for Bala Buluk started spreading around, along with stories about Nancy's exploits and vaunted tactical genius,

as told by the Afghan policewomen. Three foreign news teams, one each from Al Jazeera, the BBC and Paris Match, showed up before the end of the day, in time to film the long lines of Taliban corpses before they could be buried in a common grave. The Afghan district police chief was too happy as well to show to the reporters the huge inventory of captured enemy weapons, equipment and ammunition. While they were able to interview and photograph the Afghan policewomen, they did so with the women wearing scarves and sunglasses to hide their faces and no family names were given. That was in sharp contrast to the way they reported on Nancy and Maria, who posed with faces fully visible for the reporters. That Nancy was herself a war correspondent and thus was well known by her foreign colleagues just made the articles about her more detailed and voluminous. The three news teams had to stay overnight in Bala Buluk, due to the onset of obscurity, but a promise by the district police chief to let them document the house to house search to be started the next morning convinced them to stay for another day.

10:23 (Afghanistan Time)

Saturday, December 15, 2012 'A'

Afghan police road checkpoint

Downtown Bala Buluk

"So, Peter, what is going on along the Iranian border?" Asked Nancy to the BBC reporter standing near her. That reporter was covering with his cameraman and a Paris Match photo journalist the work of the Afghan police road checkpoint she was helping supervise in downtown Bala Buluk. The British reporter made a sardonic smile.

"Not much, frankly. Things have died down quite a lot around Iran after the initial hoopla. The one place that is still hot is Israel: it still gets its daily dose of rockets from the Lebanese border area and from Gazah, while the Israeli Air Force is kept quite busy retaliating with punitive airstrikes. The Israelis attacked Iranian nuclear installations only on two separate days, while the Americans have yet to bomb Iran even once. In turn, the Iranians, while vocal, have not attacked yet any American warship or tanker and the Strait of Hormuz is still open to traffic. It seems that President Obama is still reluctant to wage war with Iran and that the Iranian mullahs are doing their best not to give him any excuse to attack them."

"So, the only real loser in all this is Israel, the state that started it all."

“Right! And World opinion is not tender with Israel presently. Even the American public, stung by the jump in oil prices caused by this crisis, is generally critical of Israel. With some luck, this crisis may cool down and peter out in the next few weeks.”

“Hmm, just pray that the Israelis don’t decide to go nuclear on Iran. Things could then get much worse.”

The British looked at her with a mix of amusement and respect.

“Why do you persist in working for such a puny organization as CONFLICTS MAGAZINE, Nancy? You are too good a war correspondent to be wasted like this. I am sure that the BBC would be most happy to hire you. Hell, even that Paris Match scandal sheet would probably jump at hiring you.”

Jean Marsant, of Paris Match, made an obscene gesture at Peter, making him and Nancy brake out in laughter. An approaching pickup truck then caught the attention of Nancy. Two men sat inside the cab, while three other men, all bearded and wearing turbans, stood in the back, looking over the cab’s roof. What had attracted her attention was the dark aura of the men, along with their thoughts, which were full of hatred as they stared at her. The truck was now about twenty meters away, about to go around the vehicle forming the first obstacle of the police chicane. The road checkpoint was manned by six Afghan policemen, supplemented by two policewomen from the Shouz patrol tasked to search women and children. Peter Farnsworth noticed her tense up and glanced at the approaching truck before signaling to his cameraman to get ready to film.

“Be ready to roll, Charlie, just in case.”

Jean Marsant heard that and raised his digital camera as well as Nancy started to walk quickly towards the pickup truck. She undid as well the safety strap of her pistol’s speed holster, a gesture that prompted Farnsworth to give an urgent order to his cameraman.

“Start rolling now, Charlie, and get behind some cover as well.”

Farnsworth was activating his microphone, remotely connected to Charlie’s camera, when the pickup truck suddenly accelerated, while one of the men standing in the back took out an AK-47 assault rifle from behind piled up vegetable crates and started shouting, imitated by his two companions.

“ALLAH U AKB...”

POW POW POW

Peter watched, incredulous, as Nancy took out in a flash her pistol and shot three times, all in less than three seconds. The three men in the back of the pickup truck then either

fell out of the vehicle or collapsed on the floor of the truck. The driver, still unaware that his companions were dead, started speeding through the chicane, swerving wildly and making the Afghan policemen jump urgently out of the way. Nancy then shot a fourth time, killing the driver with a bullet in the forehead. Now out of control, the speeding pickup truck slammed violently into the second police vehicle forming the chicane and came to an abrupt stop. The passenger in the cab quickly recovered from the shock and, throwing his door open, ran out of the vehicle, heading towards a nearby alley between two mud houses. Seeing Afghan policemen raising their rifles to shoot down the fugitive, Nancy shouted at them in Dari as she started sprinting after the Taliban.

“DON’T SHOOT! I WILL TAKE HIM ALIVE!”

Followed by the BBC video camera and the Paris Match camera, Nancy accelerated at an incredible rate, soon attaining Olympic record-setting speeds and catching up quickly with the fleeing Taliban. She soon entered the alley behind the fugitive, zooming by incredulous Afghan civilians either passing by or sitting in the dirt while selling various wares and produces. She could easily have shot the man, having still her pistol in her right hand, but was resolved to take him alive. Once only one step behind the man, she dropped down on one foot while sweeping her left leg in front of her, swiping the Taliban’s legs from under him and making him fall hard face first in the dust. Quickly getting back up, Nancy took the time to holster back her pistol and secure it before approaching the shaken Taliban, who had slid to a stop just short of an old man and a young boy selling hard-boiled eggs contained in baskets. Grabbing him by his collar with one hand, Nancy forced the man back up with apparent ease, then threw him face-first against the mud wall on the other side of the alley, manhandling him as if he was a simple rag doll.

“So,” she said to him in Pashto with hatred in her voice, “how does it feel to have to fight against someone who can fight back, instead of mutilating and killing young girls and women? Show me how much of a man you really are.”

The Afghan civilians witnessing that scene held their breath then: for an Afghan man, doubting his courage and manhood was about the biggest insult one could make, especially when it came from a woman...and an infidel at that. The Taliban turned red with anger and took out from under his robe a knife before rushing at Nancy while screaming his rage. A lightning kick made the knife fly from the man’s hand before she stepped aside, letting him crash against the mud wall behind her. Forcibly turning the

extremist around, Nancy then held him solidly by his collar with one hand and started slapping him in the face repeatedly with all her strength.

“So you are supposed to be superior to me because I am a woman? How superior do you feel right now, you bastard?”

After administering six resounding slaps that left the man wobbling on his feet, Nancy pushed a piercing karate scream while hitting the Taliban’s forehead with the open palm of her right hand. Her adversary bounced again against the mud wall before falling face down to the ground like a log. As the civilian witnesses watched her in stunned silence, Nancy grabbed the man again by his collar and raised his head and torso from the ground just enough to be able to drag him, still using only one hand. Nancy came out of the alley with the unconscious Taliban, with cameras still filming and photographing her. Going first to the police sergeant in charge of the roadblock, she threw unceremoniously the Taliban on the ground in front of him.

“I believe that you may want to put this piece of garbage in jail, Sergeant.”

“Uh, certainly, Captain.”

As the sergeant called to him two policemen and tied the hands of the Taliban in his back, Nancy went to Zainab and Hanifa, the two policewomen assigned to the checkpoint.

“You are okay, girls?”

“Yes, Captain.” said Hanifa Kakar while looking at her with wide eyes and a smile. “You truly made that Taliban bastard look like a weak fool.”

“That was the point I was trying to make, girls.” She said with a wink.

Peter Farnsworth, who had gone to check out the crashed pickup truck, saw to his astonishment that Nancy’s four shots had all been head kills. He also saw that rifles and grenades had been hidden in the truck and made sure his cameraman filmed those before going towards Nancy. Even with her prior reputation, what she had just done was truly incredible and was certainly going to make prime news tonight on the BBC. With his cameraman filming from a few paces away, he raised his microphone as he stopped in front of her.

“Nancy, this was quite a demonstration you just did. Why did you become suspicious of those men in the pickup truck?”

“Call it instinct mixed with experience, Peter. Those men glared at me in a way not normal for simple farmers.”

"But then you shot four of them with single bullets to the head, plus caught and beat with your bare hands the fifth one. Some would say that a woman couldn't do that." That got Peter an intense look from Nancy.

"By some, you mean misogynists like the Taliban, who think that women are worthless, inferior beings, or certain NATO officers who say that combat is not the business of women?"

Peter could easily figure out which NATO officers she was alluding to: the American forces had been refusing official combat roles to their women for decades, often using rather hypocritical or even downright misogynistic arguments to justify their stance, while sending the same women in conditions that amounted very much to combat. Maybe someone here in Afghanistan had ticked off Nancy by demeaning her combat capabilities. If that was the case and he could find out about it, it could make for a juicy side report.

"Nancy, you have been known for years to be a top war correspondent and an extraordinary linguist. You just showed that you could speak Dari and Pashto. How many languages do you actually speak or read fluently?"

"I both read and speak fluently French, English, Spanish, German, Russian, Italian, Arabic, Pashto, Dari and Serbo-Croat. I also speak to some degree Iranian Farsi, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese and Creole. I always had a talent for languages and have a near perfect memory, plus an I.Q. of 153."

"But, that's genius level, Nancy!"

Nancy gave Peter a critical stare.

"Yet, I am supposed to be inferior because I am a woman, according to even the official policies of the present Afghan government."

"Many could say that you are an exception, Nancy." Replied Peter, trying to milk out the most out of this interview by playing the devil's advocate. If she was irritated by that, she didn't show it.

"I agree that I am an exception in many ways, Peter. However, I have arrived at what I am now through hard, constant training and self-studies. Most women could improve themselves the same way."

"So, you do not owe the level of expertise in pistol shooting and unarmed combat you just displayed to your military training?"

"Hardly! Suffice to say that I am ranked third overall, irrespective of sex, in North American competitive combat pistol shooting, while I rank first overall in metallic

silhouette target shooting. I also am a fifth Dan black belt in Kyokushin karate and number two female karateka in Canada. In terms of rifle shooting, while I am not as good with a rifle as with a pistol, I still would qualify as a sniper.”

“That is quite impressive, Nancy. And you have been as well a war correspondent for, what, about seven years?”

“Nine years now.” Corrected Nancy. “I have thus plenty of experience on the battlefield, both as a war correspondent and as a reserve military officer. If you want to talk about truly meritorious women, I would suggest that you mention in your report the brave Afghan policewomen who fought with me and performed admirably, despite the fact that they have not completed their training yet.”

“I will certainly feature them in my report, Nancy.”

Peter Farnsworth went on interviewing her for another minute, then let his place to Jean Marsant, who smiled while asking her a question in a hopeful tone, using French.

“Could I ask you to take a few poses for me, Nancy, apart from answering a few questions?”

“As long as you don’t ask for nude poses, Jean. You better make it quick, though: I can see our Al Jazeera colleagues coming at a gallop.”

Turning his head, the French photographer swore on seeing a car coming from the police station and bearing an Al Jazeera sign in its windshield.

“Merde! Alright, let’s get to it! Could you lean against the police car here, with your pistol in plain sight? Good! Now, give me a nice smile...”

12:07 (Israel Time)

Sunday, December 16, 2012 ‘A’

Russian restaurant-terrace

Downtown Tel Aviv, Israel

Victor Medveyev was quite fond of this little restaurant-terrace that served Russian and Ukrainian specialties in downtown Tel Aviv: it gave him a taste of his native land, which had been all but inaccessible to him for the past five years. Victor reflected with bitterness on the events of five years ago as he sat at one of the tables near the television set placed above the service counter. His arms trafficking business out of Kiev, in the Ukraine, had been going very well until that day of September 2007, when the Russian federal police had succeeded in unmasking him, probably with the help of

an informer. The Russians had then convinced their Ukrainian counterparts to let them have him. He had then barely escaped arrest, fleeing with only the content of his personal security safe and a suitcase. He had however lost nearly everything else: his house, his cars, his main bank account and his hidden stocks of illegal weapons. Fortunately, as the cautious man he was, Victor had put away some money in various anonymous foreign bank accounts, including one here in Tel Aviv. His bad luck however followed him to Israel, as the Russian authorities had contacted the Israeli Mossad. Caught and arrested as he was arriving in Israel, Victor had then escaped deportation and jail by making a deal with the Israeli secret service: tell the Mossad everything he knew about his past customers and arms deals in exchange for permission to stay and live his retirement in Israel. However, even after five years, a Mossad agent still came to see him from time to time to ask questions about certain past deals or contacts Victor had used. Today was such a meeting time.

Thankfully, today seemed to be a relatively rocket-free day for Tel Aviv...up to now. After two weeks of bombardment and thousands of heavy rockets fired at Israel from South Lebanon, the Hezbollah seemed to be finally running out of rockets, to the relief of the stressed out Israeli citizens. However, that did not mean that the country was at peace, far from it. The Lebanese-Israeli border was a battle zone, as was the areas around the Gaza Strip, while the occasional Iranian ballistic missile still fell on Israel. Terrorist attacks against Israeli and American citizens and interests around the World had multiplied since that crucial day when Israel had decided to strike at the Iranian nuclear facilities. To add to the regional chaos, the crisis in Syria had turned months ago into a full scale civil war, with President Assad still stubbornly refusing to step down or give away any of his powers. Victor reflected mentally on how much money he could have made as an arms merchant in the middle of such a situation. The arrival of his Mossad contact then took him out of his thoughts. Rising from his chair, he shook hands with the lean young man dressed like a university student.

“Hello, Ben! It is a nice day today...and a quiet one.”

“Yes, thankfully.” Replied the Mossad agent before sitting down facing Victor. Both men refrained at first from talking business, looking instead at the menu and ordering some red wine. They were just finished giving their order to the waiter when a piece of news appearing on the television set caught the attention of both men: reports from Afghanistan were now quite rare, due to the more urgent situations in and around

Israel and Iran. The Mossad agent made a face when the report, a retransmission of a BBC video, showed rows upon rows of dead Taliban fighters lying in the dirt near an Afghan police station in Bala Buluk.

"Wow! The Taliban sure got clobbered hard there. I can't say that I am sorry for those bastards, though."

"Me neither." Said Victor truthfully. The video then switched to the scene of an Afghan police checkpoint in Bala Buluk. Victor, who was taking a sip of his wine, then froze when a tall female Canadian officer appeared on the video, walking towards an approaching pickup truck. The action on the video then went in a flash, leaving the Mossad man open-mouthed.

"Did you see that piece of pistol shooting? She also beat up that Taliban as if he was only a kid. I must get the name of that Canadian, just to tell my wife about it."

"That...that's her!" Stuttered Victor, nearly spilling his glass of wine. "She hasn't aged one bit!"

The Mossad agent looked at him with incomprehension.

"What are you talking about, Victor?"

Victor didn't answer then, listening and looking at the rest of the video as a BBC reporter interviewed the Canadian officer, a tall, athletic and beautiful woman of maybe thirty with black hair and green eyes. At the end of the video, Victor sat back, pale.

"That's impossible! She should look twenty years older now."

"You are not making much sense, Victor."

Still looking shaken, Victor stared at the Mossad agent.

"Ben, twenty years ago in Kiev, in 1992, I sold sixty silenced AS Val rifles and a large stock of corresponding ammunition to a young woman, who gave only 'Nancy' as her name. I never saw that woman again afterwards...until now. That Captain Nancy Laplante is the same woman who bought those AS Val rifles from me in 1992."

"But, that's impossible! This Captain Laplante appears to be at most in her early thirties. She would thus have been around ten years of age in 1992."

"I had her undress then to prove that she had no microphone or recording device on her. She had the body of a fully grown woman in 1992, the same she has now. Her voice is also the same. I can prove this to you, Ben."

"How?"

"When I came to Israel in 2007 and was arrested, I had with me copies of video recordings taken by security cameras hidden in my house in Kiev. Whenever I

conducted a business deal in my private office, I recorded the discussion, as an insurance against bad customers and as a possible way of blackmailing them if need be. Those records include my two meetings with this Nancy Laplante. Your Mossad has had these recordings since 2007 but, despite considering the case of these AS Val rifles a priority, never could identify her.”

“I could see why those rifles would be considered hot items, even today: they would be perfect weapons for terrorists, like Hezbollah operatives.” Said Ben, thoughtful. He then took out his cell phone and composed a number, then spoke in it.

“Ari? This is Ben. A piece of news just played on television, a report made by the BBC in Afghanistan about a stinging defeat suffered there by the Taliban. Part of that report was an interview with a Canadian Army female officer, a Captain Nancy Laplante. I want you to get a copy of that BBC video right away, especially the part showing Captain Laplante. I will come by in about one hour to review it and compare it with something we have on file... Yes, do that!”

Ben then closed his cell phone and smiled to Victor.

“You and me are going to review a couple of video recordings together, Victor, but not before we can enjoy our meal. After all, one should not let good goulash be wasted.”

“Indeed, Ben.” Said Victor weakly, his mind still in turmoil.

16:19 (Israel Time)

Mossad headquarters

Tel Aviv, Israel

“This better be good, Ben.” Said Moshe Eshkol, head of the counter-terrorism branch of the Mossad, as he entered the large imagery laboratory of the headquarters building. “This was my first day off with my family this month.”

“I know, sir, but I believe that we have stumbled onto something quite, uh, stunning.” Said respectfully Bennie Kellerman. “To make a long story short, one of our informers alerted me to a certain Captain Nancy Laplante, a Canadian Army officer presently serving in Afghanistan, who may have clandestinely bought in the past sixty Russian AS Val silenced assault rifles, along with over 100,000 rounds of ammunition.”

“Wait a minute!” Said Eshkol, stopping abruptly. “My daughter just showed me a YouTube video about this Laplante, as she was shooting up some Taliban fighters in

grand style. The thing is going viral on the Internet. Miriam joked to me that we should get her as an agent. Now you are telling me that she is involved in illegal arms trafficking?"

"Maybe much more than that, sir. The problem is that this case about the clandestine sale of AS Val rifles dates back from 1992. We have video files of it." Before Eshkol could say that it didn't make sense, Ben explained in detail what Victor Medveyev had told him, then sat Eshkol down and showed him the security camera recording taken in Kiev in 1992, then the video from the BBC taken in Afghanistan. At the end, Eshkol was left stunned and confused.

"But, but, this is impossible! This Nancy Laplante could not be a grown woman in 1992. Could she have an older sister, or a lookalike?"

"We are checking on that right now, sir, but she officially is an only child and her parents died in a car accident when she was sixteen, according to her official biography. I would be ready to say that the Nancy Laplante seen in 1992 in Kiev and the one seen now in Afghanistan are the same person, sir."

"How could this be?" Protested Eshkol. Ben hesitated before answering. He and a number of analysts had looked at this from all the possible angles. The problem was that their consensus was now that the only possible explanation left was an impossible one.

"Sir, as crazy as this may sound, the only explanation we could see to this, if indeed the same woman appeared in both videos twenty years apart, is that this Nancy Laplante went back in time to 1992 to buy these rifles." Eshkol gave him an annoyed look.

"Have you guys fallen in with the extra-terrestrials, black helicopters and tinfoil hats crowds or what? You have nothing more serious as a possible explanation than time travel?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but no. You can imagine the ramifications if this would be proven to be true, sir."

"Well, I certainly would not be ready right now to go to the Prime Minister with this, Ben. He has enough on his plate already without having to listen to such stories. I however agree with you that this Captain Laplante may be hiding something. For one thing, she is way too good in combat for a simple military intelligence reserve officer. Maybe she is in reality a covert action operative, although I can't see why those Canadian boy scouts would need such a killing machine. Ben, I will put you in charge of

digging up everything you can about this Nancy Laplante. Form a team and don't hesitate to go to Canada to investigate her in depth. Unfortunately, Afghanistan is a bit too hot for our agents to go there and investigate her on the spot. Report back to me once you have more solid information on her."

"Yes sir! What if we can prove that she is a time traveler?"

"Then, this case would become way bigger than what my pay grade has the right to handle. Get me facts, Ben, just facts."

18:05 (Pakistan Time)

Taliban safe house

City of Quetta, Northern Waziristan

Pakistan

If looks could kill, then the old television set resting on a small table would have been vaporized under the hateful glares of the five bearded and turbaned men present in the lounge of the large house. When the local evening news had finished airing the syndicated video from the BBC taken in Bala Buluk, one of the bodyguards of Mullah Mohammed Omar went to switch off the television set on the demand of his leader. The graying, one-eyed leader of the Taliban was silent for a moment as his subalterns present waited respectfully. He then spoke in a firm, definite tone.

"The Devil lives in this woman infidel. It is the sacred duty of all believers to kill that woman wherever she is to be found. The believer who will kill her will be assured of a place in paradise. If she can be captured and brought to me for my judgment, then the better."

"It will be done, O Commander of the Faithful." Said his military commander, Abdul Quayyum Zakir. "We will spread the word to all the believers. She will get no rest where faithful ones are present."

18:17 (Afghanistan Time)

Field camp of United States Task Force Raider West

Area of Herat City, Herat Province

Afghanistan

Erik Johnson, followed closely by his longtime partner Dean Price and by the five other men of their team, was happy to enter the warmth of the large modular tent assigned to their unit. To nearly all the occupants of this camp, they were supposed to be from a special forces unit simply known as 'Special Group Six'. In reality, Johnson, Price and the 27 other men of Special Group Six were highly trained members of the Action Division of the Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA. Wearing no rank or unit insignias and no name tags, the men of the Action Division were tasked with executing armed clandestine missions deep inside foreign territories, missions that could be denied and kept anonymous and that often would be labeled as illegal under American or international law. Such missions took dedicated, resolute men ready to fight and die without the official support or acknowledgement of their country. Erik Johnson and Dean Price were such men, but they were much more than simple combat automatons or assassins ready to die without discussion. They were men of exceptional abilities, with expertise in many domains, and could as well speak a number of foreign languages. In Erik Johnson's case, apart from being a top notch sniper and an expert paramedic, he could speak without accent both Russian and German. Dean Price, a big and powerful man, was a demolitions expert and top pistol shooter that could have qualified as a racing car driver and that could speak French, Spanish and Creole, thanks to his family origins in Louisiana.

Taking off his backpack and load-carrying vest and putting them down in a corner of the big tent, Erik Johnson let his men make themselves comfortable and walked to the back of a command and communications van attached to one side of the modular tent. His local superior, Ben Mullen, was waiting for him, sitting inside the van with a radio headset on. Mullen took off his headset when Erik got at the foot of the ladder leading up in the van.

"So, how was your mission in Iran, Erik?"

"A bust! Our informer and guide never showed up. I hope that this doesn't mean that our informer was arrested."

Mullen nodded his head, a grim expression on his face.

"A most possible reason, unfortunately. That initial Israeli airstrike seems to have helped rally the common Iranian people to the cause of the mullahs. Many of our past sources have dried up, or have squarely turned hostile towards us."

"That was predictable, and should have been taken into account, Ben." Replied Erik firmly, having argued that exact point in the past at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. "How did our other team do on their own mission?"

Mullen hesitated for a moment, trying to find the right words for what he had to say.

"Allan's team was ambushed at the rendezvous point by a large group of Pasdarans⁵. Their last transmission was that they were down to two men and surrounded and that they were going to use their last grenades. It now seems that our whole informers network in Northeast Iran has been turned or eliminated. I am thus going to cancel all other missions inside Iran until we can assert more fully the situation."

"Fuck!" Swore Erik, upset, while banging his fist on the truck. "You know as well as me that it will take years to rebuild our network in Iran. And Allan's team counted our sole Farsi-speaking man. How the hell are we going to be able to operate covertly inside Iran if we can't even speak or read the language?"

"I am well aware of this, Erik. I am going to send a short report to Langley now. Go relax, have a bite to eat and then go sleep for a few hours. I don't expect to send teams out for the next few days, at the least."

"Very well, Ben. You will have my detailed mission report tomorrow morning."

Joining the men of his team at a table near a television set hooked to a satellite dish and that showed the CNN news channel, Erik passed to them the words about the other team's fate. It took them a moment to digest the news, with a visibly upset Dean Price finally speaking up to Erik.

"So, a whole team has just been wasted because those idiots in Langley wouldn't believe what we field operatives were telling them. Now, you are telling us that we are going to sit down and do nothing, Erik?"

"Look, Dean, I believe that Ben is correct in putting a halt to our missions inside Iran. There is no sense in risking more men if our contacts and information are unreliable."

"Damn!" Said Dean, resting his chin in one hand, with his elbow on the table. "When I think that we stopped chasing after those Taliban bastards just to end up here

⁵ Pasdarans : Iranian Guardians of the Revolution. The armed security forces protecting the rule of the Iranian clergy.

on the border and find ourselves useless. Those damn Israelis really had to come and bomb Iran, didn't they?"

One of the crypto specialists attached to the group, who was eating at the next table, got his nose up from his plate then to look at Dean.

"Well, if you want one piece of good news, Dean, it seems that the Afghans are not doing too badly against the Taliban lately. This Friday, they inflicted a severe defeat to those bearded bastards in Bala Buluk and killed hundreds of them."

"Hundreds?" Said Dean, surprised but pleased. "How did they manage that?" The specialist, smiling, pointed at the television set, which other men were watching.

"I will let you watch the video about it. CNN is about to replay it in a few minutes. You should see the statuesque Canadian chick that was with those Afghans at the time."

"A Canadian chick?"

"Yeah, their embedded mentoring officer, I believe. She shot up four Taliban with her pistol, right on camera, in a way Bat Masterson⁶ would have been proud of."

"A Canadian female officer that shoots like Bat Masterson..." said thoughtfully Dean Price. "It can't be..."

"It can't be who, Dean?" Asked Erik, suddenly curious. The crypto specialist then interrupted them by exclaiming while pointing the television set.

"THERE! You want to watch this, guys."

Looking at the television, Erik had to say that the first pictures he saw cheered him up: Afghan policemen were guarding long lines of corpses that were being described as Taliban fighters killed while attacking the district police station in Bala Buluk during the early morning of Friday. The number of Taliban losses given in the report made Dean open his eyes wide.

"Nearly 400 Taliban fighters either dead, wounded or captured? That is indeed a significant victory."

He then listened with the others around the table at the BBC account of the battle, learning that an Afghan police patrol had intervened in time to take the Taliban in the rear and throw their attack into confusion. Then, the scene changed from a field strewn with corpses to that of an Afghan police checkpoint in Bala Buluk. Dean shot up from his

⁶ Bat Masterson: Famous sheriff of the American Far West renowned for his extraordinary skills at pistol shooting.

chair the moment he saw the female Canadian officer being filmed in action by the BBC team.

“FUCK! IT IS NANCY!”

Dean however managed to keep silent from then on, until the end of the interview given by Nancy. Quite a few of the men made complimentary remarks about the nice body curves of the said Nancy, with Erik Johnson finally able to ask Dean.

“You know this Captain Nancy Laplante, Dean?”

“Sure I do, Erik! We destroyed together a motel bed while we were both attending the 2010 Houston Combat Pistol Championship. In fact, she nearly beat me during that competition, apart from giving me a run for my money in bed. She’s quite a gal, I must say.”

“I see!” Said Erik, who could not help smile. Dean Price was widely known as being the biggest skirt-chaser in the CIA, bedding about every woman he could...when not on duty. “This Nancy Laplante seems quite impressive. Her linguistic talents in particular are extraordinary. What can you tell me about her?”

“Well, when I saw her in Houston in 2010, she was just returning from a six month tour in Afghanistan. You heard her on that news interview about her language and fighting qualifications, which are already impressive by any standards. From what she told me in Houston, she visited about every war-torn area of the planet as a war correspondent, apart from serving many tours as a peacekeeper with the Canadian Forces. However, if you are thinking about possibly enlisting her in the CIA, forget it, Erik: she is the ultimate goodie-two-shoes. She would not hesitate to run inside a burning house to save a child, but don’t ask her to murder someone for political reasons.”

“Too bad! She would have made a prime candidate, apart from being a nice looking girl.”

“That she is!” Pronounced Dean Price with finality, smiling.

02:31 (Montreal Time)

Thursday, December 20, 2012 ‘A’

Nancy Laplante’s condominium

Boucherville, Province of Quebec

Canada

Bennie Kellerman felt a bit disappointed as he and his three agents finished searching methodically Nancy Laplante's condominium suite, on the second floor of a quite ordinary-looking residential building in the quiet suburban town of Boucherville, south of Montreal. They had looked everywhere in the four-room suite, while being careful to replace everything as it was. While comfortably furnished, nothing screamed of extravagant luxury or of hidden revenues earned from illicit occupations. An impressive quantity of books and magazines, many dealing with military affairs, geopolitics and history, denoted a person of learning, while the various sports gear and outfits also told of someone who took care of her body as much as of her mind. Bennie thought that this woman would have been an interesting one to meet, if not for her possible involvement in illegal arms trafficking. Judging from her choice of reading, this Nancy Laplante may be classified as a liberal or a humanist, but she also was definitely a feminist. About her intimate life, Bennie could find very little, except for a framed set of table-top pictures showing a powerful, handsome man and an extremely beautiful teenage girl, both smiling for the camera. While the man could obviously be a boyfriend or a lover of Laplante, the role of the girl was less clear. Was she a good friend, someone being sponsored by Laplante, or a family relative? Laplante was supposed to be still single, and was an orphan from a single child family. Bennie had found nothing that could put names on those two persons, which was by itself strange. He had found no personal letters that could have come from the man or the teenage girl, while Ben's computer expert had looked through the electronic mail in Laplante's computer and had found no telltale mail about the two mystery figures, apart from finding nothing that could be connected to arms trafficking. How could you have two loved ones, dear enough to Laplante to keep their pictures on her bedside table, with whom she never exchanged letters or emails? Something was definitely wrong here. However, without more clues, the only thing Ben could do was to take pictures of those portraits and hope to identify them later from other sources.

Ben was about to leave the big bedroom when he felt something under the sole of his left shoe as he walked on the thick rug. Bending down and using his flashlight, he saw a small metallic object shine under the light, half hidden by the fibers of the rug near a dresser's leg. Picking it up, he examined closely the thin, round object with the help of his flashlight: it was some sort of coin. It had probably fallen from a pocket or purse, unnoticed by Laplante or a visitor. It was however unlike any he had seen before and

was incredibly heavy for its minuscule size. Then, Ben saw what he believed to be the year of production and smiled to himself.

“Gotcha, Miss Laplante!”

09:20 (Afghanistan Time)

Thursday, December 27, 2012 ‘A’

Parade grounds, Afghan Border Police training center

Shouz, Herat Province

Afghanistan

Nancy, like Maria Garibaldi, was wearing her dress uniform with medals for the graduation parade of her class of policewomen, instead of her usual combat uniform. The 23 Afghan female recruits that were present on parade, along with their three Afghan female instructors, were also in their blue-gray dress uniforms with caps over their head scarves. The three recruits wounded during the fight in Bala Buluk sat near the dignitaries, while a small table held a blue cushion on which rested the service hat of Bibi Nayeababa, killed in Bala Buluk. Nancy had seen countless graduation parades and other ceremonial parades during her reservist career but this one meant much more for her and she felt a lump in her throat as Colonel Amin spoke to the proud policewomen: those Afghan women had braved threats of death simply to enroll and were going to have to survive during the next years in a poisoned atmosphere of public disapproval and Taliban wrath, even though they had proven that they deserved much better than that.

After giving to each policewoman their course certificate, Colonel Amin then called forward four of the graduates, plus their three Afghan female instructors, then read proclamations describing their feats of bravery and valor during the night fight in Bala Buluk, before pinning on them the Afghan medal of the Order of Military Gallantry, or Nishan-I-Shuja'at, in either fifth, fourth or third class. Then, to Nancy's surprise, Colonel Amin called her and Maria forward after dismissing the Afghan women he had just decorated. Walking at a parade step to Amin with Maria, she stopped two paces in front of him and saluted, with the colonel saluting back both women. He then read another proclamation, first in Dari, then in English.

“Captain Nancy Laplante and Lieutenant Maria Garibaldi, you have dedicated yourselves in the past weeks and months to teach and guide the brave Afghan policewomen we have just honored, sparing nothing to help them and their instructors. You have also helped lead them during a desperate and heroic fight to save the policemen of the Bala Buluk police station being attacked by the Taliban. You showed remarkable feats of courage and resolve in the face of an enemy that enjoyed overwhelming numerical superiority. Your leadership in combat was an inspiration for our policewomen and your valor in turn saved many lives among our policemen and policewomen. For these acts, and for your true dedication in helping Afghanistan build its security forces in the face of the Taliban threat, I am honored to bestow upon Captain Laplante and Lieutenant Garibaldi the Nishan-I-Shuja’at, Third Class.”

Those present around the parade square applauded while Amin pinned on the two women the small medals with black, red and yellow ribbons. As he finished pinning the medal on Nancy, Amin whispered to her.

“Please come see me after the parade, Captain: I have some news from Kabul for you.”

“Yes, Colonel!”

Once Amin was finished, he stepped back and saluted Nancy and Maria, then dismissed them. Once they were back to their original positions, Amin concluded the parade with a few more words and then left for the officers’ mess with his aides. That let Nancy and Maria mingle with the now celebrating Afghan policewomen and their instructors. Nancy made a point of hugging warmly each of the female graduates and wishing them well. She also went to see the three women wounded in Bala Buluk, who were going to graduate as soon as they would be fully healed, hugging them as well and giving them words of encouragement. Excusing herself after that with Maryam Shirzai and Maria Garibaldi, Nancy then walked to the officers’ mess, where Colonel Amin was waiting for her with an officer of the Afghan National Intelligence Service. Going to a small office with Nancy and the NIS major, Amin closed the door behind them before looking gravely at Nancy and speaking to her in Dari.

“Captain Laplante, I am afraid that Major Tajak, from the NIS, has some bad news for you. Major?”

Tajak, a big man with a square face and short beard, nodded once to Amin, then looked Nancy in the eyes.

"Captain Laplante, our services have learned an unsettling news about you about a week ago. It seems that, following the televised interview you gave after the battle in Bala Buluk, Mullah Omar, the spiritual leader of the Taliban, has pronounced a fatwa, or religious edict, against you. This fatwa declares that you are the Devil personified and that it is the duty of all believers to kill you wherever you are. By now, this fatwa is known through much of Afghanistan and Pakistan and is starting to spread among other Muslim nations, notably Yemen and Saudi Arabia."

Tajak and Amin then anxiously waited for her reactions. Nancy didn't show fear or worry at Tajak's revelation, instead looking calmly back at the NIS officer.

"Thank you for the warning, Major. You can tell your superiors that this fatwa will not stop me from continuing to help your government form its security forces. As for those who will try to kill me because of this fatwa, they may find quickly enough that God is not on their side."

Tajak, like Amin, was impressed by her calm answer and smiled to her while nodding in respect.

"You are indeed a woman of great courage, Captain. May Allah keep you safe and cover you with his blessings."

"Thank you, Major."

Tajak then saluted Nancy as a mark of respect, getting her to salute back before he left the room. Now alone with Amin, Nancy spoke to him in a low voice.

"Colonel, I would appreciate if this be kept confidential from the rest of your staff as well as from the other international staff. There is no point in making them worry about this."

"What if your government learns about this and tries to pull you out for your own safety?"

"Then, I will tell them to shove their worries up their asses." Replied Nancy, meaning it.

CHAPTER 5 – FIRST MISSION

13:44 (North America Central Time)

Tuesday, December 15, 3384 'A'

Headquarters of the Time Patrol

New Lake City University campus

Great Lakes region, North America

Global Council

Nancy entered Farah Tolkonen's office after buzzing and getting permission to enter, finding Farah sitting with three other persons of the Global Council around a low coffee table. Nancy actually knew one of them well: Doctor Jan Bella was the chief historian of the Time Patrol and had known her since her first days in the 34th century. The academician greeted her with a firm handshake and a smile.

"Nancy, it is nice to have you back. May I present you Nes Ronash and Virna Inmaez, from the Science Council?"

"Pleased to meet you." Said Nancy while shaking their hands.

"The pleasure is ours, Miss." Replied Ronash, a thin giant with wrinkles on his face and hands. He must have been well past 200 years old, which was close to the end of the normal life expectancy for a citizen of the Global Council. Everybody then sat around the low coffee table, with Ronash speaking again.

"Me and Virna are sorry to disturb you like this, but the Global Science Administrator, Daran Mien, is under increasing pressure to show a practical return for the heavy investment put into the Time Patrol. This organization has been formed over three months ago and has already cost millions of solars, with millions more to be spent in the next few weeks and months. Administrator Mien understands that it takes time to train personnel properly, but the Time Patrol does have a few qualified members that could be put to good use right away."

Hiding her irritation, Nancy looked at Farah.

"Farah, you did inform your visitors about the actual status of our organization, did you?"

"Yes, I did. They know that our network of space-time surveillance satellites is still only partially functional and that we will get our second patrol ship and our research ship only in two weeks. I also told them that you are our sole agent equipped with special implants and that the formal training of our first batch of agents started only two months ago, while the second batch started two weeks ago."

"And you still expect us to send barely trained agents on missions in the past?" Asked Nancy on a bitter tone while looking at Ronash and Inmaez. "Do you have even the faintest idea of the dangers a mission in the past entails?"

Virna Inmaez, a mature woman much younger than Ronash, answered her in a reassuring tone.

"I am sure that a woman with your qualifications and experience could conduct without problems the missions proposed by Administrator Mien and by the History Council. The Council does not expect either that these missions, deemed to entail minimal risks, be conducted immediately. A delay of a few weeks before the first mission would be perfectly acceptable."

"A few weeks..." Said Nancy while staring at Inmaez. "What loss rate among my agents is Administrator Mien ready to accept? And on what basis your experts from the History Council calculated the risks of missions in the past as 'minimal'?"

"But," protested weakly Inmaez, "I assure you that our historians took in consideration all the pertinent risk factors."

"Coming from people who never had to face life or death situations, this reassures me greatly, miss." Replied Nancy on a sarcastic tone. "I come from the past and remember 92 previous lives spread over 9,000 years. One badly chosen word, one misinterpreted gesture and a temporal field agent could be attacked, arrested or even killed with no warning. Simply visiting the past clandestinely is dangerous. To live there is even more so. No! I will not send any of my agents on missions in the past until they are fully trained and equipped, and I intend to be the one to decide when they are ready."

Inmaez and Ronash exchanged hesitant looks, surprised by Nancy's opposition. Inmaez finally took out of her briefcase a number of thin printed documents and distributed them to Nancy, Farah and Jan Bella.

"In that case, would you be ready to conduct yourself at least one mission right away? The History Council has recently provided to Administrator Mien a list of

historical research projects that they wish to be conducted, classified by order of priority. Here are copies of that list.”

Nancy, Farah and Jan took each a copy of the said list and started reading through it.

“But...there are 187 projects on that list.” Said Farah, not a little shocked. “It will take us forever to conduct all these projects, even with all of our present members.”

“Administrator Mien does not expect you to do more than a few of the top priority projects this coming year, Doctor Tolkonen.” Said Ronash in an accommodating tone. Virna Inmaez spoke after him.

“Actually, there was one project that is in the top ten priorities of the History Council and for which Miss Laplante was deemed eminently qualified. That project is the third from the top on the list.”

Nancy looked for a few seconds at the list before looking up at Virna with shock in her eyes.

“You want me to investigate the life and death of Jesus Christ?”

“That is correct, miss. We understand that, through the memories of your past incarnations, you know that time period and geographical area well, and that you even speak fluently the local language. Jesus Christ was in many ways a crucial player in the history of mankind, yet what we know of him is limited to hearsays and historical documents of dubious accuracy written decades after his death.”

Nancy was thoughtful for a moment, watched by the others.

“Miss Inmaez, it is true that I am knowledgeable about the Palestine of the first century of the Common Era and that I speak Aramaic. That is because I was then a woman named Magdala who lived in Jericho, near Jerusalem. There are however a few factors that would complicate such a mission for me.”

“Such as?” Asked Inmaez.

“Such as the fact that I am a 183 centimeter-tall Caucasian woman. For the people of early Palestine, I am a near giant, apart of being obviously a foreigner. Worse of, I would be a woman traveling alone.”

“So?” Replied Inmaez, not seeing Nancy’s point.

“So? Miss, know that, in the Antiquity, women generally were not allowed to travel by themselves. They were expected to travel only when accompanied by their husband or by an adult male member of their family. Women traveling alone were quickly tagged as prostitutes or runaway girls, which was basically the same for the

people of the time. I could probably think of a plausible cover identity, but it would probably wear thin after a while.”

“Why not have one of your male agents accompany you then?”

“Miss, none of my agents, male or otherwise, are qualified yet. As for sending them untrained on such a dangerous mission, I flatly refuse to do so.”

“A dangerous mission? But, we are talking about simply documenting the birth, life and death of a single man. Your equipment would make you nearly invulnerable anyway.”

Nancy sighed audibly, more than a little annoyed by Inmaez’ ignorance.

“Miss, if I am to conduct a mission in the past, then I intend to make it in a way that will not endanger the integrity of history. Do not forget that the primary mission of the Time Patrol is to preserve and protect history. I am not going to perform what will be construed then as miracles or acts of sorcery in order to survive that mission. Believe me when I say that just visiting that time period is dangerous enough. Living through it is even worst. Life then had little value, especially in the eyes of those who held local power, like the Romans and the local kings. Add to that the numerous thugs and bandits and the wild beasts and it made for a very dangerous environment. My special powers will probably be the only thing that will keep me safe there, if I use them discreetly.”

“When could you depart on such a mission, miss?” Asked eagerly Nes Ronash.

“It will depend on a few things.”

Nancy then turned to face Farah Tolkonen.

“Farah, how advanced is our Project EQUUS?”

“The prototype was completed last week and is being programmed right now. You will be able to test it in a few days.”

“Project EQUUS?” Said Inmaez, confused. Farah smiled to her.

“Yes! I initiated it on Nancy’s request. It is a project to build a robotic horse that, under mundane appearances, would also be a flying vehicle and a time machine for one person. I personally think it to be a brilliant idea. A horse will not attract attention in most historical time periods and is a big enough animal shape to house quite a few hidden systems and equipment.”

“Ingenious indeed.” Said Nes Ronash. “Are you an experienced rider, Miss Laplante?”

That made Nancy laugh for a few seconds.

“You could say that I have been riding horses since my tender youth as a barbarian nomad 5,000 years ago, Mister Ronash. Believe me, I can ride with the best of them.”

Farah, who had been studying the list of projects, pointed at the second and fifth projects from the top.

“If I may, now that the Jesus Christ project is decided on, I think that those two projects could be done fairly quickly, since they do not require agents on the ground. Once commissioned, our research ship and an onboard team of scientists could fulfill these missions with little risks.”

Nancy looked at the list and nodded in agreement.

“Hmm... Investigate the cause of the mass extinction of dinosaurs 65 million years ago... Observe the first hominids in the wild. All this could effectively be done adequately through the use of remotely controlled probes, especially where the hominids are concerned: the danger of historical contamination from direct contact with field agents is too great to act otherwise. Agreed!”

“Excellent!” Said Ronash. “So, we can count on you being able to start that documentary mission on Jesus Christ soon?”

“If the robotic horse turns out to be good enough to fool people accustomed to horses, then I will be departing in about two weeks. I will however have to use hidden time during my mission, so that I could continue training my apprentice agents without interruptions.”

“Hidden time?” Asked Inmaez, confused.

“We call ‘hidden time’ the time spent in the future or the past by someone who returns from his or her mission only a few minutes after his time of departure. Technically, I could leave this place tomorrow morning, spend ten years in the 1st Century and then return here five minutes after my departure. These ten years would then constitute hidden time. I have in fact just used myself twelve months of hidden time, spent living my official life in the 21st Century, where I served an eleven month-tour of duty in Afghanistan. However, our agents could burn themselves out quickly if they use too much hidden time and be forced to retire after only a few years of apparent service...that is if they survive all those years of duty in the past. I already can see the bureaucratic battles to have that supplementary time approved and added to our pay.”

Farah threw her a falsely irritated look.

“Do I look that miserly, Nancy?”

"I don't know! Aren't you a government bureaucrat now?" Replied Nancy, smiling to her before looking back at Inmaez.

Returning on the subject of the mission in Palestine, I will need a support team at first, embarked on our about-to-be-delivered research ship, the BABYLON, in order to pinpoint accurately the date of birth of Yeshua before I start my own trek."

"Yeshua?" Said Inmaez.

"Yes! That is the actual name of Jesus, as it was used in Palestine. On board the BABYLON, I will also need a team of probe operators to help better cover various locations. Since we don't have accurate dates to go by and don't know what Yeshua and his parents looked like, we will first have to spy on the inhabitants of the villages of Bethlehem and Nazareth to identify who were actually Yosef and Miriam. Once that is done, we will be able to find when Yeshua was conceived, which will be the starting point for my own mission. Thinking of it, that first phase of our mission could be of tremendous interest to historians and students of history alike: from the BABYLON, they could study firsthand the daily lives of the Galileans of the First Century. If that doesn't create good publicity for the Time Patrol, I don't know what will."

"That's an excellent idea, Nancy." Replied enthusiastically Jan Bella. "Imagine the boost to motivation this will be for the students of the history department at the New Lake City University. You should have a flood of volunteers for that mission to Palestine."

"Wouldn't that put those students at risk?" Objected Virna Inmaez, appearing concerned. Farah shook her head and answered her.

"Short of a catastrophic equipment failure on the BABYLON, that mission will be no riskier than traveling on a regular passenger ship. We can have our scoutship WALKUREN escort the BABYLON as an extra precaution, though."

"That sounds fine to me." Said Nes Ronash, who then got up from his chair, imitated by Virna Inmaez. "Well, you will certainly have more than enough to be quite busy for the coming weeks and months, Doctor Tolkonen. We thank you for your cooperation. If you need anything from the Science Council to help you in your missions, don't hesitate to ask."

"I will certainly keep your offer in mind, Mister Ronash." Replied Farah, shaking hands with her two visitors. Ronash and Inmaez then left her office, leaving her alone with Nancy. Sitting back and inviting Nancy to do the same, Farah examined the latter for a moment.

"So, how was your time in the 21st Century, Nancy?"

"Quite hectic, I must say. I spent eleven months in Afghanistan, helping to train female Afghan policewomen as their country prepares to assume its own security against the vicious attacks of the Taliban, a movement of fanatical religious extremists bent on imposing their ignorant, hateful and misogynistic rules on the Afghan people. Those months were full of violence and hardship and I had to kill many times in combat. In the process, I earned the Afghan Order of Military Gallantry and the Canadian Star of Military Valor...plus a Taliban religious edict calling for all Muslims to kill me on sight." Farah's mouth opened as she eyed Nancy with concern.

"By the stars, do you ever do anything safe, Nancy? How dangerous is that edict for you?"

"Dangerous enough to make it unadvisable for me to do any reporting as an unarmed civilian inside Afghanistan, Pakistan and possibly Yemen and Somalia. Also, while I was on tour in Afghanistan, a major international crisis erupted when Israel attacked Iran, trying to destroy its nuclear facilities. The crisis was still ongoing when I left the year 2013. On the other hand, I made some good friends during my tour, including a young Italian female police officer and an Afghan female police officer. You would have liked them."

"I am sure of that." Replied Farah, smiling. "You always had good tastes in terms of choosing your friends. What else did you do during your time in 2013?" Nancy made a face before answering that.

"Well, I lost my job as a civilian war correspondent while I was on tour in Afghanistan. The magazine I was working for folded up, going under thanks to the competition from other, bigger publishing houses and media networks. Finding a new civilian job will be my first concern when I will return to 2013 after my present stint here."

"Oh! I am truly sorry to hear that, Nancy. Are you considering to join the Canadian Army full time to sustain yourself there?"

"No!" Replied at once Nancy, surprising Farah. "While I cherish my time spent serving as a Canadian military officer, I am at a point in my career where I will probably be promoted soon to the rank of major, which would mostly glue me to a desk from then on. In fact, I am seriously considering resigning my commission and leaving the Canadian Forces on my return to 2013 'A'. Since I just completed a long overseas tour, I cannot realistically expect to be called on another overseas tour for at least another

year. Besides, with the closure of the Canadian mission in Afghanistan in 2014, there will be very few theatres of operations left of interest to me.”

“I see. I can only wish you luck in your future search for a job in Canada.”

“Thanks, Farah.”

Nancy was then silent for a moment before speaking again.

“Farah, I had much time to think things over during my tour in Afghanistan. I now believe that we made a big mistake when we built our base here, in New Lake City and in this year.”

Farah stiffened at once, her eyes fixed on Nancy.

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is that, by basing ourselves here and now, we made ourselves highly vulnerable to any attempt by someone to change or modify history in past centuries. If such an attempt succeeds and erases the Global Council as we know it, then we will be erased at the same time, without having the chance to find about that attempt and to stop it.”

Farah’s jaws tightened as she saw the correctness of Nancy’s logic.

“By the stars, you are too right, Nancy. So, we should move our base to the past, to make us less vulnerable to historical alterations?”

“Make it the distant past, Farah.” Said gravely Nancy. “There is no way for us to guess in advance at what point someone would try to modify history to fit whatever twisted purpose he or she had. I would say that we should be based at least a few millenniums in the past, and that our operational base be able to move around in space and time if need be to counter any threat.”

“I agree with you on that, but this will entail new, sizeable expenditures by the Global Council to build such a mobile base. I will have to have a serious talk with Grand Administrator Kern, but I can see already quite a fight with the High Council to approve those extra funds.”

“Tough! If they can’t see the logic and the necessity of such a move, then they deserve a serious kick in the backside. This is an essential operational requirement, not some frivolous demand for extra candies.”

“Again, I agree. I will call Grand Administrator Kern right away after our meeting and will start thinking about the design of that mobile base. It could in fact be a much enlarged version of the mobile mission control tower we already had in our book of projects.”

“Make sure that it is able to shelter, maintain and repair our scoutships then, apart from being able to house our whole organization. It should be able as well to connect with our surveillance satellites network.”

“True! However, our present surveillance center here will have to do for the moment. I suspect that the High Council will demand that we at least keep that here, in order to keep some control on us.”

“You may be right about that, even though that would constitute a wasteful duplication of efforts. Well, I better leave you alone then. In the meantime, I will go see how our engineers are doing with Project EQUUS. I will also need to modify the training schedule for the next few weeks. Good luck with your talks with Kern and the High Council.”

“Thanks! I will need it.” Said Farah, sighing.

08:01 (North America Central Time)

Wednesday, December 16, 3384 ‘A’

Main classroom, Time Patrol headquarters

New Lake City University campus

Nancy, standing behind a lectern and facing 58 apprentice members of the Time Patrol, unceremoniously banged on the lectern with the butt of her Glock 17 pistol to catch their attention. The apprentices, all ancestors except for four persons, quickly fell silent and looked at her with intense curiosity.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. In early December, you were given a print of our training schedule covering two months. However, following a long and fine tradition in military history, we will have to exercise that most practiced quality: flexibility! You can now take your schedules and rip them, because everything changed as of last night.”

The 54 ancestors took that in stride and quickly ripped their schedules in two, followed more hesitantly by the four giants in the classroom. Nancy then switched on a projector and the picture of a new schedule appeared on a giant screen by her side.

“This is the new schedule we will go by, for the moment. Don’t bother noting it down, as I will pass printed copies later on. The pilots and aircrews in your lot will probably like it, as we will concentrate on developing quickly your skills on how to fly and operate a scoutship in combat conditions.”

“What’s the rush, Nancy?” Asked Jeanne Leclerc, a French geomatics expert from the year 2052 ‘A’ who had been saved with six other astronauts stranded in orbit in a doomed space station. “What caused these sudden changes?”

“What caused this is that the Time Patrol is being pushed into its first historical research mission faster than we expected...or preferred. In about two weeks, I will leave on a long mission in the past. I will be alone, except on the first phase of the mission, when both the BABYLON and the WALKUREN will be used as support ships to pin down the exact date and location where my trek will begin. That first phase will require more qualified aircrews than what we have now, including gunners qualified and ready to operate the armament of our scoutship. For those of you who are afraid of not seeing my bum or chest for a few months, I will use hidden lifetime on that mission. The concept of hidden lifetime has already been explained to you by Farah Tolkonen, who will cover with you tomorrow the general theory of time travel. She will also explain the concept of parallel timelines, of which you are living examples. I know that this business of timeline ‘A’ versus timeline ‘B’ has confused a lot of people.”

“I don’t see why it is so difficult to understand.” Said smugly Jack Crawford, a big, athletic U.S. Navy S.E.A.L. commando from the year 2021 ‘A’. “We are the A-Team and these losers are the B-Team.”

Young Ingrid Weiss, from 1941 ‘B’, gave him the royal finger amidst an exchange of boos and catcalls, making Nancy grin in amusement.

“I am sure that this point will be hotly debated during the next practice session in unarmed combat tomorrow. Just remember that we are all part of the same organization.”

One hand then got up.

“Yes, Susanna?”

Susanna Berghof, a 23 year-old blonde who was a living proof that not all blondes were dumb, cleared her throat and spoke loudly enough for all to hear her.

“What is the nature of the mission you are going on, Nancy?”

“Simply put, I am to document the birth, life and death of Jesus Christ.” Answered calmly Nancy, bringing sudden and utter silence to the classroom. “Before anybody asks, no, you can’t come with me. I am the only one fully trained and equipped for such a mission.”

“But a woman traveling alone would be out of place there and then.” Objected Samuel Goldman, an American Jew who had enlisted in the Royal Air Force in 1939. “You will need a hell of a good cover story to explain yourself there.”

Nancy gave him a wide smile.

“Don’t worry about that, Samuel. You may be surprised, actually. Now, about your training...”

12:06 (North America Central Time)

Main cafeteria, Time Patrol residential tower

“May I sit at your table, Nancy?” Asked timidly Samuel Goldman while standing besides the table occupied by Nancy, Ingrid and Mike.

“Please, take a seat, Samuel.”

The brown-skinned young man put his tray of food opposite that of Ingrid and sat quickly, smiling briefly to the German girl before looking at Nancy, who was eating slowly.

“Nancy, I know that I can’t accompany you in Palestine, but I would like to ask a small favor from you. I suppose that you will take pictures and films while on your mission, right?”

“Of course! We are planning to put together a documentary from the video recordings I will take during my mission. Is there something that specifically interests you in Palestine?”

Samuel nodded his head quickly, hope on his face.

“The temple of Jerusalem, are you planning to visit it?”

“How could I not visit it, Samuel? My mission would anyway lead me to it. Talking of the temple, how well do you know its history?”

“Quite well, Nancy. I may not be a very observant Jew but I always was fascinated by the history of Israel. There were actually three temples built one after the other in Jerusalem. The first one was built by King Solomon in the tenth century B.C.E. and was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E.. The temple was rebuilt between 520 and 445 B.C.E. Then, the third temple was built by King Herod the Great in the last half of the first century B.C.E.. That temple, the last one to stand in Jerusalem, was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E..”

“Very good, Samuel. I have a trick question for you: when did the Ark of the Covenant disappear from the temple?”

Samuel concentrated for a moment before answering hesitantly.

“Wasn’t it taken by the Babylonians when they destroyed the first temple in 587 B.C.E.?”

“Not quite! According to the latest archeological data in 2012, the Ark of the Covenant, which was said to contain the tablets received by Moses from God, disappeared from the temple around 926 B.C.E., when an Egyptian expedition looted Jerusalem after the death of King Solomon. The Holy of Holies stood empty from that date.”

“This is very interesting, Nancy, but is there a point to all this?”

“A big point, actually. I may be a Canadian now, but I was a Hebrew twice in my past lives and the fate of the Ark of the Covenant is of personal interest to me. That artifact is too important historically to be let in the hands of looters who will pick it to pieces for the gold in it. I have a plan about the Ark and I want you to be part of it.”

Samuel, now fascinated, bent forward.

“You can count on me, Nancy. What can I do to help?”

Nancy spoke for a good four minutes, at the end of which Samuel was nearly jumping in his chair from anticipation, a big grin on his face.

“God! I can’t wait! I will do my best, Nancy.”

“I am sure of that, Samuel. Now, you better eat your food before it gets cold.”

09:27 (North America Central Time)

Wednesday, December 30, 3384 ‘A’

Main hangar, Time Patrol complex

New Lake City University campus

Lori Kano, star reporter for Global News Network, had her cameraman do a panoramic sweep of the inside of the hangar, where a good hundred people were milling around the time research ship BABYLON and the scoutship WALKÜREN. Lori herself was supposed to travel aboard the BABYLON for that first official documentary mission in the past by the Time Patrol. She could hardly contain her excitement at the idea of traveling to the distant past, all in comfort and safety, of course. About forty excited students from the history department of the New Lake City University were going to

travel as well with her and her cameraman. They were now waiting for one last person to arrive before they could depart. That person was however the key to the whole mission.

One of the two side doors used by support vehicles and robots to enter and exit the hangar started opening, prompting Lori's cameraman in pointing his lens in that direction. Lori herself switched on her microphone and head-mounted miniature camera and waited with anticipation. The details on how the mission was going to be conducted by Nancy Laplante once she set foot on the ground in the past had been kept secret from all but a few members of the Time Patrol. Lori and most of the other persons present were thus surprised to see Nancy Laplante enter the hangar on top of a brown horse. Horse riding was a sport that had been extinct in the Global Council until very recently, when a herd of horses had been reintroduced from the past by the Time Patrol, but Lori knew a few notions about it. She was thus confused when she detailed Nancy's equipment as the Canadian rode towards them. The main thing was the absence of stirrups, something Lori thought essential for riding. Nancy seemed however to be able to control her horse easily enough. Dressed in a loose-fitting, colorful combination of trousers and long-sleeved shirt, she also wore red leather boots and a long blue cloak. As befitted a woman with her reputation, she carried a number of antique weapons, including a sword, a bow, a lance, a dagger and an ax. Her fierce appearance was enhanced by a fur-lined sort of hat on her head and by a sort of leather headband incrustated with a few polished stones and worn around her forehead. A pair of saddlebags and a bedroll were attached to the back of her saddle, along with a large leather bag that contained unidentified objects. Everybody watched her dismount near the research ship and take her horse by its bridle, leading it towards the rear cargo ramp. Signaling her cameraman to follow her, Lori quickly made her way through the crowd towards the Canadian, finally meeting her near the foot of the ramp.

"Miss Laplante, is this what the women of first century Palestine wear normally? This is a quite fierce-looking outfit."

That made Nancy laugh hard for a few seconds.

"Hardly, Miss Kano. In fact, a Jewish woman dressing like this would quickly be stoned by passersby. I am actually dressed like an ancient Sarmatian female warrior. Sarmatians were a fierce nomadic people who lived west of the Caspian Sea and who

raided frequently the surrounding territories. Some of them were used as mercenaries by various states and cities around the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea.”

“And they let their women go to war?” Asked Amelia Earhart, sounding dubious. The American aviator, dressed like the other members of the Time Patrol in a two-piece, dark gray utility uniform, had approached Nancy and was detailing her equipment with curiosity. Her question made Nancy smile.

“Actually, the Sarmatians were one of the very few societies of the past that treated its women equally when it came to military matters. The skeletons of young Sarmatian girls were actually found in my time, with bowed legs denoting a life spent on horseback and with weapons surrounding them in their tombs. A Greek legend stated that Sarmatian girls could not marry before their first kill in combat. The history of the fabled Amazons was in fact based on that of Sarmatian and Scythian women.”

“That is quite an interesting identity cover, Miss Laplante.” Said Lori Kano. “Do you know much about the Sarmatians? What if you meet someone who knows Sarmatians well?”

Nancy calmly looked at Lori, her intense green eyes piercing the reporter.

“Miss Kano, I was a Sarmatian nomad once, 5,000 years ago. I was also once a Thracian woman, like what my mother was supposed to be according to my cover story. As for meeting people who knew about Sarmatians, that is actually a distinct possibility in Palestine: Roman soldiers, along with Persians and Greeks, knew and feared Sarmatians.”

“So, I am married to an Amazon.” Said jokingly Mike Crawford, who had also approached Nancy and had passed an arm around her waist. She kissed him in return.

“And I married a French musketeer.”

Lori Kano stared at the couple, unsure about the meaning of Nancy’s declaration. A fantastic thought then crossed her mind.

“Wait! Do you mean that your husband is also remembering his past lives?”

Nancy slowly nodded her head, her expression serious now.

“He is, with my help. I have been stimulating his hidden memories and those of my other apprentice agents for weeks now, while my stepdaughter, Ingrid Weiss, accessed her own memories of past incarnations at the same time as me, in 1941 ‘B’. It is a slow process but, once started, their memories stay. They now all have the experience and skills of persons who have lived thousands of years. All of our agents, including the youngest women, know how to fight and use ancient weapons, ride a

horse, live in the wild and can speak dozens of languages. Their ancient souvenirs have also greatly attenuated any nationalistic or political loyalties they may have had in their actual lives. They are now citizens of Humanity and not simply German, American, French or Russian. They serve the Global Council and are ready to die to defend it.”

“And what about special powers?” Asked Lori, her mind now boiling from the possible implications of this.

“None so far. What I do is not the same at all than what happened to me back in 1941 ‘B’. Rather, I sort of hypnotize them to revive their hidden memories. Well, enough said. Let’s board our ships and start this mission.”

A few shouted orders from Nancy got everybody moving, with Lori, her cameraman and Nancy going into the research ship with the university students, while a dozen Time Patrol members, some fully armed and armored, got into the scoutship. Once the access ramps of both ships were closed, the main doors of the hangar opened, letting the time ships roll out in the open. Once well clear from the hangar, they lifted silently from the ground and, in close formation, climbed through the low clouds covering New Lake City and the surrounding Great Lakes.

Inside the research ship BABYLON, which measured a good 85 meters in length and was much more voluminous than the escorting scoutship, Lori Kano and her cameraman made their way to the bridge, situated forward from the upper level passenger deck. Opening the armored access door to the bridge sphere and entering, she was about to start an interview with the crew when she froze in surprise: one of the two crewmembers at the controls was an ancestor woman, while three of the five other bridge crewmembers were also ancestors. The ancestor, a dark-skinned one with neck-length black hair, smiled to Lori.

“May I help you, miss?”

“Uh, I was hoping to interview the pilots, miss.”

“You certainly came to the right place, miss. I’m Sandra Billings and my partner is Jens Tarl. We will jump to the past shortly.”

“Excuse my question, miss, but I thought that you and the other apprentices of the Time Patrol had been training for only three weeks. Yet, you are at the controls of this ship.”

“Actually, Miss Kano, while I don’t pretend to understand yet much of the technology of this ship, flying it is quite simple. My old F-22 fighter aircraft was much trickier to fly than this baby.”

Still having a hard time to believe this, Lori looked at the copilot, a young man of the Global Council with the insignias of a first class pilot.

“And how would you rate Miss Billings’ performance as a pilot, Mister Tarl?”

“I would rate her as a top notch pilot, as long as I didn’t ask her to run a diagnostic of the ship’s systems. The only problem she and other ancestor pilots had at first was to adapt to our flight control systems, since they flew aircraft based on aerodynamic laws instead of the gravity drives of our ships.”

Lori instinctively looked to her left, where the scoutship WALKÜREN was visible on the panoramic view screen, flying alongside the BABYLON and with less than 200 meters separating the two ships.

“Who is flying that scoutship, Mister Tarl?”

“Presently, it is apprentice Carmen Sanchez, an ex-U.S. Navy fighter pilot, with my comrade Virna Landross acting as copilot. No need to worry, Miss Kano: all the apprentice pilots of the Time Patrol passed with flying colors the standard ship pilot test in the simulator center at the New Lake City astroport.”

“Uh, if you say so, mister. Thank you for your time.”

Lori left the cockpit, then exchanged a befuddled look with her cameraman.

“Hell, Daran, those ancestors keep surprising me every day.”

As they made their way towards the surveillance center, a flash of white light briefly blinded them. An announcement then came out of hidden loudspeakers.

“Attention all hands! We have just jumped to November 10 of Year One of the Common Era, or the seventh day of the month of Kislev of the year 3,762 of the Hebrew calendar if you prefer. We are now overflying Galilee under multi-spectral cloak at an altitude of 10,000 meters. Our sensors operators will now send miniature reconnaissance probes towards the villages of Nazareth and Bethlehem, in Galilee, to find and identify the parents of Yeshua of Nazareth, Yosef and Miriam. Once they are identified, we will then determine if Yeshua is already born or not. The moment of the birth of Yeshua will mark the start of the ground phase of this mission.”

“Already? Let’s go down to the surveillance center, Daran.”

Rushing down the spiral staircase leading down to the operations level, Lori and Daran then stepped aft into the surveillance center, a large compartment with walls covered by viewing screens. Eight sensors operators, all ancestor women, were already at work, sitting at a row of workstations and supervised by Farah Tolkonen and Nancy Laplante. The university students and their teachers were sitting in the rows of stations meant for observers and guest researchers and watching excitedly the panorama of Galilee through the giant viewing screens or the smaller screens of their observation stations. Lori went to Farah Tolkonen, who smiled to her.

“Hi, Lori! How do you like your first trip in time so far?”

“I have to say that it isn’t too different from flying on a regular airliner up to now.”

“That is because you haven’t set foot on the ground, miss.” Cut in Nancy Laplante, who then spoke to the operators. “Remember, girls, we are looking for a young girl of about twelve or thirteen named Miriam, who is the sole daughter of Yoackim and Anna. Her village is named Nazareth. The other person we are looking for is a mature man named Yosef who is a widower with two sons, Yaaqov and Josua, living in the village of Bethlehem, about eleven kilometers West-North-West from Nazareth.”

Nancy then looked again at Lori.

“All the recordings from this mission will be made available to GNN once we are back in New Lake City, Miss Kano. We were thinking of using the imagery expertise of GNN to help us produce a high quality documentary about this mission. GNN would of course obtain co-production and distribution rights for this documentary and others to come.”

“But that would be fantastic!” Exclaimed Lori, enthusiastic. “Such a documentary should be a huge popular success with Global Council audiences. I will certainly help arrange such a co-production, Miss Laplante.”

Lori then hurried to two empty seats, followed by her cameraman, as Nancy spoke for the benefit of all.

“We are going to try to pinpoint the exact date when Yeshua will be born. Up to now, the known historical accounts vary widely about that date, going from 6 B.C.E. to 2 C.E.. We have just sent down a number of remotely controlled miniature probes to the villages of Nazareth and Bethlehem, the known places of residence of Miriam and Yosef. Please note that the Bible was misleading about the true place of birth of Yeshua. Instead of being born in the Bethlehem situated to the South of Jerusalem, as the Bible pretended in order to conform to a number of old Jewish legends and prophecies,

Yeshua was actually born in Bethlehem of Galilee, which is situated only eleven kilometers from Nazareth. Once we find Miriam and Yosef, we will be able to ascertain if they have met each other yet and married. We will then be able to jump to a date nearer to the birth of Yeshua.”

Some of the screens soon started showing close-up shots of two villages taken by the miniature probes. Sounds were being retransmitted as well, letting Lori and the others follow the activities of the villagers, brown-skinned people with curly dark hair. Lori soon noticed that nobody was working in the rich fields surrounding the villages and wondered aloud about it, getting an answer from Nancy.

“Today is a Saturday, Sabbath, a mandatory day of rest in the Jewish religion. It starts at sunset on each Friday and ends at sunset on Saturday. We chose a Saturday to ensure that Yosef would not be traveling around, thus making it more probable to find him at his home.”

“Oh! I see.”

Lori kept watching the screens for the next half-hour, fascinated by what she was seeing. Life in the villages was even more primitive than she had expected. The inside of the crude stone and mud houses was nearly bare, with no chairs, tables or beds in the vast majority of the houses. Most of the people sat on the dirt floor of their houses or, in the case of the more affluent villagers, on carpets or sheep skins. Kitchenware consisted in a few wood, clay or stone cups and plates, with a measly collection of metallic pots and utensils to do the cooking. Water was drawn from a central village well and the primitive communal latrines drew horrified comments from both Lori and the history students. One of the screens then started concentrating on a young teenage girl living with an old couple in a house that was part of a group of buildings surrounding a central yard in Nazareth. At the time, the girl was sitting by the side of a group of adults engaged in an animated conversation in the central yard, listening quietly and talking occasionally with another teenage girl sitting besides her.

“I think that we found Miriam, people.” Announced Nancy, making Lori and the others watch the girl more carefully. Lori had to recognize that the girl was beautiful, something a few of the male students present in the cargo bay commented on as well. Fifteen minutes later, a second screen concentrated on a middle-aged bearded man in the village of Bethlehem. Two young boys lived with the man in a modest house, which was about as bare as the house of Miriam in Nazareth. Lori concluded, correctly, that

the bearded man was the Yosef they were looking for. Two young crewmembers then started distributing food from service carts to the occupants of the surveillance center, who ate while watching the screens. One hour after lunch was served, Nancy addressed them all on the compartment's speakers.

"May I have your attention, please? We have now positively identified Miriam of Nazareth and Yosef of Bethlehem and have locked individual probes on them. They are not married yet and may not have met each other still. We will thus jump spacetime forward by a month and download the data from our probes for speedy analysis. We will repeat the process until we pinpoint the time when Miriam and Yosef either marry or date each other."

One minute after that announcement, another flash of white light blinded Lori and the others briefly. The view on the screens was nearly the same as before, except that the sky was now overcast and a light rain was falling. Miriam was shown working at a primitive loom, while Yosef was repairing the tile roof of a stone house in a place identified as Sepphoris by an icon on the lower left corner of the screen showing him. Lori noticed with interest that armed soldiers were walking or standing around the building on which Yosef was working.

"Farah, who are these soldiers?"

The scientist spoke briefly with Nancy before answering.

"They are Roman soldiers. Sepphoris is one of their garrison towns in Palestine. Apparently, Yosef sometimes worked for them."

After about five more minutes, Farah spoke again, this time to all the ones present in the surveillance center.

"We have finished analyzing the data downloaded from our probes. Yosef and Miriam met, apparently for the first time, about a week ago in Nazareth, when Yosef came to repair the house of Miriam's parents. We are now programming our probes so that they will alert us of the moment, or moments, when Yosef and Miriam will be sleeping together. In order to respect their intimacy, we will not show those moments and will rely instead on the data from our probes. We will soon do a series of spacetime jumps forward in time to collect periodically data from our probes."

The BABYLON, still escorted by the WALKÜREN, made three more jumps during the next hour, each spaced by a month of time on the ground, collecting data as they

went. By the third jump, it was apparent that something was wrong. According to the probes, Miriam and Yosef had met a number of times by now but had not slept together or even stayed together in isolation from others. Yet, Miriam was displaying the telltale signs of morning sickness. More than a few of the university students were making allusions and jokes about that as Farah and Nancy held a quick meeting with Jan Bella in a corner of the surveillance center. The trio went to a forward compartment after that for about five minutes. Just after their return into the center, the BABYLON jumped space-time again. This time, Nazareth was shown at night. The probe spying on Miriam, who was sleeping near her parents on a carpet laid directly on the dirt floor of their house, suddenly showed a miniature probe flying inside the house through one of the windows. The small probe then slipped under Miriam's dress, going between her legs. Three minutes later, the probe flew out from under the dress and left the house. Intrigued, Lori went to see Nancy, who was sitting besides Jan Bella and was discussing the mission with him. Nancy gave Lori a welcoming smile as the reporter stopped in front of her.

"Yes, Lori?"

"Uh, I was simply coming to ask what is happening with the young Miriam?"

Nancy sighed, trying to find the right words for what she now suspected was happening.

"Well, we now seems to have a historical dilemma, Lori. According to Christian lore, Miriam was still physically a virgin after she was impregnated by God. That is in fact the main reason why she was so worshipped in the Christian religion. The problem is that we just confirmed that Miriam is pregnant...and still physically a virgin, which is an apparent impossibility."

"Then, what could be the explanation for that, in your opinion?"

Jan Bella answered her in a hesitant tone.

"Well, there are two possibilities. Either someone impregnated Miriam by using artificial methods, which would imply advanced medical technology, or..."

"Or?"

"Or God really impregnated Miriam." Answered Jan, his eyes averting Lori. "According to the level of development of her fetus, Miriam should give birth around mid October of Year 2 of the Common Era."

Seriously shaken by this, Lori looked at Nancy, who appeared equally troubled.

"But, that could mean..."

“That Yeshua could be of divine origin, as the Bible says. We will however review in detail all of our data to date and send more probes before arriving at a more definite verdict on this. Once we will be certain about our information, then I will go with my horse to accomplish the ground phase of our mission.”

CHAPTER 6 – YESHUA

16:36 (Jerusalem Time)

Wednesday, October 16, 2 C.E.

(24th day of the month of Tishri, year 3763 of the Hebrew calendar)

Bethlehem of Galilee, Israel

Yosef felt ambiguous about the coming birth as he got out of his house, wanting a quiet moment alone to reflect on things. When he had found Miriam obviously pregnant five months ago, even though he had never slept with her, he had nearly abandoned her then. Only her desperate pleas of innocence had made him reconsider giving her a second chance. Having discussed already a marriage contract with Miriam's parents, but not having married her yet, he knew what the loose tongues in Nazareth would say about this. After much indecision, he had spoken to Miriam's mother, Anna, who then had promptly examined her daughter and, to their mutual surprise and disbelief, found her still a virgin. They had not publicized that fact, though, fearing that the villagers would accuse them of blasphemy. Having such a virgin pregnancy could only mean that the hand of God had been at work, or that of the Devil. Even formally marrying Miriam three months ago had not stopped the nasty rumors in Nazareth about who was the real father of the coming child. Some had even suggested that Miriam had somehow whored herself with a Roman soldier from the nearby garrison town of Sepphoris. Yosef, growing fed up with so much meanness, had finally brought Miriam to Bethlehem a month ago to make her escape the gossips in Nazareth. This being the native village of his deceased first wife, the neighbors had been much kinder with Miriam, greeting her warmly and taking care of her needs when Yosef had to go away because of his work as a journeyman and carpenter. Once the child would be born and circumcised, though, Yosef would have to return his present house and farming fields, which had been part of his first wife's dowry, to his first parents-in-law. Then, as was the custom in Galilee, he would move to Miriam's house in Nazareth with her and their newborn child, along with his two sons from his first marriage, Yaaqov and Josua. Even that short trip would be a problem for Miriam, who was going to be still weak from giving birth. Yosef had been looking for a donkey or an ass he could borrow

or rent then for Miriam, but there were none available in the area right now. They were thus facing an incoming hard trip for Miriam to a place where their new child would be called a mamzer, a child of uncertain fatherhood, with all the ostracism that title implied.

Yosef was standing behind a low wall of loose stones, still thinking about the kind of welcome he and Miriam would get in Nazareth, when he noticed the approach of a horseman in the distance. Horses were rare enough in Galilee, save for those of soldiers, for this to attract his attention immediately. Yosef then remembered the gossips about Miriam possibly bedding a Roman soldier and anger flared in him. He stared hard as the rider got closer to the village, going at a steady amble along a footpath between two fields. The low sun glinted on metal that was part of the horse's barding, reinforcing Yosef's opinion about the rider being a soldier. The stranger was soon close enough to be examined in detail. Yosef's jaw then dropped: the rider was a woman! Young and beautiful, she wore red trousers and boots, a blue shirt with white and gold geometric designs and a blue cloak. A leather headband was covering her forehead and numerous weapons were hung on her or her horse. Her long black hair floated in the wind as she approached Yosef, who was the only person visible to her on this side of the village. Yosef was both nervous and curious as the woman stopped her horse in front of him and jumped deftly out of the saddle. She was very tall, nearly a giant. To his surprise, she then spoke in fluent Aramaic.

"Good afternoon, good man. I have been traveling from very far and was wondering if I could draw water from your village's well and pitch my tent nearby."

"Uh, if you come from so far, how come you speak such good Aramaic, woman?" She smiled at his question, showing perfect white teeth.

"A legitimate question, Galilean. Years ago, I befriended a family of Jewish merchants in the city of Ephesus, on the coast of the Aegean Sea. I also learned about the Jewish religion from them and am on my way to Jerusalem, where I want to see the great temple and experience the true god."

That last sentence pleased Yosef and made him relax a bit. Even if that woman was not Jewish, she was a god-fearer, someone at least partly acceptable to observant Jews like him. Looking at her horse, an idea then crossed his mind.

"How much in a hurry are you, woman? My wife is about to give birth and she was going to face a short but hard trip back to her village soon. I was wondering if you could loan us the use of your horse for that trip."

The stranger's smile turned into a grin.

"I have been traveling for many months now. Two or three more weeks would mean little to me. If you would be so kind to be ready to give me shelter for the time being, then I would be pleased to provide you the services of my horse and of myself."

She frowned when her words made Yosef cringe.

"I meant my services as horse handler and nothing else, Galilean."

"Uh, I would never have asked for anything improper, woman. Then, we have a deal?"

"A deal it is! If your house is already crowded, just pitching my tent besides it would be more than enough for me. By the way, when is your wife due?"

"Any time now. By the way, I am Yosef."

"And you can call me Nauca."

"Then follow me."

The woman made her horse vault over the low stone wall, then followed Yosef towards the village's water well. The excited shouts from a young boy who had emerged from one of the houses of the village quickly drew more people out. By the time Yosef and Nauca arrived at the well, half of the village was gathering around the woman and her horse, keeping a cautious distance while detailing them with a mix of curiosity and suspicion. Nauca's weapons in particular drew whispered comments. She ignored those while drinking from the well and filling her water flask, then smiled at the crowd around her.

"Shelama⁷! Do not worry: I come in peace. I was on my way to the great temple of Jerusalem. My name is Nauca."

"Where are you from, woman?" Asked an old, bearded man. "I never saw clothes like yours before."

"I am a Sarmatian, from the plains West of the Caspian Sea. I however spent years in the city of Ephesus before starting on my present trek."

"Do the Sarmatian always let their women go around with weapons, alone?"

There was more than a hint of reprobation in the old man's question but Nauca ignored that and kept smiling.

"Yes, they do! Sarmatian girls hunt and fight with their men, and we are free."

⁷ Shelama: peace in Aramaic

Many in the crowd stepped back, disturbed: in Galilee, like in the rest of Israel, women had no business traveling alone, let alone carry arms. Yosef then jumped in the conversation, trying to smooth things.

“This woman agreed to loan me the services of her horse to carry Miriam when I will have to bring her back to Nazareth. In exchange, I will shelter her until our departure.”

Heads bobbed up and down at those words: exchanging services was a way of life in Galilee, taking the place of the vilified gold, silver and copper coins of the Romans as a mode of payment. Yosef then led Nauca and her horse towards one of the groups of houses, still followed by the crowd. Before entering the courtyard of the cluster of buildings, Nauca took out of a saddlebag a long iron stake with a loop at one end and, using the back of her axe, hammered it deep into the ground. She next tied her horse’s bridle to the stake and untied her bags from the back of the saddle, throwing them over her shoulders. Yosef led her inside the courtyard, into which the houses opened, turning left and stopping in front of the second door before looking at Nauca.

“Just let me time to tell Miriam and my two sons about our deal. It won’t be long.” Entering his house, Yosef found Miriam resting on top of a sheep’s skin in the main room, while his two young sons played with clay toys in the next room. Kneeling besides his young wife of fourteen, Yosef gently took her left hand.

“Good news, Miriam: I have found someone who is willing to lend us a horse for your impending trip back to Nazareth.”

“Oh? But nobody in this village has a horse. Where did you find it?”

“A stranger just arrived while on a long trek to Jerusalem. In exchange, we will provide shelter and food until our departure.”

Miriam hesitated slightly before answering.

“But...I am about to have a baby. We can’t have a stranger in our house at such a time.”

“Don’t worry: she is willing to sleep outside, in a tent.”

Miriam’s eyes popped wide open in surprise at those words.

“She? A woman is traveling on a horse, alone?”

“She is a bit special, I will give you that. She is waiting outside right now.”

“Uh, alright, let her in, Yosef.”

Yosef quickly went to the door and opened it, signaling Nauca to come in. The Sarmatian left her bags outside and entered. She had to bend down to clear the

doorway and her head was near the ceiling when she straightened up. Miriam stared at her for a moment, then smiled to her.

“Welcome, stranger. My name is Miriam.”

“And my name is Nauca. Thank you for your hospitality.”

Nauca then looked around the small room, detailing as well the even smaller room from where Yosef’s sons were now staring at her.

“You already have little room to yourselves, especially with a baby soon to come. It would also be improper for a passing woman to sleep here, besides your husband. If this doesn’t offend you, I can camp outside: I have a small but sturdy tent with me.”

Miriam smiled in appreciation at the consideration shown by the tall stranger. She seemed to be a decent person, notwithstanding her weapons.

“Are you sure that this would not incommode you?”

“Not one bit: us Sarmatians are accustomed to hardships. I will go set up my tent, then I will play a little music for you.”

“You play music? Which instrument do you use?”

“I have a lute, a flute and a lyre with me. I won’t be long.”

Miriam watched Nauca leave, then looked at Yosef.

“She seems to be a good person. Besides, she could probably help entertain Yaaqov and Josua with the stories of her travels and her music. Uh, you don’t think that she is a...”

Yosef shook his head, knowing what Miriam was thinking. In Galilee, the traveling female musicians used by Jews who lived like the Romans were widely known for their libertine ways, many being not much more than prostitutes.

“I don’t think so. Remember the way she objected to sleeping besides me, even with you present. She is certainly a wild woman but I doubt that she is an easy woman. She told me that she learned about our religion from a family of Jewish merchants in some Greek city and that she is traveling to Jerusalem to see the temple. I think that she wants to convert.”

“Will the priests accept her? She is so...different.”

“Frankly, I don’t know about that, Miriam.”

Nauca, a.k.a. Nancy Laplante, returned twenty minutes later to find Miriam up and preparing a frugal meal for her family. Quickly putting down in one corner the lute

and the lyre she had brought with her, she went to help Miriam with the heavy clay pot of water she was handling.

“Miriam, you should not exert yourself so soon before giving birth.”

“But I have to prepare supper for my family.”

“Then let me help you. Just tell me what you want to be done.”

Yosef watched on, sitting in one corner with his two sons, while Nauca had Miriam sit down and took over the meal's preparation. He wasn't sure if eating food prepared by a non-Jew would make them unclean, but finally decided that, since the ingredients were pure according to the Jewish religion, the final result should be acceptable. As if to placate his fears, Nauca carefully washed her hands before starting to cook. In the days to come, Yosef was going to be struck by Nauca's apparent obsession with cleanliness. The Sarmatian proved anyway to be an efficient cook who seemed to know well the traditions of Jewish cuisine. That, for Yosef, was evidence that her story about befriending a Jewish family before was a true one. Even the way she prepared the flat bread that went with the salted fish was identical with that used by his own mother or his first wife. The more he watched her act in his home, the more he thought of her as a Jewish woman in funny clothes. The Aramaic she spoke would actually have sounded at home in Jerusalem. The Jews she had befriended in that Greek city were thus probably from Judea.

They all ate silently at first after Nauca served the food, but Yosef could feel the urge in his sons to ask questions to the Sarmatian. That didn't escape Nauca's attention either.

“Well, how about some stories about my travels?” She said cheerfully, getting shouts of approval from the two young boys. Eating more slowly now, she spoke at length about her youth as the daughter of a Sarmatian man and of a Thracian female captive who had won her captor's admiration and love with her sheer courage and resilience. She then spoke of her parents' death from an epidemic while she was sixteen, how she left her decimated tribe to travel South, then West, to eventually stop in the Greek city-colony of Ephesus, on the coast of Asia Minor. Miriam looked envious as Nauca told of how she had educated herself in Ephesus, learning music, dancing, singing and even writing while employed as a mercenary by the local ruler. When Nauca started telling about her encounters with a family of Jewish merchants in Ephesus, Yosef carefully prodded her to see how much she really knew about Jewish

religion and customs. The Sarmatian passed that test with flying colors, answering him as well as any Jewish woman would. Then, Nauca took her lute and started playing it while singing a ballad in a foreign language. Her first song, which drew frank applause from Yosef and his family, was followed by another, this time in Hebrew.

Darkness was coming quickly when Nauca excused herself for the night and left the house with her musical instruments. Yosef had to raise his voice at his sons, who wanted to hear more songs and stories from the Sarmatian, then sent them to sleep in the smaller room of the house. Returning to Miriam's side, Yosef caressed her huge belly, feeling the kicks from the baby inside.

"What do you think of her, Miriam?"

She caressed his beard, smiling and apparently content.

"I like her, Yosef. She may not be Jewish but she is a decent person. You did well to enlist her and her horse. I will have to see that beast tomorrow."

"It is a big, powerful one. It will probably be able to carry you and both of our sons."

"Yosef, do you still want to name our baby Yeshua, if it is a boy?"

"Yes! If it is a girl, then we will name her Sarah. Now, you better go to sleep: you tire easily with that belly of yours."

She didn't fight him on that, feeling actually spent from what had been a relatively quiet day for her. As she lay on her sheep's skin, Miriam thought about the baby inside her. Was God really the father of it, or was it the work of some devil? How would the child be received in Nazareth, where the tongues had been hard at work in her back? She was still full of doubts when she finally fell asleep.

It was still pitch dark when violent contractions woke Miriam up, making her moan in pain. She tried to keep quiet and to ignore them, but she soon had to wake Yosef up.

"Yosef, it is coming...very soon."

"By the grace of God! At this hour?" Replied her husband, panicking in the dark.

"Yes! Please, get some help."

"Let me light a lantern first."

That took a few long minutes, with Yosef fumbling around in the dark while Miriam moaned and held her belly. He was about to leave the house, a lit oil lantern in his right

hand, when someone knocked hurriedly on the door. Yosef opened the door to find Nauca standing outside with a lit torch, worry on her face.

“I heard Miriam moan in pain. Is the baby coming?”

“Uh, yes, we think so.”

“May I help? I assisted births many times before.”

Yosef hesitated only slightly before answering: the blood from the birth process was going to render temporarily impure anyone who was going to touch Miriam or the baby, so having a non-Jew assist Miriam would not represent an offense to the Jewish religion...he thought. Of course, the Pharisees in Judea would probably object to that. They doubted the religious purity of Galileans all the time, anyway.

“Please come in, woman.”

Nauca put her torch in one corner near Miriam, stuck vertically between three rocks, then knelt besides the pregnant teenager and rolled up the girl’s robe to examine her.

“I will need a pot of water and clean rags, lots of them. The water will have to be boiled.”

“Uh, we have no cloth.” Answered Yosef.

Nauca shook her head in frustration and got up.

“I have some I can spare. Get the water in the meantime and boil it.”

She stormed out of the house, getting back after two minutes with a piece of rolled white cloth in her arms. She was ripping it in large strips with her dagger when Yosef returned with a pot full of water. He proceeded to light a fire in the central hearth, then put the pot of water over it. By now, Nauca was reassuring Miriam with soft words, telling her how to breathe and push with the contractions. The water in the pot soon started to boil.

“The water is boiling. What do I do now?”

“Let it boil for a short while, then take the pot off the fire to let it cool down, with a piece of clean cloth to cover it. Boiled water helps prevent infections if we clean the woman’s belly and groin with it before the delivery.”

Yosef had never heard about that before but did what she said nonetheless. Right now he was a nervous wreck and couldn’t think straight by himself anyway.

The next few hours were nerve-racking for Yosef, with each whimper of pain from Miriam making him jump. Nauca finally told him to wait outside and to get another woman to come help her. Yosef got out and realized that the sun was now up. Seeing the wife of his old neighbor, he went quickly to her and asked for her help, explaining

Miriam's predicament. The woman understood quickly and went inside Yosef's house, leaving him to pace nervously around the central courtyard in the gray dawn. Time seemed to slow down from then on for Yosef.

"I see the head now!" Said Nauca excitedly, with the old neighbor looking on. "Keep pushing, Miriam! It won't be long now."

"I'm doing only that!" Protested the teenager, exhausted and in pain. She did however keep up her efforts. She was soon rewarded by a scream from Nauca.

"I have it!"

The noise of two slaps was followed by a wail from the baby now held head-down by Nauca. Quickly wiping the baby clean with a wet cloth, she gave it to Salome, the neighbor, then made a knot in the umbilical chord and cut it with her dagger. She made another knot on the part still attached to the placenta, then handed the crying baby to Miriam after gently washing him.

"Congratulation, it's a boy. How are you going to call him?"

"Yeshua. He's beautiful."

Nauca nodded gravely while staring at the baby boy. While the miniature multi-spectral camera hidden in her leather headband could not see it, she could see the spiritual aura surrounding the baby's body, like the auras of all the persons around her. That was one thing she had started to see after being transformed by the old Semitic man in Colditz: every living person had an aura that varied a bit in intensity and color, depending on the strength and nature of their spirit. This baby's aura was at least ten times more intense than that of any other person she had seen yet, apart from her own aura, and was pure white in color. She suddenly felt very humble. Washing Miriam's groin, legs and belly with warm water and clean pieces of cloth, she then got on her feet and smiled at the old neighbor.

"My part is done, Salome. Since I have touched blood and am unclean now, I will go away for seven days. Once the rest of the placenta comes out, wash again Miriam with the warm water."

Salome nodded her head.

"For a stranger, you know our religious customs very well, Nauca. You also are quite good at delivering babies. You did well today."

"I only helped a girl in need. Miriam, I will be back in seven days, I promise."

"We will be waiting for you, Nauca. You are my friend now."

"I am truly honored by that. Shelama, Miriam."

Leaving the house, Nauca went to Yosef, who was standing in the center of the courtyard and was staring at her and her blood-covered clothes.

"You can now go see your wife and your new son, Yosef. I will now leave for seven days to cleanse myself."

Yosef didn't reply, instead running inside his house. Not staying further, Nauca went out of the courtyard to take down her tent and pack her things.

As promised, Nauca showed back in Bethlehem seven days later, in mid-morning. In reality, Nancy had simply ridden her horse to a location out of sight of the village, then jumped ahead by seven days. Her horse may have been a very convincing recreation of a real horse, but it was also a powerful time machine and could fly, if need be. A happy Miriam waved in welcome at her while sitting besides her house, little Yeshua sucking milk from her left breast. Galloping to her, Nauca stopped her horse in front of the teenager and jumped down before kissing her on both cheeks.

"You look well, Miriam. How is the baby?"

"Hungry all the time. He hardly leaves me any free time."

"A hungry baby is a healthy baby. When will he be circumcised?"

"Tomorrow. We will be able to leave for Nazareth two days after. Uh, I'm afraid that the village elders are not ready to let you watch the ceremony because you are a non-Jew. I am truly sorry for that, but even I can't attend: it's a men-only ceremony."

Nauca shrugged, apparently unconcerned.

"Men! Always ready to believe in their superiority over women."

"Nauca, what will you do once we are in Nazareth?"

"I will resume my trip towards Jerusalem and visit the great temple there."

"And then?"

"I don't know yet. I might stay there or I might keep moving on. It will depend on what kind of welcome I get in Jerusalem."

Miriam suddenly looked concerned.

"Nauca, you should know that women traveling alone are normally not thought well of there...or here. Be careful about how you will be perceived."

"Miriam, I am a warrior and a musician, not a prostitute, and I will not give anybody any excuse to call me that way."

"Still, be careful."

“I will. I promise you. Now, can I hold your baby a bit?”

“Of course! He has finished sucking milk now.”

Miriam gently handed the baby to Nauca, who tenderly cradled him in her arms and kissed his forehead. Her apparent joy made Miriam remark on it.

“You look so happy with a baby in your arms. Maybe you should marry and start a family.”

Nauca sighed softly.

“If and when I get the time.”

07:22 (Jerusalem Time)

Sunday, October 27, 2 C.E.

(4th day of Cheshvan, year 3763 of the Hebrew calendar)

Bethlehem, Galilee

Nauca effortlessly picked up five year-old Josua and sat him across her horse's back, just forward of the saddle. Miriam was already in the large saddle, with little Yeshua in a basket held in her lap, while seven year-old Yaaqov sat behind the saddle, holding on to Miriam by her waist. Yosef, bearing his meager collection of tools on his back, was waiting a few paces in front of the horse. Nauca, in Sarmatian attire and with all her weapons on her, grabbed the bridle and spoke to her horse in Sarmatian.

“Forward, Pegasus!”

Yosef and his family exchanged last goodbyes with their neighbors and friends, then got on their way, with Nauca in the lead and still holding her horse's bridle. Heading East, they adopted a slow but steady pace, with the two young boys squealing in pleasure at first as they experienced a horse ride for the first time. The temperature was just right, with a small breeze that helped cool the effect of the rising Sun.

The trip was to be a relatively short one, Nazareth being only eleven kilometers in a straight line from Bethlehem. There were however no roads or trails in the area and the hilly countryside made the trip a four-hour affair over rough, rocky ground. Yosef was secretly relieved to have the armed Sarmatian with his family: thieves were not rare in the hills of Galilee, waiting for the lone or defenseless traveler or, even better, a merchant laden with goods. They fortunately didn't meet any band of thieves. What they met instead had the potential to be much worse. Three kilometers short of

Nazareth, in a small, narrow valley, they came face to face with a Roman mounted patrol of nine soldiers heading North, probably towards the garrison town of Sepphoris. Yosef tensed up immediately at their sight: Roman soldiers did pretty much as they pleased in what was for them occupied territory. Some were relatively decent and honest, while others rarely missed a chance to supplement their meager pay. Roman soldiers actually had the authority to requisition goods or the services of passing Jews as they saw fit. Those foolish enough to protest often ended up with a good beating or worse. The decurion leading the eight mounted legionnaires concentrated his attention on Nauca and her weapons as he approached at a trot, his men behind him.

Nancy Laplante feverishly reviewed her options as the Romans approached. Having been a Roman centurion herself in a previous incarnation, she was well aware of the ways of the Roman Army and knew that the Pax Romana benefited only the Romans. She however could not afford to kill or wound seriously any of these soldiers, even though she could probably do just that easily. Attacking or resisting Roman soldiers here and now would bring big trouble to Yosef and Miriam, something that would turn her mission, and history, into a mess. Furthermore, those soldiers had or were going to have families, who would in turn have descendants that would multiply along the centuries. The untimely death of any of those Romans could upset the genealogic tree, with unforeseeable consequences. For Nancy, this was one case where she would have to be ready to die without a fight if that was what it took to ensure the safety of Yosef and Miriam. They were now at the mercy of the decurion now approaching them.

The Roman stopped his horse close enough from Nauca to be able to touch her. Looking quickly at Miriam and the children on the horse, then at Yosef, he returned his attention to Nauca and spoke in Koine, a sort of pidgin-Greek that was the Lingua Franca of the Roman Empire.

“Who are you? What are you doing with all these weapons?”

Keeping a friendly attitude, Nauca bowed her head once and replied, also using Koine.

“My name is Nauca and I come from Ephesus, where I was employed as a mercenary by the local governor. I was on my way to Jerusalem when I met this family. The mother has just given birth and I offered her the use of my horse until she can be in Nazareth.”

“A woman mercenary?” Said the decurion in a disbelieving tone. One of his men cut in with what he thought of as a joke.

“Maybe she’s one of those fabled Greek Amazons, Decurion.”

The soldier’s remark made his leader stare hard at Nauca.

“An Amazon? I thought that they came from the plains North of the Regnum Bospori⁸. Are you Greek, woman?”

“No, I am a Sarmatian.”

The decurion reacted as if receiving an electric discharge.

“A Sarmatian? Then you are an Amazon, by Jupiter!”

The decurion grinned as his men looked at each other in surprise.

“Centurion Markus must be told about this. So, what is an Amazon doing in a hole like Galilee? Hunting for men?”

Nauca kept a straight face as the Romans burst out in laughter, answering calmly the decurion when he stopped laughing.

“We have enough true men in Sarmatia, Roman. The truth is that I met a group of Jewish merchants while in Ephesus. They taught me their religion and I decided to travel to the temple of Jerusalem. I am on a spiritual quest.”

The decurion nearly fell off his horse from laughing on hearing this, while his men were bent over and holding their sides.

“A...a Jewish Amazon. That’s rich! Go your way and may you find your god, woman.”

Still laughing, the Romans then left. Yosef, who did not speak Koine, looked with utter confusion at Nauca.

“By God, what did you say to make them laugh so hard?”

“I simply told them who I am and that I was on my way to the temple of Jerusalem. They found the notion of me being a Jew quite funny.”

“Well, you are an oddity around here, Nauca.” Said Miriam, smiling from the top of the horse. Nauca shook her head, still trying to slow down her heartbeat after this close call.

“If it can amuse the Romans and let us avoid trouble, then I don’t mind.”

⁸ Regnum Bospori: Roman name for the Crimean Peninsula, on the North shore of the Black Sea.

They reached Nazareth safely an hour later and were greeted there by a rather lukewarm crowd of curious villagers. While Nauca drew much curiosity, mixed with a good dose of suspicion tainted with xenophobia, Miriam and Yosef got what amounted to a polite welcome at best, except from Miriam's parents. The old couple insisted on holding little Yeshua and covering him with kisses while Nauca helped Miriam and the two boys down from her horse. Nauca slowly looked around her, letting the cameras in her headband film the villagers and the houses of Nazareth. Miriam's father soon came to her, bowing politely to her.

"I thank you for providing a ride to my daughter, stranger. You are welcomed to the hospitality of my house."

"I am honored, old man, but I would like to resume my trip to Jerusalem as soon as possible. I will help your daughter get her things inside her house, then I will leave."

"As you wish, woman."

Yoackim then left her and returned to Miriam and her baby. It took only a few minutes for Nauca to unload Miriam's things and bring them to the small, two-room house that would be her family's home. While standing inside, she mentally ordered the miniature computer implanted in her head to register the spatial coordinates of the house, so that she could easily jump spacetime to it if need be in the future. She hugged Miriam, Yosef and their children one last time, with Miriam giving her a hopeful smile.

"You will visit us again, will you?"

"Maybe, but it could take a while. May God bring lots of happiness to you and your family. Shelama, Miriam."

"Shelama, Nauca."

Getting on her horse, Nancy had a last look at the baby in Miriam's arms, then spurred her mount to a gallop, leaving Nazareth in a cloud of dust. She had over 140 kilometers to cover on the rocky and dusty trail passing for a road here before getting to Jericho and then Jerusalem.

15:41 (Jerusalem Time)

Tuesday, October 29, 2 C.E.

(6th day of Cheshvan, year 3763 of the Hebrew calendar)

Outskirts of Jericho, east of Jerusalem

Kingdom of Judea and Samaria

Nancy stood immobile for a long moment on her horse, looking at the small village of Jericho ahead of her. Powerful emotions were running through her right now: Jericho had been twice her place of birth in history. The first time had been over 7,000 years ago, when her newly created spirit had inhabited for the first time a human fetus, that of a girl to be named Nataï. The second time had been thirteen years before the time she was actually in. Right now, a teenage girl named Magdala was living in Jericho and would marry a shoemaker in two years. Nancy could sense vaguely the mind of Magdala in the distance and see what she saw, if she concentrated on it. If Nancy got much closer to Jericho, Magdala would probably be able to sense her too. Jericho was on the road to Jerusalem, if one could call the trail passing through it a road, so Nancy would have to go through it, probably more than once during her mission. First, though, she had a place to visit. Spurring her mount, Nancy guided it to a vast mound of sand and dust just to the North of the village and close to the source that was the main water point for the people of Jericho. Her robotic horse easily went up the steep slope of the mound, helped by its anti-gravity field set on low power. Nancy finally stopped her horse at a precise spot on the mound and dismounted. Kneeling in the sand, she bowed low and touched the dirt with her forehead. She was now on top of what was left of her first house ever on Earth. After a good minute bent over, she straightened up and looked towards the cloud-covered sky.

“Thank you for all my lives, Great One. I will serve you till death.”

Something she was hoping for but didn't expect then happened: a voice boomed inside her head.

“YOU WILL BE ABLE TO SERVE ME EVEN AFTER YOUR DEATH, NATAÏ. THIS WILL BE YOUR LAST INCARNATION. AFTER THAT, YOU WILL BE PURE SPIRIT, LIKE ABRAM.”

Nancy nearly broke in tears at the mention of her ancient husband, who was now what most people would call her guardian angel. Abram, better known historically as Abraham, had been the one who had appeared to her in Colditz Castle in 1941 and had healed the horrible wounds from the tortures the Gestapo had inflicted on her. That was also when she had gained her present powers.

“I understand, Great One. Do you have instructions for me?”

“KEEP PROMOTING YOUR WORDS AND MAKE THIS WORLD A BETTER PLACE. KNOW THAT MEN FROM THE FUTURE WERE AT WORK CONCERNING YESHUA. THEY WILL NOT COME BACK: I DEALT WITH THEM.”

A stream of images then flooded her mind for an instant. When it ended, Nancy knew everything she had to know about the origins of Yeshua and what had made possible his birth. That knowledge made her both angry and overwhelmed. Angry because history had again been manipulated by people who had ignored common sense, even though they had been well intentioned. Overwhelmed because of her involuntary but crucial role in this. However, she couldn't change one thing about it: a time causality loop of monstrous proportion was at work here.

“What shall I do about Yeshua, Great One?”

“NOTHING! HIS FATE IS ALREADY WRITTEN. GO IN PEACE, NATAÏ.”

Her mind still echoing with the mighty voice of The One, Nancy stayed on her knees and meditated. She opened her eyes a long time afterwards, with her mind at ease and focused on what lay ahead. Getting back on her feet, she jumped in the saddle and guided Pegasus towards Jericho, intent on taking the trail towards Jerusalem. She was half way through the village when what felt like a hallucination struck her. An image of herself riding her horse through Jericho was in her mind. Looking to her left, she saw a teenage girl dressed in a rough tunic who stood in a doorway, staring at her. Activating her headband cameras, Nancy filmed her, realizing that the young Jewish girl was Magdala, her incarnation in this time period. She then urged Pegasus to a gallop and put quickly some distance between her and the girl: they were not meant to meet.

Pushing her mount at a constant speed that would have killed a real horse, Nancy arrived near Jerusalem one hour later. Slowing down her horse to a trot in order not to attract too much attention, she looked around at the scenery, filming as she went. The Mount of Olives dominated her to her right, with Mount Scopus behind it. To her left lay the Hill of Bad Counsel, while the Valley of Kidron cut across her path ahead. Beyond the Valley of Kidron lay the city of Jerusalem, totally unlike what she was accustomed to in 2012. Surrounded by defensive walls, the city was dominated by the formidable mass of the Temple of Herod the Great in its Northeast corner. The palace of King Herod, now occupied by his son Archelaus, was visible in the west end of Jerusalem, in the Upper City. Much less prominent than the two previous buildings but nonetheless the real center of power in Jerusalem, the Antonia fortress sat on the northern edge of the city, adjacent to the Temple. Nancy was much more wary of the Roman soldiers occupying that fortress than of the Jewish authorities of Jerusalem: Roman rule was both ruthless and selfish and Roman soldiers did pretty well as they

pleased here. Her cover as a part-time traveling musician would undoubtedly put her in contact with some Romans in Jerusalem, probably high-placed ones too. Those Romans could in turn ask or expect services that Nancy was not prepared to provide to them. How they would react to her refusals was still an unknown to Nancy. Before she could establish her cover occupation, though, she needed to buy a vacant house. That was not going to be easy in such a crowded city.

Scanning visually the hills around her, Nancy saw only a few dozens dispersed huts and modest houses, all apparently occupied. Resigning herself to a long search, Nancy guided her horse towards the Gate of Sion, on the southern edge of Jerusalem. The travelers, merchants and pilgrims going to or coming from Jerusalem and lining the trail she was on all stared at her as she passed them, with many exchanging whispered comments between themselves. That did not surprise Nancy, as she was the only woman in sight traveling without a male companion. Her weapons were also undoubtedly attracting much attention. Ignoring the stares and the comments, she made her way along the southern walls of the city, finally stopping besides two Jewish soldiers guarding the Gate of Sion, which led into the upper city. The two men, who were each lightly equipped with a bronze conical helmet, a short sword and a javelin, examined her with obvious curiosity as Nancy spoke to the nearest guard.

“Could you tell me where I could find a respectable inn in the upper city, good man?”

The soldier smiled to her while scratching his beard.

“Well, respectable and inn are normally two words that don’t go together, but an acceptable place would be the inn of Iram the Syrian, near the palace of the Asmoneans. Enter the upper city, then follow the main street North until close to the Jaffa Gate. You will then see the palace of the Asmoneans to your right and Iram’s inn to your left.”

Searching into her belt purse for a moment, Nancy threw a large copper coin to the guard, who quickly caught it.

“Thanks for the information. Shelama!”

“Shelama, woman!”

Going through the large gate, Nancy followed the so-called main street, roughly paved and less than four meter-wide. She had to go slowly, the street being crowded with pedestrians and street vendors peddling their wares. Most of the houses and buildings

lining the street were two or three story-high and were made of either roughly cut stones or of clay bricks. While keeping an eye for potential trouble, like drunken soldiers looking for women, or chamber pots being carelessly emptied from an upper story window, Nancy carefully filmed the scenery around her with the cameras hidden in her headband. Jan Bella was going to be ecstatic about those recordings of life in an ancient city. If Iram's inn was anything like she expected it to be, then the chief historian of the Time Patrol was going to get some eye-opening footage.

She found the inn easily enough, as it bordered a wide square with an old palace to its right and a city gate across the open space. The inn was in the form of an empty rectangle, with a large gate that gave access to the central courtyard. That courtyard also served as a stable, with pitched roofs covering a series of open stalls and piles of hay. Stopping her mount in front of the open gate, Nancy jumped out of the saddle and led her horse inside by the bridle. A scruffy young man in a dirty tunic ran to her at once and bowed respectfully.

"Is the lady looking for a place in this modest inn?"

"I am! Do you have a private room left vacant?"

"Let me ask my master, lady."

The young man ran inside, returning less than a minute later with a small bearded man with a thick waistline. The bearded man was much older, maybe in his early forties, and had a jovial face. His eyes were lively, looking around constantly and taking note of everything even as he bowed to Nancy.

"Shelama, lady! I am Iram, owner of this inn. I am pleased to tell you that I still have private rooms left. How long are you planning to stay?"

"I am not sure yet, probably a few days at a minimum: I am looking to find and buy a house in Jerusalem, if there are any available."

Iram played with his beard with one hand while thinking.

"Hmm, that may not be easy to find: Jerusalem is quite crowded these days and any available housing is quickly grabbed. Your search may take weeks."

"It will take the time it will take. Do you mind if I inspect your inn before making my mind about staying?"

"Not at all." Replied Iram while bowing again. "You will find my inn to be clean and well kept. Follow me, please."

Leaving her horse in the care of the stable boy, Nancy followed Iram inside the main hall of the inn, a large room with a ceiling low enough to make Nancy cautious about where she went. A dozen rough wooden tables with benches filled the room, which was occupied at the time by nine customers, a female servant and what Nancy pegged as a very young prostitute. They all stared at once at the tall, weapons-laden newcomer. Ignoring the stares, Nancy went up a creaky staircase behind Iram in order to inspect her room. What she saw would have both scandalized and horrified a typical tourist from the 34th century if he had found a hotel room like this one in a resort of the Global Council. For a seasoned traveler of the first century, the room was actually more than acceptable. While small, it was swept clean of dirt and dust and was furnished with a straw mattress on a wooden bed frame, a stool, a chamber pot and a small table supporting a clay washbasin and a water jar. The straw mattress was probably full of vermin but that was a minor annoyance. Nancy nodded in satisfaction and smiled to Iram.

“This looks very adequate. How much per night?”

“A half shekel per night, meals not included. May I ask what kind of money you have with you, Lady?”

“I have Greek drachmas and Roman sesterces and denarii. I will take this room and pay you one week in advance. Here are twenty drachmas: that should cover for the care of my horse too. I will now get my things and bring them up.”

The innkeeper made an embarrassed smile as Nancy got ready to leave the room.

“Pardon me for being impolite, lady, but may I ask what is your occupation? The people of this city are very prudish and may complain to the authorities if they suspect you of being a woman of small virtue. You are after all traveling alone, which is most unusual for a woman around here. Don’t get me wrong, though. I have an open mind.”

Nancy slowly faced Iram, her expression neutral.

“First, you may call me Nauca. I am a Sarmatian warrior. I spent years in Ephesus, where I educated myself. I came to Jerusalem to see for myself if the religion of the Jews is worth embracing. As for how I pay for my traveling, know that I play a few instruments well and can sing. I do not sell my body around, however.”

Iram repressed a frown with difficulty: female musicians and entertainers were widely regarded by Jews as being little more than prostitutes, even though they were in high demand with Romans and the Jews that had adopted Greek customs and way of life. The public tongues would be going at it quickly with this woman. Iram was however in

need of customers, especially ones who paid in coins, like her, instead of through barter. He decided to make the best of the situation and bowed to the tall woman.

“Point taken, Nauca of Sarmatia. May I give you a word of caution for your time in this city?”

“A person forewarned is worth two persons. Speak!”

“Be careful about the local authorities, especially the soldiers of Archelaus, the local ruler. Archelaus, who has been in power for six years now, is squeezing the people dry with taxes and levies raised on a whim. He, along with his soldiers, does about everything he wants, even if it violates the religious laws. Even the Romans are starting to find his rule excessive.”

“Now, that is worth noting. The Romans are masters at bleeding dry occupied lands for their profit. That Archelaus must be one mighty tyrant.”

“He is! He also isn’t above grabbing pretty women in the streets, to be used in his palace. If I were you, I would go around wearing a veil.”

“A judicious counsel, Iram. I will heed it. If you will now excuse me, I will bring my things to this room.”

“I will have Ephraim help you.” Replied the innkeeper. Both of them then went down to the main hall, then went out to Nauca’s horse, which was being given some hay by the stable boy.

“Ephraim! Help the woman bring her things up to her room.”

The stable boy nodded his head and untied the saddlebags and other bags thrown over the horse’s back. Nauca, despite his protests, took everything except her bedroll and her saddle and, apparently without effort, carried them inside. Ephraim, sweating under the weight of Nauca’s saddle and bedroll, followed her upstairs, putting down his load at the foot of her bed with a sigh of relief. He left after catching a silver drachma thrown by Nauca, who then quickly organized her things. By then, Nancy was quite hungry and, looking through the window of her room, saw from the position of the Sun that it was suppertime.

Still wearing her Sarmatian clothes and her weapons, she went down to the main hall of the inn and sat at an empty table in a corner from where she could watch the main entrance. There were still eight customers in the room, along with the teenage prostitute and the servant. She signaled the servant to approach and gave her a friendly smile.

“What do you have available for supper?”

“Lentil soup and bread, lady. Would that be satisfactory?”

“It will do. Bring a cup of wine as well, please.”

The woman bowed and turned around, disappearing in the kitchen of the inn. Nancy then examined discreetly the other persons in the hall, who were themselves eyeing her discreetly. There was a middle-aged couple sitting at a table and eating with their two teenage sons. At a table near the entrance sat three men speaking animatedly in Phoenician between themselves. From their conversations, Nancy understood them to be merchants from the city of Tyre on a commercial trip to Jerusalem. The last customer was probably Greek and was quietly drinking wine at a corner table to the right of Nancy. The young prostitute, a gaunt-looking girl of about twelve years old, sat on the floor of the hall, her back against the corner near the Greek man. As the servant came back with Nancy’s food and wine, the Jewish family of four got up and left for their room. As soon as they were out of sight, the Greek made a discreet sign to the prostitute, who smiled and got up to sit besides the man, who promptly passed an arm around her shoulders and started fondling her left breast. While the three Phoenicians paid no notice to this, the servant gave a black look at the young girl before disappearing again inside the kitchen. Nancy frowned at the scene: the young prostitute, who was probably an orphan reduced to selling herself in order to survive, would be in for a lot of trouble if someone complained about her. Returning her mind to her food, Nancy tasted cautiously the lentil soup and was agreeably surprised: it was as good as any lentil soup she had tasted in Lebanon in the 21st Century. The Greek man and the teenage prostitute got up and went upstairs a minute later, leaving Nancy alone with the Phoenicians and the servant. The girl was back down in the hall twenty minutes later, alone. She opened wide her eyes in surprise when Nancy signaled her to come to her table, but approached anyway, eyeing cautiously the sword, dagger and axe worn by Nancy.

“Come here and sit down, girl.” Said Nancy in a polite but firm tone. The teenager sat opposite her, still wondering what Nancy could want with her.

“Do you need my services, lady?” She asked timidly, making Nancy smile.

“No! I’m Nauca. What is your name?”

“Tabitha! Why?”

“Because I am curious about why such a young girl would risk prostituting herself in Jerusalem. Where is your family?”

The girl's face turned somber at that question.

"My parents died six months ago and nobody was left to care for me. I quickly grew hungry and did the only thing that could feed me. Why would you care?"

"I care about everybody, Tabitha. Did you try finding a job as a servant, or something else than prostitution? You are risking stoning, you know?"

"I know, but nobody wanted to hire me except to use my body: I am a Samaritan and had nobody to vouch for me."

Nancy was silent for a moment. The Jews of Judea and Galilee despised Samaritans, whom they considered of impure blood and unworthy of being Jews.

"Why didn't you return to Samaria? You must have some relatives left there who could help you?"

The girl shook her head slowly while staring down at Nancy's food.

"I have no relatives left there: they all died in an epidemic. My parents came to Jerusalem because of that epidemic but died shortly afterwards. Can I go now?"

"Not yet! Are you hungry?"

"Yes!"

Nancy then waved to the servant, who came to her table while studiously ignoring the teenager.

"Waitress, bring a bowl of soup and a loaf of bread for this girl. I am paying."

The servant looked at Nancy with an incredulous expression.

"You are paying a meal for her?"

"Yes, I am! And bring a full loaf of bread."

The servant shook her head in disbelief as she returned inside the kitchen, leaving Nancy to examine Tabitha. She would have been more than pretty if not for her emaciated face. Her worn tunic and headscarf had not been washed in a long time and the few strands of black curly hair showing from under the scarf were in need of serious grooming. Breaking a piece of her bread, Nancy gave it to Tabitha, who grabbed it quickly and bit hungrily in it. The servant came back soon afterwards and put a bowl of soup and a big loaf of bread on the table, in front of the teenager, then left without a word. The girl ate the soup with gusto, biting from time to time in her bread. Her obvious hunger broke Nancy's heart: no child should ever go through so much misery. The fact that Tabitha's fate was a common one in these times as well as in most times was truly saddening. Nancy started conversing with the girl, trying to see if there was a way she could lift her out of her hopeless existence. She soon realized that she could

do very little indeed for the girl without blowing her cover up and bringing her back with her to the future. That brought another dilemma for Nancy: where did one stop and let destiny, however grim, run its course? She knew the answer too well: playing with history, even in minor ways, could have unpredictable effects, thus she would have to listen to her mind instead of her heart. Feeding the girl and maybe giving her some money to keep her from chasing male customers was about all she could do for her. When the girl finished her soup, Nancy took a handful of silver coins from her belt purse and gave them to Tabitha.

“Tabitha, take this money. In exchange, I want you to stop chasing men and to keep looking for a decent job, like laundress or cooking assistant.”

The teenager stared up at her with her big brown eyes, unable to believe her luck.

“I never met a warrior who cared for others before you. Why do you do all this for me, a complete stranger? You are not even a Jew.”

Nancy smiled meekly, thinking back about the last, hectic years of her life.

“Because I am a warrior who cares. Besides, one doesn’t need to be a Jew to show kindness and compassion. Keep out of trouble and keep me informed of your progress. Shelama and good night, Tabitha.”

“Shelama, Nauca...and thank you!”

Nancy felt better with life as she watched the girl leave, her loaf of bread tightly held in her hands. Getting up herself, she then climbed the wooden staircase leading to the upper floor rooms. Pushing the locking bolt of her room’s door in place, she shed her dusty clothes and poured some water in the washbasin sitting on the table. After a thorough sponge bath, she laid flat her bedroll in the corner farthest from the bed: she had no desire to wake up with vermin crawling on her. For good measure she poured some insecticide powder over and around the straw mattress before laying down on her bedroll. The night was going to be fresh enough for the average Israelite to use a blanket but, for a Canadian like her, the temperature was just perfect. She thus spent her first night in ancient Jerusalem naked on top of her bedroll, dreaming about a baby boy who was going to change the World.

Nancy woke up shortly after dawn but stayed down on her bedroll for a few minutes while thinking about the day ahead. Finally getting up, she used the covered wood bucket that served as chamber pot, then put on a white cotton loincloth. A white, pleated peplos, a Greek long dress made of a rectangular piece of tissue, was on next.

Sitting on the stool, Nancy laced on a pair of leather sandals and buckled on a brown leather belt that supported a long dagger and a belt purse. Next, she checked out her leather head band before putting it around her head: the memory crystal hidden inside it still had enough data space for over twenty hours of video and sound recording. Draping on a hooded cape made of blue linen that covered her head, she then hid under the straw mattress her sword, axe, bow and arrows before leaving her room. She barely beat the three Phoenician merchants to the main hall for breakfast, where she ordered and ate some salted fish and bread washed down with water. Nancy then left the inn, starting her search for a house to buy.

Going first to the upper city market, situated near the palace of Herod, she walked around the vending stalls, asking both passersby and vendors if they knew about any house available for sale in Jerusalem. At first, she drew blank looks from most people, while others were openly suspicious of a woman walking around alone and asking questions to anybody. Having no luck at the market, Nancy moved on to one of the narrow streets connecting with the market place. If anything, the persons there were even less helpful, with many refusing to speak to a female stranger. Mentally swearing about the scourge of xenophobia, Nancy went to the next street to continue her search.

The Sun was high when Nancy returned to her inn, tired and discouraged. She must have explored over half of the city in detail, with no results to show for except lots of stares. Stepping inside the inn's main hall, she stopped cold at the sight of turned over tables and benches. Iram, Ephraim and the servant were busy cleaning up the mess and looked up at her as she surveyed the scene.

“What happened here?”

Iram came to her, a grim look on his face.

“That girl you tried to help yesterday: a mob chased her all the way to here, where she was trying to find you for protection. They took her out of the city, towards the quarry just outside the Jaffa Gate.”

“When did that happen?” Asked Nancy urgently, feeling sudden dread.

“You just missed them. Now, about...”

Nancy didn't listen to him, instead running out of the inn and across the plaza, towards the Jaffa Gate. A steady stream of people were already crossing the gate, all of them heading out of the city. That was a bad sign for Nancy, who accelerated to a dead run.

Shouting to warn people out of her path, she still had to slow down and do a lot of pushing and elbowing to make her way through the city gate, oblivious of the protests from the men she had pushed away. She found a large crowd standing on the edge of the quarry just outside the walls, looking down in the wide pit. Many were shouting, shaking their fists or throwing rocks down the pit. Nearly blinded by fury and grief, Nancy elbowed her way through the crowd. The persons standing nearest to the pit were nearly all young men with the fanatical look of religious zealots.

“DEATH TO ALL SINNERS!” Shouted one of the young zealots before throwing a rock down the pit. Looking down, Nancy saw a small shape lying at the bottom of the quarry, thirty feet below, unmoving.

“NOOO!” Shouted Nancy, recognizing little Tabitha. She then jumped off the edge, to the amazement of all present. She used her power of levitation just enough to slow herself down and avoid breaking both legs on landing. The crowd above her grew silent as she hurried to the inert, bloody body of the teenage girl. Kneeling besides Tabitha, Nancy choked off her tears as she examined her. The girl was already dead, the left side of her head caved in and a number of bloody bruises all over her body. Caressing her blood-matted hair, Nancy bent over her and wept. A stone suddenly hit the ground near her, followed soon by another one. Looking up angrily, she saw that some of the zealots were now intent on stoning her as well. Getting back on her feet, she pointed an accusing finger at the crowd above.

“MURDERERS! YOU ARE NOTHING BUT COWARDLY MURDERERS! MAY GOD’S WRATH BE ON YOU!”

She then ran up the slope leading out of the quarry. The zealots, who thought at first that she was running away, ran along the banks of the quarry towards her but braked to a halt when she ran towards them after exiting the quarry’s pit. Nancy stopped ten meters from the crowd, her eyes fiery with indignation.

“YOU SELF-RIGHTEOUS BASTARDS MURDERED A CHILD!”

“WE KILLED A PROSTITUTE AND A SINNER ACCORDING TO THE LAWS OF GOD.” Replied hotly one of the zealots. Nancy shook her head and pointed him.

“WHO ARE YOU TO JUDGE IN THE PLACE OF GOD? THAT CHILD WAS AN ORPHAN WHO WAS STARVING SLOWLY TO DEATH IN THE STREETS. DID ANY OF YOU EVEN TRY TO HELP HER, TO GIVE HER A DECENT ALTERNATIVE? NO! YOU ARE TOO BUSY FINDING FAULTS IN OTHERS WHILE IGNORING THE COLDNESS OF YOUR OWN HEARTS.”

“DON'T YOU SEE THAT SHE IS A SINNER HERSELF?” Shouted the zealot to the others. “I SAY THAT WE STONE HER AS WELL.”

The young man then bent down and picked up a fist-sized stone. He was about to throw it at Nancy when he screamed in pain and let go the stone while holding his right hand.

“The stone...it burned my hand.”

Another man picked up a stone but also had to let it go with a scream of pain. An older man looked with awe at Nancy, who was standing her ground.

“GOD IS WITH HER! LEAVE HER ALONE!”

The now subdued crowd slowly retreated inside the city, leaving Nancy alone near the edge of the quarry. Breathing deeply to calm down, Nancy then turned around and returned inside the quarry, where she delicately took Tabitha's body in her arms. Walking out of the pit, she headed North, walking until she found a small cave by the side of a hill. Gently laying the girl's body inside, she piled rocks over it to make sure that predators would not get at it, then made a silent prayer. Nancy felt hollow as she left the cave and looked at Jerusalem, a good kilometer away. In thirty years, she was going to have to let die someone she had helped bring into the World.

Iram came to Nancy the moment she entered the inn. The Syrian's expression was much milder now compared to when he had informed her of Tabitha's capture.

“I'm sorry about your young friend, truly. I was told about what happened at the quarry.”

He watched Nancy slowly sit down at a table, clearly still despondent and with her eyes gazing at nothing in particular.

“Would you like some wine, Nauca?”

“Please.” Said Nancy softly. Iram hurried inside the kitchen and brought back a clay pitcher full of red wine and two cups, putting them on the table and sitting opposite Nancy. She looked at him questioningly as he poured wine in both cups.

“Why would you want to drink with me? You thought that I was just a prostitute.”

“Not anymore, my friend. You tried to turn that girl away from prostitution, then risked your life for her like a true warrior. To your health!”

“And to Tabitha's spirit.” Replied Nancy, raising her cup and knocking it against Iram's raised cup. Both then drank half of their wine. It was a young wine, like any wine made in ancient times, when airtight bottles didn't exist and wine over a year old quickly turned to vinegar. Iram gazed at the tall, strong and beautiful woman sitting opposite

him. Many Romans and Hellenic Jews living in Jerusalem would pay good money to be entertained by her and even more money to end up in bed with her. However, Iram now believed Nauca about not wanting to sell her body to others. Maybe he could work out a mutually beneficial arrangement with her.

“I heard that you had little success trying to find a house.”

“How would you know that?” She asked, suspicious.

“An innkeeper like me has ears. The people of Jerusalem are a conservative lot: they don’t tend to talk to unaccompanied female strangers. Maybe Ephraim could go around town in your place to ask about a house. What kind of house did you have in mind?”

Nancy thought for a moment about how wise it was to involve Iram in her affairs. She finally decided that he could actually save her a lot of time and effort at little cost to herself.

“A simple one, indeed. I just need a small place with two or three rooms, plus a space that I could use as a stable for my horse. As far as prices go, I have enough money with me for that to be of little concern. I saved quite a lot while in Ephesus.”

“Then finding something shouldn’t be a problem. Now, you told me yesterday that you were a musician, but you have yet to show up with an instrument. You won’t attract customers for yourself if you don’t sing.”

Iram’s argument finally brought a meek smile on Nancy’s face. She nodded her head and got up.

“You’re right, Iram. Watch my cup while I get my instruments.”

Going upstairs for a minute, she came back with her lute, lyre and flute and took place near the windows giving a view on the plaza. She grabbed her lute first, passing its carrying sling around her neck and testing the strings with her fingertips. After a moment of indecision, she chose to play a modern ballad she had adapted to Aramaic in the week before leaving for her mission. The lute, an ancestor of the guitar, was an instrument she had quickly mastered with the help of her past life experiences as a dancer and musician. Her melodious voice and music soon attracted a growing number of passersby, most of them men, who either looked through the windows or simply entered and sat at the tables. Iram, who was hoping for just that, quickly got his servant to go around and take orders from the men listening and watching Nancy. The next song from Nancy was a classic Hebrew song already a few centuries old that was well received by the audience. Switching to her lyre, she played a Celtic tune, singing in

Gaelic. While the spectators didn't understand the lyrics, most of them appreciated her singing, drinking wine while listening and making Iram happy in the process. Nancy was also enjoying herself by now, immersed in her music. Switching back to the lute, she started dancing and singing around the tables while being careful not to appear to tease the men in the room. Sexy dancing was best saved for a less conservative audience, especially today.

She took a break one hour later and was served some wine by Iram himself, who smiled to her while waving at the room now nearly full of customers.

"You are good for business, Nauca. We should become partners."

"Thanks for the thought, Iram, but you would not find me a very reliable partner. I will be traveling around a lot once I am established here and will sometimes be gone for weeks."

"Then, I will be more than happy to host you when you are in Jerusalem. You are really good at this, Nauca. You should be able to make a good living here."

Iram then left her to go serve some customers. Nancy rested for another five minutes, then grabbed her lute and got up, ready to resume her act. She was about to start playing when three clean-shaven men in red tunics entered the hall, bringing a chill to the audience. Nancy immediately guessed them to be Roman soldiers on their off time. Trying to distract the audience's attention away from the Romans, Nancy started playing and singing while walking around the hall. While the locals present cheered her on, the Romans kept quiet at first, only half-listening to her singing in Aramaic while concentrating on admiring her body. Nancy soon switched to Latin and sang a Roman Army march song that would have reddened the cheeks of a prostitute. Showing surprise at first, the three Romans then roared in approval, laughing at the more spicy lyrics of the song. They quickly ordered a pitcher of wine and kept listening to Nancy while drinking cup after cup. The song in Latin was followed by one in Koine, which half of the audience seemed able to understand. Nancy sat next and grabbed her flute, playing a few tunes originating from various centuries. She then announced a break for supper, drawing a few howls of disappointment around the room. Nancy barely had time to go back to her usual table in the corner facing the entrance when the three Romans came and sat opposite her. She gave them a cautious smile which the bigger Roman, a tough-looking man with a crooked nose, returned.

“I’m Sartorius and my friends are Flavius and Decimus. You sing very well. What is your name?”

“Nauca. Thank you for the compliment. What may I do for you?”

“First, could I ask you where you learned that marching song? Did you stay in a Roman camp before?”

“I did stop in Roman camps a few times to entertain soldiers. Don’t get the wrong idea, though: I only sing and play music. I do not sell my body to others.”

While the companions of Sartorius showed some disappointment at those words, he himself kept a straight face, simply nodding his head in acknowledgement. He couldn’t help looking down in Nancy’s cleavage, which showed parts of her large, firm breasts.

“A true shame. You would tempt the emperor himself. You are not from Judea, I believe.”

“No! While I just arrived from Ephesus, I actually am a Sarmatian.”

Sartorius raised an eyebrow in interest at those last words.

“A Sarmatian? You are one of those riders from the wide Northern plains past the Regnum Bospori?”

“I am. What about it?”

“Nothing! I was just curious. Are you going to stay for a while in Jerusalem?”

“I actually am looking for a house to buy.”

The three Romans were obviously pleased by her answer.

“Then we will be able to listen to you again. Would you be interested in coming to play and sing for our comrades at the Antonia fortress. You could make good money there.”

“As I said before, I do not sell my body. Your comrades will have to accept that fact before I go there.”

“If I could get the word from our centurion that nobody will touch you, would you come?”

A devilish smile appeared on Nancy’s face then.

“Do I interest you so much, Sartorius?”

“By Jupiter, you would interest any man. Even if I can’t touch you, listening and watching you will be nice enough. We have plenty of women at the Antonia anyway.”

“Wives or prostitutes?”

“Prostitutes, of course! Our wives are not allowed to follow us here. Talking of prostitutes, would you have seen a young girl named Tabitha. We were hoping to meet her here.”

Nancy’s face hardened at the mention of the dead teenager, grief and anger coming back to her.

“She is dead. A mob stoned her outside the walls today. I tried to save her but I was too late.”

“Those prudish Jews and their stupid religious laws. Too bad: she was a cute girl. So, will you come to the Antonia?”

“I will need the promise from your centurion first. Then I will come.”

“Then, we have a deal.” Replied happily Sartorius. “I will come back tomorrow with an answer. Ave, Nauca!”

“Ave, Sartorius!”

The three Romans then got up and left the inn, making many of the other customers sigh with relief. Iram was next to show up at Nancy’s table, bringing a pitcher of wine and a cup.

“Let me guess: they wanted to hire you.”

“You guessed right. I told them that I would only sing and dance for them but no more than that. They will be back tomorrow, supposedly with a promise from their superior that I will not be touched while at the Antonia.”

The Syrian frowned at those last words.

“The word of a Roman to a non-Roman isn’t worth much, Nauca. Be careful with them.”

“Don’t worry about me, Iram. I will go there with my weapons, just to emphasize that I am no easy girl. Now, would you have some meat available for supper? We Sarmatians are big meat eaters and I am getting tired of this Jewish diet of grains and vegetables.”

“We have some chickens, if you want.”

“Sold! Bring a whole chicken. I am starving.”

Iram nodded his head, then smiled to her with a hint of malice.

“You know, Nauca, for a traveling musician you forgot the most important part of your act today.”

“Oh? What would that be?”

“You didn’t put forward a bowl for collecting tips from your listeners. At that rate, you will grow poor quickly. Do not worry, though: I passed the bowl for you after your singing.”

Nancy slapped both hands to her face, shaking her head in frustration as Iram put a wooden bowl full of coins in front of her: so much for playing her identity cover correctly. Iram laughed at her discomfiture as he returned to the kitchen of the inn, leaving Nancy alone to drink her wine. Sifting discreetly through the bowl of coins, she smiled with satisfaction: there was the equivalent of seven shekels, or 28 drachmas, in it. She put the coins in her belt purse, promising herself not to forget again to collect her tips next time.

She nearly jumped on her supper when Iram returned half a hour later with a grilled chicken held on top of a large piece of flat bread. From the salty taste of the meat, she guessed that the chicken had been preserved by marinating it in a spiced, salty solution. Being truly famished, she devoured her chicken to the last piece of meat, enjoying the change to her diet of the last few days. She surprised a few nearby customers when she wiped her mouth and hands with a clean piece of cloth she carried with her, instead of using part of her peplos. Using a hand towel may not have been historically accurate but she could always claim that it was a Sarmatian custom. She doubted that anybody in Jerusalem would know better. Besides, she intended to follow as much of her normal hygiene practices of modern times as possible as a measure of self-respect and to stay healthy. Warmed up by the wine she had drunk, Nancy went back at her playing and singing with gusto, making sure this time to put her wooden bowl besides her.

The night was advanced when the last customers left the main hall of the inn, their walk unsteady from the wine they had drunk. Nancy’s head was none too clear either, having being offered cup after cup of wine by a number of customers. Iram came to see her, a big smile on his face, as she was ready to go upstairs to her room.

“Nauca, you are fantastic. I easily made four times my usual business today. How did you fare yourself?”

As an answer, Nancy showed him her bowl, nearly full with coins.

“It went well. I’d hate to think of what kind of success I would have if I ever danced in a lighter attire.”

Iram gave her a warning look.

“Be careful about that, unless you want a mob of young Levite thugs to return to this inn. The priests of the Temple do not laugh with public morality. If you have to do arousing dances, do it in the homes of non-observant Jews or, even better, non-Jews. You better go get some sleep now and don’t worry about waking up early to search for a house: I will send Ephraim to look around in your place tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Iram. You are a good man.”

“And you are a beautiful oddity, Nauca. Sleep well.”

Nancy heeded his advice and went to her room, her instruments and the bowl full of coins in her hands. She took the time for a sponge bath before lying down on her bedroll and going to sleep.

14:10 (Jerusalem Time)

Thursday, October 31, 2 C.E.

(8th day of Cheshvan, year 3763 of the Hebrew calendar)

Main hall, inn of Iram the Syrian

Jerusalem

Nancy was practicing her lyre in a corner of the main hall of the inn, which had few customers at this time of the day, when Iram and Ephraim came to her, both with big smiles on their faces.

“Good news, Nauca!” Said Iram loudly. “Ephraim has found something that may interest you. A house has been put up for sale near the Damascus Gate, for non-payment of debt.”

“That’s great! Let me bring my instruments upstairs and I will go see it.”

Nancy was back in less than a minute, her hooded cape on. Iram instructed his wife, who normally took care of the kitchen, to keep an eye on the inn while he was gone, then followed Nancy and Ephraim out in the street. Crossing the plaza and going through the Jaffa Gate into the new part of the city, they walked along the city walls for about 300 meters to a block of houses sitting opposite the Antonia fortress. Ephraim guided her to a house built on the hollow square pattern typical of Judean and Galilean houses. There were however two soldiers of Tetrarch Archelaus standing guard in front of the house. Iram touched Nancy’s right arm, stopping her.

“Let me do the talking, Nauca: I am familiar with how to deal with those soldiers.”

Nancy didn't protest, curious to see how Iram would proceed, and stayed a few meters away while Iram stepped close to the soldiers.

"Shelama, good men! My name is Iram and I heard that this house is for sale."

"You are right." Replied gruffly one of the guards, looking bored to death. "The previous owner didn't pay his taxes and has been evicted, while his wife and daughters were taken in as slaves by the Tetrarch as partial payment for his debts. So, you are interested in this house?"

"Maybe. Would it be possible to visit it first before offering a price for it?"

"I will have to get a palace scribe for that: I am not authorized to arrange such deals. The day is getting old, though. You may have to wait until tomorrow before getting a scribe."

Iram, who seemingly expected such an objection, flipped a silver coin into the guard's hand.

"I would like to see one this afternoon. Tell the scribe that I have more coins for him if he shows off quickly."

"In that case, I will go to the palace and see what I can do." Said the guard in a polite tone before leaving. As he was walking away, the other guard spoke in a low voice to Iram while pointing discreetly Nancy.

"Is this your wife?"

"I wish!" Said the Innkeeper, grinning. "She is a friend."

Not wanting to talk further with the soldier, Iram went to Nancy and Ephraim. Nancy looked glum, which prompted Iram to ask her why. She swallowed hard before answering.

"I feel like a leech, that's why. I may be buying the house of a family that is now broken and enslaved."

Iram stared at her, trying to understand that strange, beautiful woman. Strong and apparently tough, she was at times of a sensitivity towards others that many would find a weakness, even in a woman. It was hard to believe that she was a hardened warrior.

"Are you saying that you don't want that house, Nauca?"

"I do want it, Iram. Don't get me wrong. It is just that I wish that I didn't have to profit from the misery of others."

"Well," said Iram in a near whisper, "with a tyrant like Archelaus around, you will see a lot more misery around you in the weeks to come. You might as well get accustomed to it now."

Nancy looked away, not replying to that. They were mostly silent for the next half hour, until the guard came back from the palace with a middle-aged man wearing a fine linen robe and holding a wooden box under one arm. The latter one went to Iram and bowed his head to him.

“Shelama! I am Josiah, scribe in the service of our Tetrarch. I am told that you want to buy this house.”

“Actually, my friend here is the one who wishes to buy it. I came to help as an intermediary. Would it be possible to visit the house before discussing the price?”

The scribe looked for a moment at Nancy, who towered over him by a head, then nodded.

“It is a reasonable request. Please follow me.”

Going past the guards, the group entered through a large set of double doors giving access to the house’s courtyard. Josiah pointed to two doors on their right.

“Nearest the entrance, you will find a latrine sited over a deep pit. Next to it is the storeroom. To our left is the vestibule, which leads to the reception hall. At ground level, you will also find a kitchen, a bath, the two main bedrooms and a covered space that the previous owner used as a barn for his donkey. Above the main bedrooms are a loom room and three rooms for servants and children. Feel free to see for yourselves.”

Nancy, followed by Iram, did just that, touring the house in a quick but thorough inspection. As she somewhat expected, the house was bare, whatever furniture it had contained having probably been seized to help pay the debt of the previous owner. The house was however in a good state of repair and had no obvious faults or problems. Nancy was about to join up with the scribe to discuss a price when she noticed what appeared to be a wide brownish spot on the pavement of the courtyard. The scribe saw what she was looking at and made a dismissive gesture with one hand.

“Do not worry about that spot: rain will wash it away soon enough. The son of the previous owner was foolish enough to try preventing the guards from doing their duty.”

Iram, who was watching closely Nancy, thought that he saw murder for an instant in her eyes. She however spoke to Josiah in a calm, even voice.

“I am satisfied with the house. How much for it?”

“Its estimated value is 1,500 shekels.”

Nancy quickly whispered to Iram, who answered in kind. She then spoke again to Josiah.

“I am ready to give 800 shekels.”

A spirited session of bargaining followed, concluding with a final buying price of 1,200 shekels being agreed upon. Nancy surprised Josiah with her next question.

“Would you accept gems as payment?”

“Uh, I believe that it would be acceptable.”

Searching in her belt purse, Nancy took out a small leather pouch and undid the leather string closing it. She then rolled in her left hand a half dozen large rubies and emeralds and selected three of them, presenting them to Josiah.

“I believe those stones easily represent 1,200 shekels. Do we have a deal?”

Josiah took the time to examine carefully the polished gems before nodding with a smile.

“These will indeed do! I will now prepare the property act.”

Moving to a stone bench sitting in a corner of the courtyard, the scribe then opened his wooden box, revealing a writing set. Grabbing a piece of papyrus, a pen and an ink bottle, he started scratching down words in Hebrew.

“May I have your name and that of your parents, plus your place of birth?”

“I am Nauca, daughter of Kurgan and of Zenia. I was born in the territory of the Roxolani tribe of Sarmatia.”

The scribe, being a well-cultured man, knew about Sarmatians and gave her a cautious look as he finished writing the property act.

“You are a long way from home, Nauca.”

“Home is where I happen to be. Should I sign the act?”

“You know how to write?” Asked Josiah, more than a little surprised, like Iram and Ephraim. Nancy gave him a disarming smile.

“As you may have figured by my financial means, I may be a barbarian by name but I held a position of importance in my tribe and was well educated. Do not believe everything people say about Sarmatians either: we are more than simply a bunch of roaming looters and murderers. So, where do I sign?”

“Uh, here, please.”

Both Iram and Ephraim looked over the scribe’s shoulder while Nancy quickly signed the document in Hebrew. Josiah then applied a seal to it and handed it to Nancy.

“This house is now yours, Nauca. Congratulations!”

Nancy took out a gold denari and gave the coin to Josiah.

“Thank you for coming quickly. Shelama!”

“Shelama, Nauca of the Roxolani!”

Iram waited until Josiah was out of hearing range to speak to Nancy, who was examining the layout of the house.

“You are well educated indeed for a so-called barbarian, Nauca: You sing in at least five languages and can write. Are you sure that you are not some sort of princess?”

Nancy smiled to him and playfully pinched his cheek.

“Actually, I was one of the leaders of my tribe, but something was missing in my spirituality, so I came to experience the god of the Jews. I am now by myself. Now, lets go back to your inn before your customers miss me too much.”

19:04 (Jerusalem Time)

Inn of Iram the Syrian, Jerusalem

When Sartorius showed up again at the inn, it was in legionnaire’s armor and uniform and with eight Roman soldiers at his back. While Iram and his customers froze in near panic, Nancy simply stopped singing and gave him a big smile while still playing her lute.

“Did you come to lead me to a party or to escort me to a cell, Sartorius?” She asked in Latin.

“Please don’t mind the show of arms, Nauca. I was just completing a routine patrol and came here on our way back to the Antonia in order to get you. By the way, my tribune, Antonius Decius, guarantees your safety in the Antonia.”

“Your tribune? Wow! There must be quite a lot of talking about me in there if your tribune hears about me.”

The decurion grinned from ear to ear.

“How often does one see a real Amazon in Jerusalem? All our men are dying to see you. Do you need to change before going?”

Sartorius said these last words while eyeing her Greek peplos, as if he found it still too conservative. Nancy grabbed her instruments and walked by Sartorius and his men, on her way upstairs.

“I will go change in my room. I won’t be long.”

Effectively, she was back in the main hall in less than ten minutes. Sartorius smiled in approval when he saw that Nancy now wore a short pleated tunic that came down well short of her knees. The blue hooded cape she had draped over her shoulders only

partially hid her long legs and the bronze molded breastplate with shoulder cups that both protected and enhanced her generous chest. While titillated by her dress, Sartorius still took good notice of the sword slung across her back and of the dagger and the war axe hanging from her large leather belt. She was also wearing a leather headband inlaid with polished gems, like the first time he had seen her. In her arms were her lute and her lyre. Sartorius pointed at her gold headband.

“You seem to always wear this headband. Is it a mark of rank or status?”

“It marks me as a leading warrior in my tribe. Shall we go now?”

“Yes! Just follow me.”

Sandwiched between Sartorius and his men, Nancy walked with them across the plaza and through the gate connecting the upper city and the new city. Their group attracted a lot of stares, mostly hostile or fearful, from the Jews who saw them on their way to the big fortress that was the siege of power for the Romans in Jerusalem. The Roman soldiers ignored the stares, keeping wooden faces and walking in cadence with the discipline that had made them famous around the Mediterranean. While Nancy had no love for the limitless greed and the brutality of Rome's rule, she still admired the Romans for being the tough, well-trained soldiers they were. They soon arrived at the foot of wide steps leading up to the twin arched entrances of the Antonia, a rectangular fortress with massive square towers at each corner. The four soldiers guarding the doors saluted Sartorius as the patrol and Nancy entered the fortress, following a short tunnel before emerging in a large rectangular courtyard. It was getting quite dark by now and torches had been lit around the courtyard and along the passageways. Sartorius led Nancy and his men through a large door and into a big hall where hundreds of men were either eating, drinking or playing various games to pass the time. There were also a number of women, some very young, who were obviously of the easy kind, going around the groups of Romans and trying to interest some of them. Sartorius waved one hand around the room.

“The refectorium, where our men spend their spare time. You will be free to sing and dance around but, first, I have to present you to our tribune.”

Dismissing first his men, Sartorius then led Nancy to the upper floor of the Southeast tower, where a male servant made them wait while he went inside a room. The servant was back quickly, bowing to Nancy and Sartorius.

“The tribune will receive you now.”

Sartorius went in first, Nancy at his back. A thin but athletic man in his late thirties wearing a white tunic was waiting for them, sitting in a wooden armchair. He nodded once to Sartorius.

“You may go, Decurion.”

Sartorius didn't reply, simply bowing low before leaving. Antonius Decius then concentrated his attention on Nancy, eyeing her with cold interest. He finally spoke to her in Koine.

“So, we now have a legendary Amazon with us in Jerusalem. You certainly look the part, Nauca. Know that I served in Greece and that I have heard a lot about the Sarmatian raiders who devastate regularly the Thracian coast. Those barbarians are also the enemies of Rome, whether they are male or female. What tells me that you are not here as a spy?”

Nancy stayed calm, smiling at the Roman.

“So far from Sarmatia, Tribune Decius? We may be good warriors but we are not crazy enough to try to conduct raids so far South. Know that I left my tribe at the age of sixteen and have spent most of the years since then in Ephesus, where I met a family of Jewish merchants. I came to Jerusalem to see the great temple of the Jews and to see if their god is worth embracing.”

“A spiritual quest? That is most unusual...for a barbarian.”

“I am not a barbarian.” Replied a bit dryly Nancy. “I was well educated while part of my tribe and I improved myself further while in Ephesus. I have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Maybe. Are you planning to stay long in Jerusalem?”

“If fate is good to me, yes. I just bought a house today in the new city part. I intend to make my living here as a musician. Don't get me wrong, though: I will not rent my body to men.”

“A pity! You would turn many men crazy, Nauca. Be careful that you don't catch the fancy of Tetrarch Archelaus.”

“I will keep that in mind, Tribune. May I go now and entertain your men?”

“You may, but know that I will keep an eye on you, Sarmatian.”

“I will keep that in mind as well, Tribune.” Replied Nancy, bowing low before leaving the room. Sartorius, who was waiting in the hallway, hurried to her.

“So, how did it go?”

“Better than I expected, actually. Your tribune didn’t put me in chains right away for being a Sarmatian. Well, your soldiers must be impatient to hear me sing...and to have opportunities to grab my ass. Let’s not make them wait longer.”

Sartorius laughed and eyed quickly her body.

“You certainly look reality in the face, Nauca. I like that. Follow me!”

Most of the Roman soldiers filling the big refectory had finished eating by now and the dozen prostitutes present were now busy earning the most out of their charms, with the soldiers using much of their meager pay to buy some company. Admiring comments and exclamations went around the hall when Nancy took off her cape and, jumping deftly on top of a table, started playing her lute and singing in Koine, giving the soldiers sitting at that table a good look up her short tunic. Jumping from table to table, she sang a variety of songs, switching between Koine, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. The rowdy Roman march songs were most liked, with soldiers singing along while drinking wine. Nancy made sure to give them an eyeful, shaking her bum and letting the occasional hand caress her legs. One of the prostitutes, angered at seeing the soldier she was trying to entice throw a bronze coin to Nancy, shouted at her.

“Hey, if you are not ready to show your ass, then let us working girls give some real entertainment to these men.”

An approving roar came from the close to 400 soldiers in the hall.

“WELL SAID! SHOW SOME SKIN, AMAZON!” Shouted a half-drunk soldier. The hands around Nancy’s legs suddenly became a lot more insistent. Nancy stopped singing immediately and stood straight on the table.

“LISTEN UP! YOU WANT TO SEE MY BODY? FINE! BUT NO TOUCHING UNLESS I WANT TO! DO WE HAVE A DEAL?”

While some were ready to agree, others taunted her.

“WHAT’S THE MATTER, AMAZON? GETTING PRUDISH?”

“I AM A WARRIOR AND A MUSICIAN, NOT A PROSTITUTE. YOU HAVE ENOUGH OF THEM HERE ANYWAY, WHILE I DON’T SEE THEM PLAY OR SING.”

“WOMEN CAN’T BE WARRIORS.” Shouted back a Roman. “THEY ARE ONLY GOOD FOR THE KITCHEN AND THE BEDROOM.”

For a feminist like Nancy, that was like waiving a red flag in front of a bull. She pointed a finger at the soldier who had just shouted.

“FIND A PAIR OF PRACTICE SWORDS AND I WILL SHOW YOU THAT I AM A WARRIOR.”

Half a dozen soldiers immediately rushed out to get the weapons, with one coming back first after a minute with a pair of heavy wooden swords. Jumping off her table, Nancy went to the corner where her cape lay and put down her lute. Then, with whistles of admiration from around her, she took off all her clothes except for her loincloth and her headband before grabbing one of the practice swords and running to the center of the hall. Her opponent, a mean smile on his face, joined her there, his sword held at the ready.

“You would make a fine slave, Amazon. Maybe I should take you, after beating the crap out of you.”

“I am nobody’s slave!” Raged Nancy before stepping forward and starting a furious assault on the soldier. The Roman, overconfident and also a bit drunk, was quickly overwhelmed by her speed, incredible strength and superior swordsmanship, ending up on his back and with the blunt tip of Nancy’s weapon on his throat. To everybody’s surprise, she then threw down her sword and motioned her opponent to get up.

“You wanted to beat the crap out of me? Then let’s finish this with our bare hands.”

Roars and shouts of excitement and encouragement erupted around the hall as the Roman, feeling humiliated by his defeat at the hand of a mere woman, got back up and raised his fists.

“I will crush that pretty face of yours.”

The man, shorter than Nancy but stoutly built and with the moves of an experienced street fighter, swung a fist at her, putting all his strength in it. Waiting for him in a karate stance, Nancy easily deflected his swing and retaliated with a single lightning punch to his right eye, making the man stagger back. Now enraged, the Roman screamed and charged her. Stepping aside and grabbing him as he ran past her, Nancy pivoted a few times on her heels, making the man rotate around her before slamming him in a nearby table. The table and the soldiers sitting around it toppled in a heap, Nancy’s attacker shaking his head before getting back up. More cautious now, he advanced slowly on her, trying a few punches that were all deflected and followed by lightning blows from Nancy. Now bleeding seriously from the nose and mouth, the man tried to grab her in a bear hug, only to earn a knee in the groin. Grunting in pain and collapsing to his knees,

the man was then knocked unconscious with a hand chop to the neck from Nancy. After an instant of silence, the crowd erupted in cheers, with Sartorius coming forward to congratulate her.

“That was fantastic, Nauca! I will certainly have a healthy respect for Amazons from now on.”

“Thanks! Let’s go back to having fun now. Can anyone here play the flute?”

“Flavius is pretty good with a flute.”

“Good! I need a fast tune for my next dance.”

Sartorius turned around and shouted at his subordinate.

“Flavius, get your flute and play us a lively tune!”

Within a minute, the legionnaire was playing a spirited tune, accompanying Nancy as she danced, still nearly naked, from table to table. Being far from a prudish girl, Nancy started enjoying herself, dancing in a provocative fashion and giving an eyeful to the soldiers while staying mostly away from their hands. She ended her show a few minutes later by jumping into Sartorius’ lap and giving him a quick kiss, making others laugh. She then got up and went around the hall with a wooden bowl to collect donations. The bowl quickly filled with bronze, copper and silver coins thrown by enthusiastic soldiers. Next, she dressed up and put back on her weapons and her cape. Seeing the disappointed look on the face of Sartorius, she went to see the decurion and caressed his face with both hands, smiling warmly to him.

“Don’t look so downcast, Sartorius: I will be back some other day, to show you where my new house is. See you then.”

She waved goodbye at the soldiers while leaving the hall, feeling satisfied: the Romans should now accept her more easily around Jerusalem. The streets of the city were dark when she emerged from the Antonia.

Twenty minutes of cautious walking through the nearly deserted streets brought her back to her inn, where an anxious-looking Iram ran to her the moment she entered the main hall.

“Thank Ishtar, you are safe! How did it go at the Antonia?”

“Very well, my dear Iram. My purse is much fatter now and I didn’t need to bed any Roman for that. Tomorrow, I will start buying things to furnish my new house. If things go on like this, I should be able to do well here.”

“Still, beware of the Tetrarch and of the priests of the temple: they could be trouble for you.”

“I will keep that in mind, along with other warnings. Good night, Iram.”

The Innkeeper shook his head as Nancy went upstairs, unsure about what she had meant.

The next day was spent by Nancy going around the city markets and shops, buying things for her new house. She kept her shopping to a minimum, not wanting to appear too rich and thus attract thieves to her. Her last task of the day was to pack up her things at the inn and to load them on her horse. She exchanged warm goodbyes with Iram before leaving, promising him to come sing regularly at his inn. She made it to her house less than an hour before sundown and the start of this week’s Sabbath. Taking the time to lock the gate and the doors of the house, Nancy then got back on top of her horse, speaking to him in Neo-English.

“Pegasus, prepare for space-time jump back to base according to preset coordinates Gamma. Safe hover mode.”

“Instructions understood.” Replied the robotic beast. The horse and its rider then floated up to an altitude of two meters off the ground as a control stick and a small instrument panel emerged from the collar of the horse, just in front of the saddle. Nancy grabbed the stick and verified the coordinates on the panel, then pushed a large red button. She and Pegasus then disappeared in a flash of white light.

11:31 (North America Central Time)

Friday, January 1, 3385 ‘A’

New Lake City University campus

American Great Lakes area

One of the five students walking along one of the paved paths leading to the sociology faculty suddenly stopped and shouted while pointing skyward.

“Hey, what’s that?”

The other four teenagers also stopped and looked up, in time to see an impossible sight: a woman on a flying horse. They stared at the flying rider as she lost altitude and disappeared behind the sociology faculty.

“That was an ancestor woman. She must be with the Time Patrol.” Suggested a girl.

“What about the horse? Is it also a member of the Time Patrol?” Replied another girl, getting a frown from her friend.

“It must be a machine, obviously. Still, I wish that I could have filmed her.”

Ingrid Weiss, listening like the other apprentices of the Time Patrol to a lecture on orbital mechanics, suddenly saw from the corner of her left eye a rider approach the headquarters building, where she and the others were. Her heart jumped with joy when she recognized who it was.

“NANCY IS BACK!”

Her shout immediately made the rest of the class rush to the bay windows. Mike Crawford smiled with pride as he watched his wife ride at a gallop, her long hair and her blue cape floating in the wind.

“That’s my girl!”

“Yeah, lucky bastard!” Said Jim Milner, standing next to him. The teacher, a specialist in space operations, knocked a few times on his lectern to get the attention of his students.

“May we continue, please? We have only fifteen minutes left before lunch break anyway.”

Ingrid and Mike reluctantly took back their seats, like the others, but they only half listened to the rest of the lecture, their minds on Nancy. As soon as the class was declared over, everybody rushed out of the classroom and down to the reception area. The receptionist, a young giant woman, raised both hands as the 45 ancestors were about to overrun her desk.

“Nancy Laplante is in conference with Doctor Tolkonen and Doctor Bella right now. She will brief you all right after lunch.”

The disappointed group of apprentices was about to leave for the cafeteria when Mike Crawford saw Nancy’s horse, waiting patiently outside.

“Hey, why not get the story from the proverbial horse’s mouth?”

Amelia Earhart, who didn’t know about the true nature of Pegasus, gave him a funny look.

“Mike, I think that you spent too much time with horses on your ranch in Montana.”

“Ah, but that horse is special, Amelia. Follow me and you will see.”

The group, led by Mike, went outside and crowded around Pegasus, who gave them a phlegmatic look.

“Howdy, partners!” It said in modern English tainted with a strong Texan drawl. “I suppose that you want to know how it went for Nancy and me?”

Amelia’s jaw dropped wide open, while Mike and a few others burst out in laughter. That drew another remark from Pegasus.

“What’s the matter? You never saw a talking horse before?”

“A talking horse with a sense of humor. That’s rich!” Exclaimed Jack Crawford while trying to control his laughter. Mike ignored the others and looked into Pegasus’ eyes.

“Did everything go well, Pegasus?”

“Everything went according to plan, Mike. Nancy has bought a house in Jerusalem and is already quite in demand as a musician. She did a gig for the Romans at the Antonia fortress last night and they appreciated, or so Nancy says.”

“A house in ancient Jerusalem, at a time the temple stood. I wish I could go.” Said dreamily Samuel Goldman, an American Jew from 1941 ‘B’. Mike looked at him, thoughtful.

“Do you know Aramaic, Samuel?”

“Luckily, yes, along with Hebrew, Latin and Greek. To be able to pray at the temple of Jerusalem would be like an impossible dream come true for me.”

“Well,” said Amelia, “seeing a film of the real baby Jesus would be plenty for me. I hope that Nancy was able to get some footage of him.”

“She did!” Replied Pegasus. “She actually helped give birth to Yeshua.”

Many of the apprentices looked at each other with awe.

“That lucky Nancy!” Exclaimed Katya Budanova, a Soviet Air Force fighter pilot from 1943 ‘A’. “To be able to hold baby Jesus...”

“Well, I’m sure that she will tell us all about it.” Cut Mike. “Let’s go eat now. Maybe we will meet her at the cafeteria.”

That caused a near rush to the cafeteria, situated in the adjacent residential tower that also contained their apartments.

12:07 (North America Central Time)

Office of the Chief Administrator of the Time Patrol

"A possible war across time in a near future?" Said Farah Tolkonen in a hesitant voice, frozen in her chair as she stared at Nancy, with Jan Bella sitting beside her and also staring at Nancy. The latter nodded once her head, her face somber.

"That is what the mental images sent to me by The One suggested, as he explained to me how Yeshua was conceived. It seems that my first, involuntary trip in time to the year 1940 was the start of a causality loop of monstrous proportion. Basically, my actions in 1940, apart from splitting time and creating Timeline 'B', will result in the eventual formation of a time travel-capable civilization in Timeline 'B', a civilization that will then manipulate history to make Yeshua possible. The fact that we did not detect their ship over the Palestine of the 1st Century demonstrates that this civilization may possess like us multi-spectral cloaking fields. Worst for us, this civilization was preceded by another one, also capable of time travel but being as well a militaristic, highly aggressive society. The connection between those two future civilizations from Timeline 'B' was not clear, but an image I saw showed one of our scoutships engaged in combat with an enormous time warship."

Farah exchanged a worried look with Jan Bella before facing again Nancy.

"Do you have something else than those mental images from The One to corroborate what you just told us? The High Council will want something more concrete before believing you...or taking any action about it."

Nancy clenched her teeth, knowing how difficult to believe was her story.

"Unfortunately, no. However, we now know at a minimum that another civilization has traveled to the past to make Yeshua possible, thus influencing in a major way the history of Humanity. We will have to let that go as is, since Yeshua is now firmly part of history."

Farah shook her head in frustration.

"Too bad that our space-time surveillance network was still not operational in the 1st Century. We could then have caught those people in the act."

"And do what then? Prevent the appearance in history of one of the most influential religious prophets to have ever existed? This however reinforces what I told you two weeks ago, about the need for us to move our base to the distant past. Have you been able to convince Grand Administrator Kern and the High Council about that, Farah?"

"It took some time, but yes, they finally accepted the logic of it and agreed to allocate us supplementary funds for such a mobile base. We will also get a heavy transport ship and an armed cruiser in a few months. In view of what you just told me, I will also ask for more combat robots. All this will however mean that we will need more members to crew all those ships and facilities."

"I can delay my return to Palestine if you want, in order to help you in that, Farah. After all, I could spend a year here and still return to Palestine at the date of my choice."

"Hurray for time travel!" Replied on a sarcastic tone Farah, the weight of her responsibilities becoming ever heavier. "Well, how do you plan to proceed with your mission, now that you have this house in Jerusalem?"

"I intend to live there for the next four years, until the Romans take down the local king and announce a new census for Palestine. That census and political takeover are significant events in the Bible."

"Four years?!" Exclaimed Farah, shaken. Nancy hurried to reassure her.

"In appearance only, Farah. In reality, I will appear at intervals, pretending to go on frequent trips outside of Jerusalem to go play in other cities. I will spend at most a few months of my biological life in Palestine during those four years. I promise you to keep a detailed accounting of my time there for your bean counters at the pay section." Farah gave her a critical look.

"Nancy, you know that I am not the cheap type. Your pay will reflect your real time spent in Palestine. Anything else?"

"Yes! Once I return from Palestine, I will try to find more quality recruits for us in the past. I have in fact a few prospects in mind already. Then, I will go live for another year my life as a war correspondent in the 21st Century."

"More wars, after all that time in that barbaric past?" Said despondently Jan Bella. "Aren't you afraid to go crazy by seeing so much violence all the time, Nancy?" To that, Nancy shrugged her shoulders with an innocent smile.

"Hey, didn't you know already that I am an adrenaline junkie, Jan?"

06:53 (Jerusalem Time)

Tuesday, April 11, 6 C.E.

(25th of Nissan, year 3766 of the Hebrew calendar)

House of Nauca, Jerusalem

Kingdom of Judea, Samaria and Idumea

Nancy was coming back from fetching water at the public fountain and was about to enter her house when a Jewish man ran down her street while shouting.

“ROMAN SOLDIERS ARE OCCUPYING HEROD’S PALACE! THEY HAVE ARRESTED THE TETRARCH!”

While most of her neighbors that were within sight hesitated or seemed incredulous, Nancy knew immediately what was going to happen and hurried inside her house, pouring the water from her buckets in a clay basin before throwing a cape over her shoulders and going out again. She locked her front door with her key before walking out in the street, not wanting to attract attention on her by riding a horse. She also didn’t take any weapons with her, for the same reason. People were already running or walking from all over the city towards the palace of Herod Archelaus, from where a growing noise was coming. Soon arriving at the upper market adjacent to the palace, Nancy was able to see above the crowd thanks to her height and started filming right away with her micro-camera headband. The scene around the palace was one of utter confusion, with excited Jews milling around and trying to find what was happening, while over 200 Roman soldiers did their best to keep them away from the main gate of the palace. More Roman soldiers were visible through the gate, while dozens of Herod’s soldiers sat as a group under Roman guard, disarmed and looking dejected. The crowd of Jews cheered wildly when Herod Archelaus, without his customary gold crown and purple cloak, rode out of the palace under tight Roman escort, his hands shackled in iron manacles. A strong column of Roman infantrymen then opened a way through the crowd for the cavalrymen escorting the dispossessed king, going through the nearby Jaffa Gate. A richly dressed Roman soon appeared afterwards on top of the walls, above the main gate of the palace, and shouted to quiet down the crowd. He could soon be heard by most in the crowd, including Nancy.

“PEOPLE OF JERUSALEM! FOLLOWING NUMEROUS AND REPEATED COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE RULE OF THE TETRARCH OF JUDEA, SAMARIA AND IDUMEA, HEROD ARCHELAUS, THE GREAT EMPEROR AUGUSTUS HAS DECIDED TO STRIP HIM OF HIS POWER AND AUTHORITY AND TO EXILE HIM TO GAUL. AS OF TODAY AND BY THE WILL OF THE EMPEROR, JUDEA, SAMARIA AND IDUMEA WILL BE RULED DIRECTLY BY ROME AND WILL BE PART OF THE PROVINCE OF SYRIA AS THE AUTONOMOUS TERRITORY OF JUDEA. I, MARCUS GAIUS COPONIUS, WILL ADMINISTER JUDEA AS YOUR PREFECT FROM NOW ON.”

Whispers and exclamations went around the crowd at that announcement, drowning the new Roman prefect and forcing him to stop talking until the noise subsided again. Nancy, filming all this, was jubilant: she was now recording live a significant historical event. Jan Bella was going to be ecstatic. Coponius then started shouting again.

“BE ASSURED THAT THE RULE OF ROME WILL BE FAIR AND JUST, AS ALWAYS. YOUR TAXES, WHICH HAD BEEN WASTED AWAY BY HEROD ARCHELAUS FOR SO MANY YEARS, WILL NOW BE USED EFFICIENTLY AND FOR THE COMMON GOOD. HOWEVER, PAST IRREGULARITIES IN THE TAX SYSTEM IS MAKING IT IMPERATIVE TO REVIEW IT ENTIRELY. THUS, A TAX CENSUS WILL SOON BE CONDUCTED, TO ASSESS FAIRLY THE TAX LOAD OF EACH CITIZEN OF JUDEA.”

Nancy nodded in appreciation: Coponius was doing a good job of explaining and justifying something that was bound to raise the ire of all Jews: direct taxation by Rome. The problems started right away for the Roman prefect, with a man in the crowd shouting back at him.

“ONLY GOD CAN RULE ISRAEL! WE DON’T NEED PAGANS LIKE YOU AND YOUR EMPEROR!”

Nancy saw Coponius turn red with anger as the crowd cheered the man, who added fuel to the fire.

“LET’S NOT PAY TAXES TO THE ROMANS! WE WILL PAY TAXES ONLY TO THE TEMPLE! DOWN WITH ROMAN RULE! WE WANT THE RULE OF GOD!”

The crowd cheered even louder and started pushing against the line of Roman infantrymen protecting the gate of the palace. On a command from their centurion, the legionnaires lowered their javelins at the ready, making the crowd back away a few paces. The prefect used that break to join with his officers by the gate and get on his horse. His legionnaires, pressed on all sides by the hostile crowd of Jews, had a hard time protecting him as he retreated towards the Antonia fortress. A few Jews who tried too hard to break through to Coponius were stabbed by Roman soldiers, further angering the crowd. The same man who had shouted back at Coponius then shook his fist over his head.

“LET’S PURGE JERUSALEM OF ALL PAGANS! HUNT DOWN THOSE WHO CAVORT WITH THE ROMANS!”

Nancy swore quietly, wishing that she could shut up that fanatical idiot: he was going to start a horrible bloodbath if the others kept listening to him. It was not however her place

to intervene now: she had to stay strictly neutral in this and let history run its course. As unfortunate as all this was, it was actually going as dictated by history. Then, things started to turn ugly for her. A young, bearded man near her pointed her to others around him.

“THERE IS A PAGAN, A FOREIGN WOMAN OF LOW VIRTUE! LET’S STONE HER!”

Nancy didn’t wait to see how others reacted to that: she immediately rushed towards the nearest street entrance, pushing away anybody in her path. The speed of her reaction probably saved her, as at least fifty men shouting wildly went after her after a moment of hesitation. However, even with her superhuman strength, pushing one’s way out from the middle of a dense crowd was no easy feat. Her cape was quickly ripped away from her as countless hands tried to grab and hold her. Fighting her way out like a devil in holy water, Nancy was struck and punched from all sides, with a man making her scream in pain when he roughly grabbed her left breast and pulled hard on it. She elbowed him in the face, braking his nose and making him release his hold. The top of her tunic was then ripped off her shoulders, leaving her bare-chested. Only her wide leather belt prevented her from ending up nearly totally naked. Now desperate, she started punching around her as well as pushing, knocking out many of the men in her way. Seeing an opening to her left, she rushed in that direction, with a street opening less than twenty meters away. As she was about to break free from the crowd, she felt a sharp blow to her lower back, followed by a sharp pain. She ignored it and sprinted down the street, the screaming crowd still behind her and in pursuit. While wiping away blood from a cut on her forehead that was partially blinding her, she turned a street corner to head towards the new city part. Seeing a dark corner nearby, she went to it and, momentarily out of sight of her pursuers, activated her time distorter, disappearing in a flash of light. She reappeared in her bedroom, sighing with relief: that had been a close call indeed. She suddenly felt dizzy and had to momentarily lean against a wall. Passing her left hand in her back, she found out that what was left of her tunic was now covered with blood.

“Damn! I must have been stabbed back there.”

Nancy took a minute to concentrate and mentally heal the worst of her wounds, then took off her torn and blood-stained tunic to wash herself quickly. Inspecting next her camera headband, she was relieved to find it intact: the recordings just taken by her

cameras, while they had nearly cost her life, were now historical documents of high value.

Once washed, she put on a Sarmatian outfit of trousers and long-sleeved shirt, then donned as well her bronze helmet and scale-mail battle armor before arming herself with all her weapons. She packed quickly her spare clothes inside her bedroll, then walked out in the courtyard of her house and climbed the stairs to the upper floor at a run to go to the locked room she used to keep her valuables. She unlocked the padlock on the door of the strong room and put it inside her pouch, then entered and grabbed a wooden box hidden inside a large chest full of clothes and pieces of cloth. The box, of advanced construction despite its antique appearance, contained her electronic equipment and two stun pistols, plus a small fortune in gems and gold pieces. As she came out of the room with the box, Nancy saw many columns of smoke rising from various points inside the city. Guessing that the rioters were attacking and burning down the houses of those judged as pro-Roman, she ran down the steps and started loading her things on her horse. She was running inside her house to go grab her last things of value when the double doors of her courtyard's gate were shaken by multiple fists knocking on them, accompanied by a concert of hateful screams. One of Nancy's neighbors, who was standing on the roof of his house, shouted down at the crowd outside her house.

"THAT PAGAN PROSTITUTE IS STILL INSIDE! I CAN SEE HER AND HER HORSE!"

Nancy gave him a dark look.

"So much for being a good neighbor, you Joachim bastard!"

Running to her bedroom, she grabbed her saddlebags and her bedroll and brought them out to her horse. She quickly but solidly tied her things on her horse's back, paying particular care to her treasure chest. While she didn't really care about the gold and the jewels inside it, the transit probes and stun pistols inside were another matter. The last items she packed on her horse were her musical instruments. By now, the gates of her courtyard were shaking under a series of violent blows, probably from an improvised ram. She got on top of her horse just before the gates gave up, crashing open and letting in dozens of wild men yielding clubs, sticks, knives and lit torches. A few even had Roman shields and weapons evidently taken from overwhelmed soldiers. Her

normal exit route now impassable, Nancy decided to take the only way out that would not appear magical to the rioters.

“Pegasus, climb the stairs and jump!”

The machine, which was actually quite intelligent, understood immediately and climbed the stone steps, watched by the incredulous crowd. It then jumped one level down into the side street bordering the house’s eastern façade and galloped away with Nancy, leaving the rioters behind in a cloud of dust. Sweeping aside with the flat of her sword the few rioters she encountered along the street, Nancy made Pegasus head at a gallop towards one of the gates of the city.

As she was emerging in the public square adjacent to the Antonia fortress, Nancy saw a small group of persons who were running towards the fortress. The group comprised two men, a woman and two young children and was clothed in the Roman fashion. Nancy recognized the man leading the group as she galloped towards them: he was a Roman wine merchant that had once invited her to play and sing in his house. The man was probably leading his small family to the safety of the Antonia. Unfortunately for him, a large crowd of screaming Jewish rioters was pursuing the Romans, brandishing a panoply of improvised weapons. The rioters caught up with the fleeing Romans as they were still over a hundred meters away from the fortress. According to the rules of the Time Patrol, Nancy would normally have no other choice but to let the tragedy unfold without intervening. Two things however pushed her into action: first, the rioters were now blocking her own path of retreat; second, her conscience would not let her refuse her help to innocent persons. Besides, the battles and massacres that would follow in Jerusalem meant that the rioters she was seeing were most probably going to die in the days and weeks to come. The Roman answer to popular revolts was always brutal and merciless.

“YAH! CHARGE, PEGASUS!”

The robotic horse accelerated at once to full speed, guided by Nancy towards the Romans. The wine merchant and the other man in the group, probably an employee or a servant, were frantically slashing around them with short swords, trying to protect the woman and two children from the rioters. From the corner of one eye, Nancy could see Roman soldiers observing the scene from the top of the ramparts of the fortress. The legionnaires were however powerless to intervene, their short bows having insufficient range and precision to shoot without risking to hit the family of Romans. Grabbing her

lance with her right hand and taking it out of its leather holder on the right side of her horse, Nancy pointed it and pushed a savage war scream as she was going to plow in the crowd of rioters. Sarmatian warriors, apart from being expert horsemen and excellent archers, were known throughout the Ancient World as masters of the lance. Nancy proved it by jabbing repeatedly at the rioters around her while Pegasus ran over or violently pushed aside the Jews in its path. Excited by this battle, which reminded her of her epic charges against English soldiers when she was Joan of Arc, Nancy quickly plowed her way through the rioters, soon coming side by side with the Romans and shouting in Latin to the wine merchant while killing a rioter with her lance.

“GET YOUR WIFE AND KIDS ON MY HORSE, QUICKLY!”

The merchant, who was bleeding from the forehead, did not hesitate and grabbed at once his six year-old son by the waist to give him to Nancy. Letting go her bridle, Nancy took hold of the child with her left hand and sat him in front of her. As she was hoisting behind her the merchant’s wife, the man accompanying the family crumbled to the ground, a butcher’s knife in his chest. Nancy threw her lance at once, killing the rioter who had stabbed the Roman. Taking out her sword, she grabbed next the nine year-old daughter of the merchant and sat her against her belly in the saddle before shouting to the merchant, who was slashing madly at the rioters around them.

“HANG ON TO MY LEFT FOOT! I WILL OPEN A PATH TO THE FORTRESS.”

“NO! I WILL ONLY SLOW YOU DOWN. SAVE MY FAMILY! GO!”

Nancy clenched her teeth, realizing that the merchant was right: the rioters had reorganized themselves after Nancy’s furious charge and were now closing their ranks around her. The merchant then charged the rioters blocking the way to the fortress, killing a number of them and making others recoil. Nancy was prompting Pegasus in that direction when the merchant was submerged by the crowd and disappeared from sight, making his wife scream with horror and anguish.

“LUCIUS!”

Slashing without mercy the rioters around her, Nancy pushed her horse to a full gallop, trampling down dozens of rioters before breaking through their ranks and gaining a clear path towards the Antonia.

On top of the Northwest tower of the Antonia fortress, Sartorius was watching with Prefect Coponius, Tribune Decius and a number of legionnaires the progress of the rioters, raging at his powerlessness to stop them. They unfortunately had too few troops

in Jerusalem to do much against the thousands of fanatical Jews now filling the streets and spreading mayhem in the upper city and new city. A new pillar of smoke then started to rise over the new city, less than 250 meters away from the Antonia. Sartorius noticed it and felt dread when he realized from where it came: Nauca's house was burning. The Sarmatian would have of course been an obvious target for the Jews as a known pagan female musician, a combination that equated with sin to them. The trouble was that Nauca was one musician he cared a lot about lately, having spent some very good times with her during the last four years. He had even asked her once to marry her, to which she had gently said no. The shout from a soldier then attracted his attention to a small group of Roman citizens being pursued by a crowd of Jewish rioters. Sartorius clenched his teeth as the rioters surrounded the Roman civilians, expecting those unfortunate souls to be cut to pieces quickly. His heart then jumped in his chest when a female warrior on a horse and wearing armor charged the rioters, her lance pointed.

"YEAH! HIT THEM, NAUCA!"

He followed the savage fight that ensued with a mix of anxiety and pride, watching the Sarmatian woman show her valor and combat skills. He shouted with joy like the other legionnaires when Nauca broke free of the rioters and galloped towards the entrance of the fortress, a woman and two children mounted with her on her horse. On the directives of the Prefect Coponius, Antonius Decius ordered the main doors to be opened before running down from the ramparts, four soldiers behind him. Sartorius had to stay up on the wall and watched with Coponius Nauca's approach, ordering his six archers to start firing arrows in the crowd of Jews in order to cover her.

Nancy made Pegasus go up the stairs leading to the fortress' main gate, stopping just in front of the massive wooden doors as those opened slowly from the inside. She however did not go inside, lowering instead from her horse the two children and the wife of the wine merchant. The Tribune Decius, surrounded by legionnaires, then went to her.

"Well done, Sarmatian! I see that I badly misjudged you four years ago. Come in: I am offering you the protection of my fortress."

"Thank you but no, Tribune Decius. I just lost my house here and will go to Galilee, time for things to quiet down here before coming back. I am sorry if I wasn't able to save the father of these children."

Decius looked briefly at the two children, who were crying while being held by their mother, before eyeing Nancy with gravity.

"Many people will unfortunately die today, Sarmatian. I don't have enough soldiers here with me to stop those cursed Jewish rioters. Would you be ready to carry a message to our garrison in Caesarea?"

"It will then have to be an oral message, Tribune Decius: the rioters are soon going to block all the gates leading out of the city and I must hurry if I want to leave Jerusalem."

Antonius Decius thought for a moment before taking a decision and turning to face a centurion.

"Marius, run and go get your horse! The Sarmatian will escort you to Caesarea, where you will give the alert and ask for reinforcements to retake Jerusalem."

As the centurion was running inside after saluting him, Decius took a small purse from his belt and threw it to Nancy, who caught it with one hand.

"For your coming travel expenses and for your valorous services, Sarmatian. You have done well in the eyes of Rome today."

Nancy smiled to him before giving the purse to the widow of the wine merchant.

"Thank you, Tribune Decius, but this poor woman will need this money more than I do. To help punish those who burned down my house will be enough reward for me."

Decius nodded once, liking her answer.

"I will place a good word on your behalf with the Prefect. If you ever want to join us as an auxiliary, you will be most welcomed then."

"I will keep your offer in mind, Tribune Decius." Replied Nancy, unwilling to commit herself. Centurion Marius then showed up on his horse at the gate, nodding to Nancy.

"I am ready, Sarmatian."

"Then, let's hurry before all the gates are blocked. Ave, Tribune Decius!"

"Ave, Sarmatian!"

Followed closely by the centurion, Nancy guided Pegasus down the steps, then disappeared with him in a side street leading towards the Gate of the Sheep. Decius made the woman and two children come inside and ordered the doors closed before going back up on the wall to report to Coponius.

"Centurion Marius is now on his way to Caesarea with the Sarmatian, Prefect."

“Excellent! Let’s hope that they will get there without problems. We will need a lot of reinforcements here to retake the city. Those damn Jews will pay dearly for their impudence, by Jupiter!”

Sartorius, who was listening discreetly while keeping an eye for Nauca, shouted joyfully a few minutes later.

“PREFECT, CENTURION MARIUS AND THE SARMATIAN ARE NOW OUTSIDE THE WALLS!”

To both his surprise and joy, Sartorius saw Nauca suddenly stop her horse, then look squarely towards him before waving at him, as if she had heard him. He waved back, then watched her gallop away with Centurion Marius, tears filling his eyes.

“RIDE, NAUCA, RIDE!”

16:29 (Jerusalem Time)

Sunday, April 16, 6 C.E.

(30th of Nissan, year 3766 of the Hebrew calendar)

Village of Nazareth, Galilee

Yosef was returning to his house with a few other villagers, sweaty and dirty after a hard day of work in the fields, when he saw a rider approach in the distance. The horseman was coming from the South and was riding hard, something that alarmed Yosef and the others. They ran to their houses, warning the women and children to get inside. Yosef did encounter a problem with his son Yeshua, though: the four year-old boy wouldn’t budge from the spot behind a low stone wall from where he was watching the rider approach the village.

“Yeshua, you have to go inside, now!” Insisted Yosef, about to lose patience. His little son looked calmly up at him with a disarming smile.

“Why, father? The woman is simply happy to see us again.”

Yosef froze, mostly for two reasons: first, his son was acting up again, predicting something he couldn’t possibly know; and second, a riding woman who knew them could equate to only one person. Looking carefully, Yosef soon realized that his son was right...again. The rider was effectively the tall goyim woman who had lent him the services of her horse four years ago. Yosef looked down at Yeshua, perplex: his son kept amazing him all the time, sometimes in a scary way. Most other children refused to

play with him, finding him spooky, while rumors flew thick around the village about the boy. Yeshua then said something he didn't understand.

"Father, the woman shines brighter than you or the others in the village. Why?"

"I...I don't know, Yeshua. Maybe you should ask her later. Let's greet her."

Yeshua jumped up with joy and would have run towards the rider if not restrained by Yosef. The woman finally stopped her horse a few paces from them, flashing down a smile at them.

"Yosef! And this must be Yeshua. Am I happy to see you again."

She jumped down from her horse and led it by the bridles, going to Yosef and patting his right shoulder.

"Still as solid as four years ago, Yosef. How is your little family?"

"Well and growing." Answered Yosef in a reserved tone. The other villagers were starting to come out of their houses now, many armed with tools or blades. The woman paid them no attention, crouching to face little Yeshua and caressing his head.

"And you, my little Yeshua. You grew nicely since the day I helped deliver you four years ago. You can't remember me, so please call me Nauca."

"Nauca, why do you shine brighter than the others?" Asked innocently the little boy. Yosef grimaced in embarrassment, while Nauca looked confused at first before smiling.

"That's a secret I keep, but I will tell you later, just to you."

Yosef felt better: the woman had been quite skilled in answering Yeshua in a way that would quiet him down without offending the boy.

"You look quite tired and dusty, Nauca. Let's go inside my house, so that I can offer you something to eat before the start of the Sabbath at dusk."

"Thank you, Yosef. I appreciate that very much. In exchange, could I give your children a sweet I have: it is a mix of nuts and grains, coated with honey."

"That sounds fine to me, friend. Come!"

Yosef studiously ignored the fact that Nauca was wearing men's trousers as he led her to his house, little Yeshua holding the hand of the stranger. The other villagers threw scandalized looks at her and her weapons, staying away from her and watching her as she tied her horse to a wooden pole. She took down a pair of saddlebags and a small chest from her horse before following Yosef and Yeshua inside a courtyard onto which five houses opened up. They entered a stone and mud house that formed one of the

corners of the courtyard, stepping into semi-darkness. Miriam, busy distributing bread into clay bowls, grinned with joy at the sight of the Sarmatian.

“You came back after all, Nauca. This is a great occasion. Please, sit down and share our supper.”

“Not before I wash, my dear Miriam. I will then pitch my tent quickly before sundown comes, so...my god, you are expecting!”

Miriam touched her prominent belly with pride.

“Our fifth child is due in a month. That will be my third pregnancy. Little Miriam is resting in the corner behind you.”

Nauca squealed in pleasure at the sight of the toddler girl lying in the middle of a thick sheepskin and went on her knees to admire the child. That made Yosef smile: women were the same everywhere, especially when it came to small children and babies. After a minute of playing with little Miriam, Nauca excused herself and went out to pitch her tent before nightfall, leaving inside her saddlebags and her wooden chest. Yaaqov, now eleven, went to the latter and, out of curiosity, tried to lift one side of the chest, drawing a rebuke from Yosef.

“YAAQOV! You have no business examining the belongings of a guest.”

“Yes, father. This chest is heavy, though.”

“As I just said, it is none of your business, Yaaqov. Nauca is not a Jew but she is a good person. Be respectful with her.”

“Father, how could a goyim be a good person if she doesn't believe in God?” Asked nine years old Josua. Yosef paused, measuring his answer.

“Son, don't forget that God created all men, not only us Jews. They were in essence like us, but many lost their ways and prayed to false gods and idols. Some, like our guest, see past those gods and suspect that the true one is waiting for them. Such goyims are called God-fearers and can be nice persons. They simply need a chance to find God. Nauca went to Jerusalem four years ago in order to find God.”

“Then, is she a Jew now?” Asked Yaaqov. Yosef shrugged, unsure.

“We will have to ask her later. I am sure that she will have many stories to tell us after supper. I will now go wash myself as well before eating. Be patient and don't touch her things.”

Yosef came back a few minutes before Nauca. Once both were inside, Miriam served everybody bread, olives, figs and salted fish, with water to wash down the food. They ate in silence at first, until Nauca spoke softly to nobody in particular.

“I had to flee Jerusalem last Tuesday, when the city erupted in riots. The Romans had just deposed Herod Archelaus and had declared Judea a Roman territory, with taxations to be raised directly by Rome following a census. That was when the Jewish population rioted and attacked the Romans and other non-Jews in Jerusalem. I was attacked myself and my house was burned. I barely was able to flee the city with what I now have on my horse.”

Yosef, Miriam and the two older boys stopped eating and looked at each other with consternation.

“Is Jerusalem in Jewish hands?” Asked Yosef, hopeful. Nauca shook her head gravely.

“Not really. The rioters killed many foreigners but the Romans still held the Antonia fortress when I left and will most probably retake the city as soon as they can receive reinforcements. Those riots may spread for a while but I believe that they will eventually be quashed in a horrible bloodbath.”

“How could the Jews of Jerusalem lose?” Replied hotly Yaaqov. “God is surely with them.”

Yosef looked at Nauca, afraid that his son could have offended her, even if he tended to agree with Yaaqov. Nauca simply lowered her head, speaking in a resigned tone.

“I am a warrior, young boy, and I know about military things. As for God's help, this would not be the first time that Jews lost a battle or even a war despite their prayers. Think about the destruction of the first temple and the deportation of the Jews by the Babylonians. Believe me: there will be a lot of sorrow in this land in the days and weeks to come.”

“Why did they attack you, Nauca?” Asked cautiously Miriam. “Didn't you go to Jerusalem to try becoming a Jew?”

That brought a wry smile on Nauca's face.

“That didn't work out the way I expected. I was considered too different, too much outside the norms. Also, I found that certain aspects of your religion, like in many other religions, went deeply against some of my personal values and beliefs, like the way women are treated here as inferior to men in nearly all respects. I believe in God,

but I am not ready to demean myself just because a priest says I have to. I know that what I say may shock you, but I believe in telling the truth.”

“Then, what will you do now?”

“I have been thinking about that while riding North, Miriam. I will probably go establish myself in a city that will be more tolerant about my kind, where I will live according to my beliefs, using my talents as a musician and singer. Even though the temple priests would not accept me, I will keep God close to me...in my head.”

“But, God would have to accept you first.” Objected Yosef. Nauca stared into his eyes.

“He has already accepted me, Yosef. That much I know and no priest will tell me otherwise.”

Ignoring his shocked look, Nauca went to search for a moment inside her saddlebags, taking out a cloth bag and pouring some of its content in her open left hand. She then presented her hand to the children.

“Take some: this is a mix of nuts, grains and honey. It is very tasty and filling.”

The two older boys tried some cautiously at first, while Yeshua was quick to grab a handful of granola cereals and to eat it. Nauca next gave some to Miriam and Yosef, who tasted the granola and liked it. Everybody took seconds, to Nancy’s satisfaction. Yosef patted his stomach.

“You are right, Nauca. This mixture is very filling and sweet. The honey in it must have cost a lot.”

“Not really. Now, I believe that I had a secret to tell to Yeshua. Yeshua, come in my tent outside for a minute.”

Miriam and the two older boys looked questioningly at Yosef as Nauca and Yeshua went outside. Yosef smiled reassuringly at them.

“Don’t worry: Nauca earlier stopped Yeshua from asking weird questions by promising to answer him in secret. She can be a good storyteller, apart of singing and playing music.”

Nancy closed the flap of her small tent’s entrance before sitting cross-legged and lowering little Yeshua in her lap, facing her. Her micro-camera headband was still recording, as this could well be one of the crucial points of her mission. She smiled warmly to the boy while caressing his hair with both hands.

“Yeshua, you said earlier that I shone more brightly than others. Does everybody shine to you?”

“Yes, but you are much brighter.”

“And can you hear the others inside your head?”

The boy nodded his head gravely.

“I do, but they all laugh at me when I tell them that.”

“Yeshua, what I will tell you now is very important. You must not talk about those strange feelings and sights to others. If you do, they may grow to dislike you and even hurt you. You must keep your abilities to yourself, for your own safety. If you have to use them, then be discreet.”

“But you don’t know how I feel.”

“Yes, I do, Yeshua.” Said calmly Nancy. “You also shine much brighter than the others, like me, and I also can hear others inside my head. We probably have a lot in common in a certain kind of way. We are different from the others and that is why we both shine more brightly.”

“Are we better than the others, then?”

“Not necessarily, Yeshua. We have special abilities but we will be better only if we use those abilities to help others, not if we use them to hurt or dominate others. You must use those abilities to do good deeds. Do you understand that?”

“Yes!” Said sheepishly the boy before staring into her eyes. “Did God make you special?”

Nancy hesitated, and then nodded.

“Someone very powerful visited me some time ago and helped me. Now, promise me that you will not repeat any of this to others, even your family. They would not believe you anyway.”

“I promise.”

“Good! Now, let’s go back inside your house, where I will tell stories and sing. Would you like that?”

“Oh yes!” Replied Yeshua enthusiastically.

Nancy stayed only two nights in the house of Yosef and Miriam, waiting until the Sabbath was passed before making her goodbyes to the family. She gave a particularly warm hug to Yeshua, then got on her horse. She was about to spur her horse forward when Miriam touched her left foot, looking up at her.

“Will we see you again, Nauca?”

“Probably not, kind Miriam. Our lives are too different and I must go live where I will be accepted. I will pray God for the welfare of you and of your family, though. Shelamah!”

“Shelahmah, Nauca!”

The family watched her trot away in silence, then returned to its house to prepare for the day's work. Miriam was quick to notice Yeshua's long face and caressed his head.

“You miss Nauca already, Yeshua?”

“Yes, Mother. She was special.”

“That she was. But you don't need to be sad: she left you a nice gift.”

The boy took hold of the gold Star of David pendant hanging from his neck by a long gold chain and admired it for a moment.

“I will always wear it, mother: I promised her that.” He said proudly.

09:05 (North America Central Time)

Sunday, January 17, 3385 'A'

Time Patrol headquarters

New Lake City University campus

American Great Lakes area

Farah Tolkonen, waiting in the reception lobby of the headquarters building with Jan Bella, Mike Crawford and Lori Kano, smiled when she saw Pegasus land in front of the building at the preplanned time, Nancy on its back. The robotic horse then trotted through the snow up to the main entrance doors, with Nancy jumping down and running inside to exchange a long, passionate kiss with Mike. She finally stepped back from Mike and hugged in turn Farah, Jan and Lori.

“The second phase of my mission is now completed, Farah. Yeshua is now four years old and still lives in Nazareth with his family. Miriam had a baby girl named Sarah in the meantime, with Sarah now being two years old. Miriam is also expecting another baby. Tetrarch Archelaus was deposed by the Romans on April 11 of Year 6 and the Jews of Jerusalem then revolted. My house was burned down but I was able, barely, to escape the rioters, who were killing the non-Jews in the city. I recorded all that and my films should captivate you, Jan.”

The chief historian grinned with anticipated pleasure.

“Excellent! I can hardly wait to see those recordings. The first batch of recordings from phase one of Nancy’s mission was already fascinating.”

“I have to agree with Doctor Bella.” Said Lori Kano. “The extracts from those first recordings in the past proved extremely popular with GNN viewers. They are thirsty for more.”

“They won’t be disappointed, Miss Kano. The deposition of Archelaus and the riots that followed were dramatic...and bloody. Before leaving Nazareth for here, I gave a gift to Yeshua, a gold pendant containing a radio beacon. We can now send a shipborne tracking team to follow him for the next eighteen years via probes, with short, periodic checks to document his life until the point where he will start gathering disciples. At that point, I will return to Palestine and follow Yeshua closely, to get to know his disciples.”

Jan nodded, having already planned for that phase of the mission.

“The team has already been designated and will depart Monday morning on the BABYLON. What’s next on your agenda, Nancy?”

“First, I will go give my recordings to our team of analysts and technicians. Then, I will have a long, hot bath. Later this week, I will go check how things are going in 1941 ‘B’. With some luck, I will be able to grab some quality recruits then.”

CHAPTER 4 – OPERATION VIKING RAIDER

09:06 (GMT)

Monday, July 14, 1941 'B'

General Imperial Staff headquarters

War Office, London

Great Britain

Peter Stilwell, sandwiched between General Ismay and George Townsend in the third row of spectators, shifted uneasily in his seat as he listened to the Imperial Staff colonel briefing Prime Minister Churchill and dozens of senior officers on Operation VIKING RAIDER, the plan to retake Norway and close the access of the Baltic Sea to the Germans. The briefer and most of the officers present were dangerously overconfident in Stilwell's opinion, discounting the Germans as a nearly defeated foe. The truth was that, while the Germans were now on the defensive on the Western front and their war industry was taking a pounding from the air, the Wehrmacht was a still mostly intact force. The raids led by Nancy Laplante in Europe had hurt the Germans' pride and caused some losses but they had also awakened the Germans out of their superiority complex. The flow of new German equipment, while significantly reduced, was now including some truly worthwhile weapons in sizeable quantities, such as the Tiger tank and the FW-190 fighter. Even the German infantry, stung by the effect of the new British small arms, was being reequipped with assault rifles of their own. Even though he was a navy officer, Stilwell could see some gaping holes in the Norway invasion plan being presented. For one thing, contrary to Nancy's typical plans, the pace was too ponderous, with invading troops arriving in many successive waves on too many targets at once. The air cover was also too flimsy in Stilwell's opinion, the Luftwaffe being discounted off by the invasion planners as a pale shadow of its former self. Even the promise of Sir Arthur Harris, commander of Bomber Command, to effect heavy diversionary raids on Germany, wasn't enough to reassure Stilwell on that point. Most galling to him however was the role of the Royal Navy in this. While the squadrons of air cushion craft would be heavily employed, along with dozens of light cruisers and destroyers, the battleships and battlecruisers that represented the might of the Home

Fleet were to cruise away from the Norwegian coast, ready to block any German naval counter-attack. In Stilwell's mind, those big fifteen-inch guns would have been better used in direct support of the invading troops.

As the briefing was nearing its end, Townsend discreetly elbowed Stilwell, then whispered in his ear.

"I don't like this one bit, Peter. If the Germans are as much as half awake, they will have time to react and bring in reinforcements by air and sea. This could be a costly operation for us."

"Agreed. Hopefully, the Prime Minister will see the holes in this plan and order a review of it."

Stilwell's hopes proved unfounded, however. Either because he was overeager for the British Army to get into action or because Nancy Laplante was not there to bring some incisive counter-arguments, for which the higher staff had justly feared her, Churchill approved the operation's plan as presented to him. Being of relatively junior status in the crowd of senior officers, Stilwell's and Townsend's opinions were neither expected nor sought. As they were making their way out of the conference room at the end of the presentation, an imperial staff brigadier intercepted them and General Ismay.

"General Ismay, could I speak to you and your officers for a minute?"

"Of course, Brigadier Armstrong. Let's get closer to the coffee table first, so we don't get trampled by all these stampeding generals and admirals."

"A good idea, sir."

Once safely out of the way, they all grabbed a cup of either coffee or tea before Armstrong spoke again.

"Well, sir, as you saw, we are planning to use in this operation nearly all of our commando and paratroop units, as well as about all of the few helicopters now in service. We are however sorely short of experienced commando senior officers and even more short of helicopter pilots. Would you be ready to let go temporarily your Major Townsend and Squadron Leader Wilson for this operation?"

"Uh, I don't know about that: these officers are quite busy with high priority projects. Commander Stilwell, what do you think about this?"

Stilwell thought furiously: the truth was that himself and his comrades of the Athena Section wanted to leave the section and return to frontline duties. The shameful and hypocritical treatment handed to Nancy Laplante by their own government, which had

not hesitated to try to kill her in the name of national security, had deeply embittered them and had sent morale at the Athena Section, which Nancy Laplante had led, crashing to the bottom. Only the knowledge that their job could shorten this war had kept them from simply resigning their positions.

“Well, sir, to be frank, Doctor Jones recently had top priority transferred to his projects, while both Major Townsend and Squadron Leader Wilson have assistants perfectly capable of taking over their departments. Besides, it could be wise to let them see some action before they eat their desks out of frustration.”

“But they possess highly classified knowledge.” Objected Ismay, not very happy at the idea of losing two of his key officers. “We can’t risk having them captured.”

“That didn’t stop Nancy from going on combat missions, sir, and she knew more than me. Besides, I’m sure that George here will enthusiastically blow his brains out if he sees himself on the verge of capture.”

“Thanks for the cheery thought, Peter.” Replied Townsend, making both Ismay and Armstrong smile.

“In that case, you may have them, Brigadier.” Said Ismay. “Anything else?” Armstrong, having just gained more than he had hoped for, looked then at Stilwell with expectation.

“Well, sir, I am told that Commander Stilwell is a very experienced hovercraft commander. We were looking for someone to command one of the surface effect craft squadrons assigned to the Oslo assault force. Could he...”

“Now, Brigadier, aren’t you a bit gluttonous here? I ...”

“Sir, please!” Cut in Stilwell. “I fully realize how important my job at the Athena Section is, but I am also dying to do my share in combat. I have not had a sea command for months now. Besides, who else has more combat experience on hovercraft than me, sir?”

“Hmpfff... The prime minister will kill me for this but what the hell. You can have Commander Stilwell as well, Brigadier.”

“Excellent! Thank you, sir! By the way, that sea command called for the rank of navy captain. I’m afraid that the good Commander will have to be promoted for the job.”

“Hell, do you have any more bad news like this, sir?” Asked Stilwell, grinning.

“No, that’s all I had for the moment.” Replied Armstrong. “I will ask you and your two officers to report back here in two days for detailed briefings.”

“We’ll be there, sir.” Promised Stilwell before saluting Armstrong and leaving with Townsend. Once outside the building, both men screamed in delight and exchanged high fives.

10:26 (Berlin Time)

Friday, August 22, 1941 ‘B’

SS Corps barracks, Hamburg

Germany

“Hey, Karl, do you know what this is all about?”

“No, Otto. You will have to wait until the Obergruppenfuhrer⁹ speaks.”

Obersturmfuhrer¹⁰ Otto Skorzeni, divisional transport maintenance officer of the SS Panzer-Division ‘Reich’, grimaced with impatience: the order to recall all the men on leave and to have all the officers attend a snap divisional briefing had caught him in the middle of a technical inspection. He however sat on one of the folding chairs in the briefing room and waited patiently, a notepad and a pen ready. He did not have to wait for long, though. General Paul Hausser arrived a few minutes later, making the dozens of officers present in the room snap to attention.

“At ease, gentlemen! Take your seats: this is going to be short and to the point.”

Hausser waited until everybody was seated and listening before walking to the big map of Europe hanging on the wall facing his audience. Using his command stick, he pointed at Norway on the map.

“Gentlemen, we and the SS-Panzer-Division ‘Wiking’ are to move to Norway as fast as possible while keeping the utmost secrecy about it. Intelligence reports state that the British are preparing to invade Norway. While these reports are not fully confirmed, the Führer is not willing to take any chances and has ordered Norway’s defenses to be reinforced. New intelligence has also shed some suspicions on the security of our Enigma encoding machines. All orders and directives about this operation are thus to go either via telephone line or by hand. That point is vital: anyone breaking this directive will be court-martialed.”

⁹ Obergruppenfuhrer: SS general

¹⁰ Obersturmfuhrer: SS first lieutenant

“But, General,” protested timidly the divisional transmissions officer, “this will slow down considerably our communications. The Enigma machines are impossible to decipher: it would take millions of attempted permutations to find the proper code groups.”

“In normal circumstances, I would agree, Obersturmbannführer¹¹ Lang. However, a group of Luftwaffe helperinen held until recently in the Tower of London were extensively debriefed and revealed that the Canadian from the future, Nancy Laplante, had with her a small portable machine that could analyze data at a fantastic rate. By the way, those helperinen were brought back to Berlin by none other than Laplante.”

“Brigadier Laplante is working for us now?” Asked the divisional intelligence officer, stunned. “I thought that she had been killed in the British bombing of Colditz Castle. Besides, even if she is alive, why would she help us after the tortures she went through at the hands of the Gestapo?”

Hausser was silent for a moment as a wave of whispers went through the room. Nancy Laplante had gone in the recent past year from a despised enemy to be killed at all cost to an adversary that was both feared and respected. Many who had first dismissed her as a female trying to play a man’s role had quickly come to grief at her hands. The amphibious attack she had led on Hamburg a few months ago, where she had been severely wounded and nearly captured by SS troops, had caused immense damage and cost terrible casualties to the SS regiment that had previously occupied the barracks now used by the division. Hausser then took on him to reveal some of the information he had just got in Berlin.

“Gentlemen, I will now pass on some information that must be kept strictly to yourselves. First of, Nancy Laplante survived the bombing of Colditz Castle. Even more, she helped save hundreds of German civilians and soldiers there with the help of a ship from the future, transporting them to a safe area near Colditz just before the bombing. Before leaving for the future, she broke our helperinen out of London and brought back some of them to Berlin. The remaining helperinen from London followed her to the future. Now, you must all wonder why Laplante would do all that. The first reason is that she was mad, and rightfully so, at the British: they tried to kill her in Colditz, not hesitating to sacrifice the hundreds of allied prisoners of war held with her. Furthermore, some of the allied prisoners in Colditz, apparently thinking that she was

¹¹ Obersturmbannführer: SS lieutenant-colonel

some kind of traitor or collaborator, attacked her and beat her up badly. The second reason has to do with Laplante's nature. As you know, she had no hatred of Germans per say and always fought cleanly. That side of her was, well, enhanced by a fantastic incident that happened in Colditz shortly before the British bombing. I myself had a lot of problems believing what I was told in Berlin but I spoke personally to the commandant of Colditz Castle, who confirmed everything to me. In short, a miracle happened to her there as she lay in an infirmary bed, crippled by Gestapo tortures: She was cured of all her wounds in an instant and also gained a number of supernatural powers via some kind of mysterious intervention. Those powers, which she demonstrated repeatedly to the German staff there, included touch healing, levitation and superhuman strength."

"Who did that to her, sir? People from the future?" Asked the intelligence officer as the other officers present looked at each other in stunned disbelief. Hausser shook his head, his face grave.

"No! She said that a superior, immaterial being did it."

The whispers changed to exclamations, forcing Hausser to ask for silence.

"Gentlemen, I know how hard this may be to believe, but you should accept it as a fact. Laplante is now gone to the future, however, and is no longer a factor in this war. Let's count ourselves lucky in that respect. Now, to come back to the main subject of this meeting. I want all combat vehicles to be fully fuelled and loaded up with ammunition and supplies before the end of the day. As for those under repair, tanks and halftracks will have absolute priority. All soldiers are to be issued three days worth of combat rations and two full ammunition loads. This will all be done today, on the strength of my oral orders. I don't want precious time wasted in filling detailed orders and paperwork: any quartermaster or supply officer who will delay the issue of needed stores for this deployment on the pretext of not having written authorizations will be relieved of his position by me. The Panzer-Grenadier Regiment Deutschland will start loading up in two days on two heavy ferries who are due to arrive in the port here tomorrow. Our tank regiment will follow two days later, then our other panzer-grenadier regiment, again two days later. Our artillery and engineer train will be next. Our destination will be Oslo, which we are tasked to defend along with its airfield at Fornebu. Gentlemen, you have your orders. I will not keep you longer."

The excited SS officers, Otto Skorzeni included, waited for General Hausser to leave, then rushed out of the briefing room.

Skorzeni, after spending a frantic day and a nearly sleepless night preparing his men and equipment for the oncoming move, went the next day to the divisional orders group, only to learn that he was going to be part of the staff's advanced party, due to depart for Norway by air that afternoon with the task of securing proper accommodations and facilities in advance of the division's arrival there. Swearing under his breath at having to leave his men at such a time, Skorzeni returned to his maintenance shop to brief his senior NCO, a crusty *sturmscharführer*¹² who could find engine parts in the middle of a desert if need be. Having done that, he then packed his field kit and cleaned up and oiled his already spotless StG-41 7.92mm assault rifle before going to the officer's mess for a quick lunch. At the assigned hour, he jumped in a military bus with his kit and weapons, along with the divisional commander and eight other officers, to go to the nearby military airfield.

Their aircraft turned out to be an old triple-engine Junkers 52. While slow, it was however dependable, which suited Skorzeni just fine. As they were boarding the plane, a staff car delivered a pair of Luftwaffe female auxiliaries who were seemingly in a big hurry. Skorzeni, who had a strong appetite for pretty women despite being married, smiled with delight as the two young women, out of breath and dragging bulging kit bags, presented themselves to the plane's pilot, saluting him. The senior helperin, a tall and very beautiful blonde, showed the pilot a mission order as she spoke.

"Gruppenführerin Lisa Hartmann and Oberhelferin Barbara Holzberg, requesting permission to board your aircraft, Hauptman. We have been assigned to the Oslo-Fornebu Airfield and were told that you still had two seats available."

"Well, I'm transporting a general and some of his staff officers to Oslo. Normally I would not take any extra passengers, but I will make an exception for you two. Get on board!"

"Thank you, Hauptman."

The two women then approached the access ladder of the plane, still dragging their kit bags. Otto, still waiting his turn to climb onboard, smiled to them and bowed.

"May I help you load your luggage, Fraulein?"

Lisa Hartmann smiled back and quickly eyed the powerful, 194 centimeter-tall Austrian. Even with his long scar on his left cheek, Otto always had a lot of success with women.

¹² *Sturmscharführer*: SS warrant officer

“With pleasure, Obersturmführer. You are too kind.”

Once the other officers were inside the plane, Skorzeni effortlessly carried both his kit and the two women’s bags, storing them in the plane’s central baggage compartment. He then sat down opposite Hartmann’s seat, near the back of the plane, while Barbara Holzberg took the seat behind him. Otto next presented his hand to Lisa.

“By the way, my name is Otto Skorzeni.”

Both women reacted to this in a way that stunned Otto and made the other SS officers snap their heads around in surprise.

“You’re the famous Otto Skorzeni?” Exclaimed Lisa, while Barbara stared admiringly at him. “Nancy Laplante told us that she admired you as a soldier.”

“Uh, wait a second, Gruppenführerin. How could you have met Die Wolfin¹³ and why would she say that? I’m just a transport maintenance officer.”

“She brought both of us to Berlin with nine other helperinen from the Tower of London, where we were detained as prisoners of war for nearly four months before she made us escape. In London, she visited us regularly to help our morale and provide distractions such as films, futuristic music and books. We also had many conversations with her, during which she confided to us that, in her history, you were going to be the most famous German specialist of commando raids in this war. She admired both you and Hanna Reitsch, our famous civilian test pilot, since her teenage years.”

As Otto sat with his mouth open from the surprise, General Hausser left his seat and went to Lisa, crouching in the aisle besides her seat.

“You said that you spoke often with Laplante, Fraulein? How well did you know her?”

“Fairly well, Herr General, but not as well as I should have.”

“What do you mean?”

Lisa Hartmann lowered her head, apparently embarrassed.

“I mean that I kept underestimating her and doubting her friendship, Herr General. Even though she planned the operations where we were captured, she always made sure that we were treated as humanely as possible. I believed at first that she was doing that in order to get military information from us, but I was wrong. She knew everything about our units and us anyway. She even recognized Flugkapitan Hanna Reitsch, who had been captured as well but was disguised as a simple oberhelferin.

¹³ Die Wolfin: The She-Wolf.

Laplante kept that to herself and never told the British about it. Then, she secretly adopted one of my captive helperinnen, a fifteen years old girl who had lost all of her family in a bombing. She was a formidable soldier, but she also had a heart of gold.”

“What else do you know about her?”

“That she is now in the year 3384, with Hanna Reitsch and twelve of my helperinnen. She left the British in disgust after they tried to kill her in Colditz by bombing the castle to rubble. I told all this and more to our military intelligence, Herr General. If you want, I could tell you about it during our trip.”

“I would appreciate that, Fraulein. Keep this to yourself but know that we are expecting the British to attack Norway soon. Anything that you could tell me about their new equipment would be very useful.”

“I will do my best, Herr General.”

“Then, come sit next to me in the forward section.”

That left Otto Skorzeni alone with Barbara Holzberg. While much smaller than Hartmann, she was a beautiful young woman in her own right. Otto gave her his best smile.

“So, Die Wolfen told you about me. You have me at a disadvantage now, since I know nothing about you.”

Barbara blushed and timidly lowered her eyes.

“There is little to say about me, frankly. I was raised on a farm near Hamburg and received a very basic education, then helped run the family farm. I married a young farmer just before the war, only to find out on my return from captivity that he had been cheating me with my own sister.”

“Ouch! What did you do then?”

“I divorced the bastard and slapped my sister silly. Then I requested a posting outside of Germany. How ironic: Laplante helps capture me, then makes me escape. Now, I realize that I asked and got a posting that could get me captured again...or killed.”

Otto then patted her shoulder reassuringly.

“Do not worry, Oberhelperin. The SS-Panzer-Divisions ‘Reich’ and ‘Wiking’ will soon be in Norway to protect you.”

Barbara smiled then while eyeing Otto with appreciation: he was exactly as she had expected him to be according to Nancy Laplante’s flattering descriptions of him.

06:11 (Berlin Time)

Thursday, August 28, 1941 'B'

Message room, Luftflotte 5 headquarters

Oslo-Fornebu Airfield, Norway

Barbara Holzberg paled as she listened with alarm on her telephone headset at the message she was scribbling down frantically. Thanking quickly the helperin in Germany that had sent the message, she then shouted at Lisa Hartmann, who was in charge of the helperinen in the message room.

“Gruppenführerin! Urgent message from Berlin: 400 suspected British bombers have been detected approaching Hamburg from high altitude. All of our fighters are to attempt to intercept just Northwest of Hamburg. They can then land and refuel at out airfields there.”

“Four hundred bombers?” Said Hartmann in alarm: her parents lived in Hamburg. Walking quickly to Barbara’s station, she took the note scribbled by her and scanned it. “The British never attacked with so many bombers at once before. This is major. I’m bringing this to the general. In the meantime, contact the Stade Luftgau and get an accurate position, speed and heading for these bombers.”

“Yes, Gruppenführerin!”

Working expertly her telephone exchange station, Barbara had the required information by the time Lisa came back.

“Gruppenführerin, the British bomber pack was 195 kilometers Northwest of Hamburg at 06:10 hours, flying at an altitude of 8,000 meters and a speed of 750 km/h. They accelerated to that speed after crossing the German coast.”

“Damn! At that speed they will be very hard to intercept. Good work, Barbara.”

Lisa then went out of the room again to pass on that information. The engine noise of dozens of aircraft taking off followed shortly afterwards.

The next forty minutes were long ones for the helperinen, who were awaiting anxiously for news on the interception of the British bombers. The growing noise of approaching aircraft then made Lisa Hartmann go to one of the windows of the message room.

“This is too early to be our aircraft, unless they turned around for some reason.”

As she was looking through the window, a burst of automatic fire was heard, followed quickly by more bursts.

“Mein Gott! The British are attacking the airfield.”

The incredulous helperinen rushed to the windows as one. They soon saw dozens of transport aircraft hoverfly the airfield unmolested, the anti-aircraft guns of the base being either busy defending themselves from hidden attackers already on the ground, or were destroyed by now. The sky soon filled with parachutes, making a young helperin shout in near panic.

“We must go to the air raid shelters.”

“No!” Shouted back Lisa Hartmann firmly. “Everybody will take back its post. I want you to inform Berlin, the Stade Luftgau and the headquarters of our panzer divisions that we are under attack by British paratroopers. Now, get to it!”

Rushing back to their stations, the fourteen helperinen under Hartmann’s command started sending messages out frantically as the firing intensified around the airfield. Many found however that their efforts were in vain.

“Gruppenführerin, the telephone lines are dead.”

“Damn! Barbara, get on the teletype, it uses an underground line. Pass the word directly to Berlin.”

“Right away!”

Barbara made sure to grab her large service purse before running to the teletype station in one corner of the room: she had a 9mm LÜGER pistol in it, a gift from Otto Skorzeni. The other helperinen were unarmed, as was the norm for female auxiliaries. She was halfway through her message when automatic fire was heard from inside the building. Clenching her teeth, Barbara ignored it and kept sending her message. Machinegun fire suddenly burst a number of windows, sweeping the message room with a deadly hail of bullets. Three helperinen crumpled to the floor, while the others threw themselves flat on their belly, except for Barbara. Amidst the screams of pain and terror, the door of the message room was kicked open and a grenade thrown inside. At first, everybody could only look at the smoking grenade, too frozen by fear to react. Lisa Hartmann then did something Barbara thought she would never have the courage to do: she threw herself on top of the grenade just before it blew. Even muffled by Lisa’s body, the explosion was deafening and sprayed the horrified women in the room with blood and gore. Barbara was taking out her pistol when two British paratroopers jumped inside the room, spraying it with indiscriminate fire from their assault rifles and hitting a number of the

helferinen. Being in a corner to their left, Barbara was at first unseen and untouched and used that chance to fire twice at the nearest paratrooper from a distance of three paces, hitting him squarely with both bullets. The second paratrooper reacted instantly and shifted his fire, cutting down Barbara. The British, pumped full of adrenaline and enraged by the death of an old comrade, then methodically shot the surviving women. Three helferinen who tried to flee by the rear door were shot in the back. The British then went to Barbara, lying in a pool of blood, and finished her off with a bullet in the head before leaving the message room.

06:52 (Berlin Time)

Oslo-Fornebu road

Otto Skorzeni was driving a VW Kubbewagen¹⁴ towards the Fornebu airfield, where he was to meet a Luftwaffe staff officer to resolve a problem with air shipment of critical spare parts, when he heard the first gunfire. Being still a good kilometer away from the airfield, he immediately slowed down and got off the road, driving his car inside the forest bordering the road before stopping and shutting off the engine. Heavy exchanges of fire could now be heard from the direction of the airfield as Otto grabbed his StG-41 assault rifle and jumped out of his vehicle. The big SS man then started jogging cautiously towards the airfield, using the cover of trees and bushes along the way. He slowed to a cautious walk as he approached the airfield's perimeter. That proved a wise move, as he soon heard English words spoken to his left. Going down to a crawl, Otto peeped through a bush and saw a dozen British soldiers manning a roadside ambush position, complete with machineguns and anti-tank weapons. The British wore the green beret characteristic of commando troops. Backing away quietly, Otto then went around their position and continued towards the airfield. Once he could see the airfield through the trees, he turned right and followed the tree line to get close to the headquarters building, his objective. In the process, he saw a number of British paratroopers walking or running around the airfield. Most of the action however seemed to be in the hangars area, where there was still some resistance. Closing in to less than forty meters from the headquarters building, Otto crouched behind a tree and observed the area for a good two minutes, spotting only two British soldiers kneeling behind a

¹⁴ Kubbewagen: military variant of the original VW Beetle

parked truck and looking away from him. Taking his chance, Otto sprinted quietly across the open ground and crouched besides the rear door of the message room. Cautiously looking inside through a window, he saw no movement and quickly pushed the door open. To his surprise, something partially blocked it. He soon knew why once he was inside: the body of a dead helperin was leaning against it. Scanning the carnage in the message room, Otto couldn't help swear quietly in anger: this had been a massacre, pure and simple. Reviewing grimly each of the dead German women, he was able to recognize Lisa Hartmann's body by her rank insignias, blond hair and height. Her body was otherwise mangled beyond recognition. Otto also could figure out how it had happened and mentally praised her courage before continuing his search for Barbara Holzberg. He found her in a far corner, near the body of a British paratrooper. Grief briefly overtook him as he looked down at the body of the woman he had been dating regularly since their arrival in Oslo. The fact that she had made the British pay a price for her death was little consolation to Skorzeni. Gently closing her dead eyes, he then scanned the room one last time.

"The British will pay for this, I swear."

Spotting a teletype station nearby, he went to it and felt his heart jump when he found it still operating. The last message received on it dated back from less than twenty minutes ago and was a request from Berlin for a confirmation of an attack on Fornebu. Otto was reviewing the settings when he heard the noise of approaching aircraft. Going to a broken window and cautiously looking out, he saw at least a dozen British transport aircraft circling over the airfield, with two of them lining up for a landing. As soon as those two had landed, they slowed down and veered off the runway. Side doors were thrown open and dozens of soldiers jumped out, dispersing and taking hasty defensive positions as two more transports landed. Having seen enough, Otto went back to the teletype machine and started sending a message to Berlin.

TO HIGHER HEADQUARTERS IN BERLIN, FROM OSLO-FORNEBU. FORNEBU AIRFIELD TAKEN BY BRITISH PARATROOPERS AT ABOUT 0655 HOURS TODAY, LOCAL TIME. BRITISH REINFORCEMENTS NOW LANDING DIRECTLY IN FORNEBU. EVALUATE BRITISH FORCE IN FORNEBU AT ONE BATTALION OF PARATROOPERS, WITH APPROXIMATELY ONE BATTALION OF LIGHT INFANTRY IN THE PROCESS OF LANDING. MORE PROBABLY TO COME. NO ENEMY VEHICLES OR HEAVY WEAPONS SEEN YET AT FORNEBU. FIFTEEN

UNARMED HELFERINEN MURDERED IN COLD BLOOD BY BRITISH. SIGNED, OBERSTURMFUHRER OTTO SKORZENI, SS-PANZER-DIVISION 'REICH'. HEIL HITLER.

Closing down the teletype machine, Otto left the message room after an ultimate kiss on Barbara Holzberg's cold lips. The British never saw him as he made his way back to his car and drove off, speeding towards his division's headquarters in Oslo.

08:17 (Berlin Time)

Headquarters of the SS Panzer-Division 'Reich'

Oslo

Skorzeni stormed inside General Hausser's office, ignoring the protests of the general's Aide, and snapped to attention in front of his desk while giving the Nazi salute.

"Herr Obergruppenführer, the British have taken Fornebu Airfield. I just came back from there."

Without letting time to his superior to cut him, Otto then quickly recounted what he had seen and done. Hausser listened on patiently, frowning only at the mention of the killing of the helferinen.

"The bastards! They will pay for this. We may not have our full division in Norway yet, but we have enough to throw these British back into the sea. Obersturmführer, I understand that your maintenance section has not arrived yet from Hamburg and in fact will not leave for Oslo until tomorrow at the earliest. Die Wolfen seemingly had a high regard for you as a soldier, so why don't you attach yourself to the Panzer-Grenadier Regiment 'Deutschland' in the meantime?"

"With pleasure, Obergruppenführer."

The general's telephone then rang, picked up at once by Hausser. Knowing better than leaving before being dismissed, Otto waited and listened as Hausser's face reflected surprise, then horror.

"Nothing left? But...that's impossible!... Yes... Yes... I understand, Reichführer. We will avenge them. Heil Hitler!"

Cold anger in his eyes, General Hausser put down his telephone receiver and looked up at Skorzeni.

“Obersturmführer, it seems that your maintenance section, along with most of our logistical train, will never arrive here: over 400 British bombers attacked Hamburg with those awful blast bombs imported from the future by Laplante. Reichführer Himmler is now on the outskirts of the city and tells me that there is nothing left of it. Casualties are feared to be in the hundreds of thousands. He has ordered us to crush the British here and not to take any prisoners. Join your new regiment and avenge our compatriots. Dismissed!”

15:28 (Berlin Time)

Saturday, August 30, 1941 ‘B’

Hamburg, Germany

The civil defense workers had to back away after opening the steel doors of the air raid shelter, so strong was the stench of charred flesh. Two men wearing breathing apparatus went down the stairs and lit up the powerful electric arc lamps they had brought along, revealing a nightmarish scene: close to sixty bodies, all burned beyond recognition, filled the small basement room. Numerous children’s bodies could be recognized by their small size. Themselves wearing breathing apparatus, Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler and Air Field Marshal Milch went down into the shelter, looking around for a few seconds before climbing back out. While Milch and Himmler looked sick when they removed their masks, Adolf Hitler looked simply furious. Facing the party official in charge of Hamburg, he signaled him to approach.

“Gauleiter! What are the latest figures on the casualties from this British bombing raid?”

The Nazi official took out a sheet of paper before answering in a quivering voice.

“As best as we can tell, Mein Führer, at least 240,000 persons are either confirmed dead or missing. That count is still rising every hour, however. A surface area of over seven square kilometers was utterly flattened and incinerated as well. The local water is now undrinkable and there are risks of epidemics from all the corpses around, Mein Führer.”

Hitler nodded his head once, then looked severely at Air Field Marshal Milch.

“How many British bombers did the Luftwaffe destroy, Milch?”

Knowing what was coming, the old aviator nonetheless spoke with a grave but steady voice.

“Nineteen bombers were confirmed shot down, Mein Führer, plus many more damaged. Our...”

“Nineteen? Nineteen out of 400? Is that the best the Luftwaffe can do, Milch? I was hoping that you would do better than your predecessor.”

“But, Mein Führer, the British bombers are faster than our fighters. I am still waiting for those jet fighters promised by the industry.”

“You will get them soon, Milch. As for those British, I have a nasty surprise ready for them. One last point, and this is for all of you, gentlemen: all captured British bomber crews are to be shot on the spot as war criminals. The same applies to British paratroopers, in view of what they did in Norway. I will not tolerate any objections to these orders. Is that clear?”

A concert of meek approvals answered Hitler.

15:35 (Berlin Time)

Hills West of Fornebu Airfield

Norway

George Townsend drearily looked at the long line of wounded soldiers lying on the ground, both British and Canadian, then down at Fornebu Airfield, only two kilometers away but out of reach. The Germans, supported by heavy TIGER tanks and armored halftracks, had evicted the Anglo-Canadian forces from the airfield yesterday, following fighting of a rare ferocity. They were now in a standoff, with the Anglo-Canadians unable to retake the airfield and the Germans unable to use it as long as the Canadians' mortars were within range of it. Right now, however, Townsend's immediate concern was with the evacuation of his wounded men. One of the rare helicopters available had been promised from the successful invasion force in Stavanger, nearly 320 kilometers to the Southwest.

“Sir!” Called up a signaler, looking up from his radio set. “I have our helicopter on radio. It is now five minutes away.”

“Good! Give me your microphone and headset, Corporal.”
The signaler obeyed dutifully and moved, giving space for Townsend to kneel besides the radio.

“Seagull Six, Seagull Six, this is Mike Foxtrot Three, over.”

"This is Seagull Six. Send, over!" Replied a very familiar voice, making Townsend smile.

"Doug, is that you? This is George."

"Well, Mike Foxtrot Three, isn't this a pleasant surprise. We will be able to pick up your wounded men soon. I have two Canadian Army nurses with me, including a certain Patricia."

"No kidding? That is a real morale booster, Seagull Six. Do you need a smoke marker or a flare to mark our position, over?"

"To attract German fire? No, thank you, Mike Foxtrot Three. I am about to jump the last ridgeline before your position. You can guide me by radio from then on, over."

"Understood, Seagull Six. We will be watching for you. Out!"

Townsend didn't have to look for very long, the small shape of an approaching helicopter appearing between two hill peaks after two minutes. It was only half a kilometer away when a soldier shouted in alarm.

"Aircraft overhead!"

Townsend looked up and swore: those were German FW-190 fighters. He immediately grabbed his radio microphone and shouted in it.

"Seagull Six, go away now! You have German fighters overhead."

Doug Wilson did not respond, instead pulling his medium transport helicopter in a tight turn. The FW-190 were however very agile and had a huge speed advantage. Townsend could only look on helplessly as a German fighter dived on the frantically zigzagging British helicopter and fired a series of short cannon bursts at it. One burst hit the rear rotor of the Avro Vulture and shattered it, sending the helicopter down in an uncontrollable spin.

"THIS IS SEAGULL SIX: I'M HIT AND GOING DOWN."

The helicopter crashed in a ball of flames three seconds after that transmission. The German fighters then dived on Townsend's position, strafing it with cannon fire and not giving him any time to grieve Doug and Patricia. He and his valid men jumped in time in their trenches but the wounded, lined up in the open for evacuation, were not as lucky. Hideous screams came out as most of them were ripped apart by exploding cannon shells.

"BASTARDS! YOU BLOODY BASTARDS!" Shouted Townsend at the receding German fighters. He then collapsed on his knees, overtaken by grief.

19:41 (Berlin Time)

Hunter-Killer Surface Effect Ship H.M.S. NARWHAL

Forty kilometers off the coast of Kristiansand, Norway

Skagerrak Strait

Peter Stilwell looked nervously for the third time in less than five minutes at the screen of the air surveillance radar. A sailor was monitoring the radar station sitting in a corner of the bridge, but the very real threat of a German air attack on his hovercraft division made him extra cautious. In less than half a hour, the nineteen transport hovercraft that he was protecting with six surface effect ships should be landing in Kristiansand a mechanized infantry battalion of the First Canadian Infantry Division. Only then could they all retreat back to Britain under the cover of the growing darkness, away from the murderous attacks of the Luftwaffe. The fact that he had predicted such air attacks did nothing to decrease Stilwell's bitterness towards the Imperial General Staff's early dismissal of the Luftwaffe's threat. Only now was the high command starting to transfer squadrons of jet fighters to the captured airfield near Stavanger, realizing belatedly that fighters based in England did not have enough range to be able to provide adequate air cover to the British and Canadian troops now in Norway. As a result, the German fighters and bombers staging out of neighboring Denmark were having a field day. To add to his bitterness, the Home Fleet battleships and battlecruisers cruising around the North Sea in anticipation of a German naval surface attack had lost the battleship H.M.S. REPULSE, torpedoed by a German submarine. As a result, the heavy units that could have given precious fire support to the troops landing in Norway had been pulled further back. That left a collection of hovercraft, destroyers, light cruisers and logistic ships alone to bear the brunt of German air attacks. Already, 23 hovercraft, nine destroyers and four light cruisers had been either sunk or heavily damaged in this operation.

Pacing again around the bridge of his command surface effect ship, his eyes went for a moment on Ship's Boy Tom Allen, standing besides his 20mm anti-aircraft cannon on the starboard open wing of the bridge. The boy was only sixteen years old but was reputed to be the best machine gunner in the division. To have to expose such young persons to possible death was probably the hardest part of naval leadership for

Stilwell. A warning from the air surveillance radar operator then took Peter out of his dark thoughts.

“Sir, I have multiple air blips entering the radar screen, coming from the South.”

“How many?” Asked Stilwell while hurrying towards the radar station.

“I’m not sure yet, sir: more blips keep appearing continuously. I already count fifteen blips.”

“That’s already too much. Signals Officer! Alert the division that an incoming German air raid is approaching from the South. The MERMAID and SWORDFISH will stay with the LCACs while the others will follow me to meet the German aircraft. Also, advise Sola airfield and ask for air cover.”

“Aye, sir!”

“Chief Merrick, sound combat stations. German aircraft approaching.”

“Sir,” said nervously the radar operator near Stilwell, “I now have forty plus blips on my screen, heading directly towards us.”

“Hell! Helm, new heading: 180! Accelerate to eighty knots!”

Stilwell thought furiously as his men carried out his orders. By his actions, he intended to deflect the main brunt of the German attack from the vulnerable transport hovercraft and their embarked troops. On the other hand, he was putting four of his surface effect ships in a near suicidal position. His hunter-killer ships were well armed for their size and extremely fast but they were mostly made of aluminum and used gasoline as fuel, thus burned easily if hit by a bomb. This was going to be a nerve-wracking battle indeed. The next announcement by the radar man did nothing to help.

“Captain, I can now make out two distinct groups of aircraft. One is flying at 12,000 feet and includes 32 aircraft. The other is made of fifty plus aircraft flying at 8,000 feet.”

“Fighters on top cover for bombers.” Guessed Stilwell, somber. “Mister Ronash, were you able to contact Sola airfield?”

The young signals officer looked embarrassed as he answered.

“Uh, they just answered me, sir: they can’t spare anything right now.”

“What? Tell those R.A.F. airheads that I have over eighty German aircraft heading towards this amphibious force and that we have over 800 Canadian soldiers still to be unloaded. Thinking of it, delete that last part: no need to give information to the enemy.”

“Uh, yes sir!”

Still fuming, Stilwell got out of the command bridge and went on the open bridge, taking first the precaution of storing his cap inside: when traveling at a speed of eighty knots, any hat worn on an open deck was as good as lost. He smiled at young Tom Allen, who was firmly holding on to the gunner's harness of his Oerlikon 20mm cannon.

"You will soon have the chance to prove your skills, Mister Allen."

The teenager grinned in turn and tapped the breach of his cannon.

"Let the Germans come, sir. I just wish that I could have as much success with girls as with this."

Stilwell laughed at the boy's spunk. He knew that Allen was not bragging. He was a veteran of the mission against the battlecruisers SCHARNHORST and GNEISENAU and had been on the lead hunter-killer ship to enter Wilhelmshaven harbor during Operation BACKSTABBER. His sailor's tunic displayed the ribbon of the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal with bar, plus the insignia of expert machine gunner. As for success with girls, Allen's fit 175 centimeter frame and smooth face should help him, once he got rid of his shyness. Grabbing his binoculars, Stilwell scanned the southern sky, looking for the German aircraft. He spotted them ten minutes later, mere dots still. Grabbing the open bridge's telephone, he called the bridge duty officer.

"Reduce speed to ten knots. Four inch guns to engage only the bombers, on my order."

"Aye, Captain!"

A few minutes later, as the mass of aircraft was nearly overhead, Stilwell gave more orders on the telephone.

"To all hunter-killer ships: four inch guns to commence firing now on bombers. Reverse course to heading 350 and accelerate to eighty knots."

The three huge shrouded propellers of H.M.S. NARWHAL started spinning at maximum speed as the two twin medium gun turrets of the surface effect ship started firing, pumping a combined total of 48 shells per minute in the air. The twelve 20mm cannons and four twin heavy machineguns stayed silent for the moment, their effective range being way too short to engage the Germans now.

Matching course with the German air armada, Stilwell's four surface effect ships accelerated to nearly half the cruising speed of the German bombers while firing close to 200 shells per minute at them. Equipped with proximity fuses, the exploding four-inch shells peppered continuously the bombers with thousands of steel fragments, apart of

shaking them around. The German bomber commander soon lost patience when one, then two of his Junkers 87 STUKA started trailing smoke and had to turn around. A third dive bomber received a direct hit and broke up in midair as twelve of the escorting Bf-109 fighters started diving on the British ships. Stilwell saw them coming and gave more orders on the telephone.

“Four-inch guns, stay on the bombers, whatever happens. The light guns will concentrate on the incoming fighters. Helm, start zigzag course.”

The German Bf-109 fighters then split into pairs to target the British ships and opened fire at about the same time the British did. The latter however used armor piercing, discarding sabot rounds, or APDS in short, which the Germans didn't have. Having a much higher muzzle velocity than normal shells, APDS rounds had flatter trajectories and shorter times of flight, which helped greatly the accuracy of the British gunners. That point was quickly drilled into a German Bf-109 by young Tom Allen, who sent it crashing in flames into the sea after firing only three short bursts. Peter Stilwell, who was by now little more than a spectator in this battle, nearly applauded at that: the teenager was truly a phenomenal gunner. As the second Bf-109 of the pair attacking the NARWHAL overflew the ship, Allen fired one long burst at it. The fighter turned on its back and dived into the sea, its pilot killed. As Allen's loader quickly put in place a fresh drum of 20mm shells, Stilwell assessed visually the state of his flotilla. All four ships were still running at top speed and firing their four-inch guns in earnest at the German bombers. He could see a few 20mm shell impacts on his NARWHAL, but they appeared non-critical, while two gunners on the nearest ship had been hit and were down on the deck. A third fighter had been shot down, while a total of five bombers had been knocked out of the sky or forced to turn back with heavy damage up to now.

Stung by the murderous British anti-aircraft fire, the German fighter pilots performed wide turns before coming for a second strafing pass, trying to stay out of range for as long as possible. Tom Allen surprised even Stilwell by firing a series of short, carefully aimed bursts at extreme range, while the Germans were still turning. Stilwell couldn't help scream in delight when one of the remaining Bf-109s caught fire and crashed into the sea. The German's wingman, thoroughly intimidated by now, fired his cannons and heavy machine guns from further afar than the first run and broke off early, resulting in a less accurate and more dispersed fire. One more Bf-109 was shot down and another one damaged in the ensuing strafing pass. Stilwell's grin faded

however when he saw one of his surface effect ships trail thick smoke from its engine compartment. That presented him with a cruel dilemma: if he ordered his other ships to stay with their damaged comrade, this would leave the bombers free to attack his landing force. On the other hand, if left alone, his damaged ship would attract the fire of all the remaining German fighters. The burning ship was already falling behind as Stilwell grabbed the telephone again.

“Signals Officer, pass the following: all ships except the NARWHAL will keep pursuing the German bombers. Helm, reduce speed and adopt a station 200 yards aft and to port of the BARRACUDA.”

As his own surface effect ship slowed down to stay with the BARRACUDA, Stilwell saw with mixed feelings about fifteen German Junkers 87 dive-bombers drop from the rest of the armada and dive towards him. That was going to alleviate the threat to his landing force but the next few minutes were going to be exciting, to say the least. With only two ships to deal with six fighters, things were already hectic. Stilwell then noticed with displeasure that the fire from the NARWHAL's forward four-inch gun turret had slowed down considerably. He nearly shouted in his telephone when the gunnery officer answered him.

“Mister MacDonald, what is wrong with ‘A’ turret?”

“It has expended all the shells in its ready lockers, sir. They are now down to passing shells by hand from the ammunition room.”

“Then grab everybody available and form human chains between the ammo rooms and our four-inch guns.”

“Aye, Captain!”

Putting down the bridge telephone, Stilwell went to Tom Allen's loader and patted his shoulder.

“Sailor, go to ‘A’ turret's ammo room and help pass shells up. I will take over here as loader.”

“Uh, yes sir!” Answered the surprised sailor before running away. Tom Allen, concentrated on his shooting, didn't notice that until Stilwell came forward with a fresh drum when he shouted for more ammunition.

“Sir, what are you doing?”

“Loading you, boy. Just keep shooting: you're doing splendidly.”

Grinning at that, the teenager fired two bursts at a Bf-109 turning away after a pass, hitting the engine. Coughing black smoke, the fighter soon had to belly land in the sea.

The blood-curling shriek from a Junkers 87's diving siren then made them look straight up.

“Get that STUKA, boy!”

“I can't, sir! My gun can't elevate that high.”

“Then shoot it down when it will pull out of its dive.”

“Aye, Captain!”

The trick was of course to avoid the STUKA's bomb first. The helmsman of the NARWHAL saw to that, turning abruptly to port at the last moment and nearly projecting Stilwell off the gun deck. The STUKA's 500-kilo bomb exploded in the water besides the NARWHAL, copiously spraying its decks with seawater but causing nothing more serious. Tom Allen pursued mercilessly the dive-bomber with 20mm shells as it pulled out of its dive and started climbing back. With five other gunners adding their fire to that of Allen, the Junkers 87 soon caught fire and crashed into the sea. Being much slower than their escort fighters, the dive-bombers proved to be easier targets for the British gunners. Six Junkers 87 were shot down in the minute that followed. Zigzagging and jerking around crazily to avoid the German bombs, the BARRACUDA still received a direct hit between two of its shrouded propellers. Its propulsion system gone and its fuel tanks on fire, the sinking surface effect ship was soon being abandoned by its crew. A second squadron of dive-bombers then joined the action, intent on finishing the NARWHAL as well.

Despite the prowess of its helmsman and of its gunners, the odds were too heavily against the NARWHAL. A bomb finally scored a direct hit, penetrating through the top of its aft four-inch gun turret and exploding in its ammunition room. The horrified survivors from the BARRACUDA, huddled into life rafts, could only watch as the NARWHAL blew up in a spectacular fireball. No survivors from the NARWHAL were found by the British destroyed that showed up on the scene ten hours later.

13:21 (GMT)

Sunday, August 31, 1941 'B'

Prime Minister's office

Home Office building, London

Winston Churchill immediately noted Hasting Ismay's long face as his military secretary entered his office, a classified file in his hands.

"What is it, General?"

"The latest situation report on Operation VIKING RAIDER, sir." Said weakly Ismay before putting the file on Churchill's desk. He stood silently at attention as the prime minister read through the file with increasing dismay.

"We still have not retaken Fornebu Airfield? And what is the R.A.F. waiting for to send more jet fighters to Sola?"

"We don't have more jet fighters to commit, sir. We had in fact only a limited number of them in inventory at the start of this operation. We also had a number of accidents on landing in Sola: the airfield there is too small for them. Our field engineers are working hard to enlarge it, but it will take at least two weeks before it can be safely used by our jet fighters. As for Fornebu, our forces in the hills around it have taken heavy losses and are short of anti-tank weapons. Those two SS panzer divisions are very powerful units, sir."

"Can't we land an armored unit on the coast to link up with our paratroopers?"

"We tried that yesterday, sir. A Canadian mechanized infantry battalion was landed by hovercraft in Kristiansand but our flotilla came under heavy air attack and suffered heavily. The escort surface effect ships did a splendid job in blunting the German bomber force but at the cost of four out of six ships. The list of losses and casualties is at Annex D of the report, sir."

Churchill flipped the pages of the report and read the said annex.

"Over 9,400 men killed and 12,500 others wounded since the start of the operation?"

"Men and women, sir. German bombs don't discriminate between the sexes. Sir, I'm sad to announce to you that both Squadron Leader Wilson and Navy Captain Stilwell were killed in operation."

"Good God! That will be a hard blow to the Athena Section. What about Major Townsend?"

"He's with the force fighting near Fornebu, sir. His commandos are due to attack tonight a German position blocking a mountain pass between Kristiansand and Oslo. That position has been holding our mechanized columns for two days now and is nearly impossible to assault."

“Then it will fall tonight: Major Townsend is among the best we have. Anything else, General?”

“Uh...two things, sir. I came upon two disturbing pieces of Ultra traffic this morning. Those two German messages unfortunately took nearly two days to be deciphered. The first one was an order to shoot on capture any British bomber crew taken prisoner. It cited a figure of 340,000 civilians killed in the bombing of Hamburg as the justification for such an order.”

“340,000? How could that be? It must be an exaggeration.”

“I don't think so, sir. On inquiring with Air Marshal Harris, I learned that our bombers on the Hamburg raid were loaded exclusively with one-ton Fuel Air Explosives bombs. Those German civilians didn't stand a chance.”

“The same applied to the civilians of Rotterdam and Warsaw, General. It didn't stop the Germans from bombing them. Such killings are regrettable but hard to avoid.” Ismay lowered his head, feeling awful about this but too disciplined to argue with the Prime Minister. Nancy Laplante, if still around, would have most probably pounced verbally on Churchill for this, regardless of the consequences to herself.

“The second message is much less clear, sir. It came out of Hitler's headquarters and went to an unidentified unit in Germany that did not reply. The message was quote launch Operation ANGEL OF DEATH on August 31 unquote. That's today. Nobody can figure out what it means, sir.”

“Hmm... Operation ANGEL OF DEATH... It certainly sounds sinister enough. Keep me informed if you learn anything more about this, General.”

“Yes sir. Do you...”

The noise of a terrifying explosion, followed by a strong shock wave that made the floor shift, cut off Ismay.

“Bloody hell! What was that?” He exclaimed before rushing out of the Prime Minister's office and going to the nearest window, where half a dozen civilian employees were already looking outside. Opening the window and craning his neck out, Ismay saw a huge cloud of black smoke rising in the distance, in the direction of the East End Docks. Looking for German aircraft in the sky or any other sign of a bombing raid, he saw nothing. He was wondering to himself what had happened when a second terrifying explosion from much nearer was heard.

13:28 (GMT)

Buckingham Palace

London

Young Princess Margaret, escorted by her dressing lady, finally joined her parents near the exit giving on the royal gardens as the latter were getting impatient.

“About time, young girl.” Said the queen severely. “Where is Elizabeth? Our garden reception guests will not wait all day.”

“Oh, I believe that she is still trying to find her white gloves, mother.” Answered cheerily Margaret, who had actually hidden her sister’s gloves, knowing how thrown off her well-ordered sibling would be by that. A loud explosion then made them all jump in surprise. The king got closer to his daughter as palace security men started running around.

“Maybe we should get closer to the air raid shelter. I wish that Lilibet could hurry and join us, though.”

“Was that a bomb, Father?”

“It sounded like one, and a powerful one at that.”

The king was about to order one of the nearby security men to go fetch his eldest daughter when a blast wave toppled them all and deafened them for a few seconds as the whole palace jerked on its foundations. Light fixtures and windows shattered and plaster and dust rained on the royal family, now lying on the floor. Security men and servants quickly helped them back on their feet as they coughed from the dust and smoke filling the air. The queen immediately started towards the wing containing the royal apartments but was politely stopped by a security man.

“Your Majesty, you must go to the air raid shelter now: more bombs could fall.”

“My daughter was still in her room. I must make sure that she is safe.”

“But, Your Majesty...”

Ignoring the man, the queen pushed him aside and ran towards the royal apartments. She however had to stop soon, her way blocked by a fallen wall. Through the gaping hole and the dust and smoke, the queen saw with horror that the whole wing housing the royal apartments was gone, a huge crater surrounded by rubble sitting in its place. The king caught up with her as she started crying and screaming hysterically.

03:41 (Berlin Time)

Monday, September 1, 1941 'B'

Positions of 2nd Company, SS Panzer-Grenadier Regiment 'Deutschland'

Coastal mountain range Northeast of Christiansand, Norway

Despite the early hour, Otto Skorzeni was fully awake and alert when one of his men silently walked to his improvised command post. Having anticipated a British night attack, he had taken a few hours of sleep in the evening, along with most of his company. The grenadier he had posted to watch the cliff bordering the east side of his company's mountaintop position whispered once near Otto.

"They're coming up the cliff face, as you predicted, sir. I could hear at least a dozen men climbing up quietly."

"Ach! British commandos, probably. They are good, but not good enough to beat us. Advise Scharführer¹⁵ Eicke to move quietly his platoon to the edge of the east cliff."

"Yes sir!"

Slinging his StG-41 assault rifle across his back, Otto took out his FN GP35 9mm pistol and silently made his way to the cliff's edge. An accomplished mountain climber himself, he had examined carefully the rock face during daylight to judge where the enemy would try to climb it. A nearly vertical wall with its base washed by the waters of a wide fjord, it still could be climbed at certain spots, which Otto now knew. Going to the most likely spot and lying down on his belly near the edge, he listened carefully and smiled after a few seconds: someone was indeed climbing towards him and was in fact close to reaching the top. Looking left and right, Otto saw in the moonlight that Eicke's men were now in position and ready. Going to a crouched position, Otto took out his flashlight and, keeping it off, waited. As soon as a hand appeared on the edge, searching for a grip, Otto put one boot on it and lit his flashlight, illuminating the grimacing face of a major of the British commandos. Otto then spoke to him in English.

"Nice try, Englander, but you're still not good enough to beat me. Now, watch your men die."

On an order from Skorzeni, Eicke and his men lit a number of flashlights, illuminating over twenty British commandos clinging helplessly to the rock face. The Germans then

¹⁵ Scharfuhrer: SS sergeant

opened fire, mercilessly shooting the commandos off the cliff. With a scream of rage, the British major used his one free hand and, slapping away Skorzeni's pistol, grabbed him by the belt before pushing himself off the rock face with his feet. Both men fell together towards the jagged rocks of the fjord's shoreline, holding each other by the throat in an ultimate fight to the death. After a few seconds of freefall, a flash of white light enveloped them both. They then landed with a loud thump on a thick, soft foam mat. Skorzeni and Townsend, still holding each other's throat, looked around them with utter surprise: they were now in what looked like a brightly lit ship's cargo compartment. A sarcastic female voice speaking English then made their heads snap around.

"So, you two machos are not content on splashing yourselves on rocks: you have to strangle each other as well on the way down."

"NANCY!"

"DIE WOLFIN!"

"Welcome to the realm of the dead, gentlemen." Said Nancy Laplante, pointing a weird-looking pistol at them. "Now, be sensible and throw away your weapons. That includes you, George."

Townsend looked with incomprehension at her, noting the two big men standing besides her and also pointing pistols.

"But, Nancy, I'm on your side." Protested the British. Nancy, wearing a gray uniform and a set of body armor, shook her head slowly, not smiling.

"I'm on my own side now, George. Drop your weapons, both of you."

Skorzeni and Townsend did so reluctantly, stepping off the foam mat after putting down their rifles, pistols, grenades and knives.

"Good! Now, step towards that door, slowly."

"Where are we anyway? How did we get here?" Grumbled Skorzeni while walking slowly towards the metallic door pointed at by Laplante.

"On a time ship. You were picked up by spacetime transit probes. You are now officially dead and I am offering you a second life in a new world: the 34th Century."

"BUT I'M NOT DEAD!" Shouted Skorzeni angrily. Nancy looked at him calmly, dispassionately.

"You and Major Townsend would be, if I wouldn't have caught you in midair. Your asses are now mine."

"They should call you the She-Devil instead of the She-Wolf." Replied Otto bitterly.

“Just call me Nancy, Otto. If you will now just go through that door, I will present you to other dead people.”

“You don’t make much sense, Nancy.” Said Townsend pointedly. “Why did you abandon us, anyway?”

She gave him a dark look as her face hardened.

“Because the British government grossly abused my trust and brutalized someone from the future who risked her life to save me in Berlin. To top that, it committed an atrocity I am not about to forgive.”

“So, you saw what the British did to Hamburg?” Said Otto.

“Yes, I did and I feel like killing that Harris bastard.”

“What are you talking about?” Asked Townsend, confused. Nancy glared at him, obviously angry and bitter.

“What I’m talking about? I’m talking about a third of a million civilians, old men, women and children, incinerated in less than an hour in Hamburg. The R.A.F. used F.A.E. bombs on them, bombs that I gave the design to you British on the express condition that they would never be used against cities. That’s what I’m talking about.”

“Then,” added Otto softly, “you must know also about the helperinen murdered by British paratroopers in Fornebu Airfield.”

The blank look he got told him that she didn’t know. Otto then spent a couple of minutes to describe what he had seen in the communications room of Fornebu airfield, giving Nancy precise dates and times. Townsend cut in at the end of it.

“That’s bullshit! No British soldier would...”

“SHUT UP, GEORGE! JUST...SHUT UP!” Shouted Nancy, now deeply upset and with tears in her eyes. The fury in her voice did silence Townsend, who then went through the door of the compartment after Nancy’s two armed companions had stepped through backward, their pistols still pointed. He and Skorzeni, followed by Nancy, stepped inside a wide, comfortable lounge luxuriously furnished with big, padded seats along its walls and with low tables facing them, plus thick wall to wall carpeting. Townsend didn’t pay much attention to all that, as three persons he knew very well rose from their seats, joy on their faces. George himself ran to them, hugging and kissing the baby-faced blonde in the group, who returned his kisses.

“Patricia! I’m so happy to see you alive.” Said George before looking at Doug Wilson and Peter Stilwell. “Hell, it feels better to be dead when you are joined with friends.”

He was shaking hands with his friends when the noise of someone sobbing made him look in a corner of the room. He then saw a teenage girl wearing a cocktail gown, sitting with a small, mature woman and crying. His eyes bulged when he recognized the girl. Hurrying to her, he then knelt respectfully in front of her.

“Your Highness! How come you are here?”

Princess Elizabeth looked at him with eyes full of tears, but couldn't speak. The woman trying to console her answered George.

“The Germans have started to bombard London with big rockets. One of them hit squarely the room we were in at Buckingham Palace and destroyed our whole wing. Miss Laplante saved us just before the explosion. However, she refuses to return us to the palace.”

George got on his feet in an instant and angrily faced Nancy, who had been looking on from the center of the room.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Nancy? Why won't you return Princess Elizabeth to London?”

“Because, as far as history goes, she's dead, like you and the others here. I was able to save her because I read about her disappearance and presumed death from a V-2 missile strike in a British newspaper dated from three days after the strike. I then backtracked in time to save her and her dressing lady. If I let them return to the palace, it will change history as it is already written and may even split the timelines again. Of course, I could have let her die, if that's what you prefer.”

Her last remark infuriated George, who stepped menacingly towards her.

“Nancy, you better bring back the Princess safely to London, or...”

Her reaction was to raise her left arm and point him while looking calmly at him. To George's astonishment, he found himself incapable of moving forward, as if an invisible opponent was pushing him back.

“George, I did all this because I couldn't stand the idea of you, her and the others being killed. This was the only legal way for me to save you.”

Except for the two men backing Nancy, the others present looked on with stunned disbelief as George fruitlessly tried to advance. He finally gave up, glaring at her as she lowered her arm.

“How the hell did you do that? By some scientific trick?”

“No: by the power of the mind. Can't you just accept your fate, George?”

Skorzeni, who had watched all this carefully, stepped besides Townsend and faced Nancy.

“You said that this was the only legal way to save us. What did you mean by ‘legal way’?”

“Otto, I am the co-creator of an organization called the Time Patrol. The mandate of that organization is to protect history from tampering and to document it. I could not save you unless you disappeared from 1941 and were declared missing in action, as history has recorded.”

“And what are we to do now? Live like ghosts?”

“Actually, you will have a choice to make soon about how you will want to live. Once I take care of something, we will jump to the year 3385, where you will be able to clean up and eat before discussing your future with me. If you will now excuse me.”

Nancy and the two armed men then left through a sliding steel door leading forward. The door closed behind them, leaving George and the other so-called dead people to look at each other. Sylvie Comeau, the other Canadian Army nurse that had accompanied Patricia Wilson on the doomed helicopter, wiped the cold sweat off her forehead with one hand.

“Damn! Can someone tell me how Brigadier Laplante did that piece of magic?”

“Oh, it’s really simple, actually.” Replied laconically Peter Stilwell. “She gained some superpowers following a divine intervention.”

“WHAT?” Shouted many of the others in unison.

“That was also my first reaction to this. However, it seems that she is more angel than human now. According to many witnesses, she can heal by the touch of her hands, can fly, communicate telepathically and is incredibly strong. From having worked closely with her for nearly a year, I can tell you that she definitely didn’t possess these powers before.”

Elizabeth Windsor pondered that for a moment.

“A divine intervention... Then, God is really on our side.”

“Uh, I wouldn’t say that, Your Highness. Nancy has some very good reasons to be pissed at us and, in fact, gave back her British medals to Prime Minister Churchill before returning to the future.”

“But, she was publicly mourned as a hero.” Objected the princess. “It was all over the newspapers, with that awful picture of her, tortured to death by the Gestapo.” Peter lowered his head in shame and embarrassment.

“She was still alive, barely, when that picture was taken. You really don’t want to know what the Gestapo did to her after her capture, Your Highness. She however survived those tortures and was sent by the Germans to Colditz Castle as a high-risk prisoner of war. That was where a miracle of some sort happened: she was fully healed and gained her powers, all that supposedly in a matter of seconds. Then, to our collective national shame, a number of ministers and generals pressured Prime Minister Churchill into bombing Colditz Castle, to kill Nancy and prevent her from ever revealing military secrets. She was however taken out of Colditz and transferred to Berlin just before the raid. The castle and town were razed to the ground by the bombing.”

As Elizabeth Windsor was about to explode with indignation, Otto Skorzeni cut in, looking severely at Stilwell and standing with his arms crossed.

“Don’t forget the part about Nancy Laplante saving both the allied prisoners and hundreds of German civilians and soldiers from the bombardment of Colditz, Englander. Your government didn’t deserve such a woman. You may be claiming the high moral ground but you are as politically cynical and manipulative as anybody else.”

“Now listen, buster!” Started to protest young Tom Allen, rising from his seat. Peter cut him off with a sign of the hand.

“As bitter as this may be, Mister Allen, that Nazi is right. What I am going to say was a closely guarded state secret but I guess that it is a moot point for us now. Two days before the bombing of Colditz, a woman from the future showed up near London. She, a claimed scientist, had tried alone to free Nancy from her Gestapo jail and had been caught and tortured with her. She escaped from Berlin by using a small, portable time machine, reappearing near London and then contacting us.”

“What happened then?” Asked Patricia Wilson after the shock of that announcement was over. Peter bit his lips.

“We did about as dastardly a deed as the Gestapo: the M.I.5¹⁶ detained her and roughed her up to make her reveal how her time machine worked. Nancy, who had escaped Germany by stealing an aircraft in Berlin, somehow learned about that and broke her free, knocking out five security agents and shooting the head of M.I.5 in the process. Those facts were withheld from public knowledge on orders from the Prime Minister.”

¹⁶ M.I.5: British counter-intelligence services.

“The bastards!” Exclaimed Patricia, now furious, expressing the thoughts of most around her. Otto, on his part, was thinking furiously about what had been said. He was not proud about the Gestapo's deeds, the fighting man in him despising such cowardly and sadistic acts, but he had previously brushed over those as sometimes necessary for reasons of state security. It seemed now that the British had little to shout about in that matter as well. It also shed quite a new light on Nancy Laplante.

“Well, this is what I would call a weird situation.” Said Peter Stilwell after a long silence. “We are officially dead but we have to decide how we want to live in a future world we know nothing about yet.”

As if his remark had triggered a response, the large video screens covering the upper walls of the room came to life, while a soundtrack came out of invisible speakers. They could now see the panorama of a magnificent, futuristic city on the shores of an immense lake, as seen apparently from an aircraft. They then heard a soft female voice speaking in English.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the society of the Global Council. Founded in the 29th century, the Global Council spans the whole of the Solar System, with colonies and stations as far as the moons of Neptune. The population of the Solar System stood in the year 3384 at a total of 3.16 billion people, of which 2.8 billion live on or around the Earth. The government of the Global Council is elected by direct suffrage every five years and is headed by the Chief Global Administrator, who in turn is assisted by a council of regional and specialist administrators. Questions of global public interest are routinely put to the public via system-wide referendums.”

The view on the screens then changed to show the interior of a shopping mall, with a crowd of bald people milling around.

“The Global Council is devoted to providing a comfortable and secure life to all of its citizens through extensive social programs and the gratuity of all the basics necessities of life. Free of the scourge of war and of the burden of vast military expenditures, the citizens of the Global Council can concentrate on bettering themselves and on continuing to restore the environment of the Earth, which was devastated by a global nuclear war in the 21st century. Weapons were banned by the Global Council for the last 400 years and none thus existed until 3384.”

The view then changed again, this time to the interior of some advanced ship or aircraft. A number of bald people were visible, mixed with a man and two women with hair who were obviously much smaller than the bald persons.

“With the arrival in 3384 of Nancy Laplante, the first ancestor to enter in contact with the Global Council, the global ban on weapons was reviewed and modified to accommodate the creation of the first armed government agency in centuries, the Time Patrol. The Time Patrol, which is still being formed, has the mandate to patrol time and to protect history from illegal travels and tampering. It also is tasked to document history, which was poorly understood until recently due to the massive destruction of worldwide archives and museums during the nuclear holocaust of 2052. While still not fully operational, the Time Patrol has been able, particularly with the work of Nancy Laplante, who is for the moment its sole fully qualified field agent, to provide precious historical documentation and even to bring from the past specimens of plant and animal life extinguished during the 21st century. Training of the agents of the Time Patrol is ongoing and those who are able and willing to face the dangers and challenges of such a career are welcome to present their candidacy to the Time Patrol.”

The screens went black, letting the four men, three women and two teenagers ponder the presentation. Otto Skorzeni was the first to speak up.

“A good recruitment advertising if you ask me. Traveling through time should be interesting.”

“So that you could steal a time machine and bring it back to your Führer?” Replied George Townsend, attracting a cold stare from the big Austrian.

“I have only one word, Englander. If I decide to work with Brigadier Laplante and live in the future, then I am ready to swear my loyalty to her. As for you British, you have no lessons to give to me on that, considering the way you treated her.”

“I’m sorry to say this, George,” said Peter Stilwell, “but I have to agree with him on that.”

Peter then walked to Otto and extended his right hand.

“I believe that we have not been properly presented. Navy Captain Peter Stilwell, Royal Navy.”

Otto smiled, enhancing the long scar on his left cheek, and shook vigorously Peter’s hand.

“Obersturmführer Otto Skorzeni, Waffen SS. Pleased to know you. I suppose that this teenage boy was part of your crew.”

“That’s correct. This is Ship’s Boy Tom Allen, the best machine gunner I ever saw.”

After a slight hesitation, Tom Allen shook hands with Otto, who nodded in approval at the sight of the ribbon for the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal with Bar on his sailor's tunic.

"Young but full of valor. I like that! What about your other comrades, Captain Stilwell?"

"Well, since Nancy told us about your fondness for women, let me present you to Nurses Patricia Wilson and Sylvie Comeau, of the Canadian Army Medical Corps."

Otto shook hands first with the two nurses, smiling warmly to the young women before looking questioningly at Peter.

"What did Brigadier Laplante actually tell you about me?"

"Quite a lot, actually, at least to me. You were supposed to become the best German expert on special operations and commando raids in the war. You are a complete athlete, a deadly marksman and a born leader. You also love the company of women, despite being married and having a daughter. You were due to survive the war and to retire eventually in Spain, where you would die at a respectable age."

"But I didn't survive the war. Her predictions can't be that accurate."

"That's because her predictions apply to a history where she didn't alter the course of the war by her presence. Remember that her arrival in 1940 was a totally involuntary one: someone from the future had transported her against her will and knowledge."

"Hmphh... I see! Then you..."

The wall screens then came alive again while Nancy's voice came out of the hidden speakers.

"Your attention, please! I will ask you to pay attention to the projection about to begin on the wall monitors. What you will see happened on the morning of August 28, in the communications room of Fornebu Airfield in Norway."

"Lisa Hartmann!" Exclaimed Peter as a tall blonde appeared on the screens, watching other Luftwaffe auxiliaries at work. Nobody spoke until the first helperinen were cut down by machinegun fire. Gasps greeted the scene of Hartmann's sacrifice. They then saw the merciless gunning down of the helperinen by a vengeful British paratrooper. Nancy Laplante appeared in the lounge and shouted as the video screens went blank.

"Everybody will stand at attention and uncover themselves for a minute of silence in honor of Gruppenführerin Lisa Hartmann, who sacrificed herself for her comrades."

Everyone stood, including Princess Elizabeth and her dressing lady. After a minute of silence, Nancy looked at the persons around her, her face solemn.

“We are now on our way to the base of the Time Patrol, situated in New Lake City, in the American Great Lakes area. We will arrive there on the morning of Saturday, January 23 of the year 3385, where you will be able to start new lives. Most of you may end up enrolling in the Time Patrol, but that will strictly be your own choice. In the 34th century, we are known as ‘ancestors’, for obvious reasons. We are very much apart of the population of that time, both physically and socially. World War Two is now a thing of the past for us and I will expect all of you to show respect to everyone else. Be proud and honorable and good luck in your new lives.”

CHAPTER 5 – COMRADES AND DISCIPLES

12:18 (North America Central Time)

Saturday, January 23, 3385 ‘A’

Main cafeteria, Time Patrol residential tower

New Lake City University campus

American Great Lakes area

Elizabeth Windsor ate in silence, with Margaret MacDonald, her dressing lady, sitting across from her at the small cafeteria table and also eating in silence. Both were still under the shock of everything that had happened since they had been taken from Buckingham Palace. They had already gone through a mnemotronic chair session, where they had learned in less than one hour three new languages, then had visited the Time Patrol quartermaster to receive spare clothes and basic hygiene items before being assigned apartments. On her own request, Elisabeth had been assigned a two-bedroom suite so that Margaret, who had been her servant for over a decade now, could live with her. Everybody around them had been nice with them up to now and had tried to be as helpful as possible. Even the food at the cafeteria was great, yet Elizabeth could not stop thinking about her parents and her little sister Margaret, feeling desperately lonely despite the presence of over thirty other people in the cafeteria. Many of those people were dressed like her in loose gray sports fleece outfits, while others wore futuristic clothes, sometimes of quite immodest and scandalous design.

Nancy Laplante, dressed in the gray uniform of the Time Patrol, entered the cafeteria, attracting Elizabeth’s attention. Nancy filled a tray of food before coming to Elizabeth’s table and smiling questioningly at her.

“May I eat with you, Your Highness?”

Elizabeth nodded, making Nancy take a seat at her table. She should have been mad at her for separating her from her family, but she had been an admirer of the tall Canadian for nearly a year, and couldn’t help still feeling awe and humility at her sight. That was even more so after having learned about the supernatural intervention in Nancy’s favor in Colditz. Nancy took a bite from her plate before looking at her.

“Do you feel up to discussing your future, Your Highness, or do you prefer to wait a few more days to rest and think things over?”

“I...I might as well get this over with now, Brigadier Laplante.”

“Please, Your Highness, call me simply Nancy.”

“As you wish.” Said Elizabeth quietly, feeling totally depressed. “What could I do here anyway? I was raised to be the heir to the throne of England: I am no soldier or technician, contrary to the others. I suppose that there are no royal families in this century, Nancy?”

“Effectively, there are no surviving monarchies in the Global Council, Your Highness.”

“Please, stop calling me ‘Your Highness’: I am nothing now.”

“Don’t say that, Elizabeth, please. You probably have many talents that you were never allowed to develop because of your past education. Consider this as a chance to get to know yourself and to do things you would never have been allowed to do before.”

“Like what? I barely know how to do the most basic mathematics. The only thing I am truly good at is riding horses. How could I be useful in a world full of technical marvels?”

“Again, don’t underestimate yourself, Elizabeth. Educating you will be easy enough: you saw how mnemotronic teaching techniques could speed learning. The way you can handle horses indicates that you have a fine sense of balance and excellent coordination. You probably would make a fine pilot.”

“Me, a pilot? You really think so?”

“Why not? Take Ingrid Weiss, sitting over there. She is seventeen and received only a basic education in school, yet has proven to be a born pilot. She now flies regularly one of our time ships and can turn circles around many veteran pilots from this century. Give yourself a chance to prove what you can really do, Elizabeth! I will be there to help you along.”

Elizabeth thought over that for long seconds, finally looking cautiously at Nancy.

“What if I try my hand at this and I’m found wanting? What would I do with my life then? Marry a man here and end up as a simple housewife?”

To her surprise, Nancy simply laughed at her last question.

“Elizabeth, there are no such things as simple housewives anymore in this century. There are robots that do all the domestic chores and the maintenance work.

Women are now free to either help educate their children, pursue a career of their own or better themselves through higher education or the practice of arts and hobbies. Besides, I am confident that you will do well as a pilot.”

“Even if I do succeed as a pilot, what about Margaret, my dressing lady?”

Nancy smiled as she looked at the petite Scottish woman in her late thirties sitting besides her, who had kept a discreet silence up to now.

“Actually, it will be simpler in her case. The Time Patrol has to keep and maintain an extensive wardrobe of historical costumes, with many custom outfits needing manual work to look authentic. Manual sewing, stitching and embroidering are lost arts in the 34th century, where fashion work is done by using machines. You are an experienced seamstress if I am not mistaken, Miss MacDonald?”

“I am, Miss Laplante.” Said Margaret, not hiding her sudden interest.

“Then, I offer you a position as assistant custodian in the Time Patrol’s historical costume department. Your starting pay will be 800 solars a month, plus free lodging, food and basic clothing provided, along with all the other social benefits enjoyed by Global Council citizens. As a new citizen, you will be credited with an initial clothing allowance of 2,000 solars, so that you can acquire a decent wardrobe. You will also receive an enrolment bonus of 1,000 solars as a support staff of the Time Patrol. If you accept my offer, I can have you administratively processed right after lunch, so that you could have the afternoon free for some serious shopping time in downtown New Lake City. What do you say, Miss MacDonald?”

Margaret couldn’t help glance at Princess Elizabeth then: she had been taking care of the teenager since her tender years and, while dying to accept Nancy’s offer, was loathe to leave Elizabeth alone. Elizabeth understood her dilemma and nodded her head in encouragement.

“Don’t worry about me, Bobo. Do what will make you happy. I will take care of myself well enough.”

“But, Your Highness, I can’t leave you alone. Who will help you in this new world?”

“I had someone in mind who could act as a sort of godmother for you, Elizabeth.”

Cut in Nancy, who then motioned for a thin woman with curly blond hair sitting at a nearby table to join them. The woman, who appeared in her early forties, came to their table and presented her right hand to Elizabeth.

“Hello, Your Highness. My name is Amelia Earhart.”

“THE Amelia Earhart, the American aviator who disappeared over the Pacific in 1937?” Said Elizabeth excitedly, staring at Amelia with wide eyes while shaking her hand.

“Yes, Your Highness. When Nancy asked for a person willing to sponsor you, I was too happy to volunteer. Such a distinguished person as you should not have to be alone in such a new and strange world like this decadent society.”

“Decadent? How so?”

“Amelia thinks that some of the local social mores and customs are, well, shocking and amoral.” Said Nancy, smiling. “I’m afraid that I am part of the amoral crowd, due to my liberal views about sex and other things, so I asked her to be your chaperone.”

“Miss Earhart, I would be honored to have you as my mentor.” Said Elizabeth after only a slight hesitation. She then looked at Nancy. “Miss Laplante, I wish to enroll in your Time Patrol as a student pilot, if you are willing to take me.”

“I certainly am, Elizabeth.” Replied Nancy, grinning with satisfaction. “Let’s finish lunch, then I will let you in the capable hands of Amelia, who will escort you and Margaret to our administrative section.”

“You are not coming with us?” Said the teenager, a bit disappointed.

“I am unfortunately very busy. I have to prepare for departure this afternoon, to complete a mission in the distant past.”

“A mission? What kind of mission?”

“Historical documentation work. I am recording the main events in the life of Jesus Christ. We already recorded his birth and childhood and I will now go record his religious ministry.”

Both Elizabeth and Margaret were left speechless for a moment. Elizabeth got her voice back first.

“You are serious, are you?”

“Very, Elizabeth. Amelia could show you this evening the recordings we made to date. Well, I’m afraid that I have to go and get ready for that mission. Have a good shopping trip in town, Elizabeth.”

Taking her tray of food, Nancy left their table and, bringing first her tray to the dishwashing counter, left the cafeteria. Elizabeth, still shaken, looked at Amelia.

“She really met Jesus Christ, Miss Earhart?”

“She actually helped deliver him, Elizabeth.” Said Amelia softly.

09:28 (Jerusalem Time)

Wednesday, June 5, 30 C.E.

(18th of Sivan, year 3790 of the Jewish calendar)

Village of Cana, Galilee

Nancy stopped for a moment to contemplate from afar the village of Cana on top of a hill, with the Valley of Bet Netofah beyond it. In modern times, nothing but ruins would be left of the village, with the site to be known then as Khirbet Qana. Nancy had adopted again the identity of Nauca the Sarmatian warrior and traveling musician for this part of the mission and was wearing an ample white cotton light robe over her Sarmatian trousers and shirt, plus laced leather sandals. Her weapons and armor were in bags attached to the back of her robotic horse, Pegasus, which she was guiding by the bridle while walking. She however still had a long dagger at her belt and held a long, sturdy quarterstaff that could be used both for walking and for fighting. To complete her disguise, Nancy had put some gray in her hair and had false pockets under her eyes. After all, her last visit to Galilee was supposed to have been 24 years ago and she had to look the part for this phase of her mission, which had a limited but very specific goal.

Resuming her walk with a vigorous step along the trail she was following since Sepphoris, Nancy, or more correctly Nauca, headed towards Cana, where a large group of people were visible in the courtyard of one of the bigger houses of the village. She already knew thanks to recordings from spy probes that those people had been celebrating for six days already and were in the last day of a traditional Jewish wedding. Those miniature spy probes were presently following her overhead, ready to film at a mere mental order from her via her implanted radio. Using a concept made operational with the Time Patrol in order to support agents on a field mission in the past, those miniature spy probes were in turn supported by a much bigger flying probe that was hidden by a multi-spectral cloaking field. That bigger probe held more spy probes, plus a powerful battery of cameras and microphones, a large capacity data storage memory and recharging receptacles for spy probes returning from their tasks. Nancy however still was wearing her leather headband with hidden cameras, in case all else failed and to provide yet another viewing angle to record her mission with the most details possible.

She soon arrived in the village and headed towards the site of the wedding, followed by the eyes of the villagers that she crossed on her way. Nancy was long accustomed to be followed by such outraged looks from the Jews of this time period, for whom a woman traveling alone could only be a prostitute or, at best, a libertine. Ignoring their looks, she presented herself at the entrance of the courtyard but stayed just outside, waiting for someone to come to her. That didn't take long, as a bearded man walked towards her with the apparent intent to chase her away, while silence gradually fell among the guests of the wedding, who were now looking at Nauca and her horse.

"Go away, impure woman!" Shouted the bearded man. "This is the wedding of a rabbi."

"I know." Said calmly Nancy. "I am a friend of his family...a honorable friend." Alerted by the reactions of the guests, Yeshua came out of the house at that moment to see what was happening. After a quick look towards Nancy, he hurried to join her while shouting in a joyful tone.

"NAUCA! YOU ARE BACK AFTER ALL THESE YEARS."

Once in front of Nancy, Yeshua patted the shoulder of the man who was still blocking her way.

"You can return with the others, Shimon: Nauca is an old friend of mine."

"But...she is traveling alone, Master. She can only be a woman of low virtue."

"She travels alone because she is a foreign warrior from afar, but she still is a honorable woman. Go! I will take care of her."

Shimon, a solidly-built man with a rather obtuse appearance, hesitated but finally walked away, glancing from time to time behind him to see what Yeshua was doing. The latter smiled tenderly to Nancy, who towered over him by a full head.

"Still tall and strong, I see. The years were good to you, Nauca."

"I am indeed still strong and healthy, for which I can thank God, my dear Yeshua. I was on my way to Tiberias, where my music and my singing are popular, when I crossed path with a merchant that told me about your wedding."

Worry appeared on the face of Yeshua on hearing her words.

"The celebration of my wedding is known around the region? But, that could mean that the soldiers of King Herod Antipas would have heard about it too."

"Do not worry, my dear Yeshua. I spoke with that merchant and he had no sympathy towards Herod Antipas or the Romans. So, the man I helped enter life is finally marrying? And who is the woman who can brag about becoming your wife?"

"A high-ranking girl from the Tribe of Benjamin." Replied proudly Yeshua. "I met her for the first time a few years ago in Capernaum and my mother arranged the marriage while I was preaching with my disciples around the region. Her name is Miriam and she is from the town of Magdala."

Nancy nodded her head, smiling, hiding her jubilation at having been able to find out so quickly the identity of the one her visit was targeting. Her spy probes had filmed a young woman kept recluse in the house since the start of the wedding, as prescribed by Jewish customs, and had recorded her name as 'Miriam'. However, Miriam was probably the most common female first name here in this period. Only a direct interaction by an agent, Nancy in this case, had been judged to be able to confirm with certainty the exact identity of the bride. Now, Nancy just had confirmed a fact hidden for too long in history, that Yeshua/Jesus Christ had married and that his wife was none other than the one to be called Mary Magdalene in the Bible, the same one that was falsely described for centuries by the Catholic Church as a prostitute.

"And would it be asking too much to be able to meet this pearl? I suppose that your mother and father are here as well? I would be happy to meet them again."

Yeshua's smile faded, replaced by a melancholic look.

"My father died a year ago. It was actually one of the reasons that convinced me to marry at last."

"Oh! I am truly sorry to hear that, Yeshua. Please accept my most sincere condolences for your loss."

A faint smile reappeared on Yeshua's lips as he patted Nancy's left arm.

"Thank you, my friend. Come and join my guests: you are most welcomed to my wedding."

"I could play music and sing to entertain your guests if you want. I would hate to impose myself."

"Nonsense! You are the friend of both me and of my mother and helped my birth."

"And I am as well a foreign woman who travels alone, which is normally looked upon badly around here."

"I will vouch for your morality, Nauca, unless you are hiding something I should know about." Replied Yeshua in a malicious tone, making Nancy laugh.

"You already know that I am hiding many things from the common mortals, Yeshua."

Yeshua nodded his head, knowing very well what she meant: she had revealed to him when he was only a boy of four that she possessed the same mental powers as himself. Like 24 years ago, he could not read her mind, while he could hear the thoughts of his guests in his head.

“Know that I didn’t reveal your secrets to anybody, not even to my mother, Nauca. I also kept precious the pendant that you gave me as a gift so many years ago. But enough talk: come rest and celebrate with my other guests. As for meeting my bride, my mother will lead you to her, as I still don’t have the right to be at her side for another day.”

“Thank you, Yeshua. Let me just tie up Pegasus first and I will then follow you.”

Once Pegasus’ bridle was tied to a stake, Nancy took out her musical instruments from her bags, taking a luth, a lyre and a flute before following Yeshua towards the house. Stopping in the middle of his guests, who were sitting or slouching on cushions and carpets laid on the stone pavement of the courtyard, Yeshua raised his voice to be heard by all.

“Listen to me, my friends! This is Nauca, a very old friend that I met when I was only a little boy. In truth, she helped my mother deliver me into this life. She may look strange to many of you but she is a honorable woman with a heart of gold, apart from being a great musician. I will ask you to treat her with kindness and deference. Thank you for listening to me.”

Yeshua’s loud announcement attracted his mother, Miriam of Nazareth, out of the house. The graying woman shouted with joy on seeing Nancy.

“NAUCA!”

The small Galilean woman, still beautiful at the age of 42, ran to her to hug her warmly. On her part, Nancy did not have to fake her own joy, having known Miriam as a sweet teenager with a golden heart. That show of affection between the two gray-haired women did a lot to put at ease many of the guests, who had tensed up at seeing a foreign woman being introduced to the wedding. Finally stepping back from Miriam of Nazareth, Nancy smiled tenderly to her.

“Miriam, it warms my heart to see you again. Yeshua told me that you would be able to present me his bride.”

“It will be a pleasure for me to do so, Nauca. Please follow me.”

Leaving her musical instruments by the side of the door of the house, Nancy entered behind Miriam and was soon introduced in a small room sparsely furnished, in which a young woman richly dressed and wearing jewels was conversing with three other young women. The group fell silent at the entrance of Nancy, struck by her quasi gigantic size compared to a Galilean woman of the time. Miriam of Nazareth then smiled to the four women.

“Miriam, my daughters, I have the honor to present you Nauca, the one who helped me give birth to Yeshua and then offered the services of her horse to carry me from Bethlehem to Nazareth. Nauca, I present you Miriam of Magdala, the bride of Yeshua and one of his disciples as well, and my three daughters, Miriam, Salome and Joanna.”

Nancy couldn't believe her luck as the cameras hidden in her leather headband, supplemented by two miniature spy probes, were filming the four young women. The scene she was filming now would be sufficient by itself to roughly shake many key notions in the Bible as known by Christian churches in modern times. First, there was the fact that Miriam of Magdala was both a disciple and the bride of Yeshua. Then, there was the mere existence of the three sisters of Yeshua. Coming to Nancy, who dominated her by more than a head, Miriam of Magdala kissed her on both cheeks, with Nancy kissing her as well.

“I am honored to be able to meet you, Nauca.”

“And I am honored to meet you, Miriam. I wish you all the possible happiness in your union with Yeshua.”

“Thank you, Nauca.”

Nancy, hiding a passing feeling of sadness as she thought of what the future had in store for Yeshua, then faced Yeshua's three sisters, all in their twenties, smiling in particular at the older sister.

“You have grown up nicely since I saw you last, Miriam: you were only a toddler and Yeshua was only four years old then.”

“I still remember vaguely having heard a story while young about your visit, Nauca. You are really a warrior?”

“I was effectively raised as a warrior by my tribe, like other Sarmatian girls. Now, I mostly play music and sing for a living.”

“Mostly?” Asked with a smile Miriam of Magdala, who seemed to have a sharp mind and plenty of wit.

"Yes! The rest of the time, I hammer the heads of the men who insult me by calling me a woman of low virtue."

"Then, you should get along well with Shimon, one of Yeshua's male disciples. He doesn't think much of any woman in general."

"Oh, I am sure that my foot is just the right size for his bum." Replied Nancy, making the women around her laugh heartily. She then eyed Miriam of Magdala, a beautiful woman with long black hair who could be about 25 years old.

"My dear Miriam, you will have to tell me about you: I would like to know better the one who will marry the baby boy I helped deliver."

"Only if you tell us your own story afterwards, Nauca."

"Deal!"

"Then, sit down with us and let's talk, Nauca."

The conversation that followed, recorded by Nancy's cameras and spy probes, proved to be a treasure trove of historical information on the origins and the personality of Miriam of Magdala, apart from providing more information about the three sisters of Yeshua. In return, Nancy served them her story as a Sarmatian warrior that had come on a spiritual quest and was living from the revenues of her singing and playing. Miriam of Magdala showed sadness when Nancy told her that she had been refused by the priests of the Temple in Jerusalem.

"I can understand that the priests would have found you different, but to refuse to convert you after your long trip was unjust."

"They found me too different, too out of the norms, Miriam. I can understand them, in a sense: certain aspects of the Jewish faith, like the supposed inferiority of women and their obligation to bend to the will of the men around them, deeply irked me. I am a proud woman and I will never abase myself in front of a man just because of my sex."

"Then, talk about this to Yeshua, Nauca. He is a rabbi whose authority is recognized but that preaches according to rules that are much more flexible than those of the Pharisee priests of the Temple of Jerusalem."

"Maybe. I don't know anymore, Miriam. In retrospect, all these long years in Palestine now feel wasted to me. Maybe I should go back to my native Sarmatia to finish my days there."

That sentence, which Nancy had used to leave herself an exit door to end her mission in Palestine, made Miriam of Magdala straighten her back and look at her resolutely.

“No, don’t say that, Nauca! If you came from so far with the honest intention of finding God, then you deserve all the chances you can get to be adopted by him. Salome, go see Yeshua and tell him that Nauca needs him as a rabbi. In the meantime, I will go to the kitchen in order not to break our separation during the wedding feast.” Before Nancy could protest, Salome and Miriam of Magdala left the room, leaving her with the two other sisters of Yeshua. Less than two minutes later, Salome returned with Yeshua, who looked gravely at Nancy, who was now standing.

“Nauca, you already told me years ago, when I was a little boy, that you had been rejected by the priests in Jerusalem. You also proved to me then that God had touched you. I could not do anything for you at that time, but many things have changed since. Recently, another foreign woman served me a lesson in humility and made me understand that God is with us all, and not only with the Israelites and their offspring. Follow me outside, Nauca! Salome, bring me a pitcher of water in the courtyard.”

Alarmed by this totally unplanned development, Nancy had no other choice but to follow Yeshua outside, where the latter addressed his guests and disciples in a strong voice.

“Listen to me, my friends! This is Nauca, a foreign warrior from afar that came here 28 years ago with the hope of finding God. Despite the fact that the priests of the Great Temple of Jerusalem refused her, Nauca proved to me when I was still a young boy that God had indeed touched her. Today, I proclaim to all of you as a rabbi that the said Nauca is worthy of becoming a Jew and be part of my disciples. Nauca, kneel before me.”

Afraid that she had just involuntarily created an event that could seriously corrupt known history, Nancy obeyed him nonetheless while thinking furiously about how she could limit the damage. A strong voice, that of The One, then resonated inside her mind.

“DO NOT RESIST, NATAÏ: THE VANITY OF SOME WILL ERASE FROM HISTORY THE SOUVENIRS OF THIS EVENT. YESHUA, KNOW THAT YOU ARE NOW FULFILLING MY WILL.”

From Yeshua’s transfigured facial expression, Nancy understood that he had heard like her the mental message from The One, even though the guests around them had not.

Taking from the hands of Salome the pitcher of water she had brought him, Yeshua then spoke in a solemn tone as he looked at Nancy, kneeling in front of him.

“Nauca, you are a woman that was touched by God many years ago. Your name from now on will be Nava and you will be one of my disciples.”

He then started to slowly pour the water from the pitcher on Nancy’s head. Exclamations of surprise went around the guests and disciples witnessing the scene when the water turned deep red as it left the pitcher and before touching Nancy’s hair. Salome, giving in to her curiosity, put one hand under Nancy’s chin to collect some of the red liquid running down, then tasted it. Her eyes widened at once with shock.

“IT’S WINE! THE WATER TURNED INTO WINE!”

Yeshua nodded, fervor in his eyes.

“THIS WATER TURNING INTO WINE BY THE WILL OF GOD MARKS THE CONVERSION OF A SOUL AS HER SERVANT.”

Smiling tenderly to Nancy and giving back the pitcher to Salome, Yeshua took her hands and made her get back up on her feet.

“Nava, I know that you are very different from other Jewish women and that you are also a proud woman. You can still serve God and follow me as a disciple despite of that. You may now join the ranks of my disciples.”

“Yes, Yeshua.” Said softly Nancy, deeply shaken by what had just happened. She then walked towards the group of men and women who had now been following Yeshua for a few years around Palestine, sitting down besides a mature woman who looked at her with reverence.

“You have been blessed by God in front of us all, Nava. I am honored to have you near me. My name is Susanna.”

“Thank you, Susanna. I however hope that my presence in your group will not attract the attention of the soldiers of Herod Antipas on our path. I hardly go by unnoticed around Galilee and Judea.”

Susanna eyed her tall, strong frame for a moment, then nodded her head.

“Maybe, but with your horse you could go ahead of our group and scout for the presence of soldiers to warn us. I will pass that suggestion to Yeshua later on.”

“Uh, doesn’t he take advice only from his male disciples, Susanna? Will he listen to you?”

The Jewish woman giggled at her questions.

“The men of our group effectively think that they are the only ones able to influence Yeshua, but why would we disprove their illusions? Yeshua is a sensible man who listens to all good ideas, be they from a man or a woman. Why do you think that I follow him?”

Nancy smiled, won over by the practical thinking of her comrade disciple.

“You are right, Susanna. Female subtlety has its good sides.”

Nancy had ample time to speak to the female disciples of the group before Yeshua joined them later on. However, nearly all the male disciples ignored her studiously, treating her like they were treating the other women of the group. Accustomed by months already spent in 1st Century Palestine to this misogynist side of ancient Jews, who were little different in that respect to the other people of Antiquity, Nancy did not impose herself and stayed with the other female disciples. At nightfall, Yeshua was finally allowed to join his bride to spend the first night with her. When he emerged from the house early the next morning, Miriam of Magdala at his side, it was to go directly to Nancy to speak discreetly with her.

“Susanna spoke to me last night and I thought that her idea made much sense. I am planning to leave this morning and march West, to go to Shepharam and preach there. Our group will follow the valleys, in order not to tire too much the women in our group. After Shepharam, will will go towards Mount Carmel. Could I ask you to precede us on your horse, to make sure that there are no soldiers along our way?”

“I will be most happy to do that, Yeshua.” Replied Nancy without hesitation before looking at Miriam of Magdala. The latter was now wearing a modest travel outfit and had taken off most of her jewels. She was however carrying across her back a bedroll filled with clothes and other possessions, plus a water flask.

“I see that your new wife will accompany you in your tribulations, Yeshua.” Smiling proudly, Yeshua passed an arm around Miriam’s shoulders.

“I would be a poor husband indeed to abandon her right after our wedding. Miriam is anyway my most precious and attentive disciple.”

Nancy secretly wished that some modern Catholic Church official could have heard that.

“I see! Well, I will then leave at once, to take some distance ahead from your group. I will see you tonight in Shepharam, Yeshua.”

Quickly packing back her bedroll and her musical instruments and tying them on the back of Pegasus, Nancy then jumped in the saddle and, after a last salute to Yeshua and Miriam, left at a gallop, raising a cloud of dust on her passage.

17:36 (North America Central Time)

Saturday, January 23, 3385 'A'

Suite 343, Time Patrol residential tower

New Lake City University campus

American Great Lakes

Amelia Earhart smiled to herself as she watched Elizabeth Windsor and Margaret MacDonald happily unpack their new acquisitions in the main bedroom of the suite allotted to the two British. The four-hour shopping trip had done wonders to raise the sagging morale of the princess and of her dressing lady. While not a compulsive shopper, Amelia had to say that the shops of New Lake City offered wonders that would have made any woman from the 20th Century mad with envy. The only exception had been the swimsuits that were considered in fashion in 3385. Those, as Amelia had expected, had scandalized the two British by their skimpiness. Even the model Elizabeth had chosen, a one-piece sleeveless swimsuit of modern cut designed for swimming in cold water, while being by far the least revealing of the ones on sale, would have still scandalized Elizabeth's mother. Amelia had not yet had the stomach to warn the princess about the various swimsuits, or lack of them in a few cases, that she would see on the other apprentices at her first training session at the indoor swimming pool of the Time Patrol's sports complex. While some female apprentices, like Amelia, were not ready to go around topless in public, others had little inhibitions about being bare breasted, or worse, in front of men. On the other hand, she had no doubts that the new male apprentices would appreciate greatly the scenery at the pool, particularly that big Austrian SS officer. Mere hours after his arrival, he had already gone to town with other men in order to do a tour of the sex clubs and bars.

Elizabeth Windsor, having organized her new clothes, then chose a sky blue jumpsuit with gold embroidering as her evening outfit and went into the bathroom communicating with her bedroom to change. Margaret MacDonald, less prudish in front of other women, changed inside the bedroom, putting on a simple but pretty dress made

of a burgundy silk-type fabric. She was ready a good five minutes before Elizabeth emerged from the bathroom, her new jumpsuit on. Amelia nodded in appreciation.

“This goes very well on you, Your Highness. Shall we go eat now?”

“By all means, Amelia, and please call me Elizabeth: my titles mean nothing here.”

Amelia examined carefully the teenager’s expression, but couldn’t detect any bitterness in her last statement: it had been meant as a fact and not as a recrimination. However, Amelia knew that it would still take a long time for the princess to accept fully her fate, a process the other apprentices, including herself, had each gone through with varying difficulties.

“Elizabeth it is then. Let’s go down to the cafeteria.”

As they were walking towards the nearest elevator, Elizabeth discreetly spoke to the American aviator.

“Amelia, are you missing your old life much?”

“Not really, Elizabeth. This place is actually like a dream come through for me: I fly machines I couldn’t even imagine before and I am treated with absolute equality compared to men, something I find very refreshing in contrast with the nonsense I had to live with in 1937. Also, the prospect of traveling to the distant past both excites and fascinates me.”

“I have to say that seeing Nancy Laplante leave for ancient Palestine made me envious.”

“Uh, I would think twice before going alone in the past, like she did. She has however abilities none of us have. Still, to be able to meet Jesus Christ in person... If you want, I can show you and Margaret later tonight what Nancy has recorded about him.”

“You would?” Asked Elizabeth, excited at the idea.

“Of course! The recordings are available on the open video library of the Time Patrol and will be turned into a full-length documentary film once Nancy has completed her mission.”

“Then I take you on your offer.”

The elevator cabin they had called then arrived. To the trio’s surprise, Nancy Laplante was already in it with Mike Crawford and Ingrid Weiss. Wearing a brown leather jacket, short skirt and high boots, the Canadian was sporting a deep tan and looked positively content.

“Hi girls! Going down to the cafeteria too?”

“Yes we are, Nancy.” Replied Amelia while smiling. “How long did you stay in Palestine this time?”

“A whole fifteen months and a few days! By then I was dying for a real bath, a clean toilet... and for Mike. I will spend the coming week here before returning for a year to my own time period of origin. By the way, Yeshua married Miriam of Magdala in Canaë while I was there, in the year 30 C.E..”

Elizabeth gave her a shocked look.

“Jesus, married? But that contradicts the Bible.”

Nancy gave her a critical look as the cabin resumed its way down.

“Believe me, Elizabeth: this is not the only place where the official Bible is totally wrong about the life of Yeshua. Don’t forget that it was written after Yeshua’s death by men who had very little regard for the women surrounding Yeshua and who had their own agendas to push. Add to that the fact that the Bible was translated, often badly, many times and rewritten or edited along the centuries. What the Bible says and what real history was like are two very different things, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth nearly fired back at her, her religious education making her instinctively reject her story, but she kept her mouth shut for the rest of the trip. Once inside the cafeteria, she served herself at the hot buffet table and quickly sat down with Margaret and Amelia at an empty table. They were silent at first, chewing their food absent-mindedly while thinking over what Nancy had said. Elizabeth finally spoke in a low voice.

“Amelia, could you tell me more about Nancy? I am afraid that her opinions may often clash with what I learned through my education.”

“Hmm...to be frank, she is a bit of a mystery lately, even to her husband, Mike Crawford. There are the memories of so many past personalities in her mind now.”

“You mean that she is delusional?” Asked Margaret, attracting a vigorous shake of the head from Amelia.

“Not at all! She is perfectly sane and her personality is unambiguous. It is just that those millenniums of souvenirs have made her wiser and more rounded as a person. Also, she is rumored to be able to speak with The One, the supernatural being that transformed her. She was supposedly chosen by him to promote good and do his biddings on Earth. By the way, if I make it sound like she is some kind of preacher or faith healer, don’t get me wrong. She still won’t go to church or damn you to hell if you

don't go yourself. She is a soldier first and foremost but with a lifelong mission of mercy.”

“What about those past lives of hers? I was made to understand that she was both man and woman.”

“That is correct, Elizabeth. She alternated between sexes in various lives ranging from peasant, soldier, merchant and noble, up to royalty, like all of us did. She knows and speaks fluently over eighty languages, most of them now extinct, and is expert at dozens of varied skills like pottery making, stone tool making, steel forging and embroidering. Two of Nancy's past lives were of historical note: one in 15th century France, where she was Joan of Arc; the other in the 16th and 17th centuries B.C.E. as Saraï of Ur, the wife of the biblical patriarch Abraham, or Abram to be more correct. Her first life ever was as Nataï, the wife of a mason in Jericho around 7,000 B.C.E..”

Elizabeth couldn't help look with awe at Nancy, sitting a few tables away with Mike and Ingrid.

“Joan of Arc? Wow!” She said a bit too loudly. Nancy turned her head towards her, smiled and winked once before returning to her conversation with her family. Amelia giggled at seeing Elizabeth redden with embarrassment.

“You will have to remember that Nancy has a directional microphone implanted in her left ear. She can hear better than a cat.”

“Uh, I will remember that. Still, this business of past incarnations sounds quite fascinating.”

Amelia became serious at those words.

“You may experience it firsthand soon, Elizabeth. All the apprentices, including myself, have started exploring mentally their past lives with the assistance of Nancy. The four prior lives I can remember up to now were as a 19th Century Chinese male merchant, an 18th Century Polynesian girl, a 16th Century Turkish soldier and a 15th Century African woman. In comparison, Mike Crawford and Ingrid Weiss have opened fully their minds by now, with Ingrid in fact having her mind opened by The One at the same time as Nancy. One of the benefits of this memory recall, apart of mastering past languages and skills, is to make oneself more tolerant by showing life through the eyes of one or more past persons of various ethnicity and social rank. Take Hanna Reitsch for example: she was a German test pilot with strong loyalty to the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler. After Nancy opened her mind, Hanna found out that, among other lives, she had been a Russian Jew victim of a pogrom in Kiev. She then lost all that was left of her

Nazi fervor afterwards and became a truly nice person all around. She also became good friend with two of our apprentices that had been Red Air Force fighter pilots. In short, we apprentices of the Time Patrol are quickly changing from a ragtag band of people from varied and often conflicting backgrounds to a solid group of comrades, all because of this memory recall.”

“And there are no risks to this... memory recall?”

“None! Nancy simply stimulates gradually one’s brain to unlock the memories kept by your spirit. You will have to ask her about the details, though.”

Elizabeth was silent while thinking about what Amelia had said. Nancy’s voice then echoed inside her head, clear and strong.

“Elizabeth, if you want to explore your souvenirs tonight, just nod your head.”

The teenager looked towards Nancy’s table and saw that the Canadian was staring calmly at her. Taking a decision, she nodded once. Nancy’s lips didn’t move when Elizabeth heard her voice again.

“Then I will see you in your suite in one hour.”

21:58 (North America Central Time)

Suite 343, Time Patrol residential tower

Margaret MacDonald was getting increasingly nervous while waiting with Amelia in the luxurious lounge of the suite she shared with Elizabeth. Her charge, as she still thought of Elizabeth, had been alone with Laplante in the main bedroom for nearly three hours now. Margaret had meanwhile killed the time by watching with Amelia selected video recordings of Nancy’s mission in ancient Palestine. While those recordings had truly fascinated her, she could never stop worrying completely about Elizabeth. Margaret nearly ran to Elizabeth when she showed up in the lounge, looking subdued. Nancy was right behind her and gently directed her to the main sofa of the lounge, sitting with her and Margaret on it. The latter passed an arm around Elizabeth’s shoulder.

“How did it go, Elizabeth?”

The teenager answered in a quiet voice while looking down at the carpet.

“I actually was able to remember my two most recent past lives. I thought at first that so many souvenirs would confuse me but they ordered themselves quickly. I will just need some time to reflect on them properly.”

“May I ask what kind of lives they were?”

“You may. In my most recent incarnation, I was a 19th century Zulu warrior named Tiswayo. I...I killed a number of British soldiers at the battle of Isandhlwana in South Africa, in 1879. I, or rather Tiswayo, was killed a short time later at the battle of Ulundi. My life prior to that was as a Syrian woman of the 18th century named Fatmeh, who lived in the city of Aleppo with her husband, a goldsmith, and her five children. If you don't mind, it is late and I am dead tired. I think that I will go to bed now.”

“Do you want me to be with you tonight, Elizabeth?”

The teenager looked at her dressing lady, who had slept in the same room as her until only a few years ago, and shook her head slowly.

“Thank you but no, Bobo. I have to face my souvenirs alone.”

“Then, good night, Elizabeth.”

Nancy and Amelia discreetly left the suite to let the teenager prepare for bed, while Margaret retired to her own bedroom. Going to her room, Elizabeth slipped into a silk nightgown and crawled into the huge but comfortable bed. Once under the pink bed sheet, she used the light control unit on the bedside table to switch the lights off. As Amelia had told her a few hours ago, the ceiling of her room, which acted as a giant video screen, changed to become a night sky filled with stars. Looking around at the unfamiliar, futuristic surroundings of her room in the faint glow of the starry sky, Elizabeth felt lonelier than she had ever been before. The cocooned, regimented world she had grown into was gone, along with her family, her friends and even her titles. She was now only Apprentice Elizabeth Windsor. Her last conscious thought before falling asleep was for Philip of Greece, the only man for whom her heart had ever beaten faster.

08:46 (North America Central Time)

Monday, January 25, 3385 'A'

Gymnasium, Time Patrol sports complex

Elizabeth had to stop, her lungs on fire and her heart feeling like it was ready to explode. All the muscles in her body ached from trying to follow what she considered the infernal pace set by Nancy Laplante during the morning aerobic exercise session. The other apprentices around her didn't seem to be having much problems following the pace, though. Even the ones who had arrived with her in New Lake City were barely sweating. Elizabeth thought with some bitterness that the problem was probably with

her poor physical fitness level rather than with Nancy's pace. She glanced at the big SS officer exercising close to her: the Austrian was doing fine and seemed to be having a good time. Of course, that probably had to do with the number of young, shapely women wearing skin-tight outfits and exercising around him. The British Royal Commandos major to her left then spoke to her while continuing to jump and run on the spot.

"Don't try so hard at first, Your Highness: you need time to build up your cardiovascular capacity and your stamina. It will take a few weeks, but you will eventually be able to keep up with everybody."

"A few weeks?" Said Elizabeth, sounding discouraged. That brought an apologetic smile on Townsend's face.

"Like they say, Your Highness: no pain, no gain. Take a break until you feel better, then continue at a slower pace. The day is still young."

Elizabeth saw the wisdom in his judgment and did as he said. As she took time to catch her breath, her mind wandered to the souvenirs of the life of Tiswayo the Zulu warrior. Tiswayo had been a superb athlete, like all his comrades, able to run at a trot for hours under the hot South African sun and then go directly into battle. Elizabeth now envied his fitness. More intimate souvenirs of Tiswayo then made her redden with embarrassment: the souvenirs of the sexual lives of both Tiswayo and Fatmeh had rudely shaken her prudish royal upbringing. On the other hand, those intimate souvenirs had answered a number of questions Elizabeth would have never dared ask to her parents. Her heart now pounding at a more reasonable rate, the teenager resumed her exercising while still reviewing her past souvenirs.

The aerobic session ended half an hour later, with Elizabeth exhausted and drenched with sweat. She followed the other female apprentices inside the women's locker room to take a much-needed shower and change into her gray apprentice's uniform. Just bending down to undo her running shoes was enough to make her body ache all over, warning her that this day was going to be a tough one indeed. The next three hours were actually quiet, Elizabeth spending two hours in a mnemotronic lab of the university to assimilate the basic knowledge she would have learned in school if she wouldn't have been a princess, followed by an hour for lunch. The gaps in her education, caused by the custom of not sending British royal children to schools were they would be in contact with commoners, were becoming more and more obvious to

Elizabeth. In contrast, young women like Susanna Berghof and Bertha Reinholdt had benefited from a superb classical education in Germany. As for the women coming from the 21st century, their general and scientific education made Elizabeth appear like a moron.

Elizabeth joined the other apprentices after lunch in the huge hangar adjacent to the Time Patrol headquarters building. Her training schedule said only that they were going to travel to a place called 'Combat Training Center'. She inquired about it to Ingrid Weiss as they were lining up to board a big shuttlecraft. The German teenager obliged with a smile.

"That center is where all our shooting practice and tactical training is conducted. It is situated in the ruins of nearby ancient Chicago, where our firing will not threaten anyone."

"Chicago, in ruins? What happened to it? Why wasn't it rebuilt?"
Infinite sadness then filled Ingrid's eyes.

"Chicago was destroyed in the year 2052, over thirteen centuries ago, along with most of Humanity. The radiations from that nuclear war contaminated the air and ground, making most of the planet unlivable for centuries. Even now, the remaining low-level radiation in the Chicago area, while harmless, is still easily detectable. The people of the Global Council still avoid such areas as much as they can, partly because of the sinister souvenirs they conjure and partly because of the millions of human remains still lying around."

"There are skeletons where we are going?" Asked Elizabeth, suddenly alarmed.

"Not in the immediate area of our training center. Nancy personally gathered all the remains there for burial at a nearby mausoleum. There are however still over three million skeletons lying around the ruins of the city."

"Dear God!"

Shaken and a bit fearful now, Elizabeth boarded the shuttlecraft and took a seat after removing her winter coat. The craft soon glided silently out of the hangar and flew off towards the Southwest. Looking avidly outside through a window, Elizabeth saw that the populated area around New Lake City was actually quite small. Only a few kilometers outside the lakeside city, the vegetation of the countryside not covered by snow became much more sparse and turned to a sickly yellowish tone. Ingrid Weiss, sitting besides Elizabeth, volunteered some information as they flew over the desolate landscape.

“Only small areas of North America have been decontaminated in the last 600 years. The task of decontaminating the rest of the continent will take many more centuries. That damn 21st century nuclear war nearly spelled the end of the Human race. Europe was in even worse shape but Herculean efforts have returned a third of it to livable status.”

A sudden chill gripped Elizabeth.

“And...what about London?”

“Totally destroyed, like all the main cities of Western Europe. Like Chicago, it was never rebuilt. Less than two million people presently live on the British Isles, if I remember well. Much of present day Humanity now lives in space, away from the radiations and the rubble.”

That left Elizabeth quiet for the rest of the short trip.

The shuttlecraft soon started flying over a field of debris and ruins that extended beyond the horizon. It was obvious from the vegetation overgrowth that nobody had lived around the area in a long time. The craft flew over a few kilometers of ruins before starting to lose altitude. Nancy Laplante rose from her seat and shouted at the other passengers as the craft was about to settle down vertically.

“We are now arriving at our combat training center, situated in the old Lincoln Park, on the Western shore of Lake Michigan. Do not be alarmed if you do not see our installations at first: they are carefully camouflaged and use to the maximum the existing ruins. Put your coats and gloves on: the outside temperature is below freezing point. We will go inside the main building, where weapons will be issued.”

Once on the ground, the shuttlecraft rolled towards a ruined building, while what had appeared at first to be the corrugated steel door of a warehouse started to slide open, revealing a vast hangar. That drew an admiring whistle from Otto Skorzeni.

“Nice camouflage work. From the air, this building seems to be derelict, like the others around it.”

Nancy, who was coming out of the cockpit, nodded her head on hearing him.

“We certainly did the utmost to hide our combat center, Otto. The damaged external structures and walls have not been touched, but the interior spaces were cleaned up before prefabricated modules were placed inside. Even the infra-red signature of our installations have been hidden as much as possible. The building we are presently in serves as a hangar and as a repair shop. Once out of the shuttle, we

will go to the nearest building, which is our actual training center, via an underground tunnel meant to limit any outside movement. Here we are! Follow me!”

With Ingrid Weiss still close to her, Elizabeth followed the others outside, shivering briefly when a draft of chilly air hit her as she exited the craft. As the forty or so passengers of the shuttle followed Nancy towards a door in the south wall of the hangar, Elizabeth noticed four machines that were about the size of men and had curious shapes. The machines were not moving and seemed to have been simply left in a corner of the hangar.

“Ingrid, what are those four things over there?”

Ingrid looked quickly in that direction, then smiled as she answered.

“Those are combat robots, Elizabeth. They are part of the force of one hundred robots assigned to defend our combat training center. They will also be used for our training, as our agents will be charged with directing squads of combat robots if we ever have to defend the Global Council.”

“Combat robots?” Said Otto Skorzeni, who had listened to their conversation. “I would like very much to examine those machines later on.”

“You will have ample opportunities to get familiar with them, Otto. I can tell you that they are extremely dangerous machines, each equivalent to what you would have called a medium tank. We already have 800 such robots in service, with another 10,000 on the way.”

“Wow! That makes for an impressive combat force.”

“Well, hopefully we will never need them.”

His curiosity only partly satisfied, Otto followed the group out of the hangar and down a wide staircase that led to a short tunnel, itself leading to another staircase that went up that time. They finally ended up inside a set of interconnected modular structures located in the gutted internal space of an old hall. They used a spacious cloakroom to hang their coats, then went to an adjacent room with benches lined along its walls and four long tables in its center, where Nancy addressed them again.

“Welcome to our combat training center, ladies and gentlemen. For the newcomers in our group, you will stay here with me for a class on the firearms used by the Time Patrol. The others will go practice their shooting and unarmed combat under the supervision of Mike and Jack Crawford.”

Elizabeth soon found herself alone with Nancy and seven other apprentices in the room. Nancy led them inside an adjacent room that turned out to be a weapons vault, with racks full of weapons of varying size. Otto Skorzeni's eyes popped wide open while he smiled at the sight of the weapons.

"Now, this is one nicely furnished room."

"And you will get to play with those toys as well." Replied Nancy. "Now, be honest, all of you, and raise your hand if you never fired a gun before."

Sylvie Comeau lifted one hand up.

"Good! Who has never fired an automatic weapon before?"

Everybody but Otto Skorzeni, George Townsend and Tom Allen rose a hand. Nancy nodded once.

"Then this is a good time to learn."

Going to three different racks, Nancy picked up two pistols, a submachine-gun, two assault rifles and two heavy-looking weapons, laying them down on a table inside the vault. She then picked up the first pistol, a small and compact weapon with a futuristic shape, and held it high.

"This is a stun pistol, a non-lethal weapon produced here in the 34th Century by the Global Council for the use of its security officers. We will study it, along with the Smith & Wesson COBRA 10mm pistol, the Colt RAPTOR 10mm machine pistol, the Colt TERMINATOR 6mm assault rifle with grenade launcher, the AS Val suppressed assault rifle, the Colt DRAGON automatic grenade launcher and the Barrett SSSR-50 heavy sniper rifle. We also have in our stocks of weapons a full assortment of hand grenades, portable missile systems and explosives, but those will be for later training sessions. On top of learning to use all of those weapons, you will receive as well intensive training on how to use ancient weapons. I promise you that your next few months will be quite busy."

"That suits me just fine, Nancy." Said Skorzeni, smiling, as he admired the weapons on the table. "By what will we start?"

"By the stun pistol, which is worn by all members of the Time Patrol, including the scientific staff. Even avowed pacifists like Amelia Earhart will practice with one, since it is a non-lethal weapon."

Nancy spent less than fifteen minutes on the stun pistol, it being a very simple weapon to use and maintain. The other weapons were covered much more in detail,

taking on average forty minutes per type of weapon. Otto Skorzeni, like George Townsend, was particularly impressed by the Colt TERMINATOR combination assault rifle and grenade launcher, with its capacity of 120 6mm caliber high velocity rounds, plus three ready-to-fire 50mm dual-purpose grenades in a launch tube placed under the bloc of twelve rifle barrels.

“Himmel! I like this!”

“You will have a chance to shoot it this afternoon, Otto, like the others here. Now that I have shown you how to handle in a secure manner those various weapons, I will distribute to each of you a panoply of weapons that will become your personal weapons from this moment on. Take good care of them, as they may save your life one day. Don't be jealous if some of you get more weapons than you do: while Otto and George will need to use all of these weapons as designated ground assault specialist, I doubt that the future scoutship pilots in this group will have a need for the SSSR-50 heavy sniper rifle or DRAGON automatic grenade launcher.”

Nancy then made them line up again to enter the weapons vault and, using a list in her hand, had each apprentice take one example each of the weapons they were individually due to hold on to, plus a pair of ear defenders. That left Otto Skorzeni and George Townsend in particular heavily loaded with weapons. Leaving the weapons vault, they crossed the training room and followed a hallway that led them to a long line of firing positions. The rifle firing hall was a long, narrow building with a large window in front of each firing position. Those windows were opened when firing was conducted, like in the present case. The hall was thus quite cold, despite heating fans working full blast. It was also quite noisy, with other apprentices already firing rifles. Nancy next assigned a position to each of the apprentices of her group. Staying besides Elizabeth, she signaled Jack and Mike Crawford, who were supervising the other apprentices, to approach.

“Jack, you coach Sylvie Comeau on basic rifle shooting techniques. Mike, you do the same with Patricia Wilson. I will take care of Elizabeth.”

Nancy then distributed one loaded rifle magazine block to each of the apprentices.

“You have now 120 rounds each to practice today. I want you to start on semi-automatic, slow firing only, to get the feel of your weapons. Concentrate first on producing tight groups of five bullets, so that we can assess your level of shooting proficiency. I will assess you all after the first grouping. You may take position now.”

She next told Elizabeth to take a prone position on the padded bench of the firing spot and told her to load her magazine. Elizabeth did so and adjusted her rifle sling to steady her aim. Nancy nodded in satisfaction at that.

“You obviously have fired a rifle before, Elizabeth. You practiced with a Lee-Enfield .303, I suppose.”

“A few times, but I have more experience with a Mauser 7mm hunting rifle. My father loves hunting and coached me when on our Scottish estate of Balmoral.”

“Excellent! Take your time and give me a nice, tight 5-round grouping. The range is 100 meters. Fire when you are ready.”

Adjusting her sighting scope to the X4 magnification, Elizabeth took careful aim and, holding her breath just before shooting, gently squeezed the trigger. The trigger proved to be quite sensitive and crisp, while the felt recoil was fairly mild. The muzzle blast and noise were another matter, though.

“Wow! That ammunition appears quite a lot more powerful than the ones I used, yet the recoil was not as hard as I expected.”

“You can thank the recoil buffer in the butt of your weapon. Let’s see where that first round went.”

Nancy looked briefly through the powerful telescope mounted besides the shooting bench, then smiled at Elizabeth.

“Right in the bulls eye’s black. You are only two inches down and to the left of the center. Keep the same aiming point and fire four more rounds, to confirm your aim.” Elizabeth obeyed, aiming as carefully as she could. She then put her rifle on safe on Nancy’s command and waited for her target board to be reeled in to her firing position by its electric travel rail. Elizabeth felt pride at her tight, less than two inch-wide grouping. Nancy appeared satisfied as well.

“Very good, Elizabeth! Let me just review the others and we will practice more.” Going down the line of firing positions, Nancy saw that both Sylvie Comeau and Patricia Wilson had a lot of work to do before becoming fair rifle shooters. The others’ results varied from good to outstanding, with Tom Allen and Otto Skorzeni having fired equally tight groupings that would have made any marksman proud.

“Well done, you two. It seems that we are going to have a friendly competition here.”

“He is effectively pretty good...for a boy.” Said Otto with a grin. “I will try to go easy on him for the next groupings.”

“Speak for yourself, mister.” Replied Tom. “I bet you a beer that I am a better shot than you, especially when using automatic fire.”

“It’s your money, boy.”

“Alright, you two tough guys. Mike will supervise your friendly match. Just make sure that you follow the safety rules, though.”

Nancy then returned to Elizabeth and continued coaching her, directing her through various timed shoots and introducing her to short bursts of automatic fire. The teenager’s accuracy suffered somewhat then, which was to be expected from a non-military shooter. She was reviewing with her the finer points of automatic firing when a loud nearby blast made Elizabeth flinch. They both looked to their left as another blast shook the hall: Tom Allen and Otto Skorzeni were firing short bursts at maximum cyclic rate under the watchful eyes of Mike Crawford, obviously intent on outdoing each other. The duel went on until both had emptied their magazines. Exclamations went around as the two target boards came up to the firing positions: the boards were nearly shot to pieces. Tom’s board showed however a more concentrated fire than Otto’s board. The Austrian nodded his head in appreciation and shook hands with the British teenager.

“Boy, I have to admit that you are the best shooter I have ever seen with an automatic weapon. The beer is on me tonight.”

Nancy was next to shake the hand of Tom Allen.

“Tom, I am proud of you. I declare you proficient with the Colt STORM rifle. The same applies to you, Otto. Both of you will be issued a full ammunition load for your rifles. Mike will now bring you both to the West wing firing hall, so that you can practice with the grenade-launchers of your rifles.”

“YES!” Shouted Tom happily. Both he and Otto eagerly followed Mike Crawford down towards the West wing of the training complex. Nancy then faced Elizabeth and pointed at her firing position.

“Alright, let’s see how we could improve your automatic firing. Don’t worry if you can’t do anywhere as well as those two happy triggers: even I can’t compare to them with a rifle.”

As the evening was approaching fast and the apprentices had completed their first shooting practice session, Nancy had them walk out of the firing range and return to the training room, so that they could clean their rifles. The apprentices who were thinking that they were finished for the day were however sorely mistaken. The eight

men and women under Nancy then joined up with the rest of the apprentices in a large locker room connected to an equipment storage room, where Mike Crawford had them draw protective equipment that fitted their respective sizes. Elizabeth smiled as she eyed Patricia Wilson, who looked like an American football player with her padded vest, gloves, helmet and knee and elbow protectors, plus a shield made of leather covered plastic foam.

"We look like blimps with that stuff on. I wonder what kind of game we are going to play."

Ingrid Weiss, standing nearby, gave her a ferocious smile.

"We are going to practice medieval combat, girlies. Hold on tight to your shields: you will need them."

Nancy then shouted so that all could hear her.

"EVERYBODY, LINE UP BEHIND ME AND FOLLOW ME AT A RUN!"

The forty or so men and women followed Nancy out of the locker room and into a spacious gymnasium. The ceiling was over six meters above their heads and the floor was covered with neoprene mats. Elizabeth's eyes widened at the sight of the racks lining the walls of the gymnasium: they were full of all kinds of cutting or crushing weapons made of steel covered with thick neoprene.

"EVERYONE WILL NOW CHOOSE A WEAPON OF HIS OR HER PREFERENCE, IDEALLY ONE YOU ALREADY KNOW HOW TO USE. THEN, FORM A WIDE CIRCLE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FLOOR."

Taking some time to inspect the contents of the weapons racks, Elizabeth finally chose a padded mace that reminded her of a Zulu war club. Feeling a mix of excitement and anxiety filling her, she joined the circle of apprentices and looked at the others. The more senior apprentices appeared eager to fight, grinning and already looking around to choose their opponent. Nancy, also wearing protective padding and holding an impressive heavy mace, then stepped to the center of the circle, a grin on her face.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is now time to see of what kind of stuff is made our eight new apprentices. For the newcomers, the rules are simple: no kicks and stop fighting the moment I say so. Apart from that, everything goes. Mike, you can choose your first victim."

The powerful American, standing 193 centimeter-tall and with the built of a footballer, walked to the center of the circle as Nancy withdrew, a huge padded war hammer in his

hands. He then made a mean smile as he pointed his weapon at George Townsend, who stood a mere 178 centimeters.

“YOU! COME FORWARD IF YOU DARE!”

Not too sure of himself, the Royal Commandos officer stepped forward, his padded sword held high. Mike Crawford rushed him at once with a ferocious war cry that nearly froze Elizabeth with terror. A furious swept hammer blow slammed with a loud noise on the shield of the British, nearly sending him sprawling on the mat. Townsend didn't get a real chance to recover his balance, the American assaulting him with a series of powerful and well aimed blows that denoted a real expertise in medieval combat. Shaken by multiple blows and managing only once to hit Mike, George Townsend was sent to the mat in twenty seconds, taken down by a blow on his helmet. Mike continued to pummel him until Nancy stepped forward and shouted.

“STOP! MIKE CRAWFORD IS THE WINNER!”

Mike roared in triumph, one foot on the chest of George Townsend, as the other apprentices shouted their enthusiasm. Nancy then helped a shaken and bruised Townsend to get up and return to his place in the circle. Next, she pointed another apprentice.

“Ingrid Weiss ‘B’, choose your opponent.”

Ingrid, apparently most eager to fight, jumped to the center of the circle and made her flail turn over her head.

“LET'S SEE WHAT A TENDER PRINCESS CAN DO!”

The screams of encouragement that followed around her made Elizabeth think that she was back in the Dark Ages, surrounded by barbarians ready to cut her to pieces. The young princess stepped forward hesitantly, holding tight to her mace and keeping her shield in front of her. Screaming a war cry, Ingrid advanced on her and slammed her shield against Elizabeth's shield at the same time she hit the British teenager's helmet with her flail with a loud noise. With the adrenaline kicking in, Elizabeth replied with a swing of her mace in the German's ribs. A furious exchange of blows and parries followed, with Elizabeth putting to good use her souvenirs of combat from her previous life as a Zulu warrior. However, Ingrid Weiss showed surprising expertise with her flail, a notoriously difficult weapon to master. After over a minute of relentless combat, the superior level of physical fitness of the German teenager gave her the advantage over a heavily breathing Elizabeth, who tripped and fell on her back. Ingrid then pummeled mercilessly her shield until Nancy stepped forward.

“STOP! INGRID WEISS ‘B’ IS THE VICTOR!”

Ingrid stopped striking at once and presented her hand to Elizabeth, smiling to her.

“Good fight, Elizabeth. Here, pull yourself up.”

The British took her hand and got up, but grimaced at once with pain.

“Ow! You sure didn’t go easy on me, Ingrid.”

“Hey, if it would have been a real combat in the past, you would be dead...or worse.”

Otto Skorzeni, who had followed the two fights with relish, then raised his sword high.

“Nancy, I want the next combat.”

The reaction of Nancy, along with her war shout of incredible ferocity, stunned Elizabeth. Making a fantastic jump to the middle of the circle, she slammed the floor mat with her huge mace.

“OTTO, YOUR ASS IS MINE!”

“The poor bastard!” Said Sven Larsen to Michel Hofmann. “He didn’t know what he was getting into.”

Elizabeth heard that but couldn’t see how Nancy could win against the gigantic Austrian. She was thus stunned to see Skorzeni quickly buckle under a barrage of powerful, precise blows, being literally slammed out of the circle after less than one minute of combat. As the big Austrian tried to recover his wits, Nancy shouted again.

“ROYAL BRAWL! EVERYONE AGAINST EVERYONE! THE LAST ONE UP WINS!”

“Aw shit! She’s not serious?” Exclaimed Patricia Wilson as the apprentices around her suddenly turned against each other. The young Canadian Army nurse then had to face Keith Strong, an ex-Marine Corps pilot and ex-astronaut standing a good 188 centimeters. A savage, chaotic melee followed, with Nancy staying out of the fight to ensure that nobody got hurt seriously. After six minutes of fighting, and with practically all apprentices totally exhausted or too shaken to get up, Mike Crawford won over Otto Skorzeni after an epic fight, then roared in triumph like a barbarian warrior. Going around, Nancy made sure that everyone was alright, then spoke up.

“You now have a weak approximation of what a real combat to the death was in the Dark Ages and the Antiquity, minus the blood and gore. Work on your physical fitness, your strength and your weapon handling skills and maybe you will not get creamed by a band of Vikings or a squad of Roman legionnaires during a mission in the past. We will now put our equipment back in place and close the center for the night

before going back by shuttle to New Lake City. I hope that you enjoyed your practice today.”

Elizabeth, who had quickly lost her fight against Jack Crawford and thus had the time to catch her breath, went to help Patricia Wilson get back up. The Canadian nurse moaned with pain as she got back on her feet, her legs and arms covered with bruises.

“Ow, ow, ow! What a thrashing! I hope that not all our training days will be like that.”

Jack Crawford, standing nearby, smiled to her.

“Actually, this is an easy day.”

The ex Navy SEAL commando then burst out in laughter at the face that the poor Patricia Wilson did then.

20:11 (North America Central Time)

The Timeless Club

Time Patrol residential tower

New Lake City University campus

Elizabeth, accompanied by Margaret, walked stiffly into the social club reserved for the members of the Time Patrol and their guests, her muscles still aching from the day’s physical exercises. The Timeless Club was an interesting mix of both ultramodern architecture and old decoration and furnishing covering a few millenniums of history. The furniture was mostly late 20th century and early 21st century, while ancient pieces of armor and numerous blade weapons covered the walls. There were also quite a few fine pieces of arts and paintings distributed along the walls or contained in glass display cases. In one corner of the large, high ceiling room sat a long bar counter, while a dance floor surrounded by a number of round tables and chairs occupied the center. Opposite the bar stood a small stage for musicians and performers. There were no musicians present at the time but a soft, relaxing music could be heard from hidden loudspeakers.

Elizabeth surveyed visually the club and the twenty or so occupants present and smiled: this place made her feel relaxed at once.

“Do you know if I will be considered too young to have a drink here, Bobo?”

“In England you would be definitely too young, Elizabeth, but here? I frankly don’t know. Let’s ask the barman.”

The British duo went to the bar, behind which a handsome young giant man stood. Elizabeth remembered him as one of the two persons who had served food and drinks on the craft that had brought her and others from 1941. The young man smiled to her, revealing perfect teeth.

“May I help you, miss?”

“You may, sir. Is fifteen too young to be served in this bar?”

“In normal bars around here, yes. However, all members and apprentices have the right to drink alcohol in this club. Common sense and self-restraint are of course expected and the barman on duty has the right to stop serving customers who are deemed too intoxicated. This said, what would you like, miss?”

“Do you have Champagne, by chance?”

“We do have a few brands, miss. The French ones we have are quite expensive, though. Could I suggest a nice Spanish bubbly wine at a much more reasonable price? It is a very good one, I assure you.”

“I will try it, please.” Said Elizabeth, who then hesitated before asking another question.

“I suppose that alcohol is considered a luxury item in your society, since you are charging for it.”

“Alcohol is effectively treated as a luxury item, but not because of its cost. Alcohol abuse is recognized as a potential cause of social problems, so its consumption is discouraged by artificially high prices, while public drunkenness is looked upon quite severely in the Global Council.”

“Thank God!” Exclaimed Margaret. “Someone finally took a sensible stance against the excesses of alcohol. I have seen too many good men ruin their lives with alcohol.”

“And what would you have, miss?” Asked the barman to Margaret.

“I will help Elizabeth with her Champagne.”

The barman nodded and, putting two long flute cups on the bar, took a bottle out of one of the refrigerators behind the bar and opened it with a loud pop. He filled the cups, then accepted Elizabeth’s bank card, inserting it in the bar’s credit reader after punching in the cost. Elizabeth approved the payment by pressing a thumb on the fingerprint recognition pad of the credit reader and punching in her personal identification code. With Margaret thanking the barman and grabbing her cup and the bottle, now inside an ice bucket, both British went to an empty table in a quiet corner of the club. The nearest

other customer was a thin, nearly ascetic Indian woman close to forty who was sipping from a tall glass while reading a book. Elizabeth raised her glass and touched Margaret's glass.

"To our new life, Bobo."

"To our new life."

Elizabeth took a sip from her glass and was agreeably pleased.

"This is as good as any French Champagne I have tasted at the palace."

"Indeed! I will have to remember this brand."

Elizabeth took another sip from her glass, then looked around her. In the opposite corner was a rather loud group of six apprentices apparently having a good time while drinking beer. She recognized young Tom Allen, drinking with Otto Skorzeni as if they were old comrades. She smiled at that and looked back at Margaret.

"You know, Bobo, I have never felt as free as now, even with all the studies and the training to be done. I can finally mingle with normal people and walk around without being surrounded by palace bodyguards or being told by those old courtier farts what I can or cannot do."

Margaret gave her an amused look.

"You call the people here normal? They are the most eclectic bunch of adventurers, spies, soldiers and scientists I have ever seen together. And Nancy Laplante is by far the oddest of the lot."

"True! That business about past incarnations is also quite fascinating. I have learned a lot from just my two most recent incarnations. I can now speak Arabic and Zulu and know how to track animals and use a spear."

Margaret couldn't help show some concern at those words.

"I don't know about that, Elizabeth. There is a lot that we may not know about the true effects of recalling these incarnations. What tells you that a past personality will not overpower your present one and force you into things you wouldn't do?"

"Uh, I haven't thought about that, to be frank. Maybe we should ask Nancy about that."

"And how do we know that she really is in control of her various personalities?"

"Then, what about asking someone else, Bobo? Take that Indian woman near our table. Aren't Indians believers in the concept of reincarnation?"

"Uh, you are right."

Elizabeth turned towards the Indian woman, ready to go see her, only to realize that the woman was already looking at them, a faint smile on her face. Her voice was warm and clear.

“Excuse me for overhearing you, but the word ‘incarnation’ caught my ears. May I join you?”

“Uh, of course, miss.”

Grabbing her book and her glass, the woman came to their table and put her things down before offering her hand to Elizabeth, who shook it.

“Pleased to meet you, Your Highness. My name is Indira Saduranidrasekar, but Indira will suffice. I am an astronomer and astro-physicist from the year 2052.”

She then turned to face Margaret and shook her hand as well.

“I understand that you are Princess Elizabeth’s dressing lady, correct?”

“You are right, Miss. Margaret MacDonald, at your service. So, do you know much about this incarnation business?”

Indira sat down before answering, using her words carefully.

“Please understand that the concept of incarnation, as it is understood in India, is quite different to what Nancy and the apprentices have experienced. I have discussed at length with Nancy on the subject, however, and can shed some light on it. According to Nancy, our spiritual part, or soul if you prefer, is linked to our body in a symbiosis. That symbiosis is however incomplete in normal humans, which makes it impossible to access the souvenirs of our past lives. The spirit is the usual repository of those souvenirs and normal brains cannot read directly the knowledge inside the spirit. What happened with Nancy was that The One, through its envoy, opened a full link between her spirit and her brain. She then gained all the knowledge of her spirit, apart from activating dormant abilities in her brain, which can now work fully in conjunction with her spirit. What Nancy is doing to us is to help our old souvenirs to the surface and make them accessible. After enough stimulation, our brains then develop a link of their own with our spirits, along which past souvenirs can flow. Since that link is only partial, we do not benefit from the special mental powers Nancy received from the messenger sent by The One. As for our past souvenirs, they are just that, souvenirs. There is no ancient brain left to back them with a will or an intent.”

“Uh, I’m afraid that I lost you there, Indira.” Said Elizabeth. Indira took a sip of her glass before continuing.

“One of the first questions raised amongst us apprentices when discussing this subject with Nancy was why, if The One created all the human spirits, are there both good and bad people. You would logically think that The One only produced good spirits, right?”

“You would think so.”

“Well, there are two reasons for having bad people on Earth. The first one is that The One, whom most of us would equate to God, is not perfect, despite what we may think. It is an immensely powerful and wise being aiming for peace and harmony on Earth, but it does make mistakes from time to time. Some would say that creating Humanity was one such mistake.”

“Hell, I myself thought so a few times, what with all the stupidity and meanness we keep showing.” Replied Margaret in a disillusioned tone.

“I couldn’t agree more, especially after having witnessed from orbit our ultimate act of stupidity: the nuclear holocaust of 2052. To return to the subject at hand, The One did not create only good, perfect spirits. More than a few had a few quirks but those quirks are normally not enough by themselves to make a person mean or evil. What can make a person truly bad or even evil is the chemistry and wiring of his or her brain, plus their upbringing. If, as one could say, a person has a few loose wires in the head, there is little the spirit will be able to do to nudge that person towards good. That person could from time to time be influenced by its spirit in what would be called an attack of conscience, but a truly sick brain will not become good just because of the spirit’s influence. Take Otto Skorzeni, for example. As a SS officer, you probably would classify him as a basically bad person. Nancy actually classifies his personality as lawful evil, meaning that he may act with violence or meanness but would do it to preserve a set of rules or laws from a given authority, not for his own profit. While exploring Otto’s past lives, Nancy found out that his spirit is one of the rare ones with an evil streak, but that he also tends towards the lawful side of evil. His past lives include that of a Mexican bandit, an Indian court dancer cum spy, a brutal Turkish governor in Bosnia and one English queen you may know about: Queen Mary the First.”

“He was ‘Bloody Mary’? Hell, she was one of the most despised queens of England ever. And Nancy trusts such a man?”

“Your Highness, a lawful evil person is not necessarily a liability. Whether we like it or not, lawful evil persons are often very useful to help run a society, be it as a tough judge, an authoritative king, a cunning spy or a ruthless soldier ready to do everything to

defend his country. You yourself could find some unsavory types while exploring your past lives.”

“Uh, I see. And what about Nancy Laplante? What kind of personality is she?”
Indira surprised both Elizabeth and Margaret by laughing hard at that question.

“Nancy? She definitely is a chaotic good personality. She will do what she wants to do, period, like any true chaotic person. She is however truly good, especially since her transformation at the hand of The One. With her spirit now fully linked with her brain, the former truly dominates the latter.”

“What if she dies and is reincarnated in a body with an evil brain?”
Indira shook her head slowly, her face now somber.

“That will not happen, Your Highness, for the reason that The One told her that her present incarnation will be her last life on Earth. When she dies as Nancy Laplante, she will become a being of pure energy, in essence an angel of sort.”

The two British paled and straightened up in their chairs.

“How do you know that this is true, especially if Nancy was the one who told you so?”

“Because the telepathic message to her was intercepted and recorded by her horse, a very sophisticated robotic machine able to detect mental messages. At that time, it was tuned to Nancy’s mental frequency and was able to record everything.”

“Wow!” Whispered Elizabeth before taking a large sip from her glass. She was definitely going to have to ask Nancy for more mental recall sessions.

21:29 (North America Central Time)

Tuesday, January 26, 3385 ‘A’

Suite 343, Time Patrol residential tower

Elizabeth opened her eyes slowly, her head still full of souvenirs. Nancy, sitting in front of her on the teenager’s bed, smiled to her questioningly.

“How do you feel, Elizabeth?”

“Like a different person. God, what would my parents think of me?”

“They probably have past lives as varied as you do, Elizabeth.”

“But a Spanish court assassin?” Replied the teenager, raising her voice. “I poisoned or stabbed dozens of persons.”

“You also could cross swords with the best, helped the Spanish ambassador in England spy on Queen Elizabeth the First, were highly educated and were a first class womanizer. Your Diego de Monterey must have been a very interesting man indeed.” Elizabeth blushed at the mention of womanizing.

“Nancy, all those past lives of mine were active sexually and remembering them taught me things I would never dare ask my parents about. Yet, I am still only fifteen years of age. I am not meant to know so much about sex so early.”

“Elizabeth, it is better to know in advance what not to do rather than learning about it the hard way, especially when it comes to sex. Knowing how to have sex doesn’t mean that you have to start experimenting with it either. I have brought something for you, just in case.”

Nancy took a small can from a uniform pocket and handed it to Elizabeth.

“This is a contraceptive spray for women. If you ever have sex with a man but don’t want to run the risk of having a baby, then spray one shot inside your mouth less than 24 hours after the relation. It will prevent any possible egg from forming into an embryo. Please don’t be offended by this: I am not saying to you that you should have relations with men just yet. I am simply giving you a way to ensure that you don’t suffer unwanted consequences in the future. Romances are fine. Unwanted pregnancies are not.”

“I...I will keep it with me.”

Elizabeth then changed the subject, deeply embarrassed by all this talk about sexuality.

“Nancy, when are you going to resume your mission in ancient Palestine?”

“Next Monday morning, after I go spend some hidden time back in my home time period to live my official life. When I left the followers of Yeshua in Capernaum, I told them a story about having to move around for a while in order not to bring unwanted attention on them. A probe was left to follow Yeshua around and one of our scoutships is downloading regularly its accumulated data. This will permit me to save months of surveillance and to be able to reappear there in the last year of Yeshua, as he is about to enter Jerusalem with his disciples.”

“Do you know what really happened during the episode on Mount Hermon, when God is supposed to have spoken to Jesus in front of three of his disciples?”

Nancy’s face became grave as she stared at the curious teenager.

“Yes, we do. The One spoke to Yeshua.”

CHAPTER 9 – MIDDLE EAST TROUBLES

09:10 (Eastern Standard Time)

Saturday, November 2, 2013 'A'

Nancy's condominium suite

Boucherville, Province of Quebec

Canada

Nancy was having a luxury this morning that she rarely had lately: she was taking it easy. Wearing only a robe and with a cup of coffee in her hands, she sat down in front of her computer, set up in the room she had turned into her private office inside of her suite. According to her official agenda in this century, she had returned from Afghanistan barely a week ago and had spent most of those few days returning her extra military kit and being debriefed at her reserve unit and at the regional army headquarters in Montreal. She had also announced to her superiors at her unit her intention to retire soon from military service, to their utter consternation and disappointment. In reality, she had spent nearly three years of her biological life running up and down time during that single week. Thankfully, the genetic longevity treatment available to all the citizens of the Global Council, which extended her potential biological life to a maximum of over 200 years, would compensate for her hectic life through various time periods. Right now, though, her priority was to find a new civilian job.

Opening her electronic mail, Nancy saw that she had only a few unread messages in her 'inbox'. She deleted right away two of them, which were junk mail, then opened with some expectation one message that came from the big American news network, CNN. Reading it quickly, she felt hope grow in her: CNN was inviting her to come to their headquarters in Atlanta for a job interview, with them paying for her travel expenses. That last point could only mean that they were seriously interested in her services. Consulting quickly her agenda, Nancy replied that she was ready to go to Atlanta any day of next week, thanking the CNN executive for offering her a job interview, then sent her reply. She next shouted in triumph in her chair, raising both of her arms high, before taking a sip of her coffee and opening the next message.

That message had intrigued her at once because of its sender: the giant filmmaker Universal Productions, in Los Angeles. At first, Nancy had thought it had been sent to her by mistake, but a first quick read convinced her otherwise, apart from making her burst into laughter: they wanted her for a casting interview for a possible role as an action movie villain. She probably owed that offer to her highly publicized shootout with the Taliban in Bala Buluk, captured live by a BBC news crew and then propagated on YouTube around the World. Chuckling as she read the message a second time, she saw that the role, while very physical and involving a lot of combat skills and stunts, called for little actual acting skills, which actually made her a logical candidate for the role. In effect, she would basically be a highly visible stunt woman. Seeing that Universal was proposing her an interview date at the end of next week, with all travel expenses paid, Nancy wrote down an affirmative answer, then pushed the 'send' button after a last hesitation. With the occasional, periodic nature of film making, she probably could have a contract with both CNN and Universal Productions, especially since the CNN's offer was for a position as a special international correspondent, to cover major World crisis as they popped up. The irony of her, a Chosen of The One, playing the role of a villain particularly amused her. If that offer from Universal worked out and if she was not disappointed by the experience, this could be for her an excellent source of revenue for such part-time, occasional work, thus freeing her from having to hold a full-time job to justify her present lifestyle in this century. Getting up from her chair and going to her small kitchen corner, she took the time to prepare a solid breakfast, eating it at her small dining table set at one extremity of her lounge. She then watched the latest news on her television before returning at around eleven in front of her computer. To her joy, she found replies already in from both CNN and Universal, the first setting her for an interview for next Wednesday and the second offering her a meeting time for next Friday. Mentally thanking her good fortune, Nancy quickly sent back positive replies, then started shopping online for airline tickets and hotel reservations.

10:03 (Eastern Standard Time)

Wednesday, November 6, 2013 'A'

CNN headquarters, Atlanta

Georgia, U.S.A.

“Welcome to CNN, Miss Laplante. Please, have a seat.”

“Thank you, Miss Khosravi.”

Nancy, wearing a blue-gray female suit, took the padded chair offered by the CNN senior vice president of international newsgathering, setting down her large black leather purse besides her chair. She then waited for Khosravi, a mature, attractive woman of Iranian descent in her forties, to speak first. On her part, the executive eyed her in a professional way before speaking.

“Miss Laplante, I must say that your reputation as a daring and well informed war correspondent was well known before the shootout in Afghanistan that went viral on YouTube last December. The few syndicated reports from you that we broadcasted in the past impressed us greatly as well. Now that your old employer is out of business, we would like to offer you the opportunity to work for us as a sort of special international crisis correspondent on an on-call basis. We would specifically like to have you for the most dangerous assignments around the World, when a single reporter has better chances to get in than a full news team and could follow if need be combatant troops as an embedded reporter. We do have already a few such reporters, but I must say that none of them even approaches you in terms of military abilities or physical stamina. I will not hide to you that the assignments you will get from us will be both very dangerous and physically demanding, with high levels of hardship and stress. We however believe that you are the most capable to meet our requirements. Your incredible language skills were also a big factor in our interest in you, since they will mostly negate the need to have some local translator follow you, something that often impedes reporting in the field. Another point in your favor is your in-depth knowledge of military and international affairs and your familiarity with military equipment and procedures. In all, this makes you a very rare bird indeed, a bird that we would be most happy to have at our service.”

Nancy smiled at Khosravi, keeping a relaxed but attentive attitude as she replied to her.

“You flatter me, Miss Khosravi. I must say that your offer appeals to my taste for adventure and travel. How flexible would be my employment with CNN if I accepted your offer? Would it be permissible to you if I also held another job on an occasional basis? You must understand that I cannot simply sit at home and wait for an eventual phone call. I do have to secure a living, after all.”

“I understand perfectly your point of view, Miss Laplante. If you accept to work with us, we promise you at least one week of warning time before you would have to go

in the field, unless of course you declare yourself ready to go right away when asked. We are also ready to pay you a basic salary on top of commissions for each field assignment given to you by us. While we cannot guarantee you a minimum number of special assignments per year, due to the often unpredictable nature of World crisis, that basic salary should be a good incentive for you to give us first priority on your agenda. We have no objections to you holding another job on a part-time basis but, if we call, we expect you to be able to go to the field within two weeks of our call.”

“That is quite a restrictive clause, Miss Khosravi. Very few prospective employers would be ready to even consider me, knowing that I could be called away at any time with only a two-week notice. As for the unpredictability of World crisis, I have to disagree somewhat: a competent analyst should be able to predict fairly much in advance any new conflict, given the fact that wars don’t just pop up without reasons. To take the present Iranian-Israeli conflict, for example, talks of possible military action went on for months before Israeli planes struck Iranian nuclear facilities. If you need someone to do an in-depth coverage of major crisis, then I would be much more comfortable working on the terms of separate contracts for each crisis case I would take on.”

The female CNN executive thought that over for a moment before nodding her head once, realizing that her initial offer had been maybe a bit unrealistic.

“Very well. If you can assure us of a reasonable level of availability for given periods of time, we could go the route of individual assignment contracts. If you could let us know in advance about your periods of unavailability, that would of course help us greatly in planning assignments for you.”

“Of course! I would certainly do my best to keep you abreast on my availability, Miss Khosravi. Now, you do realize that the kind of reporting profile you are asking for would be best done with field equipment specifically designed for such assignments, especially if I have to work alone. Your present field equipment, while excellent, is quite bulky and implies multiple individual loads if you require instant satellite communication capability. I have had in mind for some time already a few ideas on how to adapt existing equipment to such field tasks.”

“If you do agree to work with us, we certainly will listen to your ideas on that subject, Miss Laplante. Right now, we have already one assignment in mind for you, one that is not too time-sensitive but would imply traveling to various battlefronts in the Middle East. I am talking about the present Israeli-Iranian conflict and its various side shows, including the fighting in the Israeli-Lebanese border area. We would like to send

you there sometime this month, if of course you accept to work for us. Your job would be to observe the situation, then make an on the spot analysis, in order to produce a special documentary report on that conflict. This would imply a contract for about a month of field work over there.”

“Now, you are seriously interesting me, Miss Khosravi. While I am due to attend another job interview this Friday, I will be able to give you a definite answer on such an assignment by next week, at the most.”

“Just out of curiosity, could I ask who is interviewing you this Friday, miss?”

“You can.” Replied Nancy, smiling. “It is Universal Productions.”

“Universal Productions?” Said Khosravi, flabbergasted.

“Yes! They are interested in possibly casting me as a villain in a future action movie. It could actually turn out to be a fun job for me.”

“I’d say! Have you some acting experience already?”

“None at all, but having to interview warlords and government officials has given me quite a lot of practice in front of a camera. Besides, the role they want me to take demands lots of combat skills but few acting skills.”

“I see! Now, let’s discuss what kind of financial compensations you would be expecting...”

Nancy ended up leaving Khosravi’s office after nearly one hour of conversation, with a promise to give a definite answer on the Middle East assignment by the end of next week. Since Nancy had not been greedy about her salary expectations, she and Khosravi had arrived fairly quickly at an understanding about the terms and limitations of any contract she would eventually sign with CNN, leaving Nancy plenty of free time for other occupations. She now only needed to see if Universal Productions’ offer would prove to be a reasonable one.

13:36 (California Time)

Friday, November 8, 2013 ‘A’

Lobby of Universal City Plaza building

Universal City, Los Angeles County

California

Channing Tatum was sitting and discussing with his agent on one of the visitors' benches in the lobby of the 36-story building housing the headquarters of both Universal Productions and NBC, when the entrance of a tall and beautiful woman caught his eyes. While many beautiful women and teenagers walked in and out of this building on any given day, that one had a special quality to her. Dressed in a skin-tight black satin jumpsuit and knee-high black leather boots with moderately high heels, the woman stood a good 188 centimeters, heels included, and sported wide, muscular shoulders. Her shape was however very feminine, with large hips, a generous and apparently firm chest and long, athletic legs. Her long black hair went down to the middle of her back and her green eyes reflected quiet strength, while her gait was like that of a dangerous feline. She didn't carry a purse, instead wearing a wide black and silver leather belt to which a black leather pouch was hooked. Tatum's agent also followed the woman with his eyes, like most men present in the lobby.

"Wow! That is what I call a splendid cat. I wouldn't mind being her agent, whoever she is."

"And I wouldn't mind doing a love scene with her." Added the actor. "I wonder if she is here to see someone at Universal. She would be perfect for the role of the Shadow Dancer."

His agent nodded: he had pushed for Tatum to be chosen for the main role in the still-to-be-produced action movie 'CROSSROADS' and had seen a preliminary draft of the script.

"Well, she will need more than simple looks to land that role, Channing: it is a very physical role, with plenty of risky stunts and combat scenes."

"If she is half as good as she looks, then she should do the trick." Replied Tatum, watching the woman as she went to the reception desk, probably to announce herself and get directions. A NBC news anchorman that Tatum knew and who was sitting on the bench opposite that of the actor and his agent suddenly seemed to recognize the woman and smiled to Tatum.

"Hey, that's Nancy Laplante, the so-called 'Afghan Calamity Jane'. I had to present a news piece about her last December, along with another one two months ago, when she was still in Afghanistan."

His curiosity aroused, Tatum went to sit alongside the anchorman.

"What can you tell me about her, Jeff?"

"She's a Canadian Army reservist officer and a war correspondent. She is a master pistol shooter and has a black belt in karate, plus has covered numerous wars in her career."

"So, she would be good in movie combat scenes?"

The anchorman gave him a funny look.

"Good? From what I know of her, she could easily clean the clock of Gina Carano...or yours."

That brought a wide smile on Tatum's face.

"That good, hey? Thanks for the info, Jeff."

The actor then returned to the bench still occupied by his agent, who looked at him with intense curiosity.

"So? What did he say?"

"That she is plenty qualified for the role of the Shadow Dancer. You may want to keep an ear up about her."

"I certainly will."

Having announced herself at the reception desk, Nancy then took an elevator cabin to the tenth floor, stepping out in the reception lobby of the Universal Productions executive suites. After speaking to the receptionist controlling the access to the suites, she went to sit in a bench outside one of the offices to wait to be called in. She had to wait for less than fifteen minutes before a man in his forties came to see her, a big smile on his face. He was a bit pudgy and already had lost much of his hair but his suit was an expensive one. Nancy rose at once to her feet on his approach.

"Miss Laplante, I believe? I am Daniel Whitfield, vice director of casting at Universal. I am truly happy for you to have come."

"It was my pleasure, Mister Whitfield." Said Nancy while shaking his hand firmly, intentionally putting quite a lot of strength in her grip and surprising the executive.

"My! You are quite a strong woman, Miss Laplante, judging from your grip. But let's go into my office to discuss our business."

Nancy was then invited into a large, posh office adorned with dozens of framed pictures of movie stars hooked to the walls. The executive proudly showed the pictures to her as he rounded a huge work desk.

"Some of the stars I enrolled for Universal. If you convince me to hire you, miss, you will be in good company."

"Indeed, Mister Whitfield." Said politely Nancy, taking the swivel seat facing the desk. "Before we go further, I must remind you that I am planning to continue on a part-time basis with my present career as a war correspondent. In fact, I should leave in about two weeks for a field trip to the Middle East that will be about a month long. However, if I am informed in advance about a casting offer from Universal, I will do my best to arrange my agenda accordingly."

"You already stated in your email your wish to go on as a war correspondent and I appreciate your warning, miss. That said, we are still most interested in using your talents for our coming film, which should start production early next year."

"And I am most interested in seeing what you have for me. You want someone with developed combat skills to play the role of a villain, right?"

"Not any villain, miss." Corrected with a smile the Universal executive. "The Shadow Dancer is supposed to be a highly trained assassin in the pay of a powerful international consortium bent on suppressing a few dirty secrets. The script of our movie 'CROSSROADS' is still only at the draft stage and can still be modified somewhat, but that is basically the role we are looking to fill with you...if you prove yourself qualified. By the way, your present outfit looks perfect for the Shadow Dancer."

"Thank you! I thought that you would like it. Most men that crossed my way seemed to like it, in fact."

Whitfield couldn't help then admire openly her shapely, athletic body, thinking that male moviegoers should also appreciate the sight of this Laplante. He then got to the serious part of the interview and took a pen and a notepad, ready to write down notes and comments.

"Well, now that I have you here, Miss Laplante, would you mind telling me if you have any acting experience?"

"Acting per say, no, but as a war correspondent I recorded many on-camera interviews with various warlords, politicians and military officers."

"That is a good start. Describe to me the qualifications and skills that you think would be relevant to help you play the role of the Shadow Dancer?"

Nancy nodded once, then took out from her belt purse a folded sheet of paper, giving it to the executive.

"I took the liberty of making a list of my relevant skills before coming to California. This is your copy to keep. As you will see, I am the number two female karateka in Canada and am ranked number twelve in the World. I have won many combat pistol

and long range pistol shooting competitions in Canada and the United States, practices skydiving, scuba diving and gymnastics and am familiar with most existing small arms, including machineguns and grenades. I am a history buff and have extensive practice in the use of medieval and ancient weapons. I am also an expert horse rider. In terms of linguistic abilities, I added to my list the languages I can speak fluently.”

Whitfield reviewed the list carefully, seriously impressed: this woman was even more qualified than he had expected...if she was not simply bragging.

“This is very impressive indeed, Miss Laplante. The fact that you can ride and fight with ancient weapons could actually be very useful to us for roles in future movies set in historical periods. Now, I have arranged for a number of our trainers and experts to test you in various combat skills, including shooting. Would you mind passing such tests this afternoon? Do not worry about ruining your nice outfit: we have plenty of action outfits available in our studios.”

“I do not doubt that, Mister Whitfield, and yes, I am ready to pass your tests this afternoon.”

“Excellent!” Said the executive at the same time he picked up his telephone receiver and punched in a number. “One of my assistants will escort you to our training facilities. The tests should take a few hours, so I will see you again tomorrow morning at ten, after I had the chance to review your performance. We will of course pick the tab for your hotel and restaurant bills in the meantime.”

“You are too kind, Mister Whitfield.” Replied Nancy with a big smile.

18:16 (California Time)

Universal Productions, cafeteria of the administrative staff

Universal City Plaza building

Daniel Whitfield was still eating his supper, alone at a table of the cafeteria used by the executive and administrative staff of Universal, when four of the stuntmen and specialists used by the studios to train actors for action roles showed up and walked directly to his table. Whitfield was not surprised by that, as he had asked them to report to him as soon as they were finished evaluating Laplante. Putting down his fork and wiping his mouth with his napkin, he signaled the four men to sit down at his table.

“So, how did it go with Miss Laplante?”

One of the trainers, an experienced ex-Navy SEAL commando, gave him a funny look as he sat opposite to Whitfield.

“Uh, did you grab an actual special operations soldier or professional assassin to play the role of the Shadow Dancer, sir?”

A bit taken aback by that, Whitfield took a second to respond.

“Well, she is supposed to be a battle-hardened officer and war correspondent, Mac. Why do you ask?”

“Because my ego just took a big hit with her: she cleaned my clock in terms of pistol and rifle shooting and beat my own best time in the tactical SWAT house run. She is also extremely knowledgeable with guns of all types and can throw knives around like a ninja. Oh, did I mention that she beat the crap out of me in unarmed combat? That woman is as well incredibly strong and fast, sir.”

Whitfield, impressed and pleased, looked at another trainer, an expert martial artist.

“And you, Hiro, what do you think of her in terms of martial arts?”

The Japanese-American answered at once in a quiet tone.

“She said that she is a 5th Dan black belt karateka and I believe her, sir. She is truly World class as a martial artist. Her repertoire is mostly limited to karate and kung fu, but she is still impressive. By the way, she speaks fluent Japanese, sir.”

Whitfield next looked at his medieval combat specialist.

“Bill?”

The medieval buff and expert horseman made a face then.

“Laplante is a true expert with all blade weapons and can shoot a bow about as well as Robin Hood, boss. She is particularly good with a long sword or a saber. As for horse riding, I think that she was born on top of a horse. If you ever want someone to replay the role of Xena the Warrior Princess, then she is it.”

Whitfield grinned, not believing his luck. He looked last at was his artistic skills judge.

“And how did our combat machine do in acting skills, dancing and singing, Peter?”

“She did extremely well in the standard acting skills test, considering that she never studied acting, sir. She is easily proficient enough in acting to play the Shadow Dancer. In fact, we may want to give her more lines than originally called for by the draft movie script. Laplante has a beautiful voice and can sing very well, and that in many languages. The funny part was her dancing. She is very fluid and flexible and is reasonably good at modern dancing styles but is at her best dancing past, exotic styles.

She could have fit in a harem as a dancing girl. She also can play a number of instruments, being best with a guitar and a piano.”

Whitfield's eyes sparkled with glee.

“Hell, did we just find the next big Hollywood star in terms of action movies? Uh, how is she in terms of body looks, Peter? Did she object to undressing in front of you?”

The artistic judge, a known homosexual, shook his head.

“She understood the need for me and my photographer to see and photograph her naked, to see if she had any physical blemishes that could detract on the big screen. She told me that she would not object to nude scenes, as long as they are not gratuitous or pornographic in nature. To make it short, Laplante has a beautiful, sexy body and has the looks of an Olympic athlete. My photographer nearly drooled while watching her. By the way, she shaves her groin. There is only the matter of her scars.”

“Scars?” Said Whitfield, surprised and confused. “What scars and how bad do they look?”

“They are actually old scars and are quite faint but are still noticeable, sir. She has multiple scars from bullets and shrapnel pieces on her upper left arm, her buttocks and the back of her legs, plus scars from a knife wound on her upper left leg. She said that she collected them both as a war correspondent and as a military officer on overseas operations.”

“But, that's perfect!” Exclaimed the executive. “She fits in the mold of the Shadow Dancer to a 'T'. Do you have the pictures you took of her with you?”

Peter nodded and took a file folder out of his briefcase, handing it to Whitfield. The executive first pushed away his tray of food, then spread the twelve large prints he found inside the folder in front of him on the table, making three of the four trainers bend forward to look at them with gleeful smiles.

“Wow!” Exclaimed Mac, the ex-Navy SEAL. “Talk about eye candy.”

A male employee passing by the table at that time got transfixed by the pictures and collided with a nearby table, spilling his glass of milk and making him swear. Whitfield giggled as the employee put down his tray to clean up the mess as best he could.

“Well, it seems that Miss Laplante can have quite an effect on men. That's another point in her favor.”

A female secretary that had been following the man who had spilled his milk and had stopped behind him looked at the pictures on the table and smiled.

“She could have an effect on quite a few women as well, sir.”

Whitfield smiled at the young and pretty woman, who was an overt bisexual girl.

“You think so, Jennie?”

“I sure wouldn't mind meeting her, sir. Don't put her near Angelina Jolie or Lucy Liu: you probably would get quite a meltdown. Who is she, if I may ask, sir?”

“A prospect for our next action movie ‘CROSSROADS’. Her name is Nancy Laplante.”

“Hmmm... I think that I will have to Google her name tonight.” Said the secretary before going her way. Whitfield then looked back at his trainers, grinning.

“Well, gentlemen, I think that we have a winner here. Let's just hope that she will not be too greedy tomorrow morning.”

10:26 (California Time)

Saturday, November 9, 2013 ‘A’

Daniel Whitfield's office

Universal Productions headquarters

Nancy hid a smile as she read the draft contract given to her by Daniel Whitfield: the terms, especially the attendance requirements for the production of the movie ‘CROSSROADS’, agreed quite well with her. The proposed salary was also more than she had expected and there was a clause that opened the possibility for her to do more movies with Universal in the future. If she wanted a safer alternative to her life as a war correspondent, this would be it. No doubt Mike Crawford would feel much better if she limited or stopped her battlefield ventures in this century: her adventures through time were risky enough as they were. Looking up from the draft document, she smiled widely to the Universal executive.

“I agree with the terms in this contract, Mister Whitfield.”

“Including the salary?” Asked Whitfield, hopeful.

“Including the salary. I was looking to turn partly to acting mostly to cut down a bit on the risks I keep taking as a war correspondent and military officer, not to get rich. I am 31 years old and have already seen enough wars for a lifetime. I will eventually have to settle down into a less hectic and dangerous life...if I get to survive the next few years. If I like my experience with this movie and you are satisfied with my performance, then I would be most happy to entertain further role offerings. Should I sign the contract now?”

"If you are in full agreement with it, yes. Take all the time you need to read the fine prints if you wish so, though."

"I already read them. Do you have a pen?"

"Of course!" Said the executive, hurrying to give her a pen. He smiled with contentment as Nancy gave him back the contract, with her signature on it.

"Excellent! We will then expect you back here at the end of January, for the start of the production of 'CROSSROADS'. We will advise you of the exact date after the new year. Please don't get killed in the meantime on some battlefield in the Middle East, Miss Laplante."

"I will do my best to stay in one piece, Mister Whitfield." Replied Nancy, smiling.

15:41 (Israel Time)

Tuesday, November 19, 2013 'A'

Mossad headquarters, Tel Aviv

Israel

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Asked Bennie Kellerman after entering Moshe Eshkol's office. The head of the counter-terrorism branch of the Mossad nodded his head and pointed one of the chairs in the office.

"Yes! Please sit down. You already know Mister Yosef Adamovich, I believe?" Bennie nodded while hiding his antipathy towards the other man sitting in the office: even for a Mossad secret agent, Yosef Adamovich was reputed to be a ruthless, nearly sadistic man, apart from being in Bennie's mind a religious extremist with racist, intolerant views. Adamovich was mostly used for the dirtiest, bloodiest jobs, something that did not bode well about this meeting.

"I do, sir. What's up?"

"Miss Nancy Laplante is coming to Israel, that is what is up, Bennie." Said Eshkol. "She applied two days ago for a visa at our consulate in Montreal. Her stated reason for her visit is to do a report on the present conflict here for CNN. Our consulate agent noted then that Laplante already had in her passport recently obtained visas for Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq...and Iran."

"Iran?" Said Bennie, incredulous. "The Iranians gave her an entry visa? But, they must know that she is a Canadian military intelligence officer."

"Oh, I'm sure that the Iranians know about that. I have to say that I admire her nerves to be ready to attempt such a risky visit there. On the other hand, it would tend to confirm that her trip is truly meant to be part of an assignment as a reporter for CNN. With the kind of surveillance the Iranians will certainly put her under in Iran, there is no way in hell that she could do any actual spying work without being promptly arrested. However, we do know more about her than the Iranians, or anybody else as a matter of fact...in this century. I have already advised Director Levy that she is coming and got from him explicit orders concerning our secret time traveler."

"Uh, what kind of orders, sir?"

Eshkol answered in a calm but firm voice while bending slightly forward behind his desk.

"Simply said, we are to kidnap her discreetly after her arrival in Israel, interrogate her and find out how she travels through time, then kill her and make her disappear. The situation around the country is getting more difficult every week and obtaining a time traveling machine from her would help us greatly in, let's say, make a few problems disappear or even be preempted before they could even pop up."

Bennie was left open-mouthed for a moment before he could object in a tone he tried to keep polite.

"But, sir, she is a Canadian military officer, thus officially not an enemy of Israel. She even has a Taliban death fatwa on her head."

"Being a Canadian does not make one automatically a friend of Israel, Bennie. The fact that she illegally obtained AS Val rifles in the past and is a secret time traveler proves that she is not what she seems to be."

"But, both as a CNN reporter and has a Canadian military officer, her disappearance is going to create a lot of turmoil, sir."

"True, which is why you and Adamovich will have to operate with utmost discretion. You will be in charge of following Miss Laplante on her arrival in Israel, then of kidnapping her. Once you have her, Mister Adamovich will take care of extracting her secrets from her and will then get rid of her body."

Bennie threw a black look then at Adamovich. The thin, bearded man was smiling with what appeared to him to be anticipated pleasure. Adamovich frowned in turn on seeing Bennie's look.

"What's the matter, Kellerman? You are suddenly having scruples, or what?"

Bennie clenched his teeth, then looked back at Eshkol.

"Sir, I strongly believes that kidnapping and killing Laplante would be a grave mistake. For one, she has proved to be a very tough woman and nothing assures us that she will accept to tell us anything about time travel. Secondly, the political and diplomatic repercussions of her disappearance in Israel could be quite severe. And I am not even talking about any reaction that could come from the future, sir."

Eshkol's eyes half closed as he stared hard at his agent.

"What do you mean by a reaction from the future?"

Bennie then raised slightly his tone of voice, getting fired up.

"Sir, if she really travels to and from the 34th Century, do you really believe that she is alone to do so, or that she doesn't work for someone in the far future? If she disappears in Israel, then we should expect an unfriendly visit from the future, either after or before her disappearance date. We already discussed the tremendous advantages that time travel would give to anyone possessing it."

"Which is exactly the reason why we want those secrets in order to protect Israel, Bennie. As for her revealing her secrets to us, I am confident that Mister Adamovich will be able to make her talk. These orders come from high up in the government. Are you refusing to obey them, Mister Kellerman?"

Bennie swallowed hard before answering, knowing what his response could cost him.

"Sir, I firmly believe that these orders will only attract disaster on us. We should find a less extreme way to find the secrets of time travel, notably by putting Miss Laplante under tight, constant, surveillance, something we have not done yet."

"I see!" Said coldly Eshkol. "I thank you for your advice, Mister Kellerman. Consider yourself off this case from this moment on. Mister Adamovich will take over Laplante's case in your place. Make sure that you give him all the data and information you have on her."

"Yes sir!" Could only say Bennie, fuming.

"Then you are dismissed."

It took all his will for Bennie not to slam the door on his way out.

17:06 (Eastern Standard Time)

Wednesday, November 20, 2013 'A'

Office of the Assistant Director for Operations

Central Intelligence Agency headquarters

Langley, Virginia, U.S.A.

Julian Moore appeared concerned to Dean Price as the latter entered with Erik Johnson the office of the CIA's Assistant Director for Operations. Moore showed them two swiveling padded chairs placed in front of his desk.

"Please sit down, gentlemen. We have just received some most disturbing information from Israel that we will need to act on decisively and quickly."

Erik Johnson nodded at the words 'act on decisively', understanding that his talents for direct, violent action would be needed again. He sat down with Dean Price and waited for Moore to speak, which he did in a grave tone.

"Misters Johnson and Price, what I am going to tell you may appear to be utterly fantastic and unbelievable, but I received solid proofs that it is too true. Basically, someone we have inside the Mossad sent us last night a short report accompanied by two video recordings and a couple of photos, to warn us that the Mossad is about to do something potentially very dangerous."

"We have a mole inside the Mossad, Boss?" Asked Price in his usual, unceremonious way. Moore nodded and smiled weakly at that.

"Hey, if the Israelis think nothing of spying on us, what's wrong with returning them the favor? Yes, we do have such a mole, which will be left anonymous for everyone's sake. What that mole told us is that the Mossad stumbled by accident about a year ago on someone that supposedly is a time traveler. That said time traveler is about to travel to Israel for legitimate purposes and the word is that the Mossad is intent on kidnapping, torturing and killing her in order to steal the secret of time travel from her."

While Erik Johnson apparently stayed impassive, Dean Price's jaw fell to the floor.

"A time traveler, Boss? You're kidding, right?"

"Not at all, Mister Price. I will now play in succession the two videos sent by our mole and you will be able to tell me afterwards what you think of them, you and Mister Johnson."

Swiveling the screen of his computer around, Moore then punched a few buttons and called up a video file, widening it to full screen before starting the 'play' button. He sat back in his chair as the two action agents watched the video, which quickly attracted an exclamation from Dean Price that caught him off guard.

"Hey! That's Nancy, when she shot up those Taliban assholes in Bala Buluk."

"You know that woman, Mister Price?"

"Sure, Boss! We met during a few pistol shooting competitions in the last few years. I even banged her a couple of times: a great lay, I must say."

Erik Johnson shook his head in amusement as Julian Moore stared with disbelief at Price. Moore however didn't say a word and let them finish viewing the video before calling a second recording on his computer screen.

"Well, you should be happy to watch this next video, as the good Miss Laplante appears naked in it, Mister Price."

Moore then started the video taken in the office of Victor Medveyev in Kiev. While Dean Price concentrated his attention on the woman in the video, trying to assert if she was indeed Nancy, Erik Johnson didn't miss the hour and date of the video, appearing in a lower corner of the screen in small digital numbers. His eyes widened and he then examined carefully the woman now seen undressing in front of two men in a private study. Price was the first to speak, with the video still playing.

"Well, this is indeed Nancy Laplante, Boss. No doubt about it. What is so special about that video?"

"Look at the time indicator on the left lower corner, Dean." Said Johnson. Price did so and opened his mouth wide under the shock.

"March 1, 1992? But...that's impossible! Nancy was a young teenage girl at that time."

"She should have been...and was, actually." Said Moore gravely. "I had her background checked quickly by one of our analysts, Ian Dorset, who is now by the way part of the only five Americans to know about this time traveler story. Mister Dorset vouched to me that there was effectively a teenage Nancy Laplante growing at the time in Montreal: he found her school graduation pictures online, along with other proofs that she didn't simply invent her background history. There is more, however. The second video you saw was taken in Kiev in the home of Victor Medveyev, an arms merchant who was later busted by the Russians but managed to flee to Israel, where the Mossad made a deal with him: they would protect him and let him retire in peace in Tel Aviv, in exchange for information about his past weapons buyers, particularly those connected to the Middle East. That's how the Mossad got the second video tape. When the Mossad connected it to the piece of news on Laplante from Afghanistan, they sent a team to her home town in Boucherville, Canada, to search her condo and bug it. There, they found nothing suspicious, except for a single small coin that had apparently been lost by Laplante on the thick rug of her bedroom. That coin had writing in an unknown language

and bore the date stamp '3382'. Furthermore, that coin, once analyzed in Israel, proved to be made of 95 percent pure iridium, plus some platinum, and was adorned with a small hologram."

"Iridium?" Said Dean Price, intrigued. "That's not a common metal, no?"

"Certainly not!" Replied Moore. "In fact, it is so rare that it is worth four times the price of platinum. Economically, it would make no sense to use such a rare and precious metal, which is about the hardest one known by the way, to produce simple coins. However, iridium is much more abundant in the asteroids flying around the Solar System."

Moore let that sink in his two action agents before continuing.

"The Israelis also found the pictures of a man and of a teenage girl that appeared to be beloved ones to Laplante. The trouble is that Laplante is not married and certainly never had children, something attested by her military medical records. Here are the pictures in question."

Price and Johnson bent forward to better look at the two pictures now on Moore's computer screen. Johnson nodded his head after a few seconds.

"They do appear to be family pictures, the way these two posed and smiled. If Laplante is indeed a time traveler, then this man and girl could be living in the future, probably in the 34th Century. This case is definitely shaping up to be a critical one, sir. You do realize how dangerous the knowledge of time travel would be for us if some irresponsible idiot gets hold of it in our era, sir? In fact, I am not sure that I would trust our own politicians and military leaders with that secret."

"Oh, I do, Mister Johnson. I do." Replied Moore gravely. "Right now, not even the President knows about it, only us and two other CIA employees that have already been told by me in no uncertain terms to keep their mouths shut. The problem is that the Mossad knows about Laplante and seems intent on stealing the secret of time travel from her...any way they can. You know like me how some of the politicians in power in Israel are less than, uh, sensible when it comes to protecting and expanding their country. The thought of such men holding the secret of time travel is enough to make me shudder."

"The same here, sir." Replied Johnson, as a number of scary scenarios paraded inside his brain. "What are your orders, sir?"

“To prevent the Israelis from stealing the secrets of time travel from Laplante and also to prevent the fact that she is a time traveler from spreading further...at all cost. You...”

Moore’s telephone then rang, interrupting him. He picked up his receiver and answered, then listened for a few seconds with growing alarm before thanking his caller and putting down the receiver, to look gravely at Price and Johnson.

“This was Mister Dorset, who is the sole analyst authorized by me to know about Laplante. Our good Canadian woman left Montreal this morning, to fly to Paris and then Tel Aviv. She should be about to arrive in Israel about now, which would make it about midnight in Tel Aviv.”

“Damn!” Said Johnson, clearly not pleased. “The Israelis will have a good 24 hours of advance on us to get at her. You did say ‘at all cost’, sir?”

“I certainly did, Mister Johnson, and I meant it.” Answered Moore, his face hard.

00:34 (Israel Time)

Thursday, November 21, 2013 ‘A’

Waiting parking spot, arrivals terminal

Ben-Gurion International Airport

Tel-Aviv, Israel

Sarah Manning, alone in her well-used gray Honda Civic, raised for a few seconds the picture she had been given by the CIA head of station at the American embassy, comparing it to the tall woman who had just walked out of the arrivals terminal of the Ben-Gurion International Airport. Being the rookie agent at the embassy, she had drawn this late minute task about following discreetly a Canadian reporter working for CNN that was due to arrive in Israel. Sarah had her misgivings about being sent alone and without backup like this but her superior had told her to simply follow this Nancy Laplante and find out where she would be lodging, so that a follow-up team could then take over from her. Sarah still didn’t know why that Laplante was to be followed but the woman now taking place in a taxi with her luggage was without a doubt her target. Starting up her car, Sarah rolled out of her parking spot and started following from a respectable distance the taxi, helped in that by the light traffic of this late hour.

The taxi with Laplante inside took the highway towards Tel-Aviv, the lights of which were visible a few kilometers away to the West. As she drove, Sarah tried to figure out why the CIA would be interested in Nancy Laplante. She knew her by reputation, mostly from the BBC news video that had shown her in action in Afghanistan a year ago, thus knew that the Canadian could be a very dangerous opponent if she wanted to. In comparison, Sarah had no illusions about her own limited experience, this being her first posting after graduating from 'The Farm', the secret estate in Virginia where CIA field agents were trained. In fact, she had drawn the Tel-Aviv station solely because of her knowledge of Hebrew, her being Jewish. Her liberal, moderate religious outlook had however taken little time before she had become thoroughly irritated and angered by the often intolerant and arrogant attitude of many Israeli Jews, with the misogyny of the ultra-orthodox men particularly grating on her nerves. Such a feminist as Laplante seemed to be would no doubt share Sarah's antipathy for all these stone age-thinking male fossils. Thinking about it, Laplante had the reputation of a straight-talking, no-nonsense reporter with little patience for racism and intolerance. Maybe the CIA bosses in Langley believed that Laplante was going to get herself in trouble with Israeli authorities. After long months of war and intermittent rocket and missile bombardment from both Iran, South Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, the Israeli leadership was certainly on edge and stressed to the breaking point, with the general Israeli population growing increasingly disillusioned and tired of a war their leaders had started and which was bringing them only fear, destruction and impending economic ruin.

Partly lost in her thoughts, Sarah didn't notice the minivan and the compact sedan that had been following both her and Laplante's taxi since the airport. At one point, as they were entering the suburbs of Tel-Aviv, the sedan passed Sarah and took position between her and the taxi. Not expecting her tailing job to be a dangerous one, Sarah paid little attention to the sedan and its three occupants, simply taking more distance in order not to attract Laplante's attention. When the reporter's taxi pulled to a stop in front of the entrance to one of the bigger hotels of Tel-Aviv, Sarah simply drove into an empty visitor's parking spot in the lot of the hotel and shut down her engine. She was about to get out of her car to follow Laplante inside when a man she had not noticed approaching bent down near her open window, a sort of pistol in his raised right fist. Sarah only had time to turn her head to look at him before the pistol emitted a barely audible 'puff' and a dart stung her neck. Her vision became blurred nearly immediately

and her head swam before she fell unconscious on her steering wheel. She never saw the group of four men that then entered the hotel behind Laplante.

02:56 (Israel Time)

Mossad safe house

Northern suburbs of Tel Aviv

Nancy woke up slowly, her vision blurred at first and her brain foggy. As she was still only half conscious, a horrible scream from nearby made her jerk, stimulating her back to consciousness. To her surprise, she found herself naked and tied to a wooden chair in the middle of a mostly bare concrete room. Her last souvenir had been of being in her hotel room, unpacking her things, when a hissing noise had attracted her to the entrance door. She had passed out then before realizing that someone was pumping out some kind of gas from a tube inserted under her door sill. With her vision still partly blurred, she now saw another woman tied naked to a chair, less than three meters from her. She was sobbing with pain and her face was bloodied and swollen from a severe beating, while two men stood facing her. The girl seemed barely out of her teens. One of the men then punched her hard in the face, making the girl's head snap around, then shouted at her in Hebrew.

"SPEAK! WHO ARE YOU WORKING FOR? WHY WERE YOU FOLLOWING US?"

When the sobbing woman simply shook her head, the man that had struck her looked at the other man, who was holding a pair of wires in his hands.

"Stimulate her nipples again, Leon."

The man with the wires then bent down and applied the end of the wires on the tip of the girl's breasts. She immediately tensed up on her chair and screamed for long seconds, until the man withdrew the wires. The interrogator then brutally grabbed the girl by her hair, forcing her to look up at him as she was still crying her pain out.

"Do you want my friend to use his wires on your cunt, bitch? Who are you working for?"

The girl, showing undeniable courage, shook her head again and clenched her teeth. The man with the wires then kneeled in front of her legs, tied open, and made her scream again for long seconds. Now furious and fully awake, Nancy shouted at the men.

“STOP THIS NOW, YOU BASTARDS!”

The two men turned around to face her, with the interrogator smiling cruelly at Nancy.

“Well well: our time traveler is with us now.” He said in English.

Nancy tensed up in alarm at once: how could these men know about her being a time traveler? Her expression made the interrogator’s smile widen.

“So, it is more than mere suppositions, hey? I hope for you that you will prove reasonable, unless you want to suffer like that too curious bitch.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about. As for that poor girl, you will pay for your sadism.”

“Another hard-headed cunt? Leon, convince her that we are serious.”

The man with the wire started stepping towards Nancy, his wires still in his hands, when he suddenly froze, his face turning red and his body starting to shake. He then let his wires fall to the ground and took hold of his head, a second only before his whole body burst into flames from inside. The man screamed horribly for a short moment, then fell to the floor, still burning and with the awful smell of roasted flesh filling the room. The interrogator could only watch that with a mix of incredulity and horror, unable to react. When he looked back at Nancy, it was to face her hateful glare.

“Go roast in Hell, bastard!”

Yosef Adamovich then burst in flames as well, dying with a long scream and falling to the concrete floor. Sarah Manning, despite her pain and tears, saw clearly the whole scene and eyed Nancy with disbelief as the latter tensed her muscles and pulled hard on her ropes, making her wooden chair splinter in pieces in an incredible show of raw strength.

“How...how did you do that?” She managed to say between her puffed, split lips. Nancy took the time to get rid of the ropes still around her arms and legs before going to Sarah and kneeling in front of her, concern on her face.

“I’m sorry if I was the cause of your ordeal, miss. Let me untie you.”

“But, those men bursting in flames from within. How could this be possible?” Insisted Sarah as Nancy started to untie her ankles. Nancy stopped her work for a moment to look the young woman in the eyes.

“What is your name, friend?”

Won over by her concerned, friendly attitude, Sarah answered her after a short hesitation.

“Sarah, Sarah Manning. You did cause those men to burn up, didn’t you?”

It was Nancy's turn to hesitate, as she weighed what she should tell Sarah. She then went back at untying her as she answered calmly.

"Let's say that God was not on their side, Sarah."

As she switched to the back of the chair to untie her arms and wrists, Sarah moaned with pain, her legs closing. Once her arms were free, she covered her nipples reflexively.

"God, this hurts!"

Her heart broken by her cries of pain and unwilling to let her suffer simply to protect her secrets, Nancy went to kneel again in front of Sarah, gently taking hold of her head and staring into her tearful eyes.

"God has heard you, and he hurts as well for it. Do not be afraid by what you will see next, Sarah: I only want to help you."

She then gently covered Sarah's breast with her hands and concentrated. The American's eyes widened when Nancy's hands started glowing, soon surrounded by halos of pure white light. At the same time, the pain of her electrical burns gradually but quickly disappeared from her breasts. Nancy then put one hand on Sarah's groin and the other on her face. Her hands glowed again and Sarah's last wounds healed within a minute, leaving her to look at Nancy with reverence.

"An angel! You must be an angel. Thank you!"

Nancy eyed her gravely: as sensitive as the revelation of her supernatural powers was, it was still better to make Sarah and whoever else would chase after her believe that she held her time travel capacity from some divine gift, rather than having anyone in this century believe that there was some kind of time machine available to be taken or stolen. Still, this was all very bad news for her and had the potential to end in catastrophe if she didn't play the game right.

"I am not an angel, Sarah, just a Chosen. I promote kindness, compassion and tolerance and also help the innocents...when I can. I am however still very much a mortal, even though I hold extensive powers from The One."

"The...The One?"

"Many would call him 'God'. I call him 'The One'. Can you get up now?"

"Y...yes, I believe so."

"Then, we should find back our clothes. I will also have to see if they brought my luggage here. I had some very expensive reporting equipment loaned from CNN that I would hate to lose."

Still under the shock of what had happened in the last minutes, but with her pain thankfully completely gone, Sarah got up from her chair and pointed at the sole door of the room.

"I believe that we are in the basement of some house near Tel Aviv. Our things are probably upstairs, but there could still be more of those bastards as well."

"If there are, I will take care of them. Who are those pieces of trash, anyway?"

"I believe that they are Israeli agents, either from the Mossad or the Shin Bet. They only spoke Hebrew between themselves. Uh, what did they mean about you being a time traveler, Miss Laplante?"

Nancy stopped to face her, concern on her face.

"You know me, and were following my taxi, yet are not an Israeli agent. Who do you work for, miss?"

Sarah bit her lips but didn't answer. Somehow, that made Nancy shake her head slowly.

"Decidedly, too many people seem to have caught an interest in me lately. Believe me, Sarah: my secrets are not meant for anyone else but me. Those who will try to find out about them may quickly regret it."

"Even me?" Replied Sarah. Nancy shook her head, becoming serious again.

"No, unless you try to attack or kill me. I do not do the Devil's work, on the contrary. Now, follow me as quietly as you can and let me do the talking and acting."

Still naked, like Nancy, Sarah walked out of the torture chamber, stepping out in another basement room that was half filled with old furniture and dusty boxes. A wooden staircase was visible in a corner of the room, leading up. Her mind was swirling with questions and doubts as she followed the Canadian cautiously up the stairs, trying not to make any noise. What was the Canadian really? The notion of 'Chosen of God' was simply too fantastic to accept without serious proofs. On the other hand, she had incinerated alive two men with only the power of her mind and had shown the strength of ten men, then had healed her with the bare touch of her hands. There were also the words used by her now dead interrogator, about Laplante being a time traveler. The only thing that Sarah could say about her was that the Canadian reporter appeared to be a decent person. Sarah then noticed the old scars from bullets, shrapnel and blades on Laplante's buttocks and upper legs, which were presently level with her eyes as the Canadian was going up the stairs ahead of her. There were many of them, faint but still noticeable. Sarah then remembered that Laplante was a war reporter and a reserve

army officer and put the scars on account of her occupation, then concentrated on their present situation.

Pushing slowly the door at the top of the staircase so that it would not squeak, Nancy looked through the crack once opened by a few centimeters. The door opened on a short passage that gave two meters away on a kitchen. A woman was sitting in the kitchen at a small table, her back to Nancy. Somehow her posture seemed curious to her, with her head held in her hands, until she scanned her telepathically: the woman was distraught by the thoughts of what was going on in the basement and was mentally cursing the interrogators. Still moving as silently as she could, Nancy finished opening the door and stepped in the hallway, then took two steps before stopping in the entrance to the kitchen. She could now see that the woman at the table wore a holstered pistol against her left ribs. The woman then slowly turned her head and saw Nancy from the corner of one eye. Snapping her head in alarm, her right hand flew towards her holstered pistol as she pivoted her chair and got up at the same time. To her surprise and that of Sarah, the pistol suddenly flew out of its holster by itself, ending up in the extended hand of Nancy. The Israeli woman looked at her pistol, now in Nancy's hand, then in Nancy's eyes, her face reflecting disbelief and incomprehension.

"How did you do that?"

"Through the power of my mind." Answered calmly Nancy, then handing the pistol to Sarah, who gratefully took it. "Be cooperative and you will live. Where are our clothes and my luggage?"

The Israeli hesitated only for a second before answering Nancy.

"They are in the lounge, behind you. Where are Yosef and Leon?"

"They are dead, as they should be. Are there any more agents in this house?"

"No! They left for a couple of hours."

What Nancy read telepathically in the woman's mind was that the two agents that had left had done so in order not to have to be present while she and Sarah were being tortured, something that was to their credit in a way.

"Why do you think that I am a time traveler?"

This time, the Israeli did not answer, but her thoughts betrayed her to Nancy, who made a wry smile.

"That is not important anyway. I will give you a message from me to your government that you will deliver once we have left. Tell them that it must stop any action against me and leave me alone from now on, free to do my job as a war correspondent."

"And if it doesn't?" Shot back the Israeli in a defiant tone. The latter suddenly fell backward, as if pushed by an invisible hand, falling on her back on the small table. Nancy then stepped forward as the Israeli tried vainly to get back on her feet, as if her back was glued to the table. Stopping less than one pace from her, Nancy looked down at her with cold eyes.

"Then, I will have to kill the agents sent after me. I do not wish ill to Israel but its own arrogance and intolerance will be its downfall. I came to Israel as a reporter and I will do my job, then will move on."

"What are you?" Nearly shouted the Mossad woman, close to hysteria as she still tried to get off the table but was kept down by some invisible hand. "Some kind of mutant freak from the future?"

Nancy looked down at her with near contempt, speaking in a very deliberate tone.

"Jews keep saying that they are the Chosen People, yet they refuse to believe that others could have God's favor. I was born and raised in this time period and my home is in this year, like yours. Pass my message to your government and pray that you never cross my path again."

Nancy then extended her left hand and touched the woman's forehead. The Israeli suddenly jerked once, then went limp, her eyes closing. Sarah Manning, who had watched the whole scene from a few paces away, looked at Nancy with wide eyes.

"You...you didn't kill her, did you?"

"How could she pass my message if I killed her? I simply rendered her unconscious. She will sleep for about one hour, then will wake up with a slight headache. Let's use that time to dress back and leave."

They did effectively find their clothes in the small lounge of the house, along with Nancy's personal effects. She shook her head on seeing her electronic equipment and camera spread out of their cases, apparently ready for detailed inspection by Mossad agents.

"I hope that these morons didn't damage anything. That equipment is critical for my job."

Sarah, who was slipping her panties on, tried something to get Nancy to say more about this crazy business of time travel.

“Maybe they were looking for a time machine.”

Nancy gave her a funny look, then touched her left temple with one index.

“It is all in the head, Sarah.”

The CIA rookie took that the way Nancy had hoped and eyed her with renewed reverence.

“What else can you do with your mind?”

“Plenty! Let’s hurry, before those other agents return.”

Sarah didn’t insist further and finished dressing quickly, then helped Nancy pack back her big backpack and her equipment carrying bags. Fifteen minutes later, they were leaving the house after taking from the still unconscious Israeli woman her set of car keys and her pocket two-way radio. They found a compact sedan parked by the side of the house, which was situated at the end of a short private road connecting with a nearby highway. Scanning the night around them and the lights of nearby downtown Tel Aviv, Sarah spoke while still looking in the distance.

“We must be a few miles North of Tel Aviv. This highway is the Tel Aviv-Haifa highway.”

Nancy, who was loading her bags in the trunk of the car, smiled to her in the dark.

“When will you Americans finally join the rest of the World and convert to the metric system? Even the British saw the light in that respect.”

“How do you know that I am American?” Protested Sarah, attracting a grin from Nancy.

“Your use of miles instead of kilometers...and your answer, plus your accent.”

Sarah suddenly felt quite foolish: this Canadian was evidently much more experienced and wiser than her. She thus shut up from then on, until they drove away and Nancy spoke again, asking her a question as she drove.

“Would you like me to drop you at the American embassy or at another location, Sarah?”

“The American embassy will do, miss. I can give you directions.”

“Thanks! And please call me Nancy instead of just ‘miss’. We are friends, remember?”

Sarah gave her a cautious look.

“Meaning that it is better for me to be your friend?”

“Meaning that I sincerely want to be your friend, and not your enemy, Sarah.”
Replied softly Nancy. “Now, which way to the American embassy?”

“Take the highway, direction South. I will tell you when to exit.”

Less than 25 minutes later, Nancy was stopping the sedan in front of the gates of the American embassy to let Sarah get out. The CIA rookie bent down to look at her through the open passenger’s window.

“Whoever you are, Nancy, thank you again for saving me and healing me. Good luck with your reporting assignment. Where will you go from here?”

Nancy smiled at that.

“Just watch the CNN news. Shalom, my friend!”

“Shalom, Nancy!”

Nancy then drove off, leaving Sarah alone on the sidewalk in front of the embassy’s gate. Turning around to face the embassy, Sarah sighed as she reviewed the last few hours in her life.

“How the hell am I supposed to explain all this to the chief of station?”

21:20 (Israel Time)

Office of the CIA Chief of Station

American embassy, Tel Aviv

Erik Johnson, freshly arrived from Washington with Dean Price, gave an angry look at the CIA chief of station.

“You sent a lone rookie agent to do a top priority job given to you by Assistant Director Moore? Are you dumb or just incompetent?”

The chief of station, a man much older than Johnson, shot up from his chair with indignation.

“How dare you talk to me like this? I am the chief of station here in Israel.”

“Not anymore after I tell Assistant Director Moore how you botched this job.”

Replied Johnson, not intimidated one bit. “Now, where is this Sarah Manning?”

George Olson swallowed his pride with difficulty before answering.

“In the personnel lounge, two doors down the hallway to the left. I could...”

"We will take it from here, Mister Olson." Cut Johnson, who then turned around and left the office, followed closely by a silent, stone-faced Dean Price. Olson glared as the door closed behind the two special action agents.

"Goddamned Action Division prima donnas! They think that they are better than anyone else."

Johnson and Price found Sarah Manning sitting alone in the lounge, looking at a television set. Erik was about to present himself to her when he noticed that Nancy Laplante was on television, speaking and obviously delivering one of her trademark war reports from some devastated urban landscape. The report must have been filmed hours earlier, as the Sun was still up on the picture. Like Dean, Erik stopped where he was to listen to Nancy's report, while Sarah completely ignored them, her eyes fixed on the television.

"...is completely devastated after nearly a year of incessant Israeli artillery and air bombardment. Electricity and gas has been cut to the Gaza Strip by the Israelis since the start of the war and nothing can get in or out along the borders with Israel. The only sources of food and other supplies have to trickle in from the Egyptian border crossing points. As a result, local hospitals have been out of most essential medical supplies for months now and famine is widespread, while the Israeli blockade has all but killed the local economy. Added to this human misery is the carnage from Israeli shells and bombs, which are targeting area targets rather than pinpoint ones. Right now, you can see and hear such an area artillery barrage about one kilometer behind me, chewing up a residential area of Gaza City. I am presently standing on the roof of a local hospital that has received in the past month its share of artillery shells, despite being clearly marked as a hospital. This has apparently not hindered the Israelis, who regularly fly reconnaissance drones and helicopters over the Gaza Strip, from shooting at it while justifying their actions by saying that Hamas militants use the hospital as a command center. Despite all of this, the Palestinians of the Gaza Strip are not giving up yet and are grimly surviving as best they can, while Hamas fighters continue to fire the occasional rocket at Israeli villages close to Gaza."

As the CNN anchorman in Atlanta that was in satellite communication contact with Nancy asked a question to her, Erik took his eyes off the television set and stepped in front of Sarah Manning to attract her attention.

"Miss Manning? I and my partner have been sent from Langley to handle the case of Nancy Laplante. We would like you to come with us in a more discrete room in order to hear what happened to you and Laplante."

Sarah, realizing that the two men were much more senior agents than her, didn't protest and got up from her sofa to follow them. Erik, who was studying her face, noticed her forlorn expression. Having been told by Olson that the young agent had supposedly been tortured by the Israelis, he could understand her attitude: even without physical marks, torture deeply marked the psyche of victims, often for years after the fact. The trio did not exchange further words until they had closed behind them the door of an office assigned to Erik and Dean for their stay. Erik then showed a chair to Sarah, while Dean sat in a nearby sofa.

"Please sit down, Agent Manning, and tell me in detail and from the start what happened to you and Laplante."

Sarah nodded her head once, then started describing the events of her last 24 hours. Erik and Dean exchanged shocked looks when she described the various mental powers demonstrated by Nancy Laplante and the latter's answers to Sarah's question. If not for the fact that they already suspected Laplante of being a time traveler, Erik would probably have dismissed Sarah's accounts of her powers, putting them on the pain and stress of torture. He however was taking her very seriously by the time she finished giving her description of events.

"So, in essence, Laplante told you that her ability to travel through time was a mental one, not a mechanical one, and that she was given a number of powers by God, that's it?"

"Yes, sir! I know that this sounds too fantastic to believe, but she plainly demonstrated her powers in front of me. You should have seen those two Mossad bastards bursting in flames from the inside."

"This stuff about being a so-called 'Chosen' sounds like something out of a Dungeons and Dragons game." Commented Dean Price from his sofa, making Erik nod slowly.

"Yes, but if true, and I would tend right now to believe it, it would mean that Laplante could be a very dangerous customer indeed."

"But she doesn't want us harm!" Protested at once Sarah. "She showed compassion to me and spared that Mossad woman, despite what the Israelis were ready to do to her. You are not here in Israel to kill her, are you?"

Erik gave her an inquisitive look.

“She told you that she wanted only to do her job as a reporter, right?”

“Correct, sir. You saw her reporting from the Gaza Strip on CNN, didn’t you? And if she can really travel through time via the power of her mind, then it will be quite fruitless for anybody to try stealing from her the secret of time travel. Those Israeli bastards would have tortured her for nothing. They did not find any time machine in her luggage, yet she has been able to slip inside the Gaza Strip without problems, despite the zone being under tight Israeli blockade, with nobody allowed in or out. How would she get there, unless she used time travel via the power of her mind.”

“Again, I believe that you are correct, miss. You may be a rookie but you have a head on your shoulders. We are experienced field agents but we are not as familiar as you with the lay of the land here. Consider yourself as our driver and guide during our stay in Israel, miss.”

“But, what about Mister Olson? He is my chief of station and...”

“Screw that idiot!” Cut Erik. “He will be lucky to keep his CIA badge once I report his stupidity to Assistant Director Moore. Laplante told you that you would be able to find her through her reports. Well, we will follow her advice.”

“But, we can’t get inside Gaza, sir! The place is ringed by troops and armored vehicles and patrol boats watch its shores.”

“True! We will thus wait for her to leave Gaza, which shouldn’t take very long, since she is supposed to report on all the aspects of this conflict. She in fact had secured visas for Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq and Iran, on top of Israel.”

“Iran?” Nearly shouted Sarah, stunned. “But the Iranians will arrest her the moment she lands there: she is widely known to be a Canadian military intelligence officer.”

“Well, since I don’t believe her to be stupid or naïve, it would make her a very gutsy woman, something I can only admire. You better go pack a travel bag with some spare clothes and essentials: we may be zipping around Israel during the next few days.”

“And if we find and meet her, what then?” Asked Sarah, suddenly suspicious. Erik smiled at her.

“Then, we will talk, that’s all.”

12:40 (Israel Time)

Friday, November 22, 2013 'A'

Cafeteria of the Mossad headquarters

Tel Aviv, Israel

Moshe Eshkol nearly threw his fork away in frustration as Nancy Laplante spoke on the television set of the headquarters cafeteria, delivering a report from downtown Tel Aviv, of all places. An Iranian ballistic missile had managed to pass through the Iron Dome defensive batteries about one hour ago and had smashed through one of the luxury condominium towers of central Tel Aviv, causing heavy loss of life and spectacular damage. Now, that pesky Canadian reporter was showing to the whole world that Israel was far from invulnerable to Iranian fire, something the Prime Minister was certainly not going to appreciate. The worst part was that it was nearly impossible to jam her transmissions, since it would necessitate to jam satellite communications links, thus cutting as well hundreds of links used by the Israeli government and by Israeli corporations and citizens. To top it all, Laplante had told the CNN public that the Israeli government was trying to censor her reports, something that was starting already to raise some noises in Washington.

Sitting in another corner of the cafeteria, far from Eshkol, Bennie Kellerman was secretly enjoying both his meal and the CNN report from Nancy. Even though he was loyal to Israel, he believed that too many lies and abuses had been made in the name of Israel lately, and that right wing extremists had hijacked the national agenda, turning progressively his beloved country into an international pariah. Laplante had rightly reminded her CNN viewers that this whole mess had technically been started by Israel, with its first airstrike against Iranian nuclear installations a year ago. Turkey, a past ally of Israel, was now officially boycotting all imports from Israel and was threatening to send troops with air defense missiles to protect the Lebanese capital, Beirut, and its international airport, from Israeli airstrikes. More and more European Union member countries were also adopting boycotts of Israeli products, while Russia and China had predictably taken side firmly with Iran and had cut all ties with Israel. Only the United States and, to a lesser degree, Canada, were still fully supporting Israel. Even that support was far from assured and Laplante's reporting of the merciless hammering inflicted on the Gaza Strip, something the Israeli government had tried to play down in

the eyes of the World, could only weaken that support. The nearest countries that Israel could count on now was Greece and Cyprus, or more exactly the Greek part of the island. Some mean tongues in the Israeli medias had speculated that Greek support showed more its dislike of Turkey than any true friendship towards Israel. As a result of all this, the Israeli economy had been hit hard, with its important tourist industry all but moribund now, the potential tourists scared away by the bombardments, and with its agricultural produces left to rot in warehouses, their usual export buyers now keeping their distances. The tremendous cost of the war effort, with literally tens of thousands of shells, aircraft bombs and various types of missiles being expended against Iran, the Gaza Strip and Lebanon, was also pushing down Israel in a debt death spiral. The human casualties, both civilian and military, were also mounting steadily, with the Hezbollah still offering ferocious resistance to the Israeli armored push inside South Lebanon and firing the occasional salvo of long range artillery rockets against Northern Israel. The whole Middle East was now either on fire or in deep turmoil, all with little for Israel to show for. Another Mossad employee in the cafeteria finally changed the channel on the television in exasperation, making Bennie shake his head: how long were his compatriots going to ignore reality and believe that they had a God-given right to do whatever they wanted?

Less than one hour later, Bennie learned that Eshkol had finally convinced his superiors to publish an official, Israel-wide arrest warrant against Nancy Laplante, even sending a request to Interpol to declare her a wanted terrorist supporter. Bennie could only shake his head at these moves, which were bound to hurt Israel in the long run. The more left wing Israeli medias, already deeply critical of the war, were going to scream about freedom of the press, and rightly so. CNN was also bound to react badly to that and lobby the American government in order to have at least the Interpol advisory against Laplante lifted. Then, about five in the afternoon, Nancy Laplante manifested herself again, this time from Haifa, where she filmed live a Hezbollah rocket bombardment on the city as rocket after rocket slammed in various areas of Haifa and its port. What Bennie knew, and most Israeli citizens didn't, was that after a year of war the reserves of expensive Iron Dome defensive missiles, at 50,000 dollars a copy, had all but been expended. They had done a very good job while they lasted, but the massive saturation salvos from South Lebanon had finally overwhelmed the Iron Dome system months ago. Only the low state of its own reserves of artillery rockets and missiles had

slowed down Hezbollah fire to a trickle. Now, it seemed that the Lebanese Shiite movement had received more rockets, either from Iran or from Russia or China, probably via Syria. Bennie, relegated to a desk job on order from Eshkol, could only watch all this and swear at the stupidity of this war.

13:17 (Israel Time)

Saturday, November 23, 2013 'A'

Lebanese Army checkpoint

Southern suburbs of Tyr

South Lebanon

"SERGEANT, SOMEONE IS APPROACHING FROM THE SOUTH ON FOOT!"

The shout of alarm from the soldier on guard duty attracted the Lebanese Army sergeant out of the checkpoint's sandbagged bunker and to the road chicane made of steel drums filled with sand and rocks. Lifting his binoculars, the Lebanese NCO examined for a few seconds the lone person approaching the checkpoint and still a good 300 meters away.

"It seems to be a civilian wearing a big backpack. He is still too far to make out in detail. Hold your fire and let him approach."

After a few minutes, the Lebanese sergeant was able to see the person better and swore under the surprise.

"What the Hell? It's a woman and I can see the word 'PRESS' printed on the front of her jacket. Where is she coming from? No reporters came through here in days."

"Is she cute, Sergeant?" Asked his sentry, smiling. The NCO smiled himself while still looking through his binoculars.

"Always thinking about girls, hey, Amine? I can't tell from here yet. We will see soon enough, though."

The sentry was not disappointed when the woman finally got to the checkpoint: apart of being beautiful, she was also incredibly tall for a woman and had very feminine curves. She presented her passport to the sergeant with a friendly smile as she stopped in front of the chicane, with two Lebanese soldiers covering her with their rifles just in case. Her Arabic proved excellent.

"Good afternoon, Sergeant. I am Nancy Laplante, reporter on assignment with CNN. I am on my way to Beirut to continue my reports on this conflict. As you can see, I already have a valid Lebanese entry visa."

The sergeant grinned on hearing her name and checking her passport.

"You are the one those damn Israelis have been trying to catch for a day now? How did you manage to cross their frontlines and those of the Hezbollah?"

Nancy grinned in turn to the sergeant.

"Well, let's say that I sneaked through the Israeli lines, while the Hezbollah let me pass after I presented myself to them. Could I pass and continue to Beirut, please?"

The sergeant laughed and gave her back her passport.

"Miss, anyone that the Israelis dislike is welcomed in Lebanon these days. I will do more than let you pass: give me a minute and I will get a jeep and driver for you. Your reports from Israel have done a lot to raise the morale around here."

"Why, thank you very much, Sergeant. While we are at it, do you mind if I record a short interview here with you?"

"Uh, I wouldn't mind, but I better get my lieutenant here first to authorize that. I'm sure however that he will love to be interviewed by you. Uh, could I ask you for an autograph before calling my officer?"

"Sure, Sergeant." Replied Nancy, who then took out of a pocket a hermetically sealed plastic bag containing her wallet, papers and cards. Extracting from the bag a calling card adorned with her photo, she autographed it and gave it to the Lebanese NCO. Seeing the hopeful look of the soldiers nearby, she smiled and took out two more cards, autographing them as well before giving them to the happy soldiers as the sergeant went to talk on a field telephone inside the bunker. Less than five minutes later, a Lebanese Army jeep showed up and disgorged a young Lebanese lieutenant, who politely saluted Nancy.

"Welcome to Lebanon, Miss Laplante. You wanted to make a report from this checkpoint?"

"I do, Lieutenant, if it's not inconvenient for you."

"I will be pleased to give you an interview, miss. I can also offer you a ride to Tyr afterwards, where you will be able to get a ride to Beirut."

"That would be just perfect, Lieutenant." Replied Nancy, satisfied.

14: 36 (Atlanta Time) / 21:36 (Israel Time)

CNN headquarters

Atlanta, Georgia

U.S.A.

Parisa Khosravi rushed at a near run inside the telecommunications center, finding Christiane Amanpour already there and watching with a technician a video recording.

“We got something new from Nancy Laplante?”

Christiane turned her head briefly to answer her.

“Yes! She just sent a second report from Lebanon. Believe it or not, but she managed to get recorded video interviews from the head of the Hezbollah movement and from the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces in Beirut.”

“She did? That woman is truly incredible. That portable satellite terminal unit with hand-powered battery charger that she has is decidedly proving to be worth its weight in gold. How do those interviews look?”

“Sit down and judge by yourself, Parisa. They definitely should be shown on prime time news.”

Parisa sat down at once, pulling a chair near that of Christiane to watch the recorded report from Nancy. As was her long-established habit, Nancy had conducted her interviews in the mother tongue of her guests, then added as subtitles the English translation of their conversations. The interviews had also been done in the open air, giving the viewers a panorama of a Beirut once again ravaged by Israeli airstrikes. Parisa’s excitement mounted as she watched in succession the two interviews, culminating with a defiant declaration from the general commanding the Lebanese forces to the effect that his soldiers would continue resisting the Israeli invasion of their country, along the fighters of the Hezbollah.

“This is dynamite! Christiane, have these reports edited and ready for the six O’clock news. Do we know what she is planning to do next?”

Christiane Amanpour gave her a guarded look.

“She placed a short phone call a few minutes after sending her video file: she is taking a plane for Tehran tomorrow morning.”

Parisa’s heart nearly stopped at those words.

“Oh my God! The Iranians will probably arrest her the moment she sets foot there. She does have a valid Iranian entry visa, right?”

“Yes, she does. The only thing we can do now is to pray that the Iranian authorities prove to be amenable with her. Frankly, I am not too optimistic about that. Remember what happened to Zara Khazemi: they threw her in jail and beat her to death after accusing her of spying.”

Being of Iranian descent, like Amanpour, Parisa could only nod her head slowly with dread at that.

17:39 (Washington Time) / 00:39 (Israel Time, November 24)

Oval Office, White House

Washington, D.C.

U.S.A.

Barak Obama, raising his eyes from the documents he had been sifting through as quickly as he could, gave a harassed look at his two visitors.

“Well, gentlemen, what do you have for me that could not wait for tonight’s Middle East Crisis cabinet meeting?”

“Something that we believe only you and a select few should know about, Mister President.” Answered politely General David Petraeus, Director of the CIA, while saluting. “I have brought with me my Assistant Director for Operations, Mister Julian Moore, to brief you on a most sensitive development.”

“This development, could it have serious foreign and military ramifications? If yes, then at least my Vice-President should be made to know about it.”

Petraeus hesitated for a second before answering.

“It could definitely have extremely serious foreign and military repercussions, and even domestic ones, if this matter would become public, Mister President. However, presenting it to the whole cabinet would be risking a near certain leak afterwards.”

Obama gave him a skeptical look, then punched a button of his intercom, calling his secretary.

“Miss Brown, call Vice-President Clinton right away and tell her that I want her to come immediately to see me about a most urgent matter that has just popped up.”

“Yes, Mister President!”

Obama then looked back at Petraeus and Moore, giving them a wry smile.

“Now, I do hope that what you have for me was worth calling in Hillary from her hard-earned supper, General. Please, have a seat.”

Still not sure how to present this, Petraeus sat with Moore in rolling chairs they pulled in front of the presidential desk.

“Mister President, this may sound totally fantastic and impossible, but we now have some solid evidence that we have a time traveler among our midst, a time traveler that also holds some incredible mental powers. That time traveler is presently traveling around the Middle East and already killed two Mossad agents that tried to steal from her the secret of time travel.”

Obama, having expected about everything except that, bent forward, shock on his face.

“A...a time traveler? Are you sure about that, General?”

“About as sure as I can be, Mister President. When Mister Moore approached me first with this information, I was also skeptical, but the proofs he showed me then convinced me quickly. Our problem is that the Israelis learned about that time traveler first, through sheer luck, and are now bent on getting her secrets at all costs. The Mossad was in fact ready to torture her for that and had already tortured one of our CIA agents in Israel that had been tasked to follow that person. Thankfully, that person of interest saved our agent, along with herself, demonstrating in the process some incredible mental powers, like superhuman strength, making men burst in flames from inside, telekinesis and touch healing. We have a source inside Mossad that confirmed all this after a surviving Israeli agent reported back to her headquarters.”

Obama sat back slowly, stunned by all this.

“Dear God! Is there any scientific explanation for all this? Could this...time traveler have used advanced technology to do these things?”

Moore then took on him to answer Obama.

“This is where things get even more disturbing, Mister President. That person of interest confided a few things to our agent after saving her and healing her torture wounds in seconds with the touch of her hands. Basically, this time traveler claimed to be what she called herself a ‘Chosen of The One’, a sort of envoy given extensive mental powers by a spiritual entity that may well be God himself. She alluded as well that her ability to travel through time is also a mental one and that she needs no time machine per say. By the way, that person may well have links with the 34th Century, Mister President.”

Obama’s face hardened as he saw the possible implications of all this...if it was true.

“That person, who is she? Could she be a threat to the United States?”

"We don't think that she would be a threat to us, Mister President. She is a person of excellent reputation that distinguished herself many times as an allied officer. Here is her file, just upgraded by me. Right now, only seven members of the CIA, including me and General Petraeus, plus you, know about the true nature of this person. We believe that this number should stay as limited as possible."

Obama eagerly took the file from Moore's hand, anxious to see who was such a fantastic person. He recognized at once the large color picture stapled to the inside of the 'TOP SECRET, CODEWORD NOFORN¹⁷' file, having watched her sensational reports from the Middle East on CNN last night.

"HER?"

"Yes, her, Mister President. It seems that the Taliban leaders were really asking for trouble when they put a fatwa on her head last year. On the other hand, if this becomes public knowledge, you can imagine what kind of mayhem and craziness this could cause. Just the spiritual aspect of her powers would be enough to fire up most of the religious yahoos around the World...and in the United States."

Obama nodded slowly, having had to deal too many times with political opponents and individuals who were too often inclined to claim to act in the name of God to justify the most outrageous declarations or acts.

"And where is this good Miss Laplante right now, Mister Moore?"

"In Beirut, Lebanon, where she earlier obtained exclusive interviews with the head of Hezbollah and with the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces. A couple of my best agents have been trying to catch up to her since she arrived in Israel two days ago. Unfortunately, the Mossad kidnapped her at once after her arrival and my agents arrived there only after she escaped the Mossad. From there, she somehow managed to slip inside the Gaza Strip, which has been under tight Israeli blockade for months, and do a report from there, then slipped back to Tel Aviv, to go next to Haifa and the Lebanese border area. She has proved extremely elusive up to now, which is not really surprising considering her powers and her ability to travel through space and time. My agents are presently on their way to Lebanon via Cyprus, but they may be too late before she departs Beirut to go to Tehran, her next expected destination."

¹⁷ NOFORN : (NO FOREIGN NATIONALS) Acronym used on American classified documents meant only for the attention of American citizens.

"Tehran? Is she nuts? The Iranians will most probably throw her in jail the moment she lands there. After all, she is publicly known to be a Canadian military intelligence officer."

"Maybe, maybe not, Mister President." Replied cautiously Petraeus. "The NSA intercepted a communication from the office of Sheik Nasrallah, the head of the Hezbollah, to the intelligence bureau of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Tehran, informing them of the impending visit by Miss Laplante and interceding in her favor. It seems that Miss Laplante somehow struck a decent rapport with Nasrallah during her interview of him. The fact that the Israelis have now officially published an arrest warrant against her and have declared her as being a quote 'suspected terrorist supporter' unquote to the Interpol, may also have put her in the Hezbollah's good favors."

"The Israelis did what?" Exploded Obama. Petraeus made a wry smile.

"This may very well be a case of the pot calling the kettle black, Mister President. Unfortunately, Interpol, due to the way it handles such requests by various governments, has already acceded to the Israeli demand and have put Miss Laplante on their watch list. I was told just before coming here that, in turn, our own Department of Homeland Security and the Transportation Safety Agency have as a result put Miss Laplante on their watch lists as a suspected terrorist supporter."

The President then slammed his fist on his desk out of frustration.

"The idiots! Can't we get the DHS and TSA to back off from Laplante? And what can we do about the Interpol wanted list? She will need to travel back to here by air after the end of her Middle East tour."

"Well, we were hoping to use your direct authority for this, Mister President. That way, we wouldn't have to get into the more sensitive details of this affair to explain ourselves."

Obama thought for a moment before nodding once, a faint smile appearing on his lips.

"Very well, gentlemen. I will prepare an executive order for the DHS and the TSA, telling them to back off Laplante and take her off their black lists. I will also tell the DHS to contact Interpol and have them take Laplante off their list as well. If anyone asks why she is to be left untouched, I will tell them in confidence that she is an undercover CIA agent. How about that?"

Petraeus and Moore looked at each other, then smiled with mutual amusement.

"I suppose that Miss Laplante could get quite miffed if she hears about that, but this is for her own good and protection, Mister President." Said Petraeus, looking back

at Obama. "In fact, I will have a CIA identity card made for her, along with proper documentation to back it up in case the FBI or DHS digs up her credentials."

Someone knocked at that moment on the door of the Oval Office, prompting Obama to call out.

"COME IN!"

He smiled when a Secret Service agent opened the door to let in his Vice-President.

"Ah, Hillary! I believe that I have something really juicy for you here..."

08:04 (Israel Time)

Sunday, November 24, 2013 'A'

Departure terminal, Beirut International Airport

Lebanon

Nancy had elected to take the two bags containing her precious video camera, her laptop computer and her satellite communication link unit as carry-on bags, unwilling to let these irreplaceable pieces of equipment be handled by the notoriously untrustworthy baggage handlers of Beirut Airport. Seeing the near chaotic conditions at the airport had further convinced her of the wisdom of that decision. To their defense, Nancy had to recognize that the Lebanese employees of the airport had to deal with nearly impossible conditions, including the threat of periodic Israeli airstrikes. Another difficulty was the fact that the legitimate authority of the Lebanese soldiers and policemen patrolling the airport was constantly disputed and even overruled at times by the dozens of Hezbollah fighters and officials that were seemingly everywhere around the airport. That last factor was however playing in Nancy's favor this morning, as she was escorted by an aide of the leader of the Lebanese Shiite political and military movement during her departure procedure. The aide, a timid young man with a neatly trimmed short beard who constantly held a string of prayer beads in one hand, bowed his head to her when the airport employee guarding the exit door leading to the tarmac opened it to let the passengers go to their waiting Iran Air Airbus A-310.

"It was a pleasure to know you, Miss Laplante. I wish you a safe trip to Tehran."

"And it was a pleasure to know you, Mister Labadi." Replied Nancy in Arabic. "Thank you very much for your assistance here and tell your leader that I am looking forward to interviewing him again in the future."

“He will be most happy to oblige you when you will do so, Miss Laplante. Again, have a good trip.”

They then parted ways after a last salute of the head, with Nancy leading the sixty or so other passengers of Iran Air flight 512 towards their Airbus A-310 twin jet airliner.

The stewardesses of the Iran Air aircraft did their best to hide their anxiety as Nancy and the other passengers boarded the plane, using an old-fashioned mobile staircase, but tension was palpable, and for good reasons. Just a few hundred meters from the Airbus A-310 lay the blackened and half-molten remains of another Iran Air jet, destroyed on the ground weeks ago in an Israeli airstrike on the airport. Numerous anti-aircraft guns of the Lebanese Army and of the Hezbollah dispersed around the airport were other reminders of the tough times the Lebanese capital and its airport were going through. On her part, Nancy smiled warmly to the Iran Air stewardess who greeted her aboard the plane, exchanging a few words in Farsi with her before going to take her seat in business class. Taking the right side window seat of her row, she was soon joined in the same row by a seemingly well-to-do Iranian couple and their two teenage daughters. Nancy had already conversed with the small family while waiting in the departure lounge of the airport, thus didn't need to present herself again when they sat down and buckled their seat belts. She still smiled reassuringly to the youngest of the two daughters, a beautiful girl of fifteen who had been studying at a private Beirut college and who was occupying the seat next to her.

“Everything will be fine, Yasmina, you will see.”

“I certainly hope so, Miss Laplante.” Replied the girl, flashing a nervous smile. They were then mostly silent as the plane prepared for departure, with the two jet engines started one after the other a few minutes later. The airliner then started rolling away from the departure terminal, heading for an extremity of the main runway. Nine minutes after starting to roll, the Airbus A-310 raised its nose and took off, climbing steadily to its cruising altitude and turning eastward towards Iran.

In the observation lounge of the departure terminal, Erik Johnson and Dean Price, passing themselves off as European technical consultants, watched the Iran Air flight gradually disappear in the clear sky. Dean Price finally nodded his head and spoke in French to his partner.

“Well, there she goes. Hopefully, the Iranians won't pile on her once in Tehran.”

Erik nodded once, then pointed at two condensation trails high in the sky: the trails were now curving towards the East and the Iran Air flight.

“She is not there yet, unfortunately.”

On Iran Air 512, the first sign of trouble for Nancy was when she suddenly saw a stream of tracer shells pass to the right of her plane, missing the airliner by a good hundred meters. She immediately understood what was going on: a modern fighter jet would not have missed by that much if it really wanted to shoot down the Airbus jet. The identity of the shooter was also quite easy to guess. Her presumptions were confirmed when two Israeli Air Force F-15 fighter aircraft, big machines with two engines each, pulled up to be level with the Airbus, becoming visible to the passengers of the airliner and starting a panic in the cabin. Nancy clenched her jaws together as she mentally evaluated the situation. She had no doubts that the Israeli jets would not hesitate to shoot down the Iran Air flight if the Iranian pilot refused to obey their orders. On the other hand, Nancy could not be sure if this was because of her presence aboard or if it was simply because this was an Iranian commercial plane. Either way, she couldn't expect a nice welcome in Israel if her flight was forced to reroute itself and neither would most of the other passengers of the Airbus. At best, they would be treated harshly and be interned in an Israeli jail, where their rights would be next to inexistent, while she could personally expect the Mossad to take delivery of her. Either way, she couldn't let the Israelis have it their way. Staring at the lead F-15 fighter, she mentally concentrated her powers while looking at one of the engines of the fighter jet. That engine suddenly let out flames and thick black smoke. Its pilot reacted quickly enough, activating his fire extinguishers and shutting down his stricken engine. However, flying presently over hostile territory, he didn't take any chances and turned away towards the South and Israel. Nancy anxiously followed the pair of jets as long as she could from her window, hoping that the wingman of the wounded fighter would not decide then to blast the airliner out of the sky before escorting his leader back to base. Thankfully, the two Israeli jets disappeared together towards Israel, to the relieved cheers of the passengers of the Iran Air flight. Nancy patted reassuringly the hand of young Yasmina, who was blowing out air in relief.

“No need to worry anymore, Yasmina: we are now safe.”

“Thank God! I was so scared. Do you think that they wanted to shoot us down, Miss Laplante?”

"I don't think that it was their preferred option, Yasmina. They would not have fired warning shots then. They probably wanted to force our plane to go land in Israel."

"But, we are a commercial flight, not a warplane. Why would they want to do that?"

"Probably to go through the passengers list, to find any person of interest aboard, like a Hezbollah official or Iranian military officer."

"That's still an act of air piracy." Exclaimed angrily the father of Yasmina, an import-export businessman. "Those damn Israelis respect nothing."

"True, Mister Baktyar, but in this they are only following a well-established law in the Middle East."

"Oh? And which law would that be, miss?" Asked the intrigued Iranian man. Nancy responded with a wry smile.

"The law of the strongest."

12:50 (Iran Time)

Arrival terminal

Mehrabad International Airport

Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

Despite her various powers, Nancy couldn't help feel nervous as she left her plane and entered the arrival terminal in Tehran, even though she did her best to hide it. The Iranian authorities would have every reason to be suspicious of her and could easily justify arresting her and jailing her, with little regards for her claims to be here as a simple reporter. In fact, just being a reporter in Iran was asking for trouble. When that reporter was also a foreigner from a country opposed to Iran, then trouble was next to assured. Unfortunately, being a Canadian would not help her here, contrary to most places: the present Canadian government was strongly pro-Israel, even though the Canadian public was questioning more and more such blind support. As expected, she was quickly targeted as soon as she presented herself at the customs and immigration booths after collecting her luggage, which was thankfully all accounted for. One look at her passport made the Iranian customs agent look sharply at her. Despite having slipped on a nice but conservative-looking robe with headscarf before landing, she still stood out by her sheer physical size. At least the Iranian authorities wouldn't be able to accuse her of being indecently dressed. On a signal from the customs agent, two

policemen came forward, while the agent stamped Nancy's passport and gave it back to her before speaking to her in a cold voice.

"Would you please follow these two gentlemen, Miss Laplante?"

While polite, Nancy knew that this was not a simple request, thus took back her passport and thanked the agent before pushing her luggage cart and following the two stern-faced policemen down a side corridor behind the customs booths. Three more men, those ones in civilian suits, were waiting for her in what looked like a search and interrogation room, furnished only with two tables and a few chairs. Two of the men stood in separate corners, while the third one, a man in his thirties sporting a short beard and closed-cut hair, sat behind one of the tables. He looked coldly in silence at Nancy for a moment after the two policemen had introduced her in the room, then pointed the other table and spoke in English to her.

"Put your luggage on this table, Miss Laplante...or should I call you Captain Laplante?"

"Simply call me Miss Laplante, mister: I am here as a reporter, and nothing more." Replied Nancy in Farsi. The bearded man nodded his head at that.

"You do speak a good Farsi, miss, although it sounds a bit quaint."

Nancy could not of course tell him that her Farsi sounded quaint because she had learned it first as a slave and dancing girl in the 6th Century. She thus simply smiled politely and proceeded to lay her bags on the long table and opening them. The bearded man then got up and approached the table, looking in particular at her electronic equipment.

"Some quite sophisticated equipment indeed, miss."

"Only the best a professional war correspondent could have, mister."

She then proceeded on her own to describe in detail her electronic equipment, drawing a skeptical look from the Iranian official.

"And you say that you are here only as a reporter, and not as a spy?"

"Well, I did enter this country openly and legally, plus I have a letter of introduction from Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, head of the Hezbollah. I would also have gladly shown you the Israeli arrest warrant with my name on it, but I couldn't unfortunately get a copy of it before fleeing Israel through the Lebanon border. Sorry about that."

Whoever he was, the Iranian official at least proved to have some sense of humor and chuckled briefly at her choice of words before becoming serious again.

"But you won't deny being an officer in the Canadian military intelligence, miss."

"A reserve officer." Corrected politely Nancy. "Right now, however, I came to Iran as a war correspondent, and nothing more. I am fully ready to follow and respect any restrictions you may wish to put on my reporting, as I was planning only to secure official interviews with various government representatives. You may even attach a minder to me if this could reassure you and your superiors, mister. I would just ask you then to get me a female minder: you wouldn't want to torture one of your men with the evil temptations of the flesh, would you?"

This time the official frankly laughed and smiled to her.

"You are true to your reputation, Miss Laplante: you are a gutsy and spirited woman indeed."

"Well, the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan had other words to describe me, mister."

The Iranian nodded in understanding.

"I suppose that being hated by those murderers of Shiites could constitute a reference here, miss. Still, you have a reputation as a very dangerous woman, on top of being a Canadian military officer. Your government has not been very nice lately with my government, either in words or in actions."

Nancy shrugged her shoulders at that.

"Would you say that all Iranian citizens agree with all that your government says, mister? If you say yes to that, then I would suggest that you are probably in the wrong business."

The official, who was starting to truly enjoy this oral jousting, nodded his head again.

"Touché! Well, there is still one procedure left for you to submit to, miss. If you could step through that door to my left. I promise you that there are no men in that room."

"That is truly appreciated, mister." Replied Nancy before opening the said door and finding three stern-looking women in dark chadors waiting for her. Resigned to a body search, she closed the door behind her and smiled at the one who seemed to be the senior woman.

"Well, how do you want this? A one on one or a three on one?"

The outraged look on the Iranian woman's face was nearly priceless, while the youngest woman barely kept in a chuckle. The senior woman then pointed a small table in one corner and growled.

“Remove all your clothes and put them on this table, then spread your legs and arms.”

Not antagonizing the older woman further, Nancy obeyed, then let the younger woman bodily search her with a latex glove. When the Iranian shook her head, signifying to her superior that she had found nothing, the senior woman nodded sternly at Nancy.

“You may now get dressed and return in the other room.”

Nancy obeyed again, but turned at the last moment before leaving the search room, smiling at the older woman.

“Nice to have known you, miss.”

Nancy then went in the other room and closed the door as the senior woman turned red with irritation.

Major Hossein Mousavi, of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Intelligence Bureau, had a few minutes to think over Nancy’s case before she exited the search room. Potentially, she could represent a grave threat to Iran’s security if she wished so. However, her recent and most publicized past reporting in Israel and in Lebanon had not escaped the notice of some very senior Iranian officials, who had also taken note of the Israeli attempt at painting her as a terrorist supporter. Some of those high level officials had suggested that she be used to Iran’s profit, rather than create an international incident by simply arresting her on arrival. Hossein had agreed with that suggestion, realizing too well that the Supreme Leader had been careful up to now for Iran not to get into a de facto war with the United States and Europe. On the personal level, Hossein had to confess that his initial impression of her had been quite positive. That she had suggested herself the use of a minder to escort her around actually reinforced Hossein’s opinion that she was really here only as a reporter. One of his men that had been at the arrival hall then entered the room and went immediately to him to speak in a low voice.

“Sir, the crew of the Airbus from Beirut has reported that two Israeli fighter jets tried to intercept and reroute it to Israel after departure from Beirut Airport, firing warning shots at our Airbus. Luckily, one of the Israeli fighters developed an engine problem during the interception and turned away with its wingman.”

Mousavi gave the man a sharp look: this was quite significant, as it was the first time that the Israelis had tried to divert an Iranian commercial airliner since the start of the war.

"Go through the passengers list and see if there was anybody on board that could have interested the Israelis enough to have caused them to attempt to hijack our plane."

"I already did that, sir, as soon as I learned of the Israeli attempted intercept. There were no Hezbollah members or Iranian officials aboard the Airbus, just Iranian or Lebanese Shiite businessmen, family members and students. The only true foreigner on the plane was Laplante."

Mousavi nodded slowly his head while digesting that information.

"You did well to inform me of this. Good job, Reza. If you find anything else, come and see me right away."

"Yes sir!"

The man then left the room, seconds before Nancy walked out of the body search room. Mousavi pointed one of the chairs to her.

"If you could please sit there and wait a bit, I have a phone call to make, miss. It shouldn't be too long."

Encouraged by his polite tone and the lack of brutality up to now, Nancy simply obeyed without a word and sat down, doing her best to look relaxed. Mousavi then left the room, with his two men staying in the room to watch Laplante.

Going one level up to one of the offices reserved for the use of intelligence and security personnel, Mousavi closed the door behind him and went to sit at the desk in the small room, picking up the receiver of the telephone and composing a number. The head of the IRGC Intelligence Bureau, Hossein Taeb, picked up his receiver after the second ring.

"Taeb here!"

"Sir, this is Major Hossein Mousavi, calling from the airport. Miss Laplante has arrived from Beirut half a hour ago and I had her and her baggage searched. There was nothing suspicious with her, except from some very sophisticated camera and satellite communications equipment. That equipment is however consistent with her claim to be a simple reporter for CNN. There is however something that came up."

Hossein then told Taeb about the attempt by the Israelis to forcibly reroute the Iranian Air Airbus and the lack of other persons of interest aboard, leaving Taeb to be silent for a few seconds. The head of the Intelligence Bureau then spoke again in a measured tone.

"This actually fits with another piece of information that I just received, Major. The arrest warrant that the Israelis had published against Laplante has just been upgraded with the claim that, apart from being a so-called terrorist supporter, she supposedly murdered two Israeli security officials before fleeing through the Lebanese border."

Mousavi was left stunned by surprise for a moment before he could reply.

"But, sir, that does not make sense. I can tell you that Laplante is a very intelligent and professional woman and that she would not have compromised her assignment as a reporter that way, unless she had very serious reasons to kill Israelis. Could this be simply Israeli disinformation to justify her arrest, sir? Besides, why are the Israelis so hard on her trail? Canada is supposed to be a good ally of Israel and she is certainly no terrorist. I don't understand their interest in her. If she was only being nosey while in Israel, then the Jews would have needed only to expel her, something they don't shy from doing with unwanted foreigners."

"Quite true, Major. There is certainly a mystery about her here. What kind of attitude has she shown up to now?"

"She has been very cooperative and most polite to date, sir. She stated that her visit here is meant to secure interviews with various government officials in Tehran. She even proposed by herself that we assign her a female minder as a close escort during her stay in Iran, which I would say would be a very good way to ensure that she does not spy on us. I also believe that she could be quite useful to us by doing her interviews under close supervision. The Israelis and Americans have been able to paint a one-sided portrait of us for too long, in my opinion. Laplante is a well known and respected war correspondent and could pass our messages to the Western public better than if we did it ourselves."

"Again, I agree, Major. I will send you a female agent that can be trusted completely within two hours, to be assigned as a minder for Laplante. Once she has arrived, let Laplante leave the airport with her, but keep close contact with our female agent. Consider Laplante your priority case from now on: there are too many weird things happening around her, while her work here could benefit us greatly politically and diplomatically. Report to me immediately if you learn something new about her and about the reasons why the Israelis are after her."

"I will certainly do that, sir." Said Hossein before hanging up. He was thoughtful for a long moment, trying to figure out why the Israelis were so interested in her. Unable

to think of anything plausible, he then got up from behind the desk and left the office to return to the interrogation room.

He found Nancy still waiting patiently in her chair, apparently calm and unconcerned. He secretly admired her assurance and aplomb: up to now he couldn't help like her, even though she could potentially be very dangerous. He had however read her file in detail and had seen in it a pattern consistent with what his first personal impression had told him of her. She had repeatedly proved to be a tolerant and honest woman who understood the subtleties of the Middle East better than most and who was not afraid to call things for what they were, even if it contradicted the views of her own government or of its allies. While that didn't make her a friend of the Iranian regime, she had enough credibility with the international public and medias to be able to pass on Iranian official views without distorting them the way too many Western reporters did. In fact, her last known published article about the present conflict had been quite critical of Israeli actions and of the blind support Israel was getting from many American politicians and lobbying groups. She looked up at him with a questioning expression when he entered the room.

"So, Major, what do you have in store for me?"

"Oh, nothing sinister, I assure you. A female minder should be here in a couple hours to escort you to a hotel. Then, you will be free to go around and do your things, as long as your minder approves of them. I will ask you to refrain from sending via satellite link or Internet any report until your minder has had a chance to vet them. You break that rule and we will be forced to expel you at once...or worse."

"That is quite amenable to me, Major. This is a country at war and I can understand your concerns about Iranian security. I personally think that this war is quite an unnecessary one, and have said so publicly in my articles."

"I know and I thank you for your comprehension, miss. By the way, the Israelis seem to decidedly have little love for you: they upgraded their arrest warrant in your name, to include in it the charge that you murdered two of their security officials. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

To the complete surprise of Hossein, who had expected her to vehemently deny the Israeli charge, she simply nodded once her head and made a wry smile.

"I suppose that it was to be expected. While I don't wish that to be published widely, the Israelis actually kidnapped me soon after my arrival in Israel and brought me

to some kind of discreet safe house near Tel Aviv, where they were ready to torture me. I was however able to escape, killing two of them in the process. The way they did their things clandestinely, I would say that they did not want my kidnapping to become public knowledge and probably planned to kill me and make me disappear afterwards. I acted purely in self-defense and would do the same again if need be. The Israelis will however never admit their acts publicly and will try to make me look as bad as they can to justify their actions against me.”

“And may I ask why they kidnapped you and were ready to torture you, miss?”

“Yes, you may, Major. Simply put, they seemed to truly believe, for some unknown reason, that I was involved with terrorists. Maybe they misinterpreted some of my past visits and interviews to various people around the World, or got a piece of incorrect information about me. I frankly couldn’t say right now for certain.”

“You do realize that this only paints you more as some kind of intelligence agent, miss.” Remarked Hossein while his mind raced about the implications of this revelation. She however scoffed at that.

“With the way I am known publicly around the World? I would make quite a poor secret agent indeed, Major. This is reality, not some kind of James Bond movie. An effective agent is an anonymous agent, not someone whose face is seen on television news reports.”

“You said that they were ready to torture you, miss? Why did you think so?”

That brought a sarcastic smile on her face.

“Well, the fact that I woke up naked and tied to a chair in some kind of basement was my first clue. The second clue was the battery and electrical wires in a corner of the room.”

“And you still managed to kill two Israeli agents and escape, miss? That does sound like a James Bond movie.”

“They simply were overconfident and underestimated me, Major, the same way the Taliban did in Afghanistan.”

Hossein stared at her for a moment, while his two men exchanged befuddled looks. This was decidedly a potentially very dangerous woman, but also one he liked more and more. He would have loved to have an agent as skilled as her in his service.

“Well, this changes things a bit, I would say. Excuse me again for a moment.”

This time, Hossein used a telephone at the nearby customs offices to call back his superior and tell him about Laplante's confession. Taeb was left speechless for a moment by that.

"Decidedly, this woman is full of surprises. However, she could still be useful to us. That she has good reasons to be hostile to the Israelis can only be good for us. For your knowledge, I am sending you Lieutenant Farah Qalibaf as a minder for Laplante. She is both very capable and utterly reliable. She may not be able to take down Laplante in a straight fight but I do not expect our Canadian guest to become combative with us."

"To be frank, sir, I doubt that any of our agents could take on Laplante in a fair fight: she can be a very dangerous woman indeed. However, I believe her when she says that she is here simply as a reporter."

"I am starting to believe that as well, Major. Lieutenant Qalibaf should show up at the airport in about one hour, time for her to go pack a suitcase for a hotel stay with Laplante."

"I will be waiting for her, sir."

Hossein then hung up, satisfied. He knew Farah Qalibaf and regarded her as a competent, effective agent. She also happened to be the daughter of an ex-senior IRGC officer who was presently the Mayor of Tehran. As political reliability went, it was hard to do better than that.

Nancy was having a cup of tea with Mousavi, having been invited by him to go with her luggage to a personnel lounge, when a young woman dressed conservatively but in the Western style with jeans and a loose sweater showed up in the lounge, a small suitcase in one hand. She could have been said to be pretty but the severe, all business look on her face somewhat killed any attractiveness in her. Nancy's first impression was that of a fanatic, something not surprising for a member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps. She still got up from her sofa out of simple courtesy, while Mousavi smiled to the newcomer and pointed Nancy to her.

"Aah, Lieutenant Qalibaf! May I present you Miss Nancy Laplante, presently in Iran as a reporter on assignment for CNN?"

Qalibaf gave a less than friendly look to Nancy before facing Mousavi again.

"I am ready to escort Miss Laplante to her hotel, sir."

"Good! Were you briefed about the latest developments about her?"

"Yes, Major." Said the Iranian woman in a nearly dismissive tone. Not liking her attitude, Hossein got up on his feet and excused himself with Nancy before leading Qalibaf out of the lounge, cornering her in the hallway and speaking to her in a low, severe voice.

"Lieutenant, I understand that you may not like this Canadian woman for what she is but she could be useful to us to pass certain messages to the West. I would appreciate if you could at least try to be polite with her. Also, don't be overconfident with her: she could easily break you in two if she decided to. Two Mossad agents did the same mistake that you were about to do and they are now dead."

Qalibaf gave him a nearly scandalized look.

"Aren't we overestimating her, Major? I myself am highly trained in unarmed combat and pistol shooting..."

"...and so are Mossad agents. Yet, if we can believe her, she killed two of them while tied up and naked. She is a highly experienced soldier and a World-class martial artist, so don't presume too much about your own abilities. Besides, we need her good will, Lieutenant, so make an effort to be at least civil with her. Do you understand me?"

Qalibaf hesitated for a moment but, seeing the warning look in Mousavi's eyes, nodded her head once.

"Yes, Major, I understand. Do you have any special directive concerning her?"

"Yes! She can film things around Tehran as she wishes but she is not to retransmit her video files or contact someone outside of Iran unless you have vetted them and are sure that she will not pass on classified or sensitive information. Filming daily life in Tehran or interviewing a government official is fine, but filming street protests against the regime or interviewing dissidents is of course a no-no. If you have any doubts about a report, contact me at once and withhold its transmission until I can make a decision about it. I however do not expect trouble of that kind from Miss Laplante. She is a highly intelligent woman and I believe that she fully understands the precariousness of her present situation here. One last thing: our intent is to use her to our profit, not to try to entrap her, so explain to her honestly how to do things around here in a way that won't get her arrested."

Mousavi could then see on her face that she didn't particularly like that last directive but she nonetheless nodded her head again.

"I will do that, sir."

"Good! You may now escort Miss Laplante to her hotel. She has already reserved a room at the Kowsar Hotel."

"I know it, sir."

"Then, I will let you with her. Send me at least one update per day about her activities, apart from reporting at once any significant event."

Mousavi then turned around and left Qalibaf to digest his directives. Sighing with contained frustration, the IRGC intelligence agent then went back in the lounge and looked down at Nancy, who was finishing her cup of tea.

"If you are ready, we can now go to your hotel, miss."

"And how would you like to be called by me? Miss Qalibaf or Lieutenant Qalibaf?"

"Miss Qalibaf will do, Miss Laplante. I will lead you to the taxi stand."

Putting down her cup, Nancy then gathered her luggage and followed the Iranian woman out of the lounge.

The taxi drive to her downtown hotel was spent in silence, Qalibaf not being apparently inclined to exchange small talk with her. The trip was however useful to Nancy in that it gave her a glimpse of the daily life in Tehran. For one thing, car traffic was less dense than she had expected, which was quickly explained to her when she saw prominent signs at the gas stations she passed by and that reminded the citizens that fuel was rationed due to the war effort. In contrast, bicycle traffic was quite voluminous, with men and women of all ages pedaling around, often with a bag of groceries or other items tied to the rear rack of their bicycles. There were more signs in the storefronts of many shops, particularly grocery stores and supermarkets, that announced rationing on various food items, while long waiting lines often stood at the entrance of grocery stores. That reminded Nancy very much of London in 1940 'B', when she was fighting World War Two on the British side. They finally arrived at the Kowsar Hotel, a six-storey building situated at the end of a quiet side street near one of the main city squares of downtown Tehran. It was an aging establishment but its personnel proved at once both competent and courteous, a young bellboy putting at once Nancy's luggage on a cart and escorting her and Qalibaf to the reception desk, where a smiling man greeted her in good English.

"Welcome to the Kowsar Hotel, miss. Do you have already a room reservation or do you want to book a room now?"

"I already reserved a room by Internet from Lebanon. My name is Nancy Laplante. Here is my passport."

"Ah, yes, Miss Laplante. We have one of our best rooms for you, Room 504."

"Then, charge me for double occupancy, please. Miss Qalibaf is with me."

The receptionist gave a cautious, quick look at the Iranian woman, probably pegging her right away as a government official, before handing Nancy her room key, plus another key for Qalibaf.

"Here you are, Miss Laplante."

"Thank you, mister. Do you happen to have by chance a gymnasium or fitness room in the hotel?"

"We do have a small gymnasium, along with a sauna, miss. Here is a pamphlet with the information about the various hotel services."

"Thank you again, mister. One last thing: do you have safety boxes here?"

"We do, miss. You would like to secure your passport, I presume?"

"Actually, I was thinking of something a bit bigger, if your boxes can accommodate it."

Nancy then put on the reception counter the padded carrying bag containing her satellite communications link unit and her satellite telephone.

"Would this fit in one of your safety boxes, by chance?"

"Uh, not in our standard boxes, but we do have a number of individual safes that could take this, miss. Those safes are however much more expensive to rent than safety boxes."

"Well, CNN is paying for it. I will take one. However, put it in the name of Miss Qalibaf and give her the key."

Farah Qalibaf was taken by surprise by that and looked at Nancy questioningly. Nancy however preempted her question.

"What better way to control the transmission of my reports than to put my satellite link equipment in your custody, Lieutenant Qalibaf? Take that as a show of goodwill on my part."

While pleased, Farah was still suspicious of her ultimate motives. Was Nancy hiding something else from her? The receptionist, his suspicions about Qalibaf now confirmed, kept his thoughts to himself and grabbed the padded bag, disappearing through a door behind the counter for a few minutes, then returning with a key that he handed to Qalibaf before presenting her as well a form.

"If you may fill this deposit form, miss. You have our safe number two."

Seeing that Qalibaf hesitated, Nancy filled the form for her with the precise description of the equipment contained in her bag, then let Farah sign the form. With this done, she thanked again the receptionist and headed for the elevators with Farah and the bellboy pushing her luggage cart.

Their room proved to be large and clean, although the carpet and wall tapestry were showing their age. The bathroom was also decent and fully functional. Farah noticed at once that there was however only one bed, albeit a large one. Most satisfied, Nancy quickly unpacked her things and suspended her clothes, while Farah did the same with her single suitcase. Once finished, Nancy smiled politely to the IRGC agent.

"Well, Lieutenant, if you don't mind, I am going to pay a visit to your foreign ministry nearby, in order to register myself with their foreign media liaison office and to officially request interviews with a number of high officials."

"I see no problems with that, Miss Laplante. With whom are you planning to ask for interviews?"

"First, with your foreign minister, then with the head of your atomic energy organization. Finally, if I am lucky, I would like to interview Ali Akbar Velayati, the senior advisor of your Supreme Leader."

Farah gave her a skeptical look.

"That is quite an ambitious program, miss. I won't bet on your chances of getting those interviews."

"Well, I do have to justify my travel expenses to CNN, Lieutenant. However, my charm and good looks may just do the trick. Do you mind if I lug my camera around during our outing?"

"Since your satellite equipment is under key, I see no problems with that. Just ask me before filming anything, though."

"Don't worry: I will, Lieutenant."

19:43 (Iran Time)

Room 504, Kowsar Hotel

Number 8, Shahid Malae Avenue

Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

Nancy was reasonably satisfied with her day as she put away her precious video camera in its padded bag: her visit to the foreign ministry building had been less frustrating than expected and she had been able to register official requests for interviews with a number of high level officials of the Iranian government. Now, she could only be patient and hope that her requests would be granted quickly, if at all. On her part, Farah Qalibaf had done her honest best not to be too intrusive or overbearing. Nancy's impression was that, after initially acting according to a stereotyped view of her, Farah was starting to gauge her true side. While still not exactly warm with her, Farah had relaxed somewhat her stance around her and was much less confrontational now. Taking out one of her fitness training leotards, she started stripping off her day clothes while speaking to Farah, who had sat down in one of the padded chairs of the room and was watching her.

"I am going to the hotel's gymnasium for a workout. Do you want to work out on your fitness as well, Lieutenant?"

"Thank you but no. I will go with you, but only to watch. I wouldn't be able to do my job properly while working out."

"Your loss." Said Nancy. She soon was down to her underwear, allowing Farah to examine her athletic body with professional curiosity. What Farah saw was quite impressive, she had to recognize: Nancy had the build of an Olympic-class gymnast, with long, well-shaped but also powerful legs and muscular arms and shoulders. While her breasts were large and apparently firm, her flat belly sported a proverbial 'six-pack' of abdomen muscles. Farah was however most attracted to the faint scars on her legs, buttocks and upper arms.

"Where did you get those scars, Miss Laplante?"

"Oh, I collected them on various battlefields, either as a war correspondent or as a soldier. Those scars on my buttocks, legs and arms are mostly from mortar shrapnel fragments, while I got shot in five places and stabbed once in the left leg. Thankfully, none of the damage was permanent."

Nancy then slipped on her leotard, a skin-tight light blue and white outfit, then slipped on a pair of athletic shoes and grabbed a towel and shower kit before looking at Farah.

"Well, I'm ready. Let's go!"

Farah got up and followed her out of their room, going down to the ground floor, where the gymnasium of the hotel was located. While nothing like what a typical good

fitness club in Canada or the United States would be, the gymnasium proved adequate for Nancy's purposes, with a number of exercise machines and a selection of weight-lifting equipment, plus an open area covered with exercise mats. Commensurate with the apparent low number of customers in the hotel, only two men were exercising in the gym when Nancy and Farah walked in. The men's eyes immediately went on them, then concentrated on Nancy and her form-fitting leotard. She was secretly amused and pleased by that attention, in turn eyeing the younger of the two men, a tall Caucasian man with short blond hair and blue eyes. The two men then exchanged a few words in Russian in a low voice, commenting gleefully on her curves. Hiding a smile, Nancy put down her shower kit and towel on a window sill, then went to sit on an exercise bicycle located near the blond man. Discreetly cranking up the tension on the bike's pedals to its maximum, she then smiled to the tall blond man, who was in his early thirties and was quite handsome, and spoke to him in Russian while starting to pedal her bike.

"Hi! My name is Nancy. And you?"

Not believing his luck, the tall Russian smiled and answered her while continuing to pump the pulleys of his weight machine.

"I'm Dimitri, Dimitri Kutuzov. You are Russian?"

"No, Canadian. I happen to be able to speak many languages fluently, but my mother tongue is French. I'm from Montreal."

"Ah, Montreal... I heard a lot of good things about that city. And what brings you to Tehran in a time of war, Nancy?"

"I'm a reporter. And you?"

Dimitri hesitated for a moment, put off a bit to learn that she was a reporter. However, the tempting sight of her chest, quite visible thanks to the wide cleavage of her leotard and to the fact that she was leaning forward on her bike, encouraged him to continue conversing with her.

"I'm an electronics engineer, here to help maintain some equipment in use here but produced in Russia by Almaz-Antey."

"Oh, a maintenance contract, I see. You can find about anything anywhere these days, what with this global trend." Said Nancy, still smiling and playing the ignorant. In reality, her mind was reviewing some of the latest data, some of it highly classified, that she had seen as a Canadian military intelligence officer in the last months about Iranian known air defense missile systems. Almaz-Antey was in fact a Russian company that mainly produced the S-400 TRIUMF heavy air defense missile system,

also known under the NATO designation of SA-21 GARGOYLE. The S-400 was rightly described as one of the best, most lethal long range air defense missile system in existence, and was widely compared to the American PATRIOT and AEGIS missile systems. The problem here was that the S-400 was not known to be in service with the Iranian forces. If the Iranians had somehow managed to acquire in secret some S-400 batteries, then the Israeli Air Force would be in for a nasty surprise on their next air raid against Iran. That, however, was the Israelis' problem, in her opinion. They had started this war by a first airstrike on Iran and, despite what many hypocrites had said since then, the Iranians had the legitimate right to defend their own territory. If the Israelis got burned during their next airstrike, then tough!

Farah Qalibaf, sitting on a chair in a corner of the gym and watching Nancy converse with the big Russian, was annoyed at first at being unable to understand what they were talking about. It however looked to her like a simple game of flirt, with the Russian obviously leering at Nancy's body. Farah scowled at this fresh example of the immorality of so many of those unbelievers, but then reminded herself that Iranians were often no better. In fact, the higher some officials were, the more they seemed to acquire vices. If that Canadian wanted to chase after perfect strangers, then it was none of Farah's business, unless she conducted herself indecently in public, something that would get her promptly arrested here in Tehran.

Nancy finally called it quits after nearly one hour of exercising at a rhythm and intensity that Farah found downright infernal. Both she and Dimitri then went inside their respective locker rooms to shower and change. Farah decided to wait in the gym for Nancy, getting up and walking a bit around to flex her legs. As she passed by the bike Nancy had used, she looked with curiosity at the tension mechanism of the pedals to see what setting she had used. Farah was stunned to see that it was at maximum tension: she had seen Nancy pedal away as if she was on a low setting. Getting up on the bike, Farah tried to pedal but let out a quiet swear word at once: even with all her strength, her legs could barely manage to make the pedals budge. With cold sweat breaking out on her forehead, she got off the bike and tried to visualize back Nancy's actions around the bike. Maybe she had reset the bike after using it. As it was set, pedaling that bike at the speed Nancy was doing would have necessitated monstrous strength and stamina. Farah suddenly felt much less sure about what to think of Nancy

and debated in her mind if she should report this to Major Mousavi. She however decided finally to wait and see: her evidence was way too flimsy to bother her superior with such a trivial matter.

20:19 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, November 26, 2013 'A'

First Family suite, White House

Washington, D.C.

U.S.A.

President Obama had elected to watch the news on television from the lounge of his family suite, instead of from the Oval Office, mostly to help himself decompress after another stressful day. He had however invited his Vice-President, Hillary Clinton, to watch with him and his wife the exclusive interview that CNN's Nancy Laplante had obtained from Ali Akbar Velayati in Tehran earlier today. That interview, when first aired in the late afternoon, had sent shockwaves through the State Department and the various international affairs think tanks in Washington. Now, Barak Obama could see for himself how skillful Laplante had been in that interview with the top international affairs advisor of the Iranian Supreme Leader. It was also evident that Velayati wanted to pass a particular message, it being that Iran was ready to stop all hostilities with Israel, as long as Israel reciprocated and at the condition that Iran could continue enriching uranium to low levels consistent with civilian use. The tone as well as the words of Velayati told Obama that this was more than just rhetoric. As the recording of the interview was over and as a panel of so-called political and international affairs experts started debating the interview from the CNN studios, Obama swiveled his chair to look at Hillary Clinton, who had served as his previous Secretary of State before becoming his Vice-President.

"What do you think of Velayati's offer, Hillary?"

"That it puts the Israelis in a difficult bind." Replied the Vice-President, thoughtful. "They started this war to stop Iran from possibly producing a nuclear bomb. Now, after a year of conflict that has cost them dearly in terms of both treasure, material damage and human lives, they are back to square one, with the Iranians still insisting on their right to enrich uranium for civilian purposes. If they refuse Velayati's offer, they will be stuck in a war that they can't really win short of using their nuclear weapons. If they

accept it, then the Israeli leaders will basically acknowledge that they ruined Israel for nothing by starting a fruitless war. Maybe it would be a good time for us to get in the middle and talk some sense to these Israeli leaders.”

“And what would you tell them to do?”

“To accept Iran’s terms, as long as Iran accepts in return to let back in United Nations inspectors, to prove that they are not producing weapons-grade uranium. The other alternative, basically continuing the war, would only result in more senseless losses for everyone.”

“I would tend to agree with you, Hillary. This war has not been helping anyone, except maybe for weapons producers. I will...”

Obama paused at that moment, his attention attracted to the television set and what one of the ‘experts’ in the CNN debate had said. That expert, who represented a very powerful Jewish lobbying group in Washington, was now nearly ranting in a furious tone.

“...that Laplante killed two Israeli security officials when they tried to stop her from illegally entering Gaza to conduct her interviews with those terrorists from the Hamas. Now, this new Hanoi Jane is kissing the butts of the Iranians in order to build for herself a reputation. Why should we even bother to listen to her reports?”

“Wait a minute, Mister Feinstein!” Countered another debate panelist. “That accusation that she killed two Israeli officials has not been proved at all. In fact, the Israelis have up to now presented zero proofs in support of that ridiculous accusation or of the other accusation that she is a terrorist supporter. Are you going again to try to make us believe automatically everything that the Israelis are telling us?”

As the debate in the CNN studios degenerated quickly into an exchange of hot words, Obama shook his head in frustration.

“When idiots don’t want to hear a message, they shoot the messenger. I am getting to be truly fed up with those Israelis and their arrogance and self-righteousness.” His wife, sitting beside him on a sofa, pressed his hand.

“Could this Laplante have her reputation shot because of her reports from Iran? I do like the way she reports and analyzes facts.”

“Some certainly seem to want to do just that, dear. CNN has defended her up to now, but there is no telling what more political pressure against her could do. Velayati’s proposed deal is actually quite acceptable, if the Iranians are truly ready to let back in UN inspectors. As for the Israelis, they would do well to accept it: they are now close to national bankruptcy because of the costs of this war and of the boycotts against them.”

"I unfortunately believe that they are too stubborn to admit that they can't win, Barak." Said Hillary Clinton. "The problem is that, the longer this conflict drags on, the more chances that some mistake could be made around the Persian Gulf. That could then close off the tanker traffic, with heavy economic consequences for the United States."

Obama nodded his head at that. There had already been a number of incidents where confrontations between American warships and Russian and Chinese warships escorting tankers full of Iranian oil had nearly turned into shooting incidents. It would take only one stressed-out ship captain to do a fatal mistake and potentially start a war with China or Russia. That, in his mind, had to be avoided at all cost.

"We have put the safety and welfare of the country at risk, just to protect Israel from its own actions, for far too long, in my opinion. It is high time that those Israeli leaders understand that we will not support them unconditionally forever. Enough of their lies and bluster!"

"Do you know why the Israelis are trying to smear this Nancy Laplante the way they do now, dear?" Asked his wife. "They never went that far with other reporters before."

The President exchanged a quick glance with Hillary Clinton before looking at his wife.

"Michelle, without getting into the details, which are highly classified, I can tell you that the Israelis seem to truly believe that she is connected with terrorists, which is actually false. They kidnapped Laplante when she arrived in Israel a few days ago and were ready to torture her and then make her disappear. Laplante managed to escape them, killing two Mossad agents in the process and saving at the same time a CIA agent that was being tortured by the Israelis."

"WHAT?" Nearly shouted Michelle Obama. "Why would these bastards torture a CIA agent?"

"Because that CIA agent was following Laplante in order to protect her. Michelle, Laplante works for us part-time, apart from being a genuine war correspondent. She is after all a military intelligence officer."

Obama hated to have to lie like this to his wife but, in fact, most of what he had just told her was the simple truth. Michelle looked back at the television set, where a picture of Nancy Laplante was being shown while the presenter reviewed quickly her career as a war correspondent and soldier. CNN was clearly still ready to defend her reputation, even though it was probably more to protect its own reputation at the same time.

"She works for the CIA? And she went to Iran? That takes an awful lot of guts."

"She has proven many times before that she has plenty of guts, Michelle. As for her reports from Iran, the two interviews she has already secured and done with high level officials there has certainly helped our specialists at the State Department analyze the present mindset of the regime. What these specialists are saying is that the Iranians seem to genuinely want an end to this war, but not at the cost of losing face in front of their people or of the World. Just by bringing out that mindset, Laplante has helped us greatly."

"She should get a medal for that. On my part, I certainly would love to meet her in person one day."

"That could be arranged, dear." Replied her husband, a smile appearing on his face.

08:01 (Iran Time)

Wednesday, November 27, 2013 'A'

Amir Abad District

Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

Nancy, still escorted around Tehran by Farah Qalibaf, was in a taxi heading towards the offices of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, where she was due to interview the head of the Iranian nuclear program, when a loud, sinister wail started to be heard all around the city. Farah was the first to recognize the sound and react, shouting from the front passenger seat.

"ENEMY AIR RAID! PULL OFF THE ROAD AND STOP, NOW!"

The taxi driver obeyed her at once, while most of the other drivers along the avenue they were following took a few more seconds to react. Grabbing her camera bag before getting quickly out of the taxi, Nancy joined Farah and the taxi driver on the sidewalk, using the taxi as a partial shield and looking up at the sky. Having seen many airstrikes in her career, Nancy was the first to see something in the sky and point at it.

"THERE! FOUR AIRCRAFT APPROACHING FROM THE WEST AT MEDIUM ALTITUDE! FARAH, CAN I FILM THAT?"

Farah hesitated only briefly: she still had Nancy's satellite link unit under key at the hotel and she would have ample time afterwards to edit or censor her video recording.

"Go ahead!"

Nancy then quickly took her camera out of its carrying bag and powered it on, along with its directional microphone, before pointing it skyward. Her practiced eyes then saw puffs of smoke rise from multiple points on the ground around the city. The puffs then became trails of smoke climbing fast in the sky, heading towards the four approaching condensation trails.

“SURFACE TO AIR MISSILES ON THE WAY!” She shouted to inform Farah. The Iranian woman, like the taxi driver and many other Iranians around them, anxiously followed the smoke trails, hoping for hits. On her part, Nancy suspected that the Israeli planes, as it could only be Israeli aircraft, had probably already launched their ordnance. Flying this high over a defended target could only mean that they were using laser-guided or GPS-guided bombs, or other types of guided air-to-surface missiles, and not simple iron bombs. Cheers went up around Nancy when a first Israeli aircraft contrail intersected with a missile smoke trail, resulting in an explosion. Judging from the range and speed of the missiles, Nancy thought that they must be S-400 missiles. A second Israeli jet exploded in the sky, creating more cheers. Then, a series of powerful explosions on the ground, to the North, silenced the cheers for a moment. Nancy could count a total of eight explosions, all tightly grouped.

“They had time to release their bombs, Farah, probably GPS-guided models. What do you think that they were targeting in that part of the city?”

“Our nuclear research center.” Answered Farah in a somber tone, still captivated by the duel in the sky. A third Israeli jet exploded, with the fourth and last one then diving steeply, barely avoiding the missile targeting it. The proximity fuse on the missile however still ignited its massive 190 kilogram blast-fragmentation warhead, peppering the F-15 fighter-bomber with shrapnel. Seriously damaged and with one engine on fire, the Israeli pilot still waited at the last moment to pull out of his dive, hoping to escape additional anti-aircraft fire by flying low. As it was starting to raise its nose, heading directly towards Nancy, who was filming its approach, the aircraft lost one of its ailerons and started spinning out of control. It overflew Nancy and Farah before plowing into the lower side of a large, six-storey concrete building situated on the grounds of the University of Tehran campus. The remaining fuel aboard the doomed jet aircraft ignited inside the building, making balls of flames erupt from the lower windows of a section of the building. With Nancy still filming, Farah shouted in horror.

“THAT’S THE FEMALE STUDENTS DORMITORY BUILDING! MY YOUNGER SISTER IS IN THERE!”

Stunned by grief, Nancy lowered her camera, contemplating for a few seconds the building, whose two lower floors were now nearly completely engulfed in flames, while Farah started sobbing. Taking a quick decision, Nancy put her camera back in its carrying bag, slung against her right side, and started running towards the burning building.

“COME, FARAH: WE MUST HELP THOSE GIRLS!”

Farah didn't dispute her and started running as well, following her. Nancy was however much faster than her and arrived near the base of the dormitory building with a good hundred meters of advance on her. She however could not approach further than about twenty meters from the façade, due to the searing heat of the flames. Running to the main entrance of the dormitory, she quickly saw that nobody could escape through there: the entrance hall as well as the base of the main staircase were on fire and thick smoke filled that space as well. Running to the other end of the building and then around it, with the hope of finding a secondary entrance or fire exit that could be used, she soon had to give up on that: what was not engulfed in flames was spewing a thick black smoke that would asphyxiate anybody within seconds. Farah Qalibaf joined back with her, breathing hard from the running, as she was returning to the front façade. Nancy gave her a bleak look.

“None of the exits are usable: they are either on fire or full of deadly smoke.”

“But, we can't just watch and do nothing: there are girls visible at the upper windows, screaming for help.”

“Show me!”

Without another word, Farah ran back to the front of the burning building, Nancy close behind her, and pointed at a number of windows on the upper floors, where heads could now be seen. Some smoke was coming out of those windows as well but Nancy understood that the students were able to breathe if they kept their heads out. They would not however be able to survive very long, unless someone came quickly to extinguish this fire. Unfortunately, she knew from experience that a fuel fire like this one could burn for quite a while, apart from being very difficult to extinguish. Just spraying it with water would mostly result only in spreading the burning fuel. Scrutinizing the façade to see if there was a way to climb it, she noticed a number of steel pipes running down the walls at intervals and understood that they were rainwater drainage pipes coming from the roof. They appeared to be solidly anchored to the walls, at least from where she stood, and she could probably climb them by using opposition climbing techniques.

"I'm going to climb up, using those drainage pipes. Be ready down here to help the girls that I will bring down, Farah. Here, sling on my camera bag and, please, don't lose it."

Handing to the Iranian agent her camera bag, Nancy then ran to a pipe that passed close to windows where girls were screaming for help and, ignoring the searing heat from the nearby flames, started climbing, her hands grasping the pipe and her feet pressed against the concrete wall on each side of the pipe.

Even knowing that Nancy was a superb athlete, Farah couldn't believe how fast she climbed up the pipe, getting to the level of the third floor in less than a minute. By then their taxi driver, a somewhat obese man with a short beard, had joined Farah near the façade, breathing hard from the running.

"Can...can I help here, miss?"

Farah gave him a nod of encouragement.

"Yes! We will have to help the girls that this woman will take out. They will have to be led to a safe spot away from the fire."

The taxi driver looked up, in time to see Nancy step on a window sill where the heads of at least two girls were visible. With Farah also watching anxiously, Nancy spoke for a few seconds with the girls inside, then put one leg inside, time for a girl to climb on her back and cling to her. Then, with the teenager still clinging to her back, she stepped outside and reached for the drainage pipe, grabbing it and hugging it, so that the teenager could grab herself the pipe and slide down. The girl hesitated for a few seconds then, probably utterly terrified, but finally grabbed the pipe with both hands and let herself slide down, as if using a fireman's sliding pole. With one girl on the way down, Nancy stepped again on the window sill to go load a second girl on her back. She repeated that process at that particular window a total of nine times, with girls in adjacent rooms of the same floor evidently going to that room from the inside. With nobody apparently left on that level, Nancy climbed quickly to the next upper level to do the whole process again. By the time that she had saved another fourteen girls stranded on the fourth floor and was climbing towards the fifth floor, a number of fire trucks were arriving with sirens blaring, while a large crowd was now watching the drama from the nearby sidewalks and streets. Farah, helped by the taxi driver, was greeting the sixteenth girl to slide down when a fire truck equipped with a telescopic ladder stopped near her and four firemen in rubber coats and hard hats jumped out. She turned around

and shouted at the senior fireman in the lot while flashing her IRGC Intelligence Bureau badge.

“GET THAT LADDER UP TO THAT FIFTH FLOOR WINDOW, QUICKLY!”

The fireman didn't dispute her order and got two of his men to deploy at once their ladder. They took less than two minutes to do so and, with one fireman wearing a breathing apparatus climbing up first to go inside the fifth floor room and help the students there, teenagers soon started coming down in good numbers. To Farah's joy and relief, her sister was one of the teenagers to come down the ladder. They exchanged an emotional hug for a long moment before Farah stepped back to look with concern at her sister, who was coughing.

“You better go see a medic to get some oxygen, Leila. Where is the woman that climbed up the pipe?”

“She...cough...went to check the other rooms on the floor to see if there were...cough...other girls. She disappeared in the smoke.”

“I'm sure that she will make it. Follow that man: he will bring you to the assembly point for the evacuees. I will see you later.”

“I will need to thank that woman, Farah: she was incredibly brave.”

“I know. Now, go!”

She smiled and nodded to the taxi driver, handing Leila to him, then looked up again. Girls were still coming down the ladder from the fifth floor, but she could see many more girls waiting anxiously on the sixth floor, their heads hanging out of windows in order to breathe despite the smoke still coming out of their rooms. Nancy Laplante was the second last to come out of the fifth floor window, carrying a limp girl in her arms and climbing down cautiously with her precious load. The fireman on that floor then came out and stood on the ladder's basket while it was raised to the level of the sixth floor. Farah and a fireman greeted Nancy when she stepped off the ladder, to then help delicately lay the unconscious student on a stretcher that was carried away at once to a waiting ambulance. Farah eyed Nancy with both concern and admiration: the Canadian's face and hands were blackened by smoke and her clothes were covered with soot, while she coughed hard repeatedly.

“What you did was admirable, Miss Laplante. Many of those girls would have died without your help.”

“I did...cough... what had to...cough...be done, nothing...cough...more.”

"Come, friend. Let me guide you to a medic. You need to breathe some oxygen."

Nancy stared at Farah for a moment after hearing her use the word 'friend', then smiled to her.

"Thanks, Farah!"

When she climbed down from the fire truck, she shook the hand of the taxi driver, smiling to him.

"Thank you, mister. You...cough...are a good man indeed."

"It was a pleasure, miss."

She nodded her head, then took out her wallet to pay for the taxi fare, but the driver politely refused.

"Thank you but no, miss: you already paid me by saving those girls."

Farah, like Nancy, nodded approvingly at that. The trio then let the firemen do their work and went to a grassy area where a number of firemen and paramedics were treating or checking out the evacuees. Farah thanked a last time the taxi driver, actually slipping discreetly a good sum of money in his hand and firmly pressing his hand closed so that he could not give it back.

"Consider this as the thanks of the government for your exemplary show of civic responsibility, mister. And thank you again."

Next, Farah let Nancy to her young sister Leila, who was being given some oxygen by a medic. Both women sat on the grass besides the teenager, with Farah pointing Nancy to Leila.

"Leila, I would like to present you Miss Nancy Laplante, a reporter on assignment for CNN that I am tasked to escort during her stay in Iran. Miss Laplante, this is my sister, Leila."

Leila grinned on hearing Nancy's name.

"Nancy Laplante, the one who shot all those murdering Taliban extremists in Afghanistan a year ago? All the girls in my dormitory saw the video of you on YouTube." That made Nancy smile weakly, as cough still raked her.

"Nice to see that I...cough...am known around here, Leila."

She then looked at the dormitory building, where over thirty firemen and six fire trucks were battling the flames still coming out of the lower floors.

"I am afraid that...cough...many will have died in there. I...cough...wish that I could...cough...have done more."

"You did all that one could do, miss. What caused that explosion and fire, by the way? I was about to go down to leave for the cafeteria when the whole building shook." Farah took on her to answer her sister.

"The Israelis did another airstrike on us, probably targeting our nuclear research reactor, but our defensive missiles shot down four of their planes. One of those planes then crashed into your building. Miss Laplante filmed the whole thing. Oh, that reminds me."

Farah then handed back to Nancy her camera bag and smiled to her.

"While I can guess that your planned interview with Doctor Davani will most probably be rescheduled because of this raid, I believe that there will be no official objections to you transmitting your video showing those Israeli planes being shot down."

"Including that jet crashing on the dormitory building?"

"Including that part as well. I however doubt that you will be allowed to film the damages, if any, at our nuclear research reactor."

Nancy gave Farah a critical look.

"With at least eight smart bombs falling on it, I suspect that your reactor must be seriously damaged now. Let's hope that no radiations will leak out: the center is surrounded by residential suburbs."

"Well, we will see. Let me just go make a couple of phone calls. Leila, I will leave you with Miss Laplante for a moment."

Getting up from the grass and walking to a spot where she could make discreet calls, Farah took out her cell phone and called first Major Mousavi. She took a couple of minutes to tell him what just happened, getting a pleased reaction from him.

"Four Israeli planes shot down? And Miss Laplante has that on video? We will do more than simply let her retransmit that: we will probably broadcast that video ourselves on national television. That bit about her helping to save university students will certainly help her reputation with our leaders. I must say however that this is totally in character for her, according to what we know of her."

"Well, you should have seen her climb up that drainage pipe, Major. She showed incredible strength, balance and endurance then, apart from proving her bravery. Uh, do we have news about what happened to our nuclear research center, sir?"

"Unfortunately, yes. The main reactor building has basically been totally destroyed, according to the visual report of one of our people. There are many casualties among the personnel of the center. Thankfully, all the nuclear fuel had been taken out a few days ago, in order to effect some needed major maintenance. In that, we were very lucky."

"Do you think that Miss Laplante will be allowed to film our research center after this airstrike, sir?"

"Hum, well, normally I would say no, but what she just did and the fact that she will provide us with a film of those Israeli planes being shot down may just tip the balance in her favor. I will go see General Taeb right away to report this to him. I will keep you informed about the decision he will take concerning Laplante. I suppose that she will now go back to her hotel to clean up and change, Lieutenant?"

"Most probably, sir, but she will need first to get some oxygen: she inhaled quite a lot of smoke while inside that burning building."

"Decidedly, she is the kind of enemy that I could respect. Once at your hotel, review with her the film of that Israeli attack and then contact me to give me your assessment of it."

"I will do that, sir."

Ending that call, Farah then composed another number, calling her mother and taking a few minutes to tell her that Leila was safe and to reassure her. Her mother, who had just heard on the radio that the university campus had been bombed, nearly broke out in tears of relief and thanked her, promising to pass the word to Farah's father, who was already in his office in downtown Tehran.

Closing her cell phone and pocketing it, Farah returned to where Nancy and Leila were sitting. She was pleased to see that a medic was giving oxygen as well to Nancy.

"Good news, Miss Laplante: your video of the Israeli airstrike will most probably be approved. It may even be shown on our national television."

"Uh, don't be offended by that, but I hope that I will be able to send it to CNN first: after all, it is paying me to produce exclusives for them. Well, then we should go back to the hotel, so that I could clean up and then review and edit my film with you."

"I certainly am looking forward to watching your video, Miss Laplante." Said Farah, meaning it.

Much later that day, as she was entering the restaurant of her hotel for supper, followed by the ever present Farah Qalibaf, Nancy found an apparently very happy Dimitri Kutuzov having a drink at a table while waiting for his food. She smiled to Farah and spoke in a low voice.

"Do you mind if I go sit alone with that tall, handsome Russian, Farah? You can always watch me from a couple tables away."

"Feeling like flirting tonight, Nancy?" Replied Farah, smirking.

"Hey, I have to keep up with my reputation as a feminist libertine and immoral unbeliever, no?"

That made the Iranian agent chuckle.

"Go ahead and have fun, Nancy. You deserve it today."

"Thanks, Farah."

Nancy was actually quite happy with her own day, even though she regretted all the deaths from the Israeli airstrike. Her video report of the airstrike had been edited, vetted and then sent to Atlanta via the Internet this morning, while the official Iranian government news agency had bought from CNN the right to use Nancy's video. Then, in the afternoon, Nancy had received the authorization to go film the site of the Tehran nuclear research center, where she was able as well to interview the head of the Iranian nuclear program. Again, her report had been quickly vetted and transmitted to Atlanta. From what Christiane Amanpour had told her in a later exchange of emails, her reports from Tehran had resonated like the ringing of church bells around Washington and the rest of the country, while Israeli officials were said to be livid at this proof that their vaunted air force was far from invincible. Nancy however couldn't care less right now about what those Israeli politicians felt. For one thing, the fact that Israel had conducted such a raid, at the risk of releasing a radioactive cloud in the middle of a large city like Tehran, had certainly grated on her. Also, the Israelis were not showing any signs of backing down from painting her as a terrorist supporter and a murderer. Tonight, she was firmly resolved to enjoy her professional successes. She thus walked with a slow, sexy gait to Dimitri's table, stopping near the Russian and smiling down at him.

"Good evening, Dimitri. Do you mind if I sit at your table?"

"But, not at all, Nancy." Replied the engineer, not believing his luck. "Please, sit down."

"Thank you!"

Once sitting, she pointed his glass, still half full of vodka.

"You are celebrating something, Dimitri? You actually look quite happy tonight."

"That's because I am happy tonight, Nancy. The equipment my company sold to Iran has had its first operational success ever today."

"Really?" Said Nancy, her smile changing to a grin. "You must tell me about that, but not before I order a bottle of champagne for the both of us."

"Champagne? Wow! Your day must have been very nice."

"Indeed! I was able to film this morning the downing of four Israeli F-15 fighter-bombers over Tehran by surface-to-air missiles. My video report back to CNN is said to be creating shockwaves in the United States."

Dimitri opened his mouth at her words, while his eyes reflected glee.

"By God! I must get a copy of your video for my company."

Nancy then bent forward, showing her cleavage while giving him a warm look.

"Well, what are you ready to do to me tonight in order to get that copy, my dear Dimitri?"

07:28 (Iran Time)

Saturday, November 30, 2013 'A'

Restaurant of the Kowsar Hotel

Tehran

Nancy was finishing her breakfast in the company of Farah Qalibaf in the restaurant of their hotel when Major Hossein Mousavi showed up, accompanied by two burly men in cheap suits. Seeing Mousavi marching resolutely towards her table, Nancy couldn't help feel dread: maybe she had outlived her usefulness in the eyes of the Iranian senior leadership. Mousavi stopped in front of her and scrutinized her with cold eyes, noting how she had tensed up. He then flashed her a smile.

"Ha! Gotcha, Miss Laplante! You thought that I was coming here to arrest you, right?"

Relief washing over her, Nancy looked up at Mousavi, returning his smile.

"I must say that you were quite convincing, Major Mousavi. You must love cat and mouse games."

"I certainly do, miss. But you can relax: I am here actually to do you a big favor. My government is intent on passing a message to the West, using a messenger that it

can trust: you. I will ask you to go get both your camera and your satellite link equipment: we are going on a helicopter trip.”

Farah, who had no clue what was going on, exchanged a glance with Nancy, then got up from the table.

“I will go get her equipment from the hotel's safe, sir.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. By the way, you will be coming with us as well.”

Nancy rose from the table as well after wiping her mouth clean and gave a cautious look at Mousavi.

“Since you love cat and mouse games, I suppose that it will be pointless for me to ask where we are going, Major?”

“You have that right, Miss Laplante.” Replied Mousavi, grinning. “Make sure that you have spare batteries and memory cards for your camera, miss: you may be filming quite a lot on our coming trip. Bring as well your little tripod, so you can do a sitting interview.”

“You are decidedly poking my curiosity, Major. Well, I will go to my room then. I won't be long.”

True to her word, Nancy was back in the hotel lobby six minutes later, her camera bag slung over one shoulder and her laptop bag over another. She had also taken the time to change quickly into a nice, embroidered chador, in anticipation for an interview with a probably very senior Iranian official. Farah was close behind her, carrying her satellite link unit and her satellite telephone. The group loaded up in two official cars that then drove to the Doshan Tappeh airbase, situated in the eastern suburbs of Tehran. There, they boarded a waiting Mi-8 HIP helicopter that headed South after taking off. As they were flying at medium altitude, Mousavi shouted at Nancy to be heard above the rotor noise.

“Since we are intent on passing a message through you, I will ask you to do your comments on camera in English, Miss Laplante. The officials you will meet at our visit sites can speak English anyway.”

“Understood. You said ‘sites’. We are visiting more than one location?”

“You will be visiting in succession three separate sites, miss. Don't ask yet which ones: I will let you be surprised.”

Nancy was by now convinced that something very big was coming but didn't insist and instead watched the view outside the helicopter.

After about one hour and a half of flight, with Nancy estimating the distance flown to be about 300 kilometers, what looked like a large industrial complex in the middle of the arid Iranian landscape appeared ahead in the distance. Nancy was now suspecting where she was going, having seen in the past satellite pictures of a similar facility. She looked at Mousavi with a surprise that was not faked.

"The Natanz nuclear fuel enrichment complex? You are going to let me film it?" Mousavi nodded his head, not surprised that she had recognized the complex so quickly: after all, she was a military intelligence officer.

"We will do better than that, miss: we will give you the grand tour of our centrifuge halls and fuel processing lab."

"But, spies would kill to be able to have such a look. Why do you do this, Major?"

Mousavi looked at her gravely, measuring his words.

"What I am going to tell you is for your ears only, as I am not supposed to tell you this. Promise me that you will not repeat this to anyone."

"You have my solemn word, Major. Thank you for your confidence."

"You are welcome, miss. We are going to give you access to our secrets because we need peace, badly. This war and the economic sanctions against us are killing the economy of my country. On the other hand, we need to develop our nuclear power network, in prevision for the day when our petroleum reserves will start to dry out. We do not intend to do like those Arab Gulf states that are selling away their oil and spending their profits on luxuries as if there is no tomorrow. We are a proud people and we will not stand to be told by others what we can or cannot do. The fears some have about us planning to produce nuclear bombs are unjustified and, if I may say so, quite hypocritical, considering that Israel already has plenty of nuclear weapons and has not signed the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty, contrary to Iran. You have spoken to many Iranians up to now, both high-level officials and common citizens, miss. Do we appear to you to be a suicidal, irrational people?"

Nancy eyed Mousavi, sensing his motives and discreetly reading his mind telepathically. She could see only genuine worry in his thoughts. She thus nodded somberly her head once.

"I believe you, Major. It is true that, if Israel chose to, it could erase most of Iran with its nuclear-tipped missiles. So, you would be ready to sue for peace, on the

condition that you could continue producing low-enriched uranium for electricity production purposes?”

“That is the gist of it, miss, although other, more senior officials will tell you in more detail what we want. Just keep your mind as open as your eyes.”

“I always do that, Major.” Replied Nancy soberly. She now realized how important this assignment could become, not simply in terms of personal professional success, but in terms of aiding the cause of peace. However despicable many past actions of the Iranian government had been, this offer appeared to her both fair and legitimate and could also be the only reasonable way out of a war that had proved to be as pointless as it had been costly to all involved. If this could help bring back peace, then she would be most proud to contribute to it.

With the express permission of Mousavi, Nancy took out her camera while the helicopter was still approaching the Natanz complex, filming an overall view of it from the air. She now could see distinctly the numerous anti-aircraft guns and missiles positioned around the facility to defend it from air attacks. She also noticed and filmed what looked like six large bomb craters over what she knew to be the location of the two underground centrifuge halls of Natanz. Some surface buildings had also been hit by bombs and either completely destroyed or heavily damaged.

“I see that the Israeli Air Force has tried at least once to shut down this facility, Major.”

“They actually tried twice, the last time being last Wednesday, at the same time that they struck our Tehran nuclear research center. It however cost them a few planes. The director of the complex will be able to tell you more about that in a few minutes.”

Once on the ground and out of the helicopter, her group was picked up by two cars that then drove to the heavily protected vehicle access entrance to the underground part of the complex. Nancy was careful to film that part, along with anything else that would support the legitimacy and authenticity of her future report about this visit. She finally stepped out of her car with Major Mousavi and Farah Qalibaf inside an underground garage, where five men were waiting for them. Three of them were armed and wore the uniforms of the IRGC, while the two others were civilians wearing white lab coats. Mousavi presented one of the civilians to Nancy, speaking in English.

"This is the director of the Natanz complex, along with his head nuclear physicist. You will excuse me if I don't give you their names, but too many of our scientists have been murdered abroad by Israeli agents while they were attending scientific seminars and conferences. Gentlemen, this is Miss Nancy Laplante, on assignment for CNN, or should I say Captain Laplante, of the Canadian Army Intelligence Branch."

The director nodded in understanding, while the three armed IRGC men eyed Nancy with fierce suspicion. It was obvious to Nancy that those three disapproved of her visit, but had most probably been told to put up and shut up. She shook hands with both scientists and, more cautiously, with the IRGC officers.

"I am honored that I was considered worthy of seeing and filming your installations, gentlemen. I certainly intend to stress your present openness when I will present my report to the public."

"That is indeed one of the main reasons for your visit here, miss." Said the director. "Since you have another site to visit later on, we will go straight to what is of interest to you here. If you will follow me, we will go to our two underground centrifuge halls."

As they walked to four small electric golf carts waiting nearby, Nancy asked a question in English to the director while filming him on the move.

"Mister Director, I saw from the air that at least six bombs exploded on the roofs of your centrifuges halls. Did they penetrate or caused damage to the halls?"

"No! Apart from a number of lamps broken by the shock waves, we did not suffer any damage to the halls. A number of surface support buildings were however hit and heavily damaged. As for the Israelis, they lost three aircraft in their last attack. You will be able to see their crash sites from the air on your way out. Major Manousheh will show to Major Mousavi where the crash sites are on his map."

"Did any of the pilots eject?"

"I didn't see for myself, but I was told that nobody parachuted out, miss." Answered the director. Nancy discreetly scanned his mind, to find that he was telling the truth. The same could not be said however about the said Major Manousheh, whose thoughts betrayed him. Nancy then knew that one Israeli pilot had been captured alive and had been transferred since to Tehran for interrogation. She felt sorry for the pilot, who was certainly facing some very harsh interrogations, if not to say tortures, with his future fate grim indeed. Such treatment of prisoners of war was unfortunately way too common in the Middle East, but there was nothing she could do about that.

The four carts rolled along a wide tunnel for maybe a hundred meters before stopping in front of a set of heavy armored doors guarded by two soldiers. Stepping out of the carts with the others, Nancy kept filming as they walked through the now opened steel doors, entering a huge, brightly lit hall that was about 250 meters long by 100 meters wide. Nancy sucked her breath in at the sight of the thousands of cylindrical tubes set at the vertical and interconnected by small pipes. A strong humming noise came from the tubes, which Nancy recognized as centrifuge units meant to enrich uranium. The director of the facility then spoke up for her benefit while she filmed the hall slowly from left to right, so that the number of centrifuges could be counted later on.

"As you can see, this centrifuge hall is perfectly intact and functional and was not damaged by the Israeli penetrating bombs. You will excuse me if I don't say how much overhead protection there is above our heads, miss."

"That is quite understandable, Mister Director." Said Nancy, still filming. "May I walk around the hall a bit?"

"Please do, miss."

Not stopping her filming for even a second, so that nobody could easily say later that parts were censored out, she started walking slowly along a narrow lane made between two rows of centrifuges, counting her steps as she went. The hall proved to be full to capacity with centrifuges, with a total of 5,000 of them just in this single hall, if she counted right. Returning to the waiting director, she pointed at the multitude of pipes running overhead.

"I suppose that these pipes collect the enriched gaseous uranium to some processing lab, Mister Director?"

"That is correct, miss. We have 5,000 centrifuges in this hall, plus another 5,000 centrifuges in a second hall that we will now go visit. We will then visit the uranium processing lab, where the gaseous uranium deemed sufficiently enriched is returned to solid state and molded into fuel rods compatible with our civilian reactors. Before you ask, we do not enrich uranium to more than five percent of Uranium 235. We will prove that to you later."

Already having some footage that the CIA and other intelligence agencies would kill to obtain, Nancy exited the hall and got back on one of the carts, which then rolled to another set of guarded armored doors. There, she visited and filmed another centrifuge

hall similar to the first one, which was also intact and fully functional. The crux of her visit to Natanz however proved to be the uranium processing lab and its adjacent uranium fuel storage vault. There, the head physicist explained to Nancy while she filmed the process used to turn the enriched uranium into fuel pellets to be used in nuclear reactors. She was able to film every part of that lab, then was shown the heavily shielded vault where the fuel pellets produced in the complex were stored while awaiting shipment to nuclear power plants. The director of the complex then made a signal and a technician wearing a protective suit approached them, a small but seemingly heavy cylinder in his hands. The director took the cylinder and ceremoniously presented it to Nancy.

“Miss Laplante, I am now handing to you a sample fuel pellet in its protective container, sample that you will be able to carry with you out of Iran, so that international experts can examine it and see for themselves that it is not weapons-grade uranium.” Nancy only hesitated for a second before shaking her head.

“I appreciate your gesture, Mister Director, but you don’t have only to convince me: you want actually to convince other governments of this. They could claim that this sample was chosen among your stocks of low-enrichment uranium. Thus, I would rather not take it. I would however suggest that you let me choose by myself the sample that I will carry away. That way, others may be more inclined to believe that it truly represents what you produce here.”

The Iranians around her were speechless for a moment, some apparently incensed by her skepticism, while others thought her argument over. Both the director and the head physicist finally nodded their heads at her suggestion.

“You do have a valid point, Miss Laplante. I will have a protective suit readied for you right away.”

The director gave a few quick orders in Farsi to a technician, who then nearly ran away. The man was back two minutes later with a protective suit, complete with gloves and mask, which Nancy quickly donned in an adjacent locker room. Before stepping inside the shielded uranium vault, Nancy gave her camera to Farah.

“Can I ask you to film me through the viewing port of the vault while I’m inside, Farah? It would add credibility to my report.”

Farah threw a look at Major Mousavi, who nodded, then accepted the compact video camera, which she had seen Nancy operate many times.

“Alright, Miss Laplante: I will play cameraman for you.”

"Thank you! You may start filming now."

Accompanied by an Iranian technician also wearing a protective suit, she then entered the vault and looked around at the hundreds of leaden containers inside the shielded room before starting to walk slowly among them. Stopping besides a container she had chosen totally at random, she pointed it to the technician.

"Can you please collect a pellet from that container for me, mister?"

"Right away, miss."

The technician opened the container and, using a pair of long pincers, extracted from it a cylindrical uranium pellet and put it in a lead transport tube, sealing it. He closed the container, then gave the sealed tube to Nancy.

"You now have a fifteen-gram pellet of 4.9 percent enriched uranium, miss. This lead tube will allow you to safely carry it without risks of irradiation, as long as you don't open it."

"Thank you very much, mister. How much radiation will the sealed tube emit?"

"Only four milligrays a day, miss, not enough to be significant for your health but enough to be detected with a Geiger counter."

"Then this will be perfect. Thank you again. I am now ready to come out."

Nancy followed the technician out of the vault and went first to the locker room to remove her protective gear, then returned in the lab, the precious sample tube in one hand. There, she bowed her head to the director.

"I am sure that my viewers will appreciate your openness today, Mister Director. May I have something to mark this tube properly?"

"Of course, Miss Laplante." Said the director, who then quickly got a sticker label, a felt pen and a radioactive warning sticker. Gluing the warning sticker first on the tube, he then applied the label and wrote the date and the words 'enriched uranium' and 'Natanz complex, Iran' on it. He smiled while giving back the tube to Nancy.

"Here you are, Miss Laplante. Please don't lose it."

Nancy laughed briefly at that while accepting the tube and putting it inside a pocket of her camera bag.

"Now, that would be truly embarrassing. I will guard this with my life, Mister Director, I promise. I will have to arrange for an official of the International Atomic Energy Agency to be ready to take custody of this sample once out of Iran, though."

"We can contact the IAEA on your behalf to arrange such a handover, miss. We know how to contact them, believe me."

"I do not doubt that for a second, mister. What now?"

"I believe that we are now finished for your visit to Natanz, miss. Major Mousavi will now escort you back to your helicopter, which will then transport you to another uranium enrichment facility, near Qom, where the same procedure as here will be repeated."

Nancy couldn't help snap her head towards Mousavi.

"But, nobody has had access to that site before, not even the IAEA."

"That's right, Miss Laplante, although I suspect that you did examine spy satellite photography of that underground complex as a military intelligence officer."

"I effectively did, Major." Confessed calmly Nancy, making more than one Iranian stiffen. "Today seems to be truly a day of revelations, wouldn't you say?"

"It certainly is, Miss Laplante. If you may now follow me out of the plant: we still have a lot to show you."

Nancy had a hard time believing her luck as she accompanied Mousavi and Farah Qalibaf out of the underground installations, the precious uranium sample tube in her bag. This was going to make one truly explosive report.

Taking off in their freshly refueled helicopter, they headed towards the North-West and Qom, but Mousavi had the pilot do a short detour first, making them pass over the site of an airplane crash. Already guessing what it was, Nancy filmed the site, zooming in particular on a piece of tail that bore a registry number that was still readable, as Mousavi explained.

"This is one of the three Israeli aircraft that were shot down while attacking Natanz. We won't have time to go film the two other crash sites, but I hope that this will be enough to convince the West that the Israelis can't do as they please over our territory."

"Well, I certainly recognize this as being the remains of a F-15, an aircraft type not in Iranian service. The tail registry number should be enough for me to identify it formally later."

After a fifty minute flight, the helicopter landed again, this time on a pad at the foot of a rugged and denuded hill, near a heavily reinforced cave entrance. That visit to

the secret Qom uranium enrichment facility was very similar to that in Natanz, except that this facility proved to have even more centrifuges than Natanz. A bit over an hour later, Nancy was out of the facility, a second uranium sample tube in her camera bag, and their helicopter took off yet again, this time flying towards the nearby city of Qom, one of the holiest sites in Iran. The suspicions she had then about what she was going to do there quickly turned to incredulity when, after landing in Qom, a car took her, Farah and Major Mousavi to a secluded and closely guarded residence near the city's Grand Mosque. She looked at Mousavi as a cleric came to lead them inside.

"It can't be! The Supreme Leader never gave interviews to reporters, as a matter of principles."

Mousavi acknowledged her remark with a nod, replying with utmost gravity.

"That is why you are being made to be the first to interview him, Miss Laplante. Our message needs to be taken seriously by all, and cannot be dismissed without grave consequences. I know for a fact that you do not agree with much of his views, but be polite and respectful, for your own sake. If he gets angry with you, then there is no telling what could happen to you, and I then won't be able to help you further."

Nancy didn't get angry at that advice and didn't take it as an attempt at intimidating her: Mousavi was simply giving her some common sense advice and it would be only prudent for her to heed it. She was indeed far from home...or from any truly safe location for her, and now would not be a good time to demonstrate her powers or abilities.

06:25 (Iran Time)

Sunday, December 01, 2013 'A'

Departure lounge, Mehrabad International Airport

Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

Nancy exchanged a last kiss on the cheek with Farah Qalibaf when the lounge's loudspeaker announced that the boarding for her plane to Ankara was starting.

"I am happy to have known you, Farah. And say goodbye to your sister Leila on my behalf."

"I will. Try not to let the Israelis catch you."

"Ha! I'm actually more worried about all the critics in the United States who will not like my report and will try to brand me as a stooge of Iran."

"I can see your point, Nancy. Still, be careful."

"I will, Farah. Maybe we will see each other again, hopefully not while pointing guns at each other."

"I hope not as well: you would then most probably win that duel, knowing the way you shoot."

Nancy grinned at her reply.

"That's one way to look at it. See you, Farah."

Picking up her (very) precious camera bag that still contained the two uranium sample capsules, plus the bag for her satellite link unit and a small travel bag, Nancy walked to the boarding gate, showing her ticket to the air hostess there and following the other passengers towards the waiting Iran Air Airbus A-320. Seventeen minutes later, the airliner was starting to roll towards the main runway, followed from the airport's observation lounge by the eyes of both Farah Qalibaf and Hossein Mousavi. The latter spoke in a low voice as the airliner was taking off.

"I hope that she will be able to convince enough people in the United States and Europe to take our offer seriously and at least lift some of the sanctions against us."

"I believe that Nancy will do her honest best, sir. Not because I think that she supports our cause, I am not that naïve after all, but because she truly wants to see peace return to the Middle East."

"Some past Western philosopher supposedly wrote that, after having good friends, the next most important thing to wish for is to have good enemies. I guess that Captain Laplante would be one such good enemy."

"Quite right, sir, quite right." Replied Farah, sounding regretful.

14:36 (Standard Eastern Time) / 23:06 (Iran Time)

International Arrivals Hall, Terminal 1

John F. Kennedy International Airport

New York City, U.S.A.

Having either flown or waited in airport lounges for over sixteen hours today, Nancy was dead tired and quite fed up of being inside a plane when she was finally able to step out of the Air France Airbus A-340 that had brought her from Paris, her last transfer point on her journey from Tehran. She was however also happy and satisfied, having been met at Ankara International Airport by a heavily escorted representative of the International Atomic Energy Agency, or IAEA. That representative, after proving to

Nancy who he was, had taken custody of her two precious Iranian enriched uranium samples and had given her in exchange an official IAEA nuclear material transfer receipt. As for her equally precious video reports of yesterday, she had sent them via satellite link to CNN last night, after spending many hours in her hotel room editing them and adding English translations to them where needed. She however still had the original video files with her, both in her laptop and on USB flash drives, in case the transmitted copies later proved incomplete. From what she had been able to gather from the news flashed on radio and television that she had seen in Paris, her video reports were already causing a mighty stir, both in the United States and in Europe, apart from causing untold embarrassment and rage in Israel. She definitely would be persona non grata in that latter country now, but she couldn't care less about that. Right now, she only wanted to get to a hotel in New York, so that she could have a long night of sleep before flying to Atlanta, where CNN was anxious for her to appear in a scheduled evening panel interview with a number of media commentators and international affairs experts. That panel interview already promised to be both challenging and passionate, as her prediction to Farah Qalibaf that some in the U.S.A. would try to discredit her was coming true. She was however ready and eager to confront her critics and to paint them as the hypocrites they were.

Emerging with other passengers of her flight in the arrival hall of Terminal 1, Nancy suddenly had a bad feeling at the sight of the abnormal number of Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and of Port Authority Police officers present in the hall, many of them waiting behind the customs reception stations and staring at the gate she had just emerged from. One ICE agent then pointed her from fifty meters away and spoke in his portable radio. Four burly Port Authority policemen immediately converged on her, one hand on the grips of their pistols and with hard looks on their faces. Nancy then understood with a pang of anger and frustration that her name probably was still on the American official no-fly list, where the Israeli accusations against her had landed her.

"Miss Laplante, step out of the line now and raise your hands, NOW!" Shouted one of the policemen, drawing and pointing his pistol at her. Nancy, not wanting to start a fight for such a stupid reason, obeyed at once and took three steps away from the other passengers while raising high her hands, her three bags still slung from her shoulders. She glared at the nearest policeman approaching her.

"This is all a mistake, officer. There is no need to point a gun at me."

"Just keep quiet and obey our orders and nothing will happen to you, miss. Now, move towards the customs station number six, and keep those hands up."

Fuming, Nancy walked slowly towards the said station, careful not to do any movement that could be misinterpreted. Adding to her anger was the fact that a few passengers and onlookers were filming the scene now with the help of their cell phones. Her critics were probably going to have a good laugh at her expense when they would see those recordings on YouTube. As soon as she was at the designated station, two more policemen came to her and pushed her against the counter, making her spread her arms and feet before patting her down for weapons and explosives. Finding nothing suspicious, they took away her three bags, which were immediately searched by ICE agents, while Nancy was pushed towards a nearby customs interrogation office. A senior ICE agent pointed a chair set near a small table, opposite another chair.

"Empty your pockets on the table, then sit down, Miss Laplante."

Becoming mighty pissed by now, Nancy glared at the senior agent.

"Are you all terminally dumb or what? Interpol has rejected the Israeli accusations against me two days ago. I am simply a reporter returning from an assignment for CNN to the Middle East."

"Who told you that Interpol has cleared you, miss?" Asked the ICE agent, visibly skeptical.

"An Interpol agent that I met at Ankara Airport, after arriving from Tehran."

"Well, according to the United States no-fly list, which overrules other international lists, you are still flagged as a suspected terrorist supporter and murderer. Now, empty your pockets on the table and stop arguing."

Keeping to her the pungent words she had in mind, Nancy proceeded to empty her pockets, putting her things on the small table. The ICE agent picked up at once her passport and sifted through it, then looked severely at her.

"You may sit down now, miss."

Once she was sitting, the agent showed her the entry and exit stamps in her passport.

"These stamps show that you entered officially in Israel on November 21, but never officially exited it, while you entered Lebanon on November 23 and then left for Iran the next day. Why didn't you leave Israel through an official departure point, miss?"

"Maybe because I was tired of getting kidnapped and stripped naked for torture by Israeli agents, mister? For some reason I do not know, the Israelis falsely believe that I am a terrorist, but refused to tell me why they are accusing me and were ready to

make me disappear without any due legal process. What was I supposed to do? Let them torture and then kill me? And don't tell me that the Israelis would never do that, or I will call you 'sucker'."

"Miss, the Israeli security services do not arrest people on a simple whim. They had to have good reasons to arrest you."

"Oh, really? Have you been following the same Middle East news as me in the last few years, mister? And what could justify having them trying to torture me? I am a Canadian military intelligence officer with an exemplary service record. Is that counting for nothing or are you ready to swallow anything the Israelis tell you, without a question?"

"We have only your word that they supposedly wanted to torture you, miss. Besides, you met a number of persons classified as terrorists and human rights abusers while in Lebanon and Iran."

"I am a reporter and I was on assignment to analyze the present conflict in the Middle East, you ninny! If I only interviewed people there that are as clean as a whistle, then I would never be able to interview anybody. Come down from your pink cloud, mister!"

The ICE agent was about to shoot back at her when someone knocked on the door, making him snap his head and shout angrily.

"WHO IS IT?"

One of his agents stuck his head in, an apologetic look on his face.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you like this, sir, but there is a CIA agent here that insists that we are making a mistake with Miss Laplante. He has with him an executive order...signed by the President."

Before he could say more, someone behind him pushed him, forcing the door wide open before stepping inside. The senior ICE agent glared at the tall, powerful man wearing a dark suit and sunglasses, while Nancy stared at him with disbelief.

"Dean? What are you doing here?"

"WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?" Shouted the ICE senior agent before the man could answer Nancy. The newcomer gave a contemptuous look at the ICE man and showed him a badge and identity card holder.

"I'm Special Agent Dean Price, of the CIA, and I'm here to put a stop to this Keystone Cops circus. Miss Laplante's name was supposed to have been removed from the no-fly list since last Friday. Why did you still arrest her?"

"We had no such word about her name having been removed from the list, mister. Now, I will need more than your word before I can lend credence to your claim." Dean Price took out an envelope at those words and threw it on the table, replying in an icy tone to the immigration senior agent.

"Then, maybe you will believe the President of the United States, mister, or do you think that you can overrule an order from him?"

Now unsure of himself, the ICE agent took the envelope and extracted from it a folded sheet of paper. Reading it made him snap his head up to look at Price with surprise.

"Who is Miss Laplante, to warrant such high attention, mister?"

Instead of answering him, Dean approached Nancy, who was still sitting on her chair, and gave her a leather badge and card holder.

"Here, Nancy. I brought you your CIA badge, now that you are on friendly territory...at least in theory."

While Nancy hid her surprise as best she could, the ICE agent eyed Dean with utter incredulity.

"This woman is a CIA agent?"

"Yes, and you are not going to publicize that fact, or you will face accusations of outing a serving intelligence field agent, which is a federal offense, mister. Now, you will release Miss Laplante at once and tell the idiot at DHS that is in charge of updating the no-fly list to do his job properly and take out immediately Nancy Laplante's name from the list. You will also cancel immediately any advisory circulating with her name on it. If that is not done in the next four hours, then the President himself will have your head. Am I clear, mister?"

The ICE agent swallowed hard and nodded reluctantly.

"It will be done, Special Agent Price."

"Good! Let's get your luggage, Nancy."

Nancy didn't question him then, too happy to be able to get out of this morass. Grabbing and pocketing back her things on the table, she looked at the ICE agent.

"I want my three carrying bags bag, with everything that was inside them."

The ICE man clenched his teeth, then looked at a junior agent.

"Get her three bags back to her, Winslow."

"Yes sir!"

As the junior agent hurried out of the room, Dean retrieved the President's executive order none too politely.

“Just in case one of your chumps doesn’t get the message, mister.”

He then left the room with Nancy, leaving a frustrated and flustered ICE man behind.

Dean brought Nancy back to one of the customs stations after she got back her three bags, ordering the immigration officer there to stamp her passport before leading Nancy towards the luggage carrousel on the lower floor. Nancy waited until they were riding down the mechanical staircase before looking with some amusement at Dean.

“Me, a CIA agent? That is a good one, Dean. Thanks for getting me out of that shit, anyway.”

“It was a pleasure, Nancy.” Replied Dean, smiling to her and also admiring in passing her cleavage. “I enjoy making those assholes at DHS, TSA and ICE look like the morons they are. This said, you must now realize that your personal situation is quite, uh, delicate, if I could say.”

“No shit, Sherlock! A presidential executive order with my name on it? I was just doing my job as a CNN reporter over there, in the Middle East.”

“I know, Nancy. In fact, I must tell you that you did a bang up job as a reporter, especially in Iran. Our analysts in Langley are drooling over your footage taken inside the Natanz and Qom uranium enrichment facilities.”

Nancy gave him a cautious look at those words.

“I do hope that someone understood that the reason the Iranians let me film all that was to pass the message that they are ready to negotiate a peace, Dean. That was the main reason for my report, not to provide some strategic intelligence to the United States.”

“Don’t worry about that, Nancy: I can assure you that President Obama is working on that aspect of your reports. He did sign an executive order about you, remember.”

“Why am I thinking that there will be a price asked in return.” Said Nancy, sounding a bit discouraged. “What’s next, Dean?”

“Next, we pick up your luggage before taking a government helicopter that will bring us to Langley. My boss is impatient to talk to you there.”

“If this is about the powers I demonstrated in Israel, or about the reason that made the Israelis kidnap me, then don’t expect me to say much, Dean. I don’t want to sound ungrateful or unfriendly, but there are things at play concerning me that could have tremendous negative impacts here if too many people learn about them.”

Dean gave her a side look, a slight smile on his lips.

“And you think that I can’t keep a secret, Nancy?”

“You know that I’m not worried about your discretion, big guy. It is about the thousands of American officials and politicians who would mismanage that information for their own purposes that I’m worried about.”

“And my boss understands that, Nancy, believe me. Your case is presently known by only a grand total of eight Americans, including the President and Vice-President, and we intend to keep it that way.”

Nancy couldn’t help sigh with relief then.

“Thanks! I feel a bit better now.”

They didn’t speak further until Nancy’s luggage started to appear on the luggage carousel assigned to her flight. Dean gave her a questioning look when she picked up as well a large cylindrical parcel wrapped in brown paper.

“What the hell is that, Nancy?”

Nancy gave him an innocent smile while loading the parcel on her luggage cart.

“A very nice Persian rug that I received as a gift from the mayor of Tehran, after I helped save one of his daughters from a burning building.”

“Ah, yes: that was when an Israeli plane crashed inside the Tehran University campus, wasn’t it?”

“Correct! By the way, your analysts may be interested to know that the Iranians now have a few S-400 air defense missile batteries in service, including one around Tehran.”

“We were kind of suspecting that, Nancy. How do you know about that?”

“Oh, I bedded an Almaz-Antey Russian engineer that was staying at my hotel in Tehran.” She answered nonchalantly, attracting an amused look from Dean.

“You are decidedly the same wild Nancy I met in Texas. We should renew our relationship.”

“Well, relationship may be a big word for a three-night stand, Dean. How about becoming official fuck friends?”

“That will do.” Replied Dean, grinning. “Tonight, maybe?”

“If it saves me the price of a hotel room, why not? You will have to prove to me that you haven’t lost any of your energy and know-how, though.”

“Come on, Nancy! I’m Dean Price, the darling of the CIA secretaries.”

Nancy grinned, then patted discreetly Dean's crotch.

"Then, I am looking forward to you proving your case tonight, big guy."

16:08 (Standard Eastern Time)

Director's office, CIA headquarters

Langley, Virginia

Nancy, out of ingrained military training, came to attention after entering David Petraeus' office at the CIA headquarters.

"You wanted to speak with me, General?"

Petraeus, sitting behind his word desk, nodded once his head and showed her one of the four swivel chairs set in front of him.

"I certainly did, Captain Laplante. Please, sit down. You too, Mister Price."

Waiting for Nancy to sit, Petraeus then pointed two other men already sitting in the office. One was a big man pushing fifty and with a receding hairline. The other was a tough-looking man in his late twenties or early thirties who sported a short goatee and whose eyes were as cold as ice.

"May I present you Assistant Director for Operations Julian Moore, along with one of his top field agents, Mister Erik Johnson?"

"Pleased to meet you, gentlemen." Said politely Nancy, smiling to Moore and Johnson. While Moore returned her smile and nodded his head, Johnson's face stayed impassive, him simply nodding. Pegging him as a controlled, calculating man, Nancy then returned her attention on the Director of the CIA.

"I believe that I owe this meeting to what happened around me in Israel, is that correct, General?"

"That is correct, Miss Laplante. Our rookie agent that you met there told a few rather fantastic things about you after being saved by you. By the way, I thank you sincerely for helping our agent, miss."

"It was my pleasure, General. I would however have done the same to help anyone being tortured like she was. I hate with a passion anyone who uses torture, for whatever reasons. I have to say that it was also in my personal interest to kill those Mossad agents, as they were about to plug me to their electric wires. Since your time and that of Mister Moore must be quite precious, let me tell you right away what I am willing to tell you about me. First, I am what my official biography and military file says

about me. I was born in Montreal in 1982, have been orphaned since the age of sixteen and entered the Canadian reserve officers' university program at seventeen, completing a degree in international affairs and graduating as a reserve military intelligence officer. I also took a job as a war correspondent for the CONFLICTS magazine, working for it until 2012, when it went out of business. What my file doesn't reflect is that in October of 2012, just after I had returned from reporting in Afghanistan, two scientists from the 34th Century kidnapped me to use me as a guinea pig for their experiments on time travel. Their experiment however turned sour very quickly and they got killed accidentally, leaving me marooned in England in the year 1940, along with my car and most of my computer and electronic equipment."

Despite what he knew already, Petraeus couldn't help exchange a shocked look with Moore, while Johnson stayed unflappable in appearance. Nancy however continued speaking after a short pause.

"Stuck in the past, I was faced with a cruel dilemma: to get involved in World War Two and try to shorten it, thus saving millions of lives and preventing untold misery but also changing history in the process, or refuse to get involved. I could not decide at first, until a powerful mind intruded in my head, filling me with images of what kind of horrors were in store for that war. That same powerful spiritual entity would later manifest itself to me again, but I will tell more about that later on. My mind made, I started actively helping the British to win the war, becoming a secret advisor to Prime Minister Churchill and also participating in a few military raids against Occupied Europe. Before someone here objects that the history of the World War Two doesn't reflect that, it is because my involuntary arrival in 1940 split the historical timeline, creating a new parallel branch of history, from September 1940 on. That branch in essence duplicated the whole planet, at the least, and its inhabitants at the time. Since then, that branch of history, which I call 'Timeline 'B'', has been following its own evolution."

"What happened to you after that, miss?" Asked Julian Moore, devoured by curiosity. "How did you manage to come back to your original time?"

"What happened to me was that The One, the entity that had manifested itself to me just after my arrival, connected mentally with me again after I had spent five months in England. He then opened my brain to the souvenirs of my past incarnations, which covered 92 past lives spread over 9,000 years. That is one of the reasons I am such an incredible linguist, General. A few months later, after I was captured by the Germans and then horribly tortured by the Gestapo, The One sent someone to help me as I lay

crippled in a military prison infirmary. That someone, call it my guardian angel if you would like, then healed me in minutes and gave me a number of extraordinary powers, including touch healing, telekinesis and levitation. It also made me stronger and faster than any other human being, plus gave me the ability to travel through time.”

“That was when you returned home, in 2012, I suppose?” Suggested Petraeus. To his surprise, Nancy shook her head at that.

“Not yet, General. While I was being tortured by the Gestapo, a very brave woman from the future tried to save me and bring me back to my time period, but was unfortunately captured herself and also tortured. Understand that this woman came from a pacifist civilization that had no weapons and knew nothing of war, which only made her attempted rescue more heroic. Once healed and empowered as a Chose of The One, I went to rescue her in turn, then returned to the future with her. That is the gist of my adventures, or misadventures if you prefer, in World War Two. As for my friend from the future, she since has convinced the global government of her day to curtail further time traveling attempts, in order to preserve the integrity of history and prevent potential disasters. That is my story in a nutshell, gentlemen.”

The men around her were silent for a long moment, staring at her with a mix of incredulity and wonderment. Julian Moore was the first to speak again.

“So, even if the Israelis wanted to steal a time machine from you, they would come up empty-handed, is that right, miss?”

Nancy smiled to him and put her index against her temple.

“Correct, Mister Moore. It is all in the head, as one would say.”

“Including your power to make people burst out in flames from the outside?”

Said Petraeus. Nancy nodded soberly at that.

“I do not relish having to use that power, General, but, after my awful experience with the Gestapo, you will understand that I have a particular hatred of persons who use torture.”

“With your demonstrated military skills and bravery you showed in Afghanistan last year, the Nazis must have found you to be indeed a dangerous opponent, Captain.”

Nancy made a ferocious smile at that.

“The Nazis nicknamed me ‘the She-Wolf’. As for the British, they gave me the Victoria Cross...twice.”

Petraeus rose an eyebrow at that, clearly impressed.

"You earned the Victoria Cross twice? Very few could claim that, none of them women."

"Oh, I paid for them in pain and blood, General, believe me."

Erik Johnson then opened his mouth for the first time in the meeting.

"The man and the girl whose framed pictures were found in your suite by the Israelis, who are they, miss?"

"My husband and adopted daughter from 1941 'B'." Answered Nancy, her face becoming very serious. "In this timeline, they both died during World War Two. In Timeline 'B', I saved them, then brought them to the 34th Century, where they now live in safety. I alternate my time between this century and the 34th Century, so that I can both live with them and also continue my normal life here. Before you ask, my only goal here is to live my original life as a normal human being, using my time traveling abilities only to go visit my family in the future. I still don't know how the Israelis got to learn about my ability."

"Probably because of your visit to a Kiev arms dealer in 1992, miss?" Replied Moore, looking at her severely. "If you travel through time only to go visit your family, then why did you go to 1992 to illegally buy sixty AS Val silenced rifles?"

Mentally swearing at her bad luck and at Victor Medveyev, Nancy stared back at Moore, unrepentant.

"As I told you, the civilization to which my friend from the future belonged had no weapons. The government of the Global Council, the entity that comprises all the Humans in the Solar System, needed weapons to equip a police force that could enforce the new laws about time travel. I did teach to and helped train that new police force, if you are interested to know."

"I certainly am, miss. And that time travel police force, what tells us here that it will not interfere in this time period, miss?"

Resolved to cut this discussion right there, Nancy bent forward and spoke firmly to Moore.

"One simple reason, Mister Moore: the existence of the civilization of the Global Council rests on this history being untouched by irresponsible manipulations. If someone changes in a significant way the history of the 21st Century and of the centuries to follow, then the Global Council may very well vanish, to be replaced by something completely different. You will understand that nobody but a deranged person in the Global Council would want that. I have already said a lot, and am not going to say more

about time travel or the future, for everyone's sake. Now, if you have nothing else, I would like to be able to go get a good night's rest: I had a very long and tiring day."

"I do have one last question for you, miss." Insisted Moore. "Can you prove to us that you really don't need a time machine to travel through time?"

Nancy eyed him for a moment, then disappeared from her chair without warning, to appear immediately behind Moore. Before the men in the room could do more than look stunned, she disappeared again in a flash, to appear next to Dean Price's chair. A second later, she disappeared for a third time. The CIA men looked around them in confusion at first, until Erik Johnson pointed at the ceiling.

"She's over your, General, glued to the ceiling."

Petraeus looked up and saw Nancy, her back to the ceiling and her arms crossed, looking down calmly at him.

"I believe that this should convince you, gentlemen."

She then disappeared yet again, to reappear in her chair as if nothing had happened. Now seriously shaken, Petraeus stared at her as if she was a witch.

"That...that entity you call 'The One', what is it, to be able to give you such powers?"

"Some would call it 'God', General. It has followed and supported the evolution of Humanity for millions of years already. Each Human alive has a soul that is actually a part of The One, a part that he sends to inhabit the fetus before birth. That soul leaves the body after death, to return to The One for a period of cleansing before going to inhabit a new baby. It has no interest in being worshipped in any way. In fact, its sole interest is to see Humanity progress and improve. As a Chosen, I promote his words of kindness, compassion and tolerance, plus I protect the innocents when I can. However, I do that as discreetly as I can, and sometimes without using any powers but my own humanity."

"Are there many, uh, Chosen like you, Nancy?" Asked Dean Price hesitantly. She shook her head and gave him a slight smile.

"No, Dean. Chosen ones are rare indeed in the history of Humanity. Jesus Christ was a Chosen of The One. Here, in this century, I am the only one. The One chose me because I have a high level of empathy for others and because I showed a spirit of self-sacrifice and justice that pleased it, not because I was a talented soldier."

"So, you are comparing yourself to Jesus Christ, miss?" Asked Erik Johnson in a sarcastic tone. That got him a hard look from Nancy, who spoke in a warning tone.

"Mister Johnson, I am frankly starting to dislike you. You are free to believe me or not, but don't mock or insult me. I have been polite and have cooperated readily with your CIA up to now, so please cut the sarcasm."

"Nobody here means to mock you, miss." Intervened quickly Petraeus, trying to avoid an unfortunate misunderstanding. "You however have to admit that your story is a rather fantastic one."

"True! But it is also a true one, General. As a last point, I would like to emphasize again the point that I am here in this century solely to live my normal, predestined life. Talking of my normal life, I really should go find myself a nice bed for tonight: I am due to skewer some of my critics in a televised debate tomorrow evening at eight, on CNN, and I need to recuperate from all that air traveling. While I will not throw brimstones and fire at my critics, I expect the words to be sharp. I hope that you will watch it, General: it could be entertaining."

Petraeus smiled slightly at that: he had to deal with his own share of public criticism in the past.

"I will do my best to find some time to watch it, Miss Laplante. Mister Price will now escort you out and get you to a hotel. Again, thank you for your footage from Iran: you gave a lot for my analysts to work on...and for the President to ponder. Mister Price..."

Both Dean and Nancy then got up from their seats and left the room, closing the door behind them. Petraeus sat back in his chair and digested for a moment all that Nancy had said, then looked questioningly at Julian Moore.

"What do you think of her story, Julian? She obviously didn't tell us everything, but I would tend to believe what she was ready to tell us, even if it is a rather fantastic story."

"Well, General, her little game of jumping around the room is proof enough that she can travel through space and time by herself, without a machine. Her performance in Israel also was enough to convince me that she truly holds a number of superpowers. Overall, I would say that she could be extremely dangerous but that, in view of her past record and recent actions, she is unlikely to commit hostile actions against us, unless we provoke her the way the Mossad did with her. There is however the matter of this time police she spoke about. I am sure that there is a lot more to it than what she said."

"Probably, but her argument that any action by that time police or other time traveler coming to this century could endanger the existence of that 34th Century

civilization is logical. It would be like if we went back to kill Stalin, for example. How would our world look like as a result of that? I wouldn't even dare to guess, but it would certainly not be like the one we know."

"True, General. On that point, I have to agree that this time police is probably a good thing for us to have. History is certainly best left alone."

"What about that other, parallel history, that Timeline 'B' she spoke about, sirs?" Asked Erik Johnson. "If it really exists, and I would tend to believe it does, then it would mean that there is another United States out there. Shouldn't we care about that?"

"No!" Replied at once Petraeus, his voice firm. "This United States is already mired into enough of a complicated situation as it is. We will not double our worries by trying to guess what is going on in that other timeline. Our counterparts will have to deal themselves with their own problems. Besides, I suspect that if we intervened there, and we don't right now have the means to even go there, that time police mentioned by Miss Laplante would then fall on our heads like a ton of bricks."

"Then, sir, I would suggest that we put Miss Laplante under close surveillance, to make sure that she doesn't mess with our history."

Moore shook his head at that.

"That would be a bad idea in my mind, Mister Johnson. With her powers and her ability to travel at will through time, following her would be next to impossible, while trying to capture her would probably end up the way the Mossad experienced in Israel. I also don't believe her to be a real threat to us, for the same reasons I believe that her time police will not come to change our history. Besides, she is now a very public woman, thanks to her reports from the Middle East. Being in the spotlight like she is now should ensure that she will not do something really stupid, unless she goes mad."

"There would be another way to ensure that she doesn't become a threat to the United States, sir: we could simply kill her."

While Moore simply looked at him with some misgiving, it was as if Johnson's words had sent a jolt into Petraeus, who pointed an angry finger at his action agent.

"Forget that idea, Mister Johnson! I may now be Director of the CIA but I wore a military uniform for too long to condone the killing of an officer who proved many times her bravery and devotion on the battlefield, especially when that killing is meant simply as a preventative measure. You will not touch her unless you have a direct order from me to do so. Is that clear, Mister Johnson?"

"Yes sir!" Answered Johnson, straightening in his chair.

"Then you are dismissed. Julian, you may stay a bit more."

Moore waited for Johnson to be gone before looking at Petraeus with some misgiving.

"Johnson is one of my best agents, and a very dedicated one, General. He had only the good of the United States in mind, I am sure."

"Probably, but we will not sink morally to the point of killing Captain Laplante just because we don't control her. There is also the matter of the possible retaliations from the future that would follow her killing. We..."

A thunderous voice suddenly cut him off, resonating inside the heads of both men with such power that their whole bodies vibrated.

"RETALIATION FROM THE FUTURE WOULD BE THE LEAST OF YOUR WORRIES, GENERAL PETRAEUS. LEAVE MY CHOSEN ALONE, FOR YOUR OWN SAKE. THIS WILL BE MY ONLY WARNING TO YOU."

Petraeus and Moore were stunned into silence for long seconds. Petraeus finally spoke with a shivering voice, cold sweat running on his forehead.

"I...I think that this point is now decided, Julian. I will now prepare a short brief that I will deliver myself to the President tonight. I will keep you informed of the President's reactions."

"And I will inform you at once if anything new about Laplante pops up, General." Getting up from his chair, Julian Moore left Petraeus' office at a slow pace. Once in the anteroom, he leaned against a wall and wiped his forehead with his left hand.

"God, I need a stiff drink right now."

CHAPTER 10 - CRUCIFIXION

19:08 (Jerusalem Time)

Sunday, September 14, 31 C.E.

(11th of Tishri, year 3791 of the Hebrew calendar)

Valley of Kidron, northern outskirts of Jerusalem

Miriam of Magdala, sitting near Yeshua around a small campfire with a dozen other disciples, raised her head nervously when a shout from a disciple on watch duty was heard in the growing darkness.

“Halt! Who goes there?”

A number of male followers started to rise, walking staffs or rocks in their hands, but Yeshua’s soft voice made them sit back.

“Do not be alarmed, my friends: an old friend of mine is back. Miriam, you may want to greet her.”

“Her?”

Understanding and joy then came to Miriam. Jumping on her feet, she ran towards where the sentry had been heard. She soon saw his silhouette, along with that of a much taller person wearing a hooded robe and holding a long walking staff. Miriam ran to the newcomer and gave her a warm hug.

“Nava! I am so happy to see you again.”

“And I am also happy to see you, Miriam. I was afraid of not being able to join with you and Yeshua before you entered Jerusalem.”

“You are just in time: we will enter through the Damascus Gate tomorrow morning. Come and meet Yeshua, my friend.”

Both women walked to the campfire, where a dozen followers and disciples looked up with curiosity at the tall newcomer. Yeshua got on his feet and went to Nava, kissing her on the cheek.

“Welcome back with us, Nava. Are you hungry or thirsty?”

“I am fine, thank you, Yeshua. I am sorry for all those months away from you.”

“It was not your fault if I insisted on traveling only with male disciples for safety reasons, Nava, although I strongly suspect that I would have been safer with you than with a dozen of my men.”

“You must be joking, Master!” Interjected Shimon ‘The Rock’. “How could one feel safe because of a woman?”

“A few seconds in combat against Nava would probably show you why, Shimon.” Replied Yeshua in an amused tone. “Don’t forget that she was an Amazon warrior once.”

Yeshua then turned to face his elder brother Yaaqov, sitting near the fire, pointing him to Nava.

“You may remember my brother Yaaqov, even after all those years, friend.”

“I do, although he was only nine years old when I saw him last. Shelama, Yaaqov.”

“Shelama, Nava.” Replied cautiously Yaaqov. He was much more conservative than Yeshua about relations with women, especially foreign ones. Yeshua ignored his cold attitude towards Nava and looked back at the tall woman.

“We have to talk in private, my friend. Please follow me.”

Leading Nava away from the campfires and the huts and tents of his followers, Yeshua finally stopped behind a tree and faced her.

“God told me about you while I was on Mount Hermon, Nava.”

Nancy stiffened immediately: this could very well spell disaster for her mission. She didn’t reply, waiting instead for Yeshua to continue, which he did in a low voice.

“You were chosen by God and given powers by Him to promote his words. He also told me that you were once Sarai, wife of the great patriarch Abraham, and that you are timeless. I am the one who should kneel in front of you, not you in front of me.”

Yeshua then kneeled in front of Nancy, who quickly forced him back on his feet.

“Don’t say that, Yeshua. Yes, I was chosen by Him but so were you. A lot is resting on your shoulders, Yeshua, and you must fulfill your destiny by yourself. I am here simply to witness it. Whatever happens, know that He is with you. As for me, I will ask you not to say anything about what you just told me to your followers, even to young Miriam. Any such slip could change things in catastrophic ways.”

“I understand, Nava. Still, it is a great honor to have you by my side.”

“Don’t forget that I am here strictly to observe, not to act. Don’t expect me to wield a flaming sword and sweep the Romans out of Jerusalem in the name of God.”

“How unfortunate: that would have been a grand spectacle indeed.”

“Indeed! Let’s go back to the campfire: young Miriam must be missing you already.”

Yeshua smiled in amusement.

“Is there something you don’t know, Nava?”

“Plenty, actually. Come, I have my musical instruments with me. Your followers should appreciate some distraction.”

When they entered Jerusalem in the early morning, a probe was in position overhead to supplement the video recordings from Nancy’s headband hidden cameras. Walking with the other women at the rear of the crowd of 150 followers and disciples, Nancy felt an overpowering emotion when Yeshua, riding on an ass, entered the holy city through the Damascus Gate to the acclaims of hundred of Jews. By now Yeshua was a well-known and highly popular rabbi in Palestine, famous for his miraculous healings and his stinging rebukes to the high priesthood class. Nancy knew however that his popularity was unfortunately going to be one of the causes of his incoming downfall. Staying as anonymous as she could despite her height, she followed the others to the bathing establishments south of the great temple, where the group split into men and women in order to do their ritual bathing before they could enter the temple. Yeshua reformed his group at the exit of the bathhouses, then led his followers up the stairs of the temple. Once inside the outer courtyard, Yeshua’s happy smile at the thought of leading his disciples in the sacred temple faded at the sight of a mass of animals, mostly sheep and goats, roaming the far end of the outer courtyard, ready to be sold by numerous Levite priests to pilgrims as sacrificial offerings. The booths of moneychangers and other vendors also were visible in the courtyard. Yeshua entered in a mighty rage and threw his walking staff on the ground.

“WHO DARED DESECRATE LIKE THIS THE TEMPLE OF GOD? HOW COULD ONE LET THE TEMPLE’S COURTYARD BE USED FOR TRADING? GOD WILL PUNISH THOSE RESPONSIBLE, MARK MY WORDS! LET US GO TO BETHANY!”

He then stormed out of the courtyard, leaving his disciples confused and disappointed. Young Miriam of Magdala in particular was smitten.

“But I wanted so much to pray at the temple today. What shall we do now, Nava?”

“Follow Yeshua, I suppose. We will have ample opportunity to visit the temple again in the days to come.”

Leaving Jerusalem via the Essenians' Gate, Yeshua and his followers walked east-southeast for two kilometers, to arrive at a village built along a wide central street. Going to a large, two-storey house, Yeshua and his brother Yaaqov were greeted effusively by two elder women, attracting a whispered question from Miriam to Nancy.

"Who are those two women, Nava?"

"Two sisters named Martha and Miriam who are distant relatives of Yeshua. I met them before. They live here with their brother, Eleazar."

"What is Yeshua going to do? There are way too many of us to fit into that house. Besides, trying to feed the lot of us would quickly ruin about anybody."

"Well, I guess that Yeshua and his closest male disciples will stay in the house, while the others will have to camp in huts. I do have a small tent. You are welcomed to share it with me if you want."

"Nava, you are a real friend. I accept. Uh, what about food? I have some money but it won't last that long."

"I will do like I always did, Miriam: I will sing and play music to earn money, which I will use to buy food. I could also dance to accompany my music."

"Isn't that the way of sinners, Nava? Yeshua admonished me often enough for dancing in front of strangers in the past."

"Not if I am clothed modestly and perform for honorable families. Besides, who would covet an old hag like me?"

Miriam looked critically at her tall friend. Despite the pockets under Nava's eyes, her wrinkles and her gray hair, she still moved with the agility and speed of a young woman. Miriam had also seen Nava naked at the baths: her body was still that of a young, very fit woman, with breasts still firm and shapely.

"Many young women would envy your body, Nava. How old are you supposed to be?"

"I am 52."

Miriam laughed loudly at that.

"Nava, you will never convince me of that. For one thing, those big breasts of yours are still round and firm, instead of being flat like those of other old women. Don't deny it: I have seen you at the baths. What is your secret for staying young like this?"

Nancy thought furiously for an answer. Young Miriam was no fool, far from it, and there was only so much she could do to alter her body in order to appear older.

“God must have graced me, Miriam. Come, let’s pitch our tent before the best spots are taken.”

The next two days went by quickly for Nava and Miriam, with Nava having no trouble finding customers for her performances amongst the numerous Jewish pilgrims filling Jerusalem for the incoming feast of Sukkoth. Many of those pilgrims were from outside Palestine and quite a few were very wealthy and ready to pay for entertainment. One such rich pilgrim was a wine merchant from Cyprus named Yosef who happened to have met Yeshua seven years earlier. Miriam was delighted to learn about this and ended up talking at length with Yosef while Nava kept playing and singing. Both women returned late that day to Bethany, to find Yeshua and his closest male disciples apparently plotting some action in Jerusalem in the coming days. When she tried to inquire about what they were planning, the male disciples told Miriam that it was no woman’s business. Fuming, Miriam returned to Nava’s tent to rant and rave about the men’s stupid superiority complex over women. Nava grinned while listening to her complaints.

“Miriam, I have been clashing with men over that subject all of my life. What I have learned from that is that men will never learn to appreciate us for our true value. So, just let them go and stumble around while we pick up the pieces behind them. This said, how would you like to go pray at the temple in two days, on Sukkoth? Yaakov, son of Halphayah, is willing to escort us and vouch for us at the temple’s entrance.”

“That would be marvelous. Thanks, Nava!”

“The pleasure is mine, Miriam.” Replied Nancy. What she did not tell her was that there was a very specific reason for her to want to be in the temple that day. Her mission was now approaching its climax.

10:47 (Jerusalem Time)

Thursday, September 18, 31 C.E.

(15th of Tishri, Sukkoth day, year 3791 of the Hebrew calendar)

Outer courtyard, Great Temple of Jerusalem

Immediately after having given his offering to the priests at the sacrificial altar and having performed a few prayers, Yaakov, a young man with gentle manners, excused himself with Nava and Miriam and left the inner courtyard. Miriam was a bit

intrigued by his haste but followed Nancy out of the women's courtyard of the temple. They then walked slowly around the outer courtyard, staying near the Holy of Holies and watching the pilgrims come and go. Miriam got suddenly excited when she spotted Yeshua, surrounded by male disciples, as he was making his way towards the area occupied by the vendors in the temple. She would have gone after him if Nancy had not firmly held her arm, attracting a protest from Miriam.

"What are you doing, Nava? Let me go! Yeshua is over there."

"I know, Miriam, but you don't want to be close to his group right now. Just watch from a distance."

Confused and still a bit upset at Nava, Miriam nonetheless stayed with her and watched Yeshua and his group as they mingled with the vendors. Then, on a shout from Yeshua, his male disciples and over a hundred other men attacked the vendors, knocking down their tables, thrashing their boots and creating a stampede amongst the animals on sale. Some vendors tried to resist but were quickly overwhelmed and chased away. The temple's police, completely taken by surprise, was too slow to react and Yeshua and his followers were all out of the temple before they could be caught. Miriam, her eyes sparkling with pride for her husband, was now all excited.

"Did you see what Yeshua did, Nava? He taught a lesson to those arrogant temple priests who would turn the sacred temple into a vulgar market."

Nancy's hand then came firmly on her mouth.

"Quiet, Miriam! Do you want the temple's police to arrest us for complicity? Yeshua may effectively have humiliated the High Priest and his greedy associates but he also just made himself a mortal enemy. Look over there, at that window."

Miriam looked at the window pointed at discreetly by Nancy and saw a man dressed in a rich robe and wearing a huge turban standing at the window, apparently angry.

"Caiaphas, the High Priest. What do we do now?"

"We get the hell out of here before the police starts asking questions."

As they were making their way towards the exit, they saw four Levite priests drag away the body of an obviously dead vendor. Miriam watched them for a moment, horror on her face.

"Yeshua could not have killed that man."

"No, and neither any of his true disciples. It was the work of one of the thugs who have been following him while hoping for a chance to create mayhem. The High

Priest can now pin murder on top of the accusations of sedition, vandalism and profanation to be put on Yeshua's shoulders. Come, let's go back to Bethany."

Arriving an hour later at the house of Martha and Miriam, they found a jubilant Yeshua and his disciples celebrating their actions at the temple. Miriam of Magdala went straight to Yeshua and embraced him tightly while looking up in his eyes.

"Yeshua, what you did was magnificent but it was also dangerous. The High Priest will do everything now to get rid of you. You should not stay here."

Smiling gently to her, Yeshua grabbed her shoulders and made her step back.

"Do not worry, Miriam: the people of Jerusalem are with me on this. Caiaphas' decision to put vendors in the temple's courtyard is despised by nearly everybody, including the Sanhedrin."

"Maybe, but he is very jealous of his powers and privileges. He will not forget you."

"We will see, Miriam. For the moment, let's rejoice at our success."

Only half convinced, Miriam returned to Nancy, who had been watching from a distance.

"I fear that you are right, Nava. Caiaphas has a number of ways to get rid of Yeshua, including enlisting the help of the Romans. What should we do now?"

"Wait and hope that cooler heads will prevail. Stay with Yeshua while I help poor Martha feed all these people."

It took only a few days for the initial euphoria to evaporate and to be replaced by the grim acknowledgement that Jerusalem was now too dangerous for Yeshua and his nearest disciples to go into the city. Apart of the temple's police, bands of young Levite thugs roamed the streets, ready to grab and stone Yeshua if he dared show up. Some of those thugs also went outside the city, looking actively for Yeshua and his disciples. Some of the disciples, intimidated and scared, left to return to Galilee, while others made themselves discreet and moved away from Bethany. Not Miriam of Magdala, though, who was as faithful to Yeshua as ever. She spent more and more nights alone with him, comforting him and keeping him company in this time of need. On his part, while outwardly still confident, Yeshua realized how vulnerable he was now while staying near Jerusalem. His practice of holy feasts with his disciples continued but became a somber, more discreet affair. The one thing he indulged into was to go occasionally to the nearby Mount of Olives, where the priests of the Sanhedrin and pilgrims hostile to

Caiaphas' policies gathered at a place called 'the Chanute' to debate the actions of the High Priest and what to do about them. There, Yeshua delighted into entering the debate, arguing points of religious law and reveling in controversy. Those debates invariably attracted crowds of listeners, along with the attention of the agents of the High Priest.

On the urgings of many, including Miriam of Magdala, Yeshua started traveling around instead of staying all the time in Bethany, where he was becoming an easy target for his enemies. He used those travels to preach to Judeans living in small villages, practicing his custom of holy feasts and healing the sick. The months went by and winter set in as he roamed the hills around Jerusalem, spreading his gospel and still participating from time to time in the debates at the Chanute, on the Mount of Olives. In the meantime, Miriam of Magdala stayed with Nancy in Bethany, helping to run the house of the two sisters and of their brother Eleazar. With most of the disciples now dispersed, Miriam and Nancy had been given a room on the upper floor of the big house, where they could spend the winter more comfortably than in Nancy's small tent. Nancy, occasionally accompanied by Miriam, still went out nearly daily to Jerusalem to sing and play for wealthy residents while Miriam discreetly preached Yeshua's teachings to the women of Jerusalem. The money earned by Nava in turn helped support the still heavy expenses incurred by Martha and Miriam in running their household. In this, Nancy was careful not to become too notorious: the last thing she wanted was to be mentioned by name in some of the future gospels. She knew that she would be helped in this by the tendency of Yeshua's male disciples to dismiss the women around him as mere followers and to refuse to acknowledge them as true disciples. If anything, the closeness of Miriam of Magdala to Yeshua and the intimate times they spent together, while normal for a married couple, grated on many of the male disciples and also helped deflect the spotlight away from Nancy, who was too happy to let things go as they were.

The sudden death of Eleazar, the elderly brother of Martha and Miriam of Bethany, shook a number of events into motion. Yeshua was away at the time, something that embittered Martha and Miriam to no small degree as they grieved for their brother. Nancy, having witnessed the illness and quick death of Eleazar and realizing how important historically that event would be, became even more discreet. From what she knew of Yeshua by now, she doubted that he had the power of

resurrecting Eleazar, as the Bible would claim later. Having secretly checked Eleazar's body, she also knew that he was truly dead and not merely in a death-like coma. Unless Nancy had totally misjudged Yeshua, that left only a divine or supernatural intervention as a way to resurrect the old man.

Yeshua showed up in Bethany four days after Eleazar's death, as numerous mourners were still in the small village, gathered near the cave that contained the body of the old man. Nancy watched carefully as Yeshua was told of his friend's death and wept in grief before going to the tomb. Martha and Miriam, after initially refusing to greet back Yeshua out of grief and bitterness, met him in front of the cave and exchanged hugs with him. Yeshua, still crying, then ordered a group of men to roll away the stone that covered the entrance of the cave. They did so after some hesitation and over the objections of Martha. Once the cave was opened, Yeshua shouted out loud.

“ELEAZAR, COME ON OUTSIDE!”

At first, nothing happened. Then noises came from inside the tomb, noises of someone or something moving. Gasps followed by a deathly silence greeted the appearance of Eleazar, wrapped in his white burial sheet. The old man staggered out of the cave and into the sunlight, his face pale, stopping finally a few paces in front of Yeshua. Nancy, having recorded the whole thing via the micro-cameras hidden in her headband, held her breath: this had all the makings of a true miracle. As far as she knew, only The One could accomplish this. She slowly walked away, stunned, as Martha and Miriam ran to their brother and hugged and kissed him.

Yeshua left Bethany again the next day, conscious that his spectacular miracle would without doubt attract the attention of the authorities on to Bethany. Miriam of Magdala, as shaken as anyone by Eleazar's resurrection, did however spend the night with Yeshua before he left. She was in tears after his departure in the early morning and went to Nancy for comfort.

“Nava, I have a bad feeling about all this. I fear that Yeshua has doomed himself by doing this resurrection. Some people are starting to call him a messiah and that is bound to provoke further the High Priest and maybe the Romans too.”

“You are too right about that, Miriam. However, there is little we can do now but let things run. You will have to be brave.”

Miriam then started crying again, consoled as best she could by an equally emotional Nancy.

“I don’t want to be brave. I just want Yeshua to be safe.”

“I...I want that too but he is now in the hands of God, Miriam.”

Three weeks later, young Miriam came to Nancy hesitantly and led her to an isolated corner of the house before speaking in a low voice.

“Nava, I need your advice on something.”

“Sure, anything you want. What is it?”

“I...I think that I’m pregnant. I am normally very regular and my periods were due over a week ago. They never came.”

Nancy’s mind went into high gear: Miriam had been seeing only one man since her marriage. The baby she was going to bear could kick a furious religious storm in the future if its existence came to light. She gently held Miriam by the shoulders and spoke softly in a near whisper.

“Miriam, you must not tell anyone about this: it could make you and your coming child targets of Yeshua’s enemies. The Romans would not hesitate at killing you if it meant snuffing out any possible focus for the followers of what they see as a troublemaker. Please, promise me.”

“I promise.” Said Miriam in a subdued voice. “What will I do if... if something happens to Yeshua?”

Nancy then hugged Miriam and kissed her on the head.

“Then I will protect you and take care of you. You have my solemn word on this.”

Weeks later, in late February of 32 C.E., they saw a number of Yeshua’s followers and disciples starting to leave, many looking angry. Intrigued and worried, Miriam finally went to one disciple who was getting ready to leave Martha’s house and confronted him.

“Yudah, what is going on? Why are you and others leaving like this?”

The man’s violent reaction surprised and scared her. Turning quickly to face her, he nearly shouted in her face while jabbing a finger hard in her chest.

“Because Yeshua is committing a sacrilege, that’s why! Since he’s your husband, why don’t you go to him and try to straighten him out?”

“Yeshua, committing sacrilege? But he would never do that.”

“Oh yeah? He offers bread and wine at meals while calling them his flesh and blood and you don’t call that a sacrilege?”

Miriam was stunned speechless for a moment. In the Hebrew religion, blood was the most sacred substance on Earth. The idea of drinking blood or eating human flesh would be totally abhorrent to any Jew.

“But...it must have been a figure of speech. Yeshua would never ask anyone to drink real blood.”

“Then go put some sense in him. I am not going to be associated with this new, sacrilegious rite of his.”

Yudah then shouldered his bag and stormed out of the house, leaving Miriam hurt and confused. She knew that Yeshua simply could not ask people to drink blood and must have spoken another of his parables, which were often hard to understand fully. She however also knew enough to realize that this latest turn of event would turn many against Yeshua and would provide the perfect pretext to the High Priest to push the Sanhedrin into approving the arrest of her husband. Miriam also realized that the High Priest would most likely make his move before the feast of Passover. She had to find Yeshua and talk to him.

19:16 (Jerusalem Time)

Wednesday, March 3, 32 C.E.

(3rd of Adar II, year 3791 of the Hebrew calendar)

House of Shimon, Bethany

Yeshua had stopped with a few of his disciples at the house of a man he had earlier cured from leprosy and was conducting one of his ritual feasts. The house of Shimon was only a few minutes away by foot from Martha’s house but he did not dare go to it, as spies of the High Priest could be watching it. They were in the middle of the meal when a young woman entered the house and went directly to Yeshua. He and his disciples fell quiet, as they knew very well the woman: it was Miriam of Magdala, tears in her eyes and a small alabaster jar in her hands. Without a word, she first kissed Yeshua on the forehead, then smashed the alabaster jar and poured its content, an expensive perfumed ointment, on his head and massaged it into his hair. This alarmed quite a few disciples, who got on their feet.

“She is designating you as the messiah by anointing you, Master. She is going to attract bad attention to you.”

“She wasted a fortune in perfumed ointment at the same time. That money could have been better used to take care of the poor.”

Yeshua raised a hand to silence his disciples, then caressed Miriam’s lips.

“Leave her! Why are you making problems for her? She has done a fine deed with me. Because you always have the poor with yourselves, and whenever you want, you can always do them good, but me you do not always have. She acted with what she had; she undertook to myrrh my body for burial. Amen I say to you, wherever the message is announced in the whole World, what she did will also be spoken of in memory of her.”

Yeshua then spoke softly to Miriam, who was now kneeling in front of him.

“I understand your distress, my sweet Miriam. I may be soon gone but I want you to have something to help remember me.”

Taking off the gold chain and Star of David pennant he was wearing around his neck, he then put it around her neck and kissed her forehead, whispering to her at the same time.

“May this gift from Nava bring protection to you and the small life growing inside you. I will never forget you, Miriam.”

Miriam touched the chain around her neck and, crying silently, got up and left the house.

17:21 (Jerusalem time)

Sunday, April 4, 32 C.E.

(6th of Nissan, year 3791 of the Hebrew calendar)

Martha’s house, Bethany

Nancy and Miriam of Magdala were helping Martha and Miriam washing pots and utensils when Eleazar came in the kitchen, excited.

“Martha, Miriam, your cousin Miriam of Nazareth is here.”

The two sisters rushed out of the kitchen to greet their cousin, who was waiting in the lounge. Nancy and Miriam of Magdala followed them discreetly, staying a few paces behind while the three women and Eleazar exchanged hugs. It was Miriam of Nazareth who actually came to Nancy after noticing her tall silhouette.

“Nava, is that you?”

“It is, Miriam. It is good to see you, old friend.”

“And it is good to see you too, Nava. My god, it has been many months since we last met.”

“Two years, actually.” Said Nancy. Miriam was now close to 46 and she looked her age, but she was still seemingly healthy. “I suppose that you came to see Yeshua?”

“Yes, I did. Where could I find him?”

“He is in Jerusalem, waiting for Passover at a friend’s house.”

“Could you lead me to him, my friend, please? I am afraid that his fame could attract danger to him.”

“You may be right, Miriam, and I will lead you to him, but in the morning. You need to rest after your long trip from Nazareth.”

“Nava is right, Miriam. Stay in our house and have supper with us.” Said Eleazar. After a short hesitation, Miriam agreed to stay until tomorrow, bringing joy to her cousins. She was offered a place on a comfortable cushion and served a cup of wine by Eleazar, while Martha hurried back in the kitchen with Nancy to prepare supper. Yeshua’s mother then smiled gently at Miriam of Magdala, who was still standing timidly a few paces away.

“I have missed you as well, young Miriam. Come sit besides me, so that we could talk.”

The young Miriam sat near the old Miriam, unsure what to do or say. She decided however against telling about her pregnancy, as Nava had urged.

“What would you like to talk about, Miriam?”

“You could tell me how your life with Yeshua is going. Does he still loves you as much as before?”

“Yes,” said quietly young Miriam, “He still loves me a lot. I just fear that his preaching may get him killed soon. I wish that I could drag him away from Jerusalem, but he would never agree to that.”

“He certainly can be hard-headed when he wants to.” Agreed glumly old Miriam. “Tell me about his life lately.”

They talked together for nearly an hour, until supper was served. The conversation then became more general, with Martha, Miriam, Eleazar and Nava now participating. They ate, drank and spoke until late in the evening, when they broke up to go to sleep.

Nancy and Miriam of Nazareth left early in the morning for Jerusalem, accompanied by Miriam of Magdala, who had pestered Nancy into coming along.

Eleazar had at first insisted in escorting them, finding inappropriate that three women would travel alone, even on such a short journey. Nancy's answer had been to swing and twist her heavy walking staff in a short fighting demonstration that had left the old man speechless.

"Eleazar, I was raised as a warrior and fought many battles. I killed over a hundred armed men in combat before I gave up war as a way of life. I may be old but I still can defend myself. Thank you for your concern, though."

Miriam of Magdala was still quietly chuckling when they departed Bethany.

"Nava, you are really something, you know. I still don't believe that you are 52 years old, though."

"It is all a question of good nutrition and careful exercising, my young friend. I still spend an hour a day practicing and working out."

"But I never saw you do those exercises!"

"That's because I go out in the wilderness to do them. You think that male disciples like Shimon 'The Rock' or his brother Andreas would approve if they would have seen me exercise?"

"Definitely not!"

The trio arrived forty minutes later at the Sion's Gate of Jerusalem, guarded by armed auxiliaries of the Roman Army. Those auxiliaries were a ragtag mixture of Jews, Syrians, Persians and Greeks that, while still well trained, were more lightly armed than the standard Roman legionary. An elderly Roman centurion was actually supervising the changing of the guards at the gate when Nancy and the two Miriam showed up, mixed in a sparse crowd of merchants and pilgrims. Nancy suddenly threw the hood of her cape further over her head and turned her head after having looked at the centurion. Miriam of Magdala saw that and whispered to her as they were approaching the soldiers.

"What is it, Nava?"

"That centurion: I met him years ago and this is not a good time for him to recognize me. Just keep walking normally and don't speak."

Unfortunately for Nancy, her unusual height gave her away. The old centurion, glancing at the passing crowd, noticed the female silhouette sticking out by a full head over everybody else and stared at it, disbelief in his eyes.

"Hey you, woman, come here!"

Nancy, swearing quietly to herself, had no choice but to obey and approach the centurion after discreetly urging her companions to keep going. The centurion gently lowered her hood and stared at her face.

“Nauca, is that you?”

“It is, Sartorius. I see that you survived all those years in the army in reasonable shape.”

“And you look well enough yourself. By Jupiter, I am so happy to see you again, Nauca. Do you live in Jerusalem?”

“No! I still travel around and offer my services as a musician. I have converted to Judaism and my name is now Nava.”

“Nava...Beautiful...a fitting name for a woman such as you. Could we see each other tonight? I would like so much to discuss all those past years we lived separately.” Nancy hesitated only for a short moment: she could not afford to turn Sartorius against her right now, even though the Roman would probably never hurt her short of a direct order from a superior.

“I would be pleased to do that, Sartorius. I was on my way to entertain a customer for the day but I could free myself for tonight. I suppose that you are quartered in the Antonia fortress.”

“Of course! I do rate a private room now, however. So, I can hope to see you for supper?”

“Make it after supper: my customer may ask for entertainment this evening. I will show at the Antonia after dark, though. I promise.”

“Excellent! Then have a good day, my friend.”

“The same to you, Sartorius.”

Nancy discreetly sighed with relief as she passed the city gate and joined back with the two Miriam, who looked anxiously at her.

“Is everything alright, Nava?” Ask the younger Miriam. Nancy smiled and nodded once.

“Yes! That was just an old friend who wanted to speak to me. I am going to visit him tonight at the Antonia fortress.”

“The Antonia? But that place is crawling with Romans. You shouldn’t go there: it’s too dangerous.” Said the older Miriam.

“Don’t worry about me, Miriam. I will be just fine. Let’s go now to Yosef’s house. Yosef is a Cypriot wine merchant whom Yeshua nicknames Barnabas. He is a good, decent man who also happens to be quite wealthy. He is a follower of Yeshua as well.”

Walking slowly in deference to the older Miriam, Nancy took ten minutes to arrive at Yosef’s house, a big, two-storey structure with a large central courtyard. A male servant introduced them into the reception lounge, where Yosef was discussing with Yeshua and fourteen of his closest disciples. A gentle smile appeared on Yeshua’s face at the sight of his mother. Getting up from the low couch he was using, he went to her and kissed her on both cheeks.

“Mother, it is good to see you after all these months. Come, let me present you to my host, Barnabas.”

Letting Yeshua and his mother with Barnabas, Nancy and the younger Miriam sat discreetly in a corner of the lounge, apart from the male disciples. Most of the latter were content to ignore the two women: contrary to Yeshua, who was uncommonly accommodating of women, they shared the generally low regard towards women common to the Jewish men of the time. Nancy quickly got bored of just waiting and listening to the others: inaction had never been her style. Excusing herself with Miriam of Magdala, she took her musical instruments and left the house to start walking around the city. She unconsciously went towards the old inn of Iram the Syrian, arriving in front of it in minutes. The inn had been miraculously spared by the rioters 26 years ago, but Iram himself had died a few years ago and his son Cheb had then taken over the establishment. Nancy had been received warmly when she had visited the inn three months ago, Iram’s family having kept a good souvenir of her despite the years of absence from Jerusalem. Nancy thus decided to spend her day in the inn, singing and playing music. She knew that Cheb would welcome her, especially since she was still able to attract a lot of customers.

The morning and afternoon passed quickly for Nancy, who managed to collect quite a few coins from her singing. Excusing herself with Cheb at the end of the afternoon with a promise to return the next day, Nancy then walked back to Barnabas’ house. She still didn’t know on which exact day Yeshua was going to be arrested, so she didn’t dare miss a supper there until events unfolded. She found Miriam of Magdala dozing off in the lounge while Yeshua and his disciples were still discussing with

Barnabas some finer points of Jewish laws and traditions. Nancy discreetly lay besides Miriam and stayed there quietly until suppertime came. She then gently woke up Miriam so that both of them could help Barnabas' wife serve the meal. Contrary to biblical misconceptions, Yeshua did take his meals with all of his disciples present, including the female ones. Nancy just wished that some of those misogynist preachers and churchmen she had met in the 21st Century could see her and Miriam now, sitting on each side of Yeshua and his mother after having helped serve the food. Unfortunately, the documentary film that was going to be produced from her mission recordings was going to be restricted to 34th century viewers and members of the Time Patrol. She realized too well what kind of storm the presentation of such a documentary would create in, say, 1941 England.

Once the meal was over and it was apparent that Yeshua was not going to leave the house that night, Nancy excused herself again with Yeshua and left with her musical instruments. It took her about ten minutes through the dark, mostly deserted streets, to get to the Antonia fortress. Two auxiliaries challenged her as she got to the top of the wide stairs leading to the main gates.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"My name is Nava. Centurion Sartorius is expecting me."

The two auxiliaries exchanged a knowing smile before one of them spoke to Nancy.

"Wait here! I will have Centurion Sartorius warned of your presence."

Going inside through the massive doors, one of the guards left for a few seconds before returning to his post.

"A servant will warn him, woman."

Nancy nodded and waited patiently for a few minutes, until Sartorius himself showed up, wearing a simple red tunic and sandals. He happily exchanged a hug with Nancy, his arms proving to be still strong despite his age.

"Nava, it is truly nice to have you here tonight. Come!"

He escorted her inside the fortress, crossing the large internal courtyard and going up a flight of stairs before introducing her inside a small room. Nancy looked around at the sparse furniture and at the arms and armor laid on a bench in a corner, then at Sartorius.

"Always the frugal, disciplined soldier, even after all those years? Did you ever go back to Rome, Sartorius?"

"I did, about twenty years ago." The Roman answered in a subdued voice. "I found a marvelous woman and married her. We were happy for two years, then she died during labor, along with our first child."

"I'm truly sorry to hear that, Sartorius. What happened then?"

"I spent a few more years in Rome, trying to forget my grief. I finally asked to be posted back East and was transferred to Syria, where I served for twelve years before being posted to Jerusalem. So, here I am now."

"Here you are, lonely and waiting for retirement in this small room. You are a good man, Sartorius: you deserve much better than this."

"Maybe, maybe not. Please, sit down while I get you a cup of wine."

She took the seat offered by him as he poured wine from a pitcher into two cups, then brought one cup to her. They knocked their cups together after he sat on a stool in front of her.

"To an old soldier." Said Nancy.

"To two old soldiers." Replied Sartorius. They drank in silence while looking at each other. Sartorius spoke then, smiling at his ex-lover.

"You look well indeed, Nava, even after all those years. Tell me about you, about your past years."

Nancy obliged, spending a good half hour describing her activities in Palestine, or rather what they were supposed to have been, with Sartorius asking questions from time to time. She finally smiled warmly to him and put her cup away.

"How would you like that I dance for you, like in the old times?"

"I would love that very much, Nava."

Sartorius watched her, mesmerized, as she got up and, undoing her belt first, took off her long tunic. She now wore her sandals, loincloth and a band of cloth wrapped around her chest that was the contemporary equivalent of a bra. Nancy, humming a soft tune, then started dancing slowly in front of Sartorius, who couldn't take his eyes off her body.

"By Venus, your body is as beautiful and young as it was 26 years ago. How do you manage that?"

"Daily training and a careful diet, my dear. So, you like my body, still?" She said softly before shedding her chest wrapping and getting closer to Sartorius. The Roman swallowed hard. The loincloth was next to fall to the floor. After another minute of provocative dancing, Nancy then sat on Sartorius' lap, facing him. She could feel his erection through his tunic.

"I see that I still have an effect on you. Let's not waste time while it lasts."

Sartorius proved to be a still vigorous lover and one who cared about his partner, contrary to most men of the Antiquity, who took their own pleasure for granted. He finally collapsed on top of Nancy after lasting as long as he could so that she could climax herself. They exchanged yet more kisses, with Sartorius playing some more with her breasts.

"You must have the most beautiful chest I ever saw, truly. You are fantastic."

"You are not bad either, even compared to much younger men. I especially like your kindness. You still could find yourself a nice woman, you know. Such a man as you should not live alone."

The Roman looked in her eyes with hope.

"I was actually hoping for you to be the woman in my life, Nava. I have loved you since that evening when you danced for our soldiers in the refectory."

Nancy felt a bit of guilt as she gently caressed his hair: Sartorius was a nice enough man for this time period but giving him false hopes would not be right.

"Sartorius, I don't want to hurt you, since I really like you, but I will never be able to settle down. I am too wild and love too much my freedom for that. I still could visit you in the next few nights, before I resume my trek. Would you like that?"

Sartorius hid his deception as best he could: he had kind of anticipated that answer from her.

"Seeing you will always be a pleasure, Nava. Could you stay for a while longer?"

"Why not, my strong centurion?"

They thus lay together in bed for some time, caressing each other. Sartorius eventually experienced a second erection, prompting another love session. Nancy did have to use all her expertise though to make him last long enough for a climax. The Roman lay panting in bed when she got up with a big smile.

"I hope that the evening was pleasant enough, friend. I will show up again tomorrow night, if you are available."

"I will be there for you, Nava." Replied Sartorius, smiling back. "My heartbeat should be back to normal by then."

"Good! Have a good night, Sartorius."

Dressing quickly, she kissed Sartorius one last time before leaving his room. On her way to the main gate she met a group of Roman officers conversing with a lean man dressed in a rich tunic and wearing a number of expensive rings. The Romans briefly stopped their conversation to look at her, but did not stop her. One of the officers then called the nobleman 'Dominus'. Nancy, keeping a steady pace towards the main gate, then understood that she had just seen Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator of Judea and the man that was going to condemn Yeshua to crucifixion. Pilate thankfully didn't see the brief flash of hatred that showed in her eyes then.

23:19 (Jerusalem Time)

Thursday, April 8, 32 C.E.

(10th of Nissan, year 3791 of the Hebrew calendar)

Barnabas' house, Jerusalem

The supper had been a somber, nearly gloomy affair that had upset Miriam of Magdala to no small degree. After predicting that one of his own disciples would betray him, to the dismay of all present, Yeshua had concluded the meal early and had left with a few disciples to go to the Mount of Olives. Nava had left to go on her own way at the same time, leaving Miriam by herself in the lounge. Consumed with dread, she had waited restlessly, often going on the flat roof of the house to look towards the Mount of Olives. Despite the warnings from both Barnabas and from Miriam of Nazareth that going out of the city at night was too dangerous for a lone woman, Miriam of Magdala was about to leave the house when Yudah 'The Twin', one of Yeshua's closest disciples, stumbled inside the house. Miriam shouted in alarm for Barnabas to come quickly when she saw that Yudah was bleeding from a head wound.

"Come, Yudah, sit on these cushions. What happened to you?"

"The Romans, along with some temple police, have arrested Yeshua at the Chanute an hour ago. Yudah Ish Kerioth betrayed the Master. Some of us were roughed up."

"Oh God! Where did they take Yeshua?"

"I don't know! I didn't dare follow the soldiers afterwards."

"But we have to help Yeshua. The Romans could kill him."

"And what are we supposed to do, woman? We are not soldiers and we don't even know where the Master is now." Nearly shouted Yudah in frustration. Barnabas,

his servant and Miriam of Nazareth then ran in the lounge. Yudah repeated his story to them, making Miriam of Nazareth collapse on her knees from fear and grief. Miriam of Magdala grabbed Barnabas' arm with the strength of despair.

"Barnabas, you are a Levite. Do you have any idea of where they would have taken Yeshua?"

"Uh, if there were some temple police present during the arrest, then the High Priest, Caiaphas, must be involved in this."

Miriam's reaction surprised all of them: at Barnabas' words, she bolted out of the house and into the dark street.

"Miriam, where are you going? This is too dangerous. Come back!" Shouted Barnabas, getting no reply.

Miriam of Magdala didn't bother answering Barnabas as she ran down the street towards Caiaphas' house: her mind was set on doing all she could to save Yeshua. All those male disciples who had sneered at her for being a woman had done little to protect Yeshua, leaving her no choice but to act by herself. She really could use Nava's help now, but she had no idea where the Sarmatian was. Miriam slowed down as she approached the palace of the High Priest, finally hiding in a dark corner that gave her a good view of the luxurious complex, situated in the Southwest corner of the upper city. She didn't dare get closer, as two guards were visible at the main entrance of the palace. Miriam thought furiously about her possible courses of action as she tried to catch her breath: they were actually extremely limited in numbers. Trying to break Yeshua away from his guard would be for her both futile and suicidal. She could however try to plea for Yeshua's life, telling the High Priest that she could convince Yeshua to retire quietly to Galilee. Despite being Yeshua's enemy, Caiaphas would probably not harm her: he had no quarrel with her personally and no motives to accuse her of anything apart from caring about her husband. The worst she risked was a good flogging for interfering in his affairs. If that could save Yeshua, it was a risk well worth taking. Breathing deeply to chase her fear away, Miriam stepped out of her corner, resolved to go see Caiaphas. A strong hand then covered her mouth, while she was pulled from behind back into the darkness. She tried to break away but her attacker was extremely strong and kept a tight grip on her. A voice she knew well then whispered in her right ear.

"Calm down, Miriam. It's me, Nava."

Immense relief then washed over Miriam. She turned around to face Nava, looking up at the tall Sarmatian.

“Thank God you are here, Nava. I really could use your help right now to save Yeshua.”

Nancy gave her friend a sad, resigned look.

“Miriam, Yeshua’s fate has already been decided. There is nothing we can do for him now. What you wanted to do was very brave but was also pointless.”

“How could you give up so easily?” Said Miriam with a peak of anger. “You are as cowardly as all those male disciples.”

Miriam regretted those words as soon as she said them. Nava didn’t get angry, instead shaking her head slowly.

“Believe me, Miriam, I would not hesitate to slaughter the whole Roman garrison of Jerusalem if that was what it took to free Yeshua. However, as I already said, his fate is already decided and cannot be changed. His death will be a blow to both of us, but it will eventually put in motion important events and will bring hopes of a better life to many.”

“Nava, you are scaring me. Who are you really?”

“Someone chosen by God to promote his word. I am not what I claimed to be during all those years. Look at the palace now: Yeshua is being led out towards the palace of the previous High Priest, Annas.”

Miriam turned around and saw effectively a group of temple police leave Caiaphas’ palace, tightly escorting a chained Yeshua. Nancy’s grip on her tightened, warning her not to do anything.

“Caiaphas has made an alliance with the Roman procurator and King Herod Antipas in order to get rid of Yeshua. They consider him too dangerous to be simply expelled from Jerusalem.”

Miriam suddenly started to cry, prompting Nancy in hugging her.

“Miriam, you will have to be brave and to have faith in me. The only thing we can do now is to support Yeshua in his last hours and to show our love to him.”

“I don’t want to live without him, Nava.” Said Miriam between sobs.

“I understand, but you must live, if only for the sake of his coming child.”

“But, he would grow up an orphan. Who will protect us anyway? His feckless male disciples? They are all jealous of me and will simply ignore me...at best.”

"I will protect and take care of you to the best of my abilities, Miriam, I swear. We will now return to Barnabas' house. Please keep what I told you to yourself."

"...I will."

Both of them, along with Miriam of Nazareth and Barnabas, spent a sleepless night, with Nancy helping to comfort both Miriams as best she could. Two probes were already following Yeshua since last night, which left Nancy free of her movements in those last dramatic hours. She was emotionally spent when morning came, with the two Miriams huddled besides her on the cushions of the lounge and praying constantly. Her telepathic talents, which made her feel all the sorrow and pain of the people around her, were now working to her disadvantage. At about seven O'clock, she gathered her courage and got ready to leave, prompting a question from Miriam of Magdala.

"Where are you going?"

"Outside the walls, to the Golgotha. We will be waiting for Yeshua there."

Horror filled the eyes of Miriam of Nazareth at those words.

"Nooo! My son is to be crucified by the Romans?"

Nancy nodded her head sadly, prompting near hysterical cries from the older Miriam. Her heart broken, Nancy helped the old woman to her feet and led her out of the house with the young Miriam and three other female disciples, named respectively Miriam, Joanna and Susanna. They proceeded very slowly, Nancy having to support the grieving mother of Yeshua most of the way.

They arrived at the foot of the small knoll called the Golgotha half a hour later. Miriam of Magdala shivered with horror at the sight of the numerous wooden beams planted vertically on the top of the place of execution: all Jews feared and despised this place, crucifixion being a most cruel and humiliating form of death that would never be condoned under Jewish law. Young Yaakov, one of the disciples most favored by Yeshua and the son of the third Miriam present, joined them along the path to the knoll a short while later, hugging tearfully each of the female disciples, including Nancy. No other male disciple showed up, a fact that soured up mightily Miriam of Magdala. In contrast, two rabbis from the Sanhedrin, Yosef of Aramithea and Nicodemus, did join the group of disciples half a hour later. Both confirmed to the women the sentence of crucifixion passed on Yeshua by Pontius Pilate, as well as the participation of Caiaphas and Herod Antipas in the downfall of Yeshua. The group then waited despondently for

another half hour, until about twenty Roman soldiers led by a centurion emerged from the city gate, escorting four men, three of which were carrying each a heavy patibulum, the wooden crossbeam to which a condemned would be nailed before it would be hoisted in place in a notch cut in each of the vertical beams. Sobs and whimpers came out of the female disciples when they recognized Yeshua as the prisoner without a patibulum. His robe was covered with blood and he was stumbling along the path, forcing two soldiers to help him along, being apparently too weak to walk by himself. The man preceding him and carrying a patibulum was actually a common Jew commandeered by the Romans to carry Yeshua's load. Despite the tears filling her eyes, Nancy had no trouble recognizing the centurion in charge of the procession: it was Sartorius, his face impassive as he led the column up the path. He also recognized Nancy and slowed down as he was about to pass in front of her.

"Nava, what are you doing here?" He asked in Latin.

"I am a disciple of Yeshua, one of the men you are leading to their death. I need a last favor from you, Sartorius: don't let Yeshua suffer long."

Sartorius hesitated for a moment, looking briefly at Yeshua, before answering Nancy.

"For you, I will do that. I am sorry for your friend."

He then resumed his walk up the hill. A few of the disciples looked suspiciously at Nancy.

"What did you say to this Roman, Nava?" Asked Susanna, as Yeshua was about to pass in front of them.

"I pleaded for him to be merciful." Said simply Nancy, her eyes (and hidden micro-cameras) locked on Yeshua. She held the hand of Miriam of Magdala, who was crying at the sight of the bloodied Yeshua. The latter looked at their group, his face showing pain and shock, before being pushed past them. Still holding Miriam's hand, Nancy fell ten meters behind the procession, following it towards the summit of the knoll. The other disciples hesitated for a moment, then followed her. A Roman soldier blocked their path at the top, thirty meters away from the vertical beams.

"Halt!" He ordered in Koine. "Nobody goes further."

They had no choice but to obey him. They watched from a distance as Yeshua was stripped naked and pushed to the ground on his back, then had long iron nail driven through his wrists and into the wooden patibulum. Most of the female disciples looked away as Yeshua screamed in pain and the noise of the hammer hitting the nails could be heard. Nancy forced herself to keep watching the whole cruel process, with Yeshua's

patibulum being hoisted and tied in place before a long nail was driven through Yeshua's feet, making him scream again. Contrary to popular biblical descriptions, Yeshua did not tower over the Romans around his cross, his feet actually being only a mere meter off the ground. Yosef of Aramithea initiated a round of prayers with the disciples as Yeshua's long agony started. Nancy stayed on her feet, towering over the two Roman soldiers facing her and her group. She saw Sartorius take a small sponge and pour some wine on it before planting it on a soldier's javelin, then telling him to offer it to Yeshua. The condemned, exposed naked to the hot sun, avidly sucked on the sponge when it was presented to him. The alcohol helped dull his pain somewhat and he then resumed his silent contemplation of his mother and disciples.

Four hours later, with Nancy and the others still watching and with Yeshua apparently going to last many more hours, Sartorius gave a curt order to a soldier. The legionnaire approached Yeshua and, in a quick, practiced move, jabbed Yeshua once in the chest with his javelin. Yeshua didn't scream, being already in deep shock from the loss of blood and constant pain. Nancy nodded in approval when Sartorius looked at her next. Now bleeding from the chest and losing his remaining strength rapidly, Yeshua tried to speak, managing only a weak whisper. Sartorius got close to him and listened for a while, then walked to Nancy and her group, stone-faced, and spoke in Koine.

"The condemned wishes to speak one last time to his family and friends. I will allow up to six people to approach him."

Nancy translated his words into Aramaic, then looked at Miriam of Nazareth.

"You are his mother: you should decide who will hear his last words."

Miriam nodded tearfully, then looked around at the group of disciples.

"Miriam of Magdala, Yaakov and Miriam of Bethsaida, Joanna, you will come with me. Nava, you come as well, as you helped deliver him into this world."

Nancy, feeling most humble now, followed Miriam of Nazareth and the others towards Yeshua's cross. Six Roman soldiers surrounded them as they stood in front of the dying man. Gathering his strength, Yeshua managed to speak strongly enough to be heard by the group.

"Mother, who I hold dearest, I put you in the care of Yaakov, my beloved disciple. Yaakov, promise me that you will help and protect my mother."

"I promise, Master." Replied the young man in a strangled voice. Yeshua then looked at Miriam of Magdala.

“Miriam, my wife, your life is and will always be most precious to me. You will stay with Nava, who will guard and protect you. Trust her in everything, as she has been touched by God. To my disciples, I say that they should forgive my executioners and continue to preach peace and tolerance. Shimon ‘The Rock’ will lead you in my place. May God all protect you.”

Yeshua then lowered his head, exhausted by his efforts to speak. Sartorius, standing nearby, looked at Nancy.

“You must now go back with the others.”

“I understand. Thank you for your comprehension and compassion.”

The group moved backed slowly to join the other disciples and the two Sanhedrin members. Miriam of Nazareth repeated what Yeshua had said for their benefit, then resumed her grieving watch. Half a hour later, Yeshua looked skyward and shouted with his last strength.

“MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?”

He then died after a last, incoherent scream. His followers collectively burst into tears, overtaken by grief. Yosef of Aramithea was the first to act afterwards, asking a soldier to speak to Sartorius. The Roman, recognizing him as a high-ranking Jewish priest, accepted readily and led him to his centurion. Yosef knew Koine and used it to plea with him.

“Yeshua of Nazareth is now dead. I beg of you the right to be able to bury him according to Jewish customs.”

“That decision is not mine to take, rabbi. I can however lead you to the procurator, to whom you will be able to present your request. The body will stay on the cross until a decision is taken.”

“Then I am ready to follow you, Centurion.”

Sartorius left his soldiers behind to guard the site when he walked away with old Yosef. Nancy and the others spent the next two hours in a sad vigil, oblivious of the hot sun. Sartorius and Yosef finally returned from the city. While Sartorius gave orders to his soldiers to lower Yeshua’s body, Yosef went to see the disciples.

“Pontius Pilate has agreed to release Yeshua’s body into my care. We must now hurry before sunset and the start of Sabbath if we want to bury him properly. I have a tomb that I had made excavated some time ago for the future needs of my family. I am ready to offer a place in it, if it is agreeable to you.”

Miriam of Nazareth nodded slowly to him.

“Your kind offer is accepted, Yosef of Aramithea. May God thank you for this.”

“I have brought with me a linen sheet, to wrap Yeshua’s body. I will also provide you money to buy burial ointment, which will be applied after Sabbath. I will lead you to my family tomb now.”

“Then I will carry his body.” Said spontaneously Nancy. “I am the strongest in our lot. Miriam of Magdala and another could wash and wrap his body once at the tomb.”

“I will help as well.” Replied Yosef. Miriam of Bethsaida also volunteered to help. By then, Yeshua’s body had been taken down by the Romans and the nails in his wrists were being pulled out with pliers. Sartorius soon came to the group of disciples.

“The body is now yours.”

After these terse words and a last, longing look at Nancy, he left with most of his soldiers, four of them staying behind to watch over the two other condemned men brought with Yeshua, who were still agonizing. The disciples slowly approached Yeshua’s naked body and formed a circle around it, making a last prayer to God. Taking her cape off, Nancy covered the body with it and, effortlessly, picked it up in her arms.

“Lead the way, Yosef of Aramithea.”

Following the city walls towards the South, the small procession walked slowly down into the Valley of Hinnom, past the Pool of the Serpents, and up the rocky slope opposite the Sion Gate. They stopped in front of a cave whose entrance was blocked by a big, round stone. Yosef pointed at the heavy rock.

“This is my family tomb. I will need some help to roll the stone out of the way.”

Nancy gently put down Yeshua’s body, then approached the round stone.

“Miriam, start washing Yeshua’s body while I move this.”

Yosef was about to protest that one woman would not be able to push away the stone but was left speechless for a moment when Nancy rolled away the stone with a single push of one arm.

“By God, you are indeed the appropriate one to protect young Miriam, Nava.”

Nancy didn’t reply to that and watched quietly as Miriam of Magdala and Miriam of Bethsaida washed Yeshua’s body, using water from the water pouches of the others, then wrapped it loosely in the linen sheet provided by Yosef. This time, Nancy let both Miriams and Yosef help her put the body inside the tomb, laying it in one of the small niches dug in the walls of the cave. They were back out, with Nancy pushing back the

stone in place, when they saw four soldiers from the temple police head their way. Yosef glared at them with anger.

“That damn Caiaphas is not content to have Yeshua executed. Now he wants the body too?”

The four soldiers were soon close enough for Yosef to shout at them with contempt.

“What does your master want now? Handing a Jew to the Romans for crucifixion is not enough for him?”

The senior soldier gave the old man a warning look as he kept advancing on him.

“We were sent to prevent any followers of this man from removing his body and using it to foment further trouble. Now, step aside!”

“You really believe that any decent Jew would move a body during Sabbath? May God damn the High Priest and his thirst for power! You can tell him that he can forget any support from the Sanhedrin from now on. As for you and your men, pray that you leave this body in peace and don't incur the wrath of God.”

Shaken by Yosef's warning, the Jewish soldier hesitated for a moment, then walked past the old man and stopped in front of Nancy, who still stood in front of the stone blocking the entrance.

“Move away, woman! We will now guard this tomb.”

She obeyed him readily enough, fighting the urge to smash the face of the soldier. However satisfying that would be, it would however create unnecessary trouble and thus change history in some way. Returning with the others, she had a last, sad look at the tomb.

“Let's go back to Barnabas' house before sunset, friends.”

They slowly walked back to Jerusalem, entering through the Sion Gate and going to Barnabas' home, where the wine merchant anxiously inquired about what happened. Nancy let Yosef and Miriam of Nazareth speak with him and went to sit in a corner of the lounge with a despondent Miriam of Magdala. The young woman was like in a trance, her eyes fixing the wall in front of her without really seeing it. Nancy caressed her hair gently. Miriam responded by hugging her even more tightly. Nancy knew that, whatever happened from now on, she would never deny her protection and support to the young woman and her future child. She was already thinking furiously about what she could and could not do for her when a powerful voice echoed inside her head.

“A FEW SOULS DISPLACED THROUGH TIME WILL NOT MATTER, NATAI: I CAN EASILY REPLACE THEM. DO AS YOU SEE FIT.”

“Thank you, Great One.” Whispered Nancy in French, an immense weight now off her shoulders. Miriam looked up at her, puzzled.

“What did you say, Nava?”

“Nothing, Miriam. Let’s honor Yeshua’s memory until we can go back to properly anoint him.”

Much later, when night had fallen and everybody in the house was sleeping, Nancy cautiously got up from her bedroll, careful not to wake Miriam besides her, and walked out of the small room allotted to them. Making sure first that nobody was in sight, she then jumped spacetime, reappearing high above the cave containing Yeshua’s body. The four temple police soldiers were plainly visible, one of them standing guard in front of the entrance while the three others slept nearby. Floating quietly down to the ground, behind the unsuspecting soldier, Nancy then carefully calculated her next jump and, in a crouched position, materialized inside the cave. Taking a miniature lamp hidden in a secret compartment of her belt, she switched it on and swept the beam around her. Yeshua’s body was still in place, wrapped in the linen sheet. Approaching it, she delicately uncovered his face and contemplated it, tears coming back to her eyes.

“If only I could have been permitted to save you, friend. You are too good a man to die like this.”

Yeshua’s face suddenly started glowing in the dark, making Nancy recoil from the surprise. Yeshua’s whole body soon glowed, with the brightness increasing steadily. Nancy was soon unable to look directly at the body, so blinding was the light now. After less than a minute, the light decreased in brightness, until the cave was dark again. Switching her light on again, Nancy was shocked to find the niche now empty, with no trace of Yeshua’s body or even of its linen wrapping. Incredulous, Nancy filmed the empty niche and the surrounding cave in detail, anxious to record any trace of what could have happened. She however had already a good idea of what had just happened. She finally jumped spacetime again, returning to Barnabas’ house. She lay back on her bedroll, besides Miriam, and silently thanked The One before going to sleep, emotionally exhausted.

06:49 (Jerusalem Time)

Sunday, April 11, 32 C.E.

(13th of Nissan, year 3791 of the Hebrew calendar)

Yosef of Aramithea's family tomb

Slopes south of Jerusalem

Miriam of Magdala, followed by Nancy and by Miriam of Bethsaida, hesitated and stopped as they were arriving at the tomb of Yeshua with supplies of ointment and linen wrappings: the temple police guards were nowhere in sight and the stone blocking the entrance had been rolled out of the way.

“Nava, somebody went in the tomb.”

“Wait here, I will check the place out.”

Despite Nancy's request, Miriam was a mere two paces behind her when she cautiously looked inside. She thus saw at about the same time than her the young man, nearly a teenager, dressed in an immaculate white robe and sitting inside the tomb, near the niche that had contained Yeshua's body. Miriam, her eyes wide, looked first at the young man, then at the empty niche.

“Where is Yeshua's body?” She asked to nobody in particular. The young man answered her while smiling gently to her.

“You seek Yeshua of Nazareth? He has raised and is not here. Tell his disciples and Shimon ‘The Rock’ that he will go to them in Galilee. You will see him there.”

Completely overwhelmed by this, the two Miriam fled in terror. Nancy, none too reassured either, still held her ground and detailed the young man. The stranger's aura was extremely bright, like Abram's. She could not sense his thoughts either.

“The One sent you, right?”

The stranger nodded his head once.

“As The One chose you, Nataï. He is not disappointed by your services.”

Nancy knelt at those words and bowed her head.

“I will continue to serve him and to follow his guidance until death.”

“And then?”

“Then, I will be his forever.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

On those enigmatic words, the stranger disappeared from the cave, leaving Nancy to ponder their conversation. Looking behind her, she saw that the two Miriam had run to

an olive tree a hundred meters away and were hiding behind it. Getting to her feet, Nancy calmly walked to them, attracting a remark from Miriam of Magdala when she got close to her.

“How could you be so calm about all this, Nava?”

“One should not be afraid of angels, Miriam. Come! You have a good news to bring to the other disciples. We will leave for Galilee today.”

15:20 (Jerusalem Time)

Monday, April 19, 32 C.E.

(21st of Nissan, year 3791 of the Hebrew calendar)

House of Shimon ‘The Rock’, Capernaum

Galilee

Miriam was positively fuming when she came back from the harbor, where she had gone to meet Shimon ‘The Rock’ and other male disciples. Nancy watched her gravely as she stormed in the central courtyard of Shimon’s house, where they had been offered hospitality on their arrival from Jerusalem.

“I gather that they did not believe you, right?”

“WHAT ELSE COULD I EXPECT FROM THOSE THICK-HEADED MULES?” Shouted Miriam. Her fury then turned into despair and tears. “After all those years of teaching from Yeshua, they haven’t learned a thing. They still won’t listen to the words of a woman, even one who had been nearer to Yeshua than any of them.”

Salome, Judith and Miriam of Bethsaida kept quiet, pretending not to listen as Nancy got up and went to Miriam of Magdala to console her.

“They will see soon enough that you told them the truth, Miriam.”

“And who will convince them of that?” She replied, bitter.

“I will!”

All the women present in the courtyard turned around as one and gasped at the sight of Yeshua, standing near the entrance of the courtyard and wearing a white robe. Miriam, transported with joy, was about to throw herself in his arms when Yeshua raised a hand in warning.

“Do not try to touch me, my beloved Miriam: what you see is my spirit, not my body. I came here to tell you not to be sad or give up hope for happiness. There are

many good people worth living with, like Nava, your protector. Raise my child in the respect of God and in tolerance and peace.”

“Can’t I kiss you one last time, Yeshua?” Pleaded Miriam, in tears.

“Maybe after you have given birth, then I shall visit you again in Nava’s domain. Nava, you will leave tonight with Miriam and lead her to safety, where none of my enemies can get to her. You have God’s support in this.”

“It will be done, Yeshua.” Replied Nancy with difficulty, a big lump in her throat. Her micro-cameras were working now, something that would later help convince Farah and the others in the Time Patrol that she had not simply hallucinated. Miriam of Bethsaida passed out as Yeshua vanished into thin air. Miriam of Magdala crouched into a ball and started crying as Nancy and the others went to the unconscious woman to help her. It took them a few minutes and some cold water to reanimate her. Nancy then returned to Miriam of Magdala and crouched besides her. She did not say a word, simply gently holding her and caressing her hair until Miriam stopped crying. The young woman eventually looked up at Nancy, her eyes red and puffy.

“Where are we going tonight, Nava?”

“To my domain, as Yeshua said. Do not worry about the travel: it will be comfortable enough. Pack only the minimum.”

“Isn’t it far?”

“In a way, yes, but I have means to get there quickly. Don’t worry about that, friend.”

Their conversation was then interrupted by the arrival of Shimon and of the half dozen other disciples who had been fishing with him. The men looked both excited and scared.

“What the hell happened to you men?” Asked Salome, Shimon’s wife. “Did a big fish try to swallow you?”

“We saw someone in the harbor. We think it was the Master. He spoke to us.” Answered Shimon. His wife eyed him with derision.

“After all these years with him, you still can’t tell if someone is Yeshua or not?”

“Will you listen to me, woman? That man didn’t look like the Master, but he spoke exactly like him. It was him, I swear!”

“Alright, we believe you, especially since the Master just visited us here.”

“WHAT?”

“You heard me, Shimon. He came to see young Miriam, whom you didn’t believe, and asked Nava to leave with her tonight.”

Suddenly acutely conscious that he was now looking like an ass, Shimon looked down apologetically at Miriam of Magdala.

“Uh, I am sorry for having laughed at you earlier on, Miriam. Where will you go?”

“Only Nava knows, Shimon.”

“Don’t ask, Shimon.” Said Nancy as the big man looked at her. Shimon didn’t dare insist, in order not to look even more foolish, and went inside the house. Salome looked at the other men, still standing dumbfounded in the courtyard.

“So, did you catch any fish today or did you just have a leisurely cruise around the harbor? We have people to feed here, you know.”

Andreas lowered his head in embarrassment.

“We didn’t catch anything today, but the Master fed us with fish and bread at the harbor.”

“That’s a big help to us.” Replied his wife, Judith. Nancy then got on her feet with a sigh of exasperation.

“Alright, I will go buy a fat sheep at the market. You guys know how to skin and gut a sheep or will I have to do it myself?”

The six men cringed as the women around the courtyard looked at them critically.

21:09 (Jerusalem Time)

Hills east of Capernaum

“So, are we going to take a boat to go to your country, Nava?” Asked Miriam, dying with curiosity as Nancy led her eastward through the dark countryside.

“No need for a boat, Miriam: I have a horse.”

“In the middle of nowhere?”

“Exactly. Pegasus!”

Miriam nearly jumped out of her skin when a brown horse appeared in front of them in a flash of white light. Nancy held her arm firmly so that Miriam wouldn’t run away.

“Do not be afraid: this is Pegasus, my fateful horse. He has been following me all these years. He will bring us to my domain.”

“But...but, how could it appear out of nowhere like this?”

“It would take long to explain. Just trust me, Miriam. I will help you get on its back.”

“But I never mounted a horse before.”

"That's alright. Besides, this is a flying horse: no experience is required."

"A flying horse? Are you drunk or are you laughing at me, Nava?"

"Neither. Just get on the horse."

Nancy helped Miriam up, sitting her in the saddle. She then jumped on behind Miriam and placed the young woman's hands on the pommel of the saddle.

"Hold on this tightly: I don't want you to fall off while we are flying. Before we go, you need to know something: I am not from this world."

"Where are you from, then? Heaven?"

"No, I am from the future. We are going to travel over 3,300 years to the future, where you will be able to live in peace and comfort with your child."

Miriam looked at her with big eyes, totally overwhelmed.

"You...you are joking, right?"

"I was never more serious, Miriam. Another thing: this horse is not a real animal. Rather, it is a machine, a construct produced not by some magic but by a highly advanced science. Watch this!"

Pressing a hidden button, Nancy made a small instrument panel and a control stick emerge through small hatches from the back of her horse. Miriam gasped at that sight but didn't try to jump off the horse. Nancy, her arms surrounding Miriam, grabbed the control stick and punched a few commands on the panel, before whispering in Miriam's ear.

"Hold on tight, Miriam. We are about to take off."

The young Jewish woman squealed with fear when Pegasus lifted off the ground and accelerated forward while climbing in the dark sky. She however held on to the saddle, helped in this without her knowledge by a small tractor beam generator under the saddle. Nancy then activated Pegasus' time distorter and they were enveloped briefly in white light, emerging in a bright winter day sky over New Lake City. Miriam looked down with awe at the futuristic city below her, then shivered as a cold wind buffeted them.

"This is beautiful but so cold! Is this your world?"

"This is where I came from, Miriam. This is also where you will live with your child. I will now land, so that you don't have to freeze for too long."

It took Nancy two minutes to fly down to the ground at an angle that would not scare Miriam to death. Pegasus finally landed in front of the Time Patrol headquarters building and trotted up to the main entrance, where a dozen persons were waiting on top of the steps. Nancy pointed them to Miriam.

“These are my friends, Miriam. Some are giants with six fingers per hand but don’t think of them as some sort of monsters: the people of this time period are simply like that, but they are also convinced pacifists incapable of violence. By the way, we are now on Saturday, January 30th of the year 3385. This would translate into the 25th of Tevet of the year 7146 according to the Hebrew calendar.”

The persons at the main entrance then ran down the steps and surrounded Pegasus. Mike Crawford glanced quickly at Miriam, then at Nancy.

“Isn’t this Miriam of Magdala, Nancy? Why did you bring her with you? This could be a big breach of our protocols.”

“No protocols were broken and I had very good reasons to act the way I did, Mike: The One, along with Yeshua, asked me to bring her here. Since Miriam disappeared from biblical texts soon after Yeshua’s death, no harm will be done to history. Let’s get inside first, though: Miriam is freezing in this January weather.”

“Uh, of course.”

Jumping off Pegasus, Nancy then helped Miriam down and led her inside, where the young woman welcomed the warmer temperature of the reception lounge. Nancy pointed at Farah Tolkonen, who appeared to have a million questions on her lips.

“Miriam, this is my best friend, Farah Tolkonen, who also is my superior here. Farah, this is Miriam of Magdala. I brought her here for her protection and at the direct request of Yeshua. Miriam is two and a half months pregnant.”

The group around her fell silent, stunned by the implications of what she had just said. Farah then looked at Ingrid Weiss, who was one of the few persons in the 34th century to speak Aramaic.

“Ingrid, please take charge of our new guest and have her first learn Neo-English, English, German and French. Then find a suite for her and see to her comfort.”

“I’m on it, Farah.”

As the teenager invited Miriam to follow her, Farah, not looking pleased one bit, faced Nancy.

“Let’s go to my office: we have to talk.”

CHAPTER 11 – POLITICAL HEAT

10:18 (North America Central Time)

Saturday, January 30, 3385 'A'

Time Patrol headquarters

New Lake City University campus

American Great Lakes area

“And what did you expect me to do? Tell Yeshua on his cross to fuck off?”

The fury in Nancy Laplante’s voice made Farah Tolkonen cringe behind her work desk. She hated this process but she had to enforce Time Patrol rules, rules she believed Nancy had broken.

“Look, maybe you should not have been there and then in the first place.”

“Swell! Then I would have learned of Yeshua’s request from his mother. Do you realize what the public knowledge of a child from Yeshua would have eventually caused? The whole history of Christianity would have been turned upside down. Hell, the Pope would probably suffer a heart attack if someone told him that Jesus Christ conceived a child, and with a so-called sinner to boot. Miriam of Magdala and her fetus could not stay in Palestine, it is that simple.”

“Nancy, I know that you did your best, but you have lately spent years working in a harsh, dangerous environment. I think that you seriously need rest. In fact, you are owed nearly two months of vacation. Take them, spend some time in your cottage in the Laurentians.”

“I can’t afford to take a vacation now, Farah. Who will train our apprentices? Besides, those vacations would feel too much like a suspension from my duties.”

“Nancy, that was a suggestion. Don’t make me change it into an order. I want you to go see Doctor Bella for a full mission debriefing, then to have your normal appearance restored. Once that is done, Mona will drop you with your car at your cottage in 2014. After two months of your time, she will pick you up but will return here a mere week after your departure.”

“Scrap that plan, Farah. If someone is going to juggle with my future in the Time Patrol, then I want to be within reach, to be able to defend myself. I will take my vacations, but in this time period.”

Farah sighed, discouraged at having to discipline her best friend like this.

“Then, may I suggest the moons of Jupiter? The sights are fantastic...”

“...and Earth is far. Alright, I will go to Jupiter.”

Nancy’s resigned expression suddenly changed to a mischievous smile.

“Could I bring Miriam of Magdala with me?”

“Not before she passes a complete medical checkup. Nancy, you are truly devious.”

“I know!”

Both women then became dead serious again: they knew what was at stake here.

“Look, Nancy, I and Jan Bella will send a full report to Daran Mien, the Global Science Administrator, on this mission. If he decides to press for your suspension or dismissal, then I will contact you and we will appeal his decision to the highest levels possible. Would that be satisfactory to you?”

“I guess so, Farah. I still maintain that I only acted in order to preserve history, though. Ask any of our apprentices from the 20th century who was a Christian. One last question: will Miriam be allowed to become a citizen of the Global Council?”

“I don’t see any reason why she wouldn’t. If born within our society, her baby will of course become automatically one of our citizens.”

“About that baby, Farah, you must realize that it may very well inherit genetically some of Yeshua’s mental powers.”

Farah gave her a blank look: she had not thought of that yet.

17:46 (North America Central Time)

Suite 345, Time Patrol residential tower

New Lake City University campus

Ingrid smiled at seeing the obvious happiness of Miriam of Magdala, fresh back from a shopping trip downtown, as the Galilean woman unpacked her new wardrobe. Miriam had chosen clothes that were both simple and conservative, at least by 34th Century standards. The German teenager in fact had a wonderful time with Miriam, delighting in her wonderment at nearly everything around her. The Galilean had proved

to be an intelligent, albeit poorly educated woman full of sweetness and charm and had attracted the attention of a godly number of men during her shopping trip. They were now in the suite newly assigned to Miriam, which itself had awed her by its level of luxury and comfort, unimaginable even for a king of her time. Someone then buzzed at the entrance door.

"I'll get that!" Announced Ingrid as she moved towards the door. She opened it to find herself facing Nancy, whose hair was back to its normal silky black. The wrinkles on her face and hands were gone as well.

"You look just great now, Nancy. Uh, how did it go with Farah?"

"Not very well: I am now on forced vacation for a few weeks, until someone decides if I should be booted out of the Time Patrol."

"They can't do that!" Protested Ingrid, frankly outraged. "You made the Time Patrol possible."

"Ingrid, don't count me out yet. I have plenty of fight left in me. Is Miriam in?"

"She is in the bedroom, putting away her new wardrobe. She loved her shopping trip in New Lake City."

"Did she? Then she should love to accompany me on my vacation to the moons of Jupiter."

"What? The lucky girl! Could I come too?"

"Ingrid, you know that you have your training to attend. In fact, with me on forced vacation, you will probably end up teaching some of my classes on ancient skills. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to see Miriam."

Passing by Ingrid, Nancy went to the main bedroom, finding Miriam turning her back to her as she hanged a dress in the large closet of the room.

"Hello, Miriam, could I have a word with you?"

Miriam turned around, smiling, only to stare at Nancy with wide eyes.

"Nava, you look so...young. How is this possible?"

"I was actually wearing a disguise while in the past, Miriam. By the way, my real name is Nancy, Nancy Laplante."

"Nancy... You do look even more beautiful now. Yeshua would have been impressed."

"Oh, he did see me like this, when he was four. Miriam, I will soon leave on a long vacation in a place full of fantastic sights. Would you like to come with me?"

Miriam glanced at Ingrid, hesitating for a moment.

“Will it be as nice as the city where I bought my new clothes?”

“It will be much nicer actually, Miriam. So?”

“When would we leave?”

“Probably in two days. In the meantime, I would like to show you something here before we go have supper.”

“Give me a moment: I’m nearly finished here.”

Miriam was effectively finished and ready to follow Nancy a short while later. The two women left the suite and took an elevator down to the first underground level of the residential tower. Coming out of the elevator, Nancy guided Miriam to a heavy set of double doors of polished wood. The doors opened silently on their rails when Nancy put her hand on a fingerprint recognition pad set on the wall by the door, revealing a long, wide room. Nancy made Miriam enter, then closed the doors behind her.

“This is the museum of the Time Patrol. It is open to the public for educational visits during the day and houses the various historical artifacts brought back from the past by us. There is one item I want to show you.”

Nancy led her past a multitude of artifacts, ancient weapons and works of art and to the end of the room, where a big armored glass cage contained a large object that made Miriam gasp in disbelief.

“It...it isn’t the Ark, no?”

“It is the Ark of the Covenant, Miriam, the real one. We saved it from loot and destruction by replacing it with a replica just before the first temple of Jerusalem was sacked by an Egyptian expedition after the death of King Solomon.”

Miriam, stunned, approached the glass cage and fell to her knees, examining the Ark. The elaborate, gold-inlaid chest was identical to the descriptions read from old texts by her old rabbi in Magdala, with two gold cherubim angels on the top cover and two gold-plated carrying rods hooked along the sides.

“The tablets of the law, were they inside the Ark?”

“They were, Miriam. This is by far our most precious historical artifact. You may make a prayer now if you wish so.”

“I will. Thank you so much, Nancy.”

“Seeing you happy is all I ask for, my friend.”

After a silent prayer, Miriam got on her feet, still unable to take her eyes off the holy artifact.

“You showed a lot of knowledge and respect concerning my religion, Nancy. Are you in fact a Jew?”

“I was a Jew twice, actually. Miriam, there are a few things you should know about me.”

Nancy spoke for a good five minutes, at the end of which Miriam’s head was nearly spinning.

“You, the wife of the patriarch Abraham? God almighty! And you saw God...”

“I saw a higher being, not God, Miriam. Don’t forget that and never treat me otherwise. Now, let’s go have supper before my hungry band of apprentices eat up the whole buffet at the cafeteria. I will tell you what is fit to eat for a Jew. Don’t eat what I will take, though: I still have a very Canadian list of favorite dishes.”

“Canadian? You mean Akkadian, no?”

“No! I am from Canada, a huge country on the other side of the World from Palestine. Remind me to show you a World map tonight.”

14:08 (North America Central Time)

Thursday, February 4, 3385 ‘A’

Farah Tolkonen’s office

Time Patrol headquarters

“Please, Jan, take a seat: we have a lot to discuss.”

Jan Bella, Chief Historian of the Time Patrol, took the armchair offered by Farah Tolkonen. He then pointed at Farah’s computer screen, where a text was visible.

“You are looking at my report on Nancy’s mission in Palestine, I suppose.”

“You are right, Jan. I need to clarify a few of its points with you before I forward my own report to the Science Administrator.”

“Fair enough. What is your first point of concern?”

“My main worry is the case of Miriam of Magdala and of her future baby. You say in your report that this baby should not exist according to history. Why?”

“Because, as Nancy said on her arrival from Galilee, all our historical sources, including the collective souvenirs of our apprentices, never mention Jesus Christ conceiving a child or even Miriam of Magdala having a child. In fact, there are precious few mentions of Miriam of Magdala by name in historical books. Some are obvious fabrications, like the one about her and a few disciples being forced on a rudderless ship

departing the coast of Palestine and then crossing the whole Mediterranean Sea to the southern coast of France, where she eventually died of old age. The fact that the local church officials promptly built a church containing her supposed remains and collected donations from visiting pilgrims shows that story for what it really is: a fable meant to bring money to the coffers of the local church. There is even confusion about who is Miriam of Magdala. Despite all the time she spent with Yeshua's disciples, those disciples, the male ones at the least, failed miserably to properly identify her or even to mention her except once, in the Gospel of Luke. This has a lot to do with the ancient habit of mentioning only the names of the men when telling a story, relegating the women to mostly anonymous roles."

"Hurray for male misogyny." Said Farah, sarcastic.

"You got that right, Farah. Anyway, there never was any mention of Miriam having a child, especially from Yeshua. As Nancy also said, Miriam is last mentioned after a resurrected Yeshua appears briefly to her. Then...a total blank as far as credible history is concerned."

"But, since those male disciples did such a poor job of properly recording events and people, especially women, around them, couldn't she have had a baby from Yeshua and live in anonymity afterwards?"

"That, in my professional opinion as an historian, is very hard to believe. Understand that, in ancient times, lineage was very important. Yeshua was a well-known, controversial figure in the Palestine of his time and his followers and disciples eventually founded what became one of the great religions of Human history. In that time in Palestine, it was normal and acceptable for a rabbi to marry and have children, thus the disciples of Yeshua had no reasons to hide the fact that he fathered a child...unless it was never officially born. Furthermore, if Yeshua fathered a child, especially a boy, who was publicly known to exist, that child would have become very precious to Yeshua's disciples, both as a symbol and as a religious focus. At the least, a son of Yeshua would have been expected to carry on with his father's ministry, the more so if that son possessed some of Yeshua's powers. Nothing of that nature appears in any credible historical source. Such a child never existed as far as history is concerned. Further to this, we have two established facts to consider: one, the chromosomal tests of Miriam's fetus done as part of her medical examination shows that she will have a healthy boy; and two, the DNA of that boy contains some very unusual sequences that, we believe, indicate genes modified to boost mental abilities. In other words, that boy

will probably possess some unusual mental powers. That is by the way a proof that Yeshua was conceived from genetically modified DNA, as the mental message from The One to Nancy led us to believe.”

“Damn, then Nancy was right to make Miriam and her baby disappear.”

“That is what I believe as well, Farah.”

Farah pondered that point for a long moment before looking again at Jan Bella.

“What about Nancy’s role and the way she infiltrated Yeshua’s group? Could it have changed history?”

“Simply being there could change history, if you believe in the Chaos Theory. Nancy was at a particular disadvantage because of her unusual physical build for the time but, considering that she mostly operated alone with little or no support during all those months, she did as well or better than anybody could expect. Her cover story, while unusual, was actually quite credible to the persons she met and she played her role to near perfection. Yeshua was widely known to associate freely with women and to have had numerous female disciples and followers, yet the great majority of those women were never mentioned by their name or described properly. It is perfectly credible historically to have a woman like Nancy follow Yeshua and to never be mentioned by name or even be accounted for in the Holy Scriptures. In fact, the more a woman would stand out near Yeshua, like Nancy or Miriam of Magdala, the less the male disciples would have mentioned her, in order to keep women in what they believed to be their correct place: the shadows. Hell, look at how Miriam of Magdala, a woman who was the wife of Yeshua and also his main confidant, was practically ignored by the male disciples. Anyone who would want to criticize Nancy’s work would be double guessing from behind the safety of a desk. Let’s not forget that she was nearly killed at least once during her mission.”

“That is certainly a point I will include in my report. So, in your professional opinion, did Nancy do anything to endanger history through either ignorance or incompetence during her mission?”

“No!” Said Jan flatly. “If the Science Administrator judges that she still put history at risk by being there, then the only way to avoid such risks would be to use only remotely-controlled probes. However, as you know well, a probe cannot do everything a good field agent like Nancy could do, since it could not interact with people and elicit responses that would answer some of our questions. If anything, Daran Mien’s insistence in pushing us into historical research work before we were ready forced

Nancy into doing alone work that should have been done by a team of agents supported by at least one ship. If anyone is to blame, it is him.”

“Jan, you read my mind on that point. Any other remark or comment before I start writing my own report?”

“Yes: whatever happens, let Nancy have her vacation. She worked in hellish conditions for over four years, alone and at the mercy of an accident or act of random violence while in ancient Palestine. It is hard for a person of the Global Council to fully understand how harsh and uncomfortable life was in that time period.”

“Agreed! Actually, I am a bit jealous of her: the tourist resorts of the Jupiter system are said to be fantastic, but they are also very expensive. Before you go, could you bring me up to speed on the status of our historical documentary film on Yeshua?”

“Certainly! My team has finished reviewing and analyzing the latest data brought back by Nancy, which by the way is an absolute gold mine of historical information. The video scenes to be added to what we already had from the previous parts of her mission have been selected and the sound is being edited as we speak. Final film editing should be completed in about a week and, if your review of the draft version is favorable, we could release publicly the film in less than two weeks. There will be a General Audience version, appropriate for family viewing, plus an integral version for viewing by historians and forewarned individuals, which will contain the scenes cut out of the general version because of excessive violence or gore. Those people loaned from the Global News Network’s documentary production department work well and fast, by the way. We will have a product that we can be proud of and that will be a must to see for any historian or history student.”

“That would be a nice change from being considered by many as strictly a band of armed mercenaries to be kept at a distance. Oh, I nearly forgot: have your production team decided on which musical score to use for that documentary?”

Jan Bella grinned at that question: young Ingrid Weiss had actually made the suggestion about the musical score that had been eventually adopted.

“That part was actually easy, Farah. It will be a mix of songs and musical scores from the past, including some of the songs sung by Nancy during her mission. She after all has over 9,000 years of practice in singing, playing musical instruments and dancing and she has a beautiful voice. Why look far when you have such talent available at your fingertips?”

21:08 (Central Europe Time)
Wednesday, February 17, 3385 'A'
Residence of the Global Chief Administrator
Zurich area, Central Europe

Tomi Kern saw immediately that her husband Boran looked preoccupied when she greeted him back from his work with her customary kiss.

“One of those bad days, Boran?”

“It could turn into one, Tomi. I have a difficult decision to take, one I may not like at all.”

Tomi gently put her index over Boran’s mouth.

“Don’t tell me now. Take the time first to put yourself at ease and to take a shower. After that, I have something nice to show you that will help you change your state of mind: Farah Tolkonen sent us an advance release copy of the Time Patrol’s first full length historical documentary. I was waiting for you so that we could watch it together.”

Boran smiled at those words, amused rather than pleased.

“So, our friend Farah can play politics like the rest of the lot. Good for her!”

“What do you mean?” Said Tomi, frankly confused by his reaction. Boran opened his briefcase and extracted a memory chip, presenting it to his wife as he answered her.

“I received today this report from Daran Mien, the Global Science Administrator. In it, he alleges that Nancy Laplante has grossly violated the operating protocols of the Time Patrol by bringing back from the past an ancestor of high historical significance. Farah Tolkonen is defending the actions of Miss Laplante but Mien still is calling for Laplante’s dismissal. Is the documentary you received about the life of a religious prophet named Yeshua?”

“Well, its title is ‘Yeshua of Nazareth, a man who changed history’.”

“That’s the one. I read both the arguments of Mien and of Tolkonen and I can’t make my mind on this. I am unfortunately too ignorant of history to gauge the real significance of some of the facts involved. Tolkonen is supported by Doctor Jan Bella, but Mien has enlisted the opinion of two top historians who contradict Bella’s arguments. I could use your advice on this, Tomi.”

Tomi nodded, smiling. This was not the first time that Boran asked for her advice on a sensitive issue. Their long-standing marriage involved professional cooperation as much as love and mutual respect. Tomi was an experienced politician and administrator in her own right, with degrees in multiple disciplines and an impressive pedigree of achievements in government service.

“Hmm, it looks like my studies in history will finally pay off. I will review Mien’s report while you shower, then we will look together at that documentary.”

“Thank you, love. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“You would do your best, as always. Now, go have that shower: you really need one.”

Tomi then took the memory chip and went to her study while Boran went to their bedroom to undress. Powering up her computer, she inserted the chip in it and opened the file containing Daran Mien’s report. She read it carefully, then did the same with Farah Tolkonen’s report, which was attached as an annex. She reread a second time both reports to make sure that she fully understood the arguments presented in them. Laplante’s case was definitely a delicate one, Tomi had to conclude at the end of her reading. For good measure, Tomi printed one of the annexes that gave the chronology of Laplante’s mission in the past, so that she and Boran could understand better the documentary on Yeshua: this business of Common Era versus Hebrew calendars was quite confusing. The printed sheets in her hands, Tomi went back to the main lounge, where she found Boran already sitting on their favorite sofa, a glass of red Vermouth on the rocks in his hands. He looked at her questioningly as she sat next to him and grabbed the remote control unit of the giant holographic screen covering a third of the wall facing them.

“So, what do you think of that report?”

“Both Mien’s and Tolkonen’s reports bring forth valid points. However, Tolkonen hit the nail about one important thing: Mien’s insistence in getting historical research done while the Time Patrol was still barely in its infancy did put severe operational stresses and limitations on Nancy Laplante. I am also not convinced that this Miriam of Magdala is really a pivotal historical figure. I guess that this documentary will help answer a few of the questions still in my mind. Ready?”

“Ready! I am actually dying to see it.”

Tomi started the viewing, then passed an arm around Boran’s shoulders. In response, his hand caressed her right leg, exposed by her opened robe. The opening scene

showed a bearded man walking alone in a desolated, arid area, with the camera zooming in on his serene face as the title appeared in the background. The next five minutes were used by the documentary to explain the geography and history of the area of concern, with the help of maps and side pictures. The whole thing was accompanied by a musical score of haunting beauty that included songs in ancient languages. That first part alone was enough to raise the enthusiasm of Tomi, who was fully hooked by the time the story of Yeshua proper started showing. The next two and a half hours passed by quickly, with Tomi and Boran glued to the screen. The credits and pictorial review of the various characters involved in the documentary occupied another two minutes and were by no means the least interesting parts of the documentary, as Tomi avidly searched for the names of the artists who had composed the beautiful musical score. She and Boran were not a little surprised to see that all the music originated from Pre-Holocaust past. Two side pictures in particular attracted them, which showed two female ancestor singers whose performances had been extensively used in the documentary.

“Enya and Sarah Brightman... Damn! Too bad that their work is not available anymore: I would have bought their recordings in a second.”

“Who says that their work is not available anymore?” Said Boran, an enigmatic smile on his face. “The Time Patrol is importing lots of music from the 20th and 21st centuries for use by their personnel. They even came to an understanding with Global Entertainment Network, the sister company of GNN, to make this music available to the public at no cost. A GEN music jockey even started recently a show dedicated to past music and songs. It is called ‘Musical tribute to the past’.”

“And you didn’t tell me before now? I could strangle you!”

“Uh, sorry, dear. So, what do you think? Should Nancy Laplante be praised or disciplined?”

“She should be praised, especially after seeing in what kind of conditions she worked in. That part when she was caught in the middle of a fanatical mob was truly scary: she was lucky to have survived it. As for the controversy concerning this Miriam of Magdala, Mien overlooked something that Tolkonen didn’t: the misogyny factor in history. Despite her obvious importance in the life of Yeshua, his disciples systematically ignored or demeaned her and she was thus largely painted over in the historical texts of the time, like most of the women involved. Tolkonen was also right in pointing at the historical inexistence of Miriam’s coming child. Mien, like the huge

majority of our citizens, doesn't understand anything about religion and the way it affected the history of Humanity."

"You can actually count me in that lot, dear." Said softly Boran.

"And I won't hold it against you: it is after all a very complicated subject where logic has little to no place. The so-called experts enlisted by Mien missed by a light-year on this subject. Had a son of Yeshua been born and subsequently become a matter of public knowledge, that boy would have totally changed the history of Christianity. Mien's arguments instead center mostly on a statistical study based on the Chaos Theory in order to claim that Laplante has courted with historical disaster. Well, statistics are worthless where religion is concerned."

"What about Mien's argument that Laplante is turning into a dangerous religious fanatic, with her loyalty to the Global Council second to her loyalty to this so-called One? She did after all decide to bring Miriam only after hearing the said One tell her it was okay to do so."

Tomi sneered in disdain on hearing Mien's claim.

"Laplante, a religious fanatic? Give me a break! Just believing in a god seems enough for Mien to call someone a fanatic. This whole business about The One actually raises a number of questions of primordial philosophical and spiritual importance. In view of what happened to Laplante and of her powers, is it so implausible that such a being as The One could exist? If its existence is indeed possible, does believing in it make you a fanatic? Is this question worth losing the services of a person with such talents as Nancy Laplante?"

Boran grimaced as he considered Tomi's arguments.

"In truth, there is also a purely political factor in this case, Tomi. Daran Mien, as well as Golen Bartok, the Global Chief of security, and a number of other members of the Council, is growing increasingly scared of Nancy Laplante and of her Time Patrol. She controls after all the only true armed group in our world and she did pledge loyalty to that One."

"You know what, Boran? This reeks of both jealousy and racism. Do you know that I still hear from time to time other people calling the ancestors of the Time Patrol 'barbarians'? Another question for you: did Mien or Bartok ever risk their life in the service of the Global Council? The answer is never. On the other hand, they are accusing a woman who just spent four years working for us in conditions no citizen of the Global Council would ever accept and who has proved many times that she was

ready to give her life to protect our citizens. Who are you going to trust, Boran? Mien can be replaced, but not Laplante.”

Boran bowed his head, shaken by Tomi’s arguments.

“You are right, as always. I will respond to Mien accordingly and endorse Laplante’s actions. I will also confirm full citizenship for this Miriam of Magdala. I will however personally review the operating methods of the Time Patrol and have a long talk with Farah Tolkonen. If I have to risk my political career on this subject, then I better understand fully what is at stakes here.”

“A sensible move. By the way, did you like the documentary?”

“I loved it!” Replied Boran, a smile returning to his face. “It should be a huge hit with the public. It probably will also wet the public’s appetite for more historical documentaries.”

“If it does, then please make sure that the Time Patrol is given the proper time to prepare before being pushed into another mission.”

“Oh, I got the lesson on that, Tomi.”

15:24 (Universal Time)

Saturday, February 27, 3385 ‘A’

Europa One Station, Europa moon

Jupiter system

Miriam, leaning forward on the inner sill of the large armored window, sighed as she stared at the huge orb of Jupiter, which dominated the sky of Europa. The swirling, multicolored clouds of the famed Great Red Spot of Jupiter was currently facing the sixth moon of the giant gas planet, offering to the humans occupying the icy moon a majestic sight.

“God, I could watch this forever. This is the most wondrous sight I ever contemplated.”

“Well, we have been staring at it for half an hour now.” Replied calmly Nancy, standing besides Miriam. “Don’t you want to see something else?”

“I suppose that we could watch other things.” Said Miriam, half convinced, while regretfully straightening up. “Still, Jupiter is such an impressive thing to look at. What else could we watch?”

“How about going to see what’s new at the station’s cinema?”

Miriam grinned with excitement at those words: she had already watched two films on the giant viewing screens of the local cinema and had been fascinated by the experience. While her hotel room had a holoscreen viewer on which she could program any of the films held in the station's extensive video library, the quality of the pictures when shown on giant screens was unbeatable. The number and variety of the films shown at the station's cinema were also vast, even though 34th century films lacked the violent content of 21st century films. They however made up for that with a level of sexually explicit content that had at first made Miriam's cheeks redden.

"I would like that very much, Nancy. Show me the way again, please: I am still getting lost in this place."

Nancy didn't make fun of her for that: Europa One Station was a truly big place, with all the facilities to house over a quarter of a million people, plus hangars and maintenance shops to service its astroport. Most of the station's installations sat in caves dug in the 60 kilometer-thick crust of water ice covering Europa, with only a few observation domes and landing pads emerging from the ice into the cold vacuum surrounding the moon. Fortunately for them, the cinema was straight down from where they stood: a simple elevator ride would get them there.

Nancy and Miriam arrived at the entrance of the cinema six minutes later, to find a lineup already forming at the admission counter. Nancy eyed critically the long line of people.

"Gee, they must have something brand new to attract this kind of lineup."

"Nancy, look at that poster!" Suddenly said Miriam excitedly, reverting unconsciously to Aramaic. "This film is about Yeshua."

Nancy had one look at the poster and grinned with pleasure: it showed Yeshua walking in the Galilean hills, an anonymous group of followers behind him.

"I see that Jan Bella worked overtime on our documentary. Let's go see it: I am really curious to see how my mission recordings turned out."

Followed by an eager Miriam, Nancy patiently followed the lineup of prospective viewers and paid the entrance tickets for both of them. Most of the other customers turned out to be also going to see 'Yeshua of Nazareth, a man who changed history'. The big viewing room was nearly full when Nancy and Miriam sat mere minutes before the start of the show. Their hair and small size still attracted a few looks and whispered comments, but not as much as when they had arrived at the station three weeks ago. Miriam smiled

with anticipation as the film started with a short historical review of the Palestine of the first century. That smile turned into a delighted grin when she saw on the screen Nancy, masquerading as Nauca the Sarmatian, approaching Bethlehem of Galilee on her robotic horse. She soon saw that the voices were in the original Aramaic, with subtitles in Neo-English, which added to her pleasure at watching the film.

Nancy, while enjoying the film tremendously, couldn't help pay attention to the reaction of the Global Council citizens around her. Overall, they seemed fascinated by the movie, with whispered, horrified comments at the more primitive and violent aspects of life in ancient Galilee. Miriam herself, like the other viewers, gasped when Nancy was shown fighting for her life to escape an enraged mob of Jewish zealots in Jerusalem. Nancy's headband micro-camera had captured well the danger and desperation of the moment, with dozens of hateful zealots punching and lounging at Nancy while she elbowed her way to safety. Thankfully, Miriam kept quiet when she first appeared on the screen, simply pressing Nancy's hand then. She however quietly wept at the few scenes showing her in moments of intimacy with Yeshua, whose presence dominated the film. Those silent tears changed to a deep grief during the scene of Yeshua's crucifixion, forcing Nancy to console her and quiet her down. Significantly, Miriam was not the only person in the cinema to cry then. She was still in tears when the film's credits started appearing in the form of small windows opening on the screen, each showing one of the film's characters and its name before shrinking in size and moving to the periphery of the screen. Yeshua was the first to be shown, with Nancy being fourth and Miriam being tenth. When the film ended and the lights came back on, Miriam needed a few seconds to emerge from the near trance she was in and to get up from her seat. That was when a number of spectators around her and Nancy realized who they were. Their collective reaction of surprise and wonderment towards them nearly scared Miriam, who still found the peaceful giants' size intimidating. She however relaxed and smiled when a young girl came to her with a memo pad and an electronic pen.

"Could I have your autograph, Miss Miriam?"

"Uh, of course."

Miriam signed her name in Aramaic, then let Nancy sign as well at the girl's request. It took them a good fifteen minutes to leave the cinema, with dozens of people asking for their autographs on the way out. Emotionally drained by the film, Miriam went to a far corner of the hall outside the cinema, then knelt to silently pray for Yeshua's soul, while

Nancy patiently stood near her, providing her some intimacy from passersby. Her eyes were still red when she finally got back on her feet and faced Nancy, looking up into her eyes.

“Thank you for making possible for these people to learn about Yeshua and to honor his memory. I will owe you for eternity.”

Nancy gently smiled and caressed Miriam’s face with her hands.

“You don’t need to thank me, my friend. Getting to know Yeshua was a fascinating experience for me. The best way now to celebrate his memory is to take care of that child you are bearing from him. Now, let’s go find a good restaurant: I don’t know about you but I am famished.”

Thankfully for Nancy, they found a large food court near the cinema, adjacent to a commercial center. They walked along the line of food counters first to review the choice of menus, finally choosing a counter that served what looked close to Chinese cuisine to Nancy. The society of the Global Council was a thoroughly mixed racial pot, since few truly distinct cultures had survived the nuclear holocaust of 2052, but oriental flavors and styles seemed to have survived better than those of other cultures. Oriental food also had the advantage for Miriam of offering something that was generally acceptable to an observant Jew, if one took away the pork recipes, of course. Being an eternal news freak by professional nature, Nancy took a table close to an overhead viewing screen tuned to the local news station.

They were halfway through their meal, enjoying the food, when the newscaster’s tone abruptly changed to a somber mood, attracting Nancy’s attention as well as that of Miriam and of the other customers around her.

“Dear viewers, we have learned that a tragic accident just occurred on Io. The regular sightseeing shuttle that provides orbital tours of Io has crashed on the surface of that moon, with a total of 86 passengers and crew on board. The occupants of the shuttle are reported to be still alive, but their craft impacted near an active sulfur volcano and is quickly being buried under hot sulfur. Space Control is scrambling to assemble a rescue mission as I speak but the hellish conditions on Io will make any rescue operation very risky and tricky. We will keep you apprised of any new developments concerning this event as new information becomes available.”

Nancy was already getting up from her seat as exclamations and comments went around the crowd of dinners.

“Miriam, I want you to return to our hotel room and wait for me there.”

“Are you going to try saving these people, Nancy?” Asked Miriam, anxious.

“Well, I will see first if anything can be done and...”

“Then I want to come with you.”

Nancy looked down at Miriam, dubious.

“Miriam, you are now three months pregnant and you know absolutely nothing about modern technology. You would actually be a hindrance in any rescue effort. I am sorry but you will have to wait for me at the hotel. Please don't object further: I will have to move fast from now on if anything can be done for those people.”

Miriam bowed her head in resignation.

“If you say so, Nancy. Please be careful.”

“I will, I promise. See you later, Miriam.”

Nancy then ran to a Community Security officer, the rather whimpish 34th century equivalent of a 21st Century police officer. The female giant, wearing a blue jumpsuit and silvery helmet, looked down at her with curiosity as Nancy addressed her in an urgent tone.

“Excuse me, officer, but could you show me the way to Space Control central command? I may be able to be of help to the people of the crashed shuttle on Io.”

“Are you a specialist in space operations, miss?” Asked the ComSec officer, clearly dubious. Nancy ignored the thinly veiled snub in the woman's voice and shook her head.

“No, but I am a field agent of the Time Patrol. I can effect spacetime jumps by my own.”

The giant hesitated, then activated her helmet radio.

“Security Central, this is agent Rana Borlan. I have with me a woman ancestor who claims to be a member of the Time Patrol. She wants to help with the rescue of the Io shuttle.”

Borlan listened for a few seconds to the radio reply, then looked at Nancy.

“I am told to lead you to the Space Control command post. Please follow me.”

To Nancy's annoyance, Borlan then started walking rapidly towards the nearest elevators.

“Uh, miss, could we run instead of walking? Every minute counts.”

“But you are so small. You won’t be able to follow me.”

“Don’t worry about me. Just run!”

Borlan broke reluctantly into a sedate run, which Nancy easily followed. The giant was breathing hard and was sweating heavily when they arrived at their destination twelve minutes later, while Nancy was hardly breathing faster than usual. Two ComSec agents on watch at the entrance of the Space Control command post watched them approach with some surprise.

“Borlan, why did you run like this?” Asked one of the agents, attracting an irritated look from Nancy, who answered for the female agent.

“Because we have a case of life and death situation in our hands, mister. A little physical exertion won’t kill her. I am Nancy Laplante, senior field agent of the Time Patrol, and I need to speak urgently with the person in charge of the rescue operation concerning the Io shuttle.”

The guard examined briefly Nancy’s Time Patrol badge and identity card, then opened the sliding double doors of the command post.

“Please go in, Miss Laplante.”

“Thank you!”

Nancy entered the command post, a large room full of workstations and giant viewing screens, and found inside a group of very dejected-looking men and women sitting around an electronic plot table. Nancy, shocked by their apparent inaction, walked quickly to the plot table.

“Who is in charge of the rescue operation for the Io shuttle?” She asked, nearly shouting. All the persons present looked at her, with one woman of mature age rising from her seat.

“I am Dina Skorvalsen, Space Control Administrator on Europa. I suppose that you are Miss Nancy Laplante?”

“I am! Why is everybody sitting and apparently doing nothing? Are the people on the Io shuttle already dead?”

Skorvalsen shook her head sadly, answering in a muted voice.

“No, but they are as good as dead now. Let me show you.”

The giant led Nancy to one of the wall view screens, where an overhead view of a portion of Io’s surface appeared.

“How familiar are you with the environment of Io, Miss?”

"I know from my astronomy classes that the surface of Io is made of a thick crust of solid sulfur floating on a sea of molten sulfur. Io is also subject to violent volcanic activity, with huge volcanoes shooting out thousands of tons of sulfur at velocities of up to 900 meters per second to altitudes that could attain 250 kilometers. Its surface is frigid, near the absolute zero, and there is no atmosphere to speak of."

Skorvalsen nodded once, satisfied by her knowledge.

"Add to that the fact that Jupiter's gravity pull makes the crust of Io rise and fall by as much as a hundred kilometers, and the presence of a field of ionized particles accompanied by intense radiations and you get one of the most hellish environments in the Solar System. Our sightseeing shuttle was hit 45 minutes ago by a meteorite while over Io and then crashed on the surface. Only a few minor injuries resulted from that crash landing but our shuttle unfortunately plowed into the slopes of the Ra Patera volcano. It in fact crashed right in the middle of the main lava flow channel of Ra Patera and sank into more than fifty meters of sulfur lava."

"Damn! Talk about a worst case situation."

"Exactly. Fortunately, our shuttle's external hull was specially coated to resist the extremely corrosive sulfurous compounds found on and around Io, but it will still be eaten up and breached by boiling sulfur lava in a few hours. A space tug that witnessed the accident intervened immediately and tried to pull our shuttle out of the lava flow with a tractor beam but was unsuccessful: its tractor beam only managed to grab a few hundred tons of lava. The space tug was also severely buffeted by the erupting gasses and particles from Ra Patera and had to pull out to avoid crashing itself. The crew of that space tug is now in hospital on this station, suffering from severe radiation exposure. As sad as I am to say this, those 86 people on Io are going to die and there is nothing we can do about it. Even if someone managed somehow to get to that shuttle, that person would not be able to enter without flooding the entrance airlock with molten sulfur. That person would anyway be quickly exposed to a lethal radiation dose after less than an hour. It would be a hopeless suicide mission."

"Maybe not." Said quietly Nancy, attracting a shocked look from Skorvalsen. "I would need to see the inner and outer layout of your shuttle first before deciding to go or not."

"Miss, you are wasting your time. How would you enter the shuttle and take its occupants to safety anyway?"

To skorvalsen's surprise, Nancy then disappeared in a flash of light. Her voice in the back of the administrator made Skorvalsen turn around.

"Like this, miss. I can jump spacetime at will and enter that airlock without opening its door. Now, please show me those layout plans."

Feeling a bit of hope returning to her, Skorvalsen went to the plot table and punched in a set of commands on its control board, making the layout plan of a large shuttle appear on the plot.

"The main airlock is here, with a secondary one near the cockpit. Thankfully, safety regulations oblige all the passengers on this sightseeing run to either rent or bring their own spacesuits, even for the children. How do you plan to proceed, Miss?"

"First, I need someone to contact that shuttle if it is still possible and tell everybody inside to put on their spacesuits without delay, if that is not done already." Skorvalsen looked at one of her assistants, who nodded his head.

"We are still in contact via an orbiting cargo ship. I will advise them now." As the assistant ran to a workstation, Nancy looked at Skorvalsen.

"That cargo ship could be crucial in my rescue effort. I will bring the occupants of the shuttle to that ship's orbit, if its crew accept to participate in the effort."

"I am sure that Captain Mabratrang will cooperate to the fullest with you. What else?"

"I will need a fast ship to bring me as close as possible to the crash site. I will then go E.V.A. and dive into the sulfur lava to get to the shuttle. Once I am in position in front of the airlock, I will go inside it via a spacetime jump. Each passenger will then enter the airlock, one at a time, so that I can jump spacetime with one person directly from the airlock to the proximity of your cargo ship, which will then retrieve the survivor while I jump back to the shuttle. With any luck, I should have enough time to save the majority of the occupants of the shuttle before it is too late."

Skorvalsen and the others around looked at Nancy with horror.

"But, your spacesuit will be eaten up by corrosive sulfur compounds in minutes. You will also be repeatedly exposed to lethal levels of radiations. This is pure suicide for you."

"Maybe, maybe not." Replied calmly Nancy. "I have a few aces up my sleeve, miss. I will now go get my personal spacesuit while you get me that fast ship. I will be back here in less than ten minutes."

Nancy then disappeared again, leaving Skorvalsen staring at the space she had been in. The administrator then quickly got back control of herself and started shouting orders at her assistants.

Nancy appeared back into the command post nine minutes later, wearing a massive, mean-looking type of spacesuit and prompting an exclamation from Skorvalsen.

“By the stars! What kind of suit is this?”

“A Time Patrol combat spacesuit. It is heavily armored and is resistant to radiations, fire and acids. I should be able to withstand Io’s environment for a while. Is that fast ship ready?”

“It is waiting for you in hangar number twelve. I will have someone guide you there.”

“No time for that. Just give me the precise bearing and distance to it from here and I will jump directly to the hangar.”

Skorvalsen, getting accustomed by now to this spacetime jump business, cued her computer and got that information for Laplante. As soon as she got her coordinates, Nancy disappeared again. Skorvalsen then looked at the screen offering a view of hangar number twelve and saw Nancy running to the access ramp of the fast courier ship.

“There goes a brave woman.” She said quietly to herself. Unknown to her at this time was the fact that the local GNN news crew was already tapping into the video links used by the command post, something that was actually perfectly legal. Everybody on the station, including Miriam, could now watch Nancy run to the courier ship.

It took less than forty minutes for the courier ship to arrive above Io. The pilot, fighting off his fear, then dived towards the Ra Patera volcano, leveling off very close to the surface about 160 kilometers from the volcano and hugging the ground while approaching its crater. The volcano was still spewing a huge plume of sulfur ash and gas and corrosive dust kept raining down constantly as the ship stopped to a hover above a river of sulfur lava. The pilot then turned his seat to face Nancy, still wearing her massive spacesuit.

“We are directly above the shuttle, which has its emergency radio beacon on at maximum power. The cargo ship STAR HOPPER is waiting 140 kilometers above, with

its main airlock open and with two shipmates with spacesuits ready to collect the survivors. I wish you the best of luck, miss.”

“Thanks, I will need it.”

Nancy got up and walked to an empty corner of the cockpit, then floated up before disappearing in a flash of white light. With all the ship’s external cameras recording, the pilot watched Nancy reappear below before she splashed down in the lava flow and disappeared. The pilot then hurriedly pulled his ship away from this hellish spot, climbing steeply and accelerating towards Europa: he needed to have his ship washed and decontaminated in a hurry before it became one big piece of rusted junk.

Unknown to the pilot of the courier ship and to the Europa personnel, Nancy’s combat suit was equipped with a shield generator that she switched on before splashing into the lava. Now as good as blind in the hot yellow liquid, Nancy used the signal from the shuttle’s radio beacon to guide herself. Surrounded by a protective bubble of vacuum, she bumped against the shuttle after a two-minute descent that felt like an hour to her. Using the laser radar sensor of her suit, Nancy quickly mapped the position she was relative to the shuttle and, using the built-in gravity drive of her suit, floated to the main airlock entrance. This was now the first dicey part of her plan: she would have to switch off her shield generator before jumping spacetime if she didn’t want to wreck the inside of the relatively cramped airlock. That meant in turn that she would be covered with hot, corrosive sulfur lava when appearing in the airlock. Clenching her teeth in cold determination, she carefully calculated her jump, then switched off her shield generator a second before jumping. The sudden rush of yellow lava that engulfed her just before her jump made her heart thump hard. Then she found herself inside the shuttle’s airlock, but with sulfur covering her armored glass helmet and blinding her. Wiping away as best as she could the sulfur coat, she then spoke in her radio.

“Shuttle EXPLORER II, this is Nancy Laplante. I am inside your main airlock. Are you all suited up?”

The answer came quickly, with an elated female voice answering her.

“Thank heaven that you are here, miss. Yes, we are all suited up and ready to go.”

“Then, this is how we will proceed: I will take with me first the sole baby on board and its mother, then jump spacetime to orbit, where the cargo STAR HOPPER is waiting. Make sure to keep order in your passengers, so that no adult tries to jump the

line in front of the children. I will also need a clean piece of cloth if you have one, so that I could wipe clean my helmet: it is covered with sulfur and I can hardly see anything through my visor. You may now open the airlock.”

After a wait of a few seconds, the inner door of the airlock was pulled open and a giant woman wearing a spacesuit came in, a thick blanket in her hands. She then proceeded into quickly wiping clean her helmet and toweling off the worst of the sulfur coating Nancy’s suit. Throwing away the now smoldering blanket, the woman retreated inside the shuttle and pushed forward another woman holding the pressurized capsule used as spacesuits for infants. Before taking hold of the woman, Nancy quickly positioned in each corner of the airlock a time beacon that would ensure that she would jump back precisely in the middle of the airlock on her return trip. Then taking the terrified woman and her baby in a bear hug, Nancy activated her gravity drive and floated off the deck with her charges. Resetting the time distorter of her suit, she initiated her jump, disappearing from the airlock and reappearing into the darkness of space, high above Io. As promised, a cargo ship waited a few kilometers above her. Her radiation alarm then beeped, signaling to her that she was now being exposed to strong radiations, but she shut off the alarm signal. Another, much shorter range jump brought her and the mother and baby besides the ship, where light shone from the inside of an open airlock. A short dash brought them to the access of the airlock, inside which two men in spacesuits were waiting. Nancy smiled briefly to the woman she was holding.

“You are now safe, madam. I will propel you and your baby gently towards the airlock, so that those shipmates could catch you and guide you in.”

“I...I can’t thank you enough for this, miss. I...”

“Tell me later, Madam. I have to hurry and get the others out too.”

Turning the woman and her baby around, Nancy then pushed them inside the airlock. Backing away a bit from the ship, she had her suit computer record her relative position, then jumped back to the inside of the shuttle’s airlock. She breathed in relief when she saw that her jump had been as accurate as hoped for. A small boy was then pushed forward inside the airlock. Nancy thought quickly and shouted at the female shipmate controlling the access to the airlock.

“If you have another small child, I will take it now.”

A small girl soon ran to Nancy, who hugged both children before jumping to the cargo ship. The cargo’s shipmates were ready when she pushed gently the children inside the ship’s airlock. Nancy did four more return trips with children and young teenagers before

starting to ferry adults to safety. She was on her ninth trip, 21 minutes having passed since she had jumped off the courier ship, when the computer of her suit spoke aloud in her helmet.

“Warning, excessive radiation exposure. You have now absorbed a total of 2,000 milligrays. You are approaching the threshold for permanent radiation damage.”

“I acknowledge, computer. My mission is not over yet, however. Please discontinue radiation warnings.”

Pushing to safety the young man in her arms, Nancy jumped yet another time to continue her rescue mission. Despite her earlier request, her suit’s computer came back as she was doing her twentieth trip.

“Warning, you have now absorbed a total of 5,000 milligrays. You have now attained the semi-lethal dose.”

Already suffering from nausea, Nancy nearly vomited as she was about to reply to the computer. She barely kept it in and, not saying a word, pushed the woman in her arms inside the cargo ship’s airlock. She jumped back to the shuttle’s airlock and barely had the time to open her visor and bend over before vomiting violently. The shipmate observing her from inside the shuttle’s cabin paled, realizing too well what was happening to Nancy. One of the male passengers still on the shuttle also understood and, panic on his face, pushed his way towards the airlock.

“Take me with you now! Don’t go away!”

The other passengers, their nerves already raw, either fought to keep the panicky man in place or rushed themselves towards the airlock. Constantly dizzy and sick now, Nancy realized with bitterness that she would be able at best to save one more person before becoming useless. In a supreme mental effort, she telekinetically pulled the female shipmate into her arms and closed her visor before jumping to the cargo ship. She was about to propel herself and the shipmate towards the cargo’s airlock when a popping noise and a sudden hurricane inside her suit told her that the sulfur compounds covering her suit had finally eaten through a part of it. Initiating a single impulse from her gravity drive, she shut her mouth and eyes, as she had been told to do to in case of explosive decompression, and hoped that the cargo shipmates would react fast enough. They fortunately did, grabbing both her and the female shipmate and pulling them inside the airlock before closing the outer door. Nancy was gasping desperately for air and was bleeding from the mouth, nose and ears as the airlock was being pressurized.

“Let’s get her out of this suit: it’s totally contaminated by now.” Shouted the shuttle crewmember in her suit’s radio. The woman rolled Nancy over on her belly and, finding the emergency opening mechanism, activated it. The large hatch covering the back of the helmet and torso popped open, letting the woman pull Nancy out of her suit with the help of the two men in the airlock. The inner door of the airlock then opened and a third man came in, a radiation detector in one hand. Quickly passing it over Nancy’s body, he nearly recoiled from her when his instrument growled fiercely.

“Damn! She is violently radioactive. Keep away from her.”

“No way, mister!” Replied resolutely the female shipmate. “She risked her life to save me and the others and I won’t abandon her.”

“She is going to die anyway, miss.”

“Not if I can help it. Get out of the way!”

Stunned by the woman’s fierceness, the man with the detector stepped aside, letting her drag Nancy inside the cargo ship’s locker room. Putting her gently down on the deck, the woman only then removed her spacesuit, throwing it inside the airlock once she was out of it. The two men who had been in the airlock did the same, knowing that their suits were probably also contaminated to a certain degree. Watched by the 24 other survivors from the shuttle sitting on benches around the locker room, the female crewmember knelt besides Nancy, who was throwing up on the deck, and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t worry, miss: we will bring you to a hospital quickly.”

Nancy’s response was to approach both of her shaking hands near her own face. Her whole body then started glowing faintly, making the woman besides her recoil in surprise and alarm.

“What the hell is happening to her?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Said the man with the detector. “She is so radioactive that she is glowing.”

The woman gave him a mean look, then looked back at Nancy. The latter was still glowing but was slowly passing her hands over her body. After long minutes of tense silence, Nancy stopped glowing and her eyes fluttered open. Appearing weak and disoriented, she sat up and looked around her.

“I...I must go get the others. I will need another spacesuit.”

“No, miss!” Replied firmly the female shipmate. “You should be dying now from all the radiation you took out there. I don’t know what you just did to yourself but

returning to the shuttle would mean your certain death. You already saved 25 people, including me: that's 25 more than we thought possible. Please, rest."

Nancy bowed her head, grief apparent on her face.

"Then, 61 persons will die."

"They are now dead, miss." Replied quietly one of the men who had been in the airlock. "The radio beacon of the shuttle has just stopped emitting. The lava must have eaten through the hull, like it did with your suit."

There was a moment of grieving silence, with some of the women survivors crying. The female shipmate caressed Nancy's face, from which patches of dead skin were starting to fall off.

"Miss, you are the bravest person I ever met. I will never be able to thank you enough for what you did."

Nancy looked up at her, tears in her eyes.

"It still wasn't enough for those 61 persons. What is your name, miss?"

"Lori...Lori Spacek, space pilot third grade."

The man with the radiation detector then approached Nancy again to check her out. His jaw dropped open after a few seconds.

"Nearly all the radioactivity has left her body. How could this be?"

"I healed myself. I will still need a shower to clean up the dead tissue on me and wash away the rest of the contamination."

"Uh, sure. Follow me, Miss Laplante."

Helped by Spacek, Nancy weakly got up on her feet, then started following the man with the detector out of the locker room. One of the survivors, the woman with the baby, then started applauding, soon followed by all the others present. Nancy, unable to keep it in, burst in tears.

23:18 (Universal Time)

Europa Station Hospital

Miriam, advised by videophone of Nancy's whereabouts, arrived at the station's hospital only to find a large crowd of people waiting anxiously in the reception lounge. A few were apparently what Nancy called reporters, a strange concept Miriam had quickly learned about in her first days in the 34th century, while the others appeared to be either friends or relatives of the people saved on Io by Nancy. Miriam's arrival in the lounge

temporarily brought quiet to the room as everyone looked with curiosity at her. Her small stature, pure Semitic racial type and long dark brown hair was still enough of a novelty around the station to cause such curiosity, which Miriam didn't really mind. Right now, she was only interested in finding Nancy. Most of the reporters however rushed to her before she could get to the information counter.

"Miss, are you a member of the Time Patrol, like Nancy Laplante?" Asked the first reporter to get to her, a young man that towered three heads above her. Miriam shook her head emphatically.

"No, I am simply a friend of Nancy."

"But you are obviously from the past."

That was when a female reporter looked crossly at her colleague.

"Haven't you seen that new documentary produced by the Time Patrol? She was brought from the past for her own protection."

The female reporter then smiled to Miriam, who forced herself to smile back.

"Miss, do you know what happened on Io today?"

"No! To be frank, I still barely understand the things around me in this wondrous time. I came to see if Nancy was alright."

The reporter looked a bit disappointed but then spotted a woman bearing a baby coming out of the examination area. Her haggard face and gaunt look marked her as one of the survivors, which was enough for all the reporters to switch their interest to her. Miriam sighed with relief as she was left alone and was able to walk to the information counter unhindered. A man with a gentle face greeted her from behind the counter.

"May I be of help, miss?"

Miriam bowed with her hands joined in front of her.

"Shelama! I am a friend of Nancy Laplante. Would it be possible to see her?"

"Let me check, please."

The man worked briefly on his computer before smiling to Miriam.

"Miss Laplante is under medical observation but can receive visits. She is in room 221, one floor up from this one. Just go through those doors over there, then take the elevator to your left, to the second level. You will find a nurses duty station there, where you will get further directions."

"Thank you!"

Miriam got to the nurses duty station easily enough, finding four nurses there, including a male one. They all looked with intense curiosity at her as she approached them and bowed politely.

“Shelama! I would like to see Nancy Laplante, if possible.”

One of the nurses looked briefly at one of the video monitors of her workstation before answering Miriam.

“Miss Laplante is sleeping right now, miss. She had quite a rough day but is now apparently healthy. Doctor Kotwar has prescribed at least two days of close medical observation, to make sure that there are no aftereffects from the radiations she absorbed.”

“Those...radiations, they are some kind of poison?”

The four nurses looked at her with some surprise.

“You don’t know what radiation is?”

“Uh, no. I never learned about such things.”

One of the female nurses then stared at Miriam’s face.

“Wait! Aren’t you the widow of this Yeshua of Nazareth whose life was documented by the Time Patrol? You are from the 1st Century, no?”

“I am Miriam of Magdala and I was a follower of Yeshua.” Replied timidly Miriam.

“Can you mentally heal people, like Laplante and your Yeshua?” Asked the nurse after a hesitation.

“No! They are the only two persons I know who can heal. Did Nancy heal someone today?”

“Yes, she did.” Said the nurse, now looking definitely uncomfortable, like her companions. “She absorbed enough radiations to die in a few days but healed herself, then healed in this hospital six crewmembers who were also irradiated while trying to rescue our Io shuttle. This is...unexplainable.”

“It is the power of God, simply.” Said Miriam with fervor. “God gave Nancy her powers, like He must have given his powers to Yeshua. Faith can accomplish miracles.” The four nurses exchanged troubled looks then: up to now, they knew or cared little about religions of any kind, personal philosophies being the most that Global Council citizens developed normally in terms of spirituality. The male nurse then got up from his chair and pointed down the hallway.

“If you will follow me, miss, I will show you Miss Laplante’s room.”

“Thank you. You are too kind.”

A short walk brought them to a small private room equipped with a wide assortment of medical sensors. Miriam saw that Nancy was effectively sleeping in a bed, looking serene. The nurse looked at Nancy and shook his head.

“When I think that she should be nothing more than a bloated, bleeding mass of tissue by now. This is all so incredible.”

Miriam couldn't help look at the nurse with horror and fear.

“Those radiations, they are this terrible?”

The young man nodded his head somberly.

“Your friend absorbed over 5,300 milligrays of ionized radiation, enough to ensure death for any normal human being. With that kind of dosage, all the cells in her body should be breaking down and dying, leading to widespread internal bleeding and bloating of the tissues. We are still waiting for the results of genetics tests on her to see if her DNA suffered any damage. Normally, she would at the least become sterile for good. Your friend showed incredible bravery and self-sacrifice, miss.”

“As it would befit a Chosen of God.” Replied quietly Miriam. “Would it be possible for me to sleep near her tonight?”

“I can bring in a portable cot for you, miss. Just make sure not to wake up your friend: she needs her sleep.”

“I will be careful.”

While the nurse went away to get a cot, Miriam approached the bed and gently kissed Nancy's forehead.

“God must be proud of you, friend.”

07:54 (Universal Time)

Sunday, January 23, 3385 'A'

Room 221, Europa One hospital

Europa, Jupiter system

Nancy was awakened by a kiss on her lips and slowly opened her eyes to see Mike Crawford, Ingrid Weiss, Miriam of Magdala, Farah Tolkonen, Tom Allen and the Global Chief Administrator, Boran Kern, all standing near her bed and smiling widely. She sat up abruptly in her bed, taken by surprise, then returned their smile.

“My God! You certainly made it fast from Earth to here. Chief Administrator Kern, what are you doing here?”

"I came to honor a heroine, Miss Laplante. I also wanted to bring you a good news: you were cleared officially yesterday of all charges of negligence and incompetence concerning your mission in ancient Palestine. You can resume your duties whenever you want."

"Please, Nancy, come back: we miss you." Added fervently Ingrid, making Nancy grin.

"How could I say no if it is asked in such a nice way? Besides, I was getting restless here, beautiful sights or not."

"And that's why you had to launch on this suicidal mission, Nancy?" Asked Farah pointedly. Nancy's smile faded as she stared at her giant friend.

"It may have been near-suicidal, but it was to save lives. My only regret is for not having been able to save all of those poor people on Io."

"Nancy, I did speak with the doctor who takes care of you and I also went to inspect what was left of your combat spacesuit. Your suit's computer warned you twice that you had absorbed excessive amounts of radiation. As for your suit, it was corroded through in at least four places and is so radioactive that it will have to be embedded in concrete and dumped back on Io. It was a suicidal mission."

"Gee! Are you going to dock the cost of my spacesuit from my pay, Farah?"

"Nothing so drastic, my heroic friend. Chief Administrator Kern will administer your punishment."

Boran Kern then got closer to her bed and took a small velvet-covered box from one pocket of his suit, opening it and taking out an elaborate medal made of gold and rubies and attached to a long purple ribbon.

"Miss Laplante, it is my true pleasure to present you the first Valor Cluster medal ever awarded since its introduction by the Global Council a month ago. By your courage and self-sacrifice, you saved the lives of 25 citizens of the Global Council facing certain and horrible death."

Kern then passed the ribbon over her head, letting the medal hang from her neck. Nancy looked for a moment at the medal, moved, as the others applauded her warmly. Miriam applauded as well. Kern smiled warmly to the young Palestinian woman.

"So, you are the one who started this whole case, miss. I have to say that Miss Laplante did well to bring you with her."

"She was just obeying a last wish from Yeshua, sir. I still don't understand what the fuss was all about."

“I will explain it to you later, Miriam.” Cut in Nancy, who then looked back at Kern. “Chief Administrator, I was not alone in risking my life in yesterday’s rescue effort: the crews of the space tug which tried to pull out the shuttle and of the courier ship which brought me to Io’s surface richly deserve recognition for their courage as well.”

“I have not forgotten them, Miss: the crewmembers of the space tug HERCULES will get each the Star of Courage, while the pilot of the courier ship MERCURY will get the Time Star. I must thank you in passing for having healed the crew of the HERCULES. You saved them from a long and painful recovery.”

That last word seemed to awaken some kind of worry in Nancy, who looked questioningly at Farah.

“Farah, this is the first time that I had to face the effects of radiations. I healed the others and myself but I am not sure that I canceled out all the damage. Did Doctor Kotwar get the results of my DNA’s analysis? Will I be able to have normal children in the future?”

“I did speak with Doctor Kotwar on this and other things, Nancy. As far as he can see, you seem fully healed. However, I want to run a full series of tests on you once back in New Lake City. Even a single distorted or missing chromosome could spell tragedy for any future child, so I won’t take any chances with this. You will come back with us today on Ingrid’s scoutship, I hope?”

“I will, Farah. It is high time that I resume training our apprentices.”

“Uh, what about me?” Asked timidly Miriam. “I am starting to feel useless in this world full of mechanical wonders. What shall I do to be productive and not be simply a burden on your people?”

Nancy smiled gently to her and patted her shoulder.

“Miriam, you once told me that the people of Galilee called you a sinner because you arranged the hair of other women. Lynda Crawford, the wife of one of our apprentices, is currently the only person in this century that is qualified and experienced in hair care and she could certainly use an assistant. Would you be interested in taking on that position?”

Miriam’s big grin was an answer by itself.

“That would be marvelous! I really could take that job?”

“Consider yourself hired, Miriam.” Said Farah in a definite tone, making Miriam jump with joy.

19:17 (North America Central Time)

Monday, July 11, 3385 'A'

Maternity section, New Lake City University Hospital

American Great Lakes area

"Here they come!" Nearly shouted in excitement Elizabeth Windsor, waiting with seemingly every ancestor member of the Time Patrol in the visitors lounge of the hospital's maternity section. The British teenager and the others quickly lined up on each side of the door just before a tired looking Miriam of Magdala entered, sitting on a wheelchair pushed by a nurse. All eyes immediately went to the small baby Miriam held in her arms, wrapped in a blue cloth.

"Isn't he beautiful?"

"He is so cute. Could I hold him?"

Smiling with pride, Miriam carefully handed over her baby to Amelia Earhart.

"His name will be David, as he is from the House of David, like his father Yeshua."

"I can't believe that I am holding the son of Jesus Christ right now." Said quietly Amelia, attracting a retort from Lilya Litvyak.

"If you can't believe it, then pass him to others who will."

The baby boy, his eyes still closed, pushed a small whimper as he changed hands, prompting the petite Russian blonde in kissing his forehead.

"Don't worry, little David: you will have many aunts and uncles to take good care of you."

"May I have him?" Asked a male voice behind Lilya. The Russian turned around to hand the baby over, then froze in utter disbelief as Yeshua, wearing an ancient robe, took delicately his son in his arms. Everybody present except Miriam and the nurse fell to their knees in reverence as Yeshua approached Miriam with the baby. Miriam was as stunned as the others but still managed to get up from her wheelchair to kiss Yeshua.

"I had thought that I never would have seen you again, my love. Are you here to stay?"

Yeshua slowly shook his head while smiling to her.

"I cannot, sweet Miriam. I now serve The One for eternity, but he sent me to see my son and you and to bless both of you. Please, sit down, Miriam: you are weak and must rest."

She did so, then watched Yeshua apply one hand to little David's head and start a prayer in Hebrew as his hand glowed. Yeshua went on for a few seconds, with little David's body bathed in a halo of soft light, then handed the baby back to Miriam before looking at the people kneeling around him.

"May The One be with you all, good people. Great things, but also great tragedies await you."

Yeshua next faced Nancy, who was kneeling like the others.

"This applies especially to you, Nataï, but The One will be with you. Shelama, all of you."

Yeshua then vanished into thin air, leaving the spectators stunned for a few seconds. Most went next to Miriam and her baby, touching and caressing little David. The infant was now quiet and had his brown eyes open, looking at the adults around him. Amelia Earhart had tears in her eyes as she caressed his cheek.

"He is truly blessed by God now. You will be a special child to us, little David."

CHAPTER 12 – INFANTICIDE

16:25 (North America Central Time)

Wednesday, September 21, 3385 'A'

Time Patrol headquarters

New Lake City University campus

American Great Lakes area

Fred Noonan thanked Mona Zirel for the ride and, stepping off the time scooter with his shopping bags, walked out of the scooter hall. Taking a flight of stairs, he soon entered the operations readiness room, where all the personnel leaving or returning from missions had to report. Nancy Laplante was there, along with a few apprentices and a duty clerk. Fred waved at the others briefly, who waved back, before going to the duty clerk to register his return. He also handed the giant young man his receipts for the books and magazines he had just bought in 1946 'B' New York, along with the American cash left in his wallet. That cash would be carefully stored away for future trips to that time period, while the receipts would help account for the gold he had exchanged in New York.

Once he was done with the duty clerk, Fred went to Nancy and the others, who were going through books recently bought in the past by other apprentices. A total of twelve teams had been scheduled today to systematically document parts of the period from 1941 to 2000 of Timeline 'B', mostly by buying books and magazines. Fred had been the only one to go by himself, partly because the New York of 1946 would be still quite familiar to him, and partly because of his loner style of personality. Nancy smiled to him and looked at the shopping bags Fred held.

"How did it go, Fred?"

"Very well, Nancy. It was a real piece of cake. I did find quite a few books of interest on the war. Here, have a look."

The first book he presented to Nancy was a big, well-illustrated TIME-LIFE pictorial review of World War II.

“As you requested, I bought two copies of each book or magazine I selected: one for our common library and one for our history analysts.”

The seven apprentices present in the room immediately congregated behind Nancy to look over her shoulders at the Time-Life pictorial. Excitement rose as soon as Nancy opened the big book at the table of content.

“They have a chapter dedicated to you, Nancy.” Exclaimed young Johanna Fink. Nancy hid a smile and calmly started going through the book page by page.

“We will get there in good time, Johanna. Let’s see first what others did in the war.”

The first part of the book was a chronological review of the war, with short captions accompanying a multitude of mostly black and white pictures. Some of them concerned actions where Nancy had been involved, with a picture showing her receiving the bar to her Victoria Cross at Buckingham Palace after the conclusion of Operation BACKSTABBER. Another, showing her supposedly dead from Gestapo tortures, drew a frown from Otto Skorzeni.

“Damn Gestapo sadists! They had no honor.”

William Anderson gave him a quick glance but said nothing. The next picture to attract a comment, this time from Amelia Earhart, showed a burning American battleship in Pearl Harbor.

“I can’t believe this! You forewarned Washington about the Japanese plan to attack Pearl Harbor, yet they still managed to get caught by surprise.”

“Look at the date of the attack, Amelia: the original attack came on December 7, 1941. In timeline ‘B’, the Japanese advanced their raid and attacked on October 19 of 1941. The American Pacific fleet was still expecting the attack to come on the original date, despite my warnings to prepare for an earlier raid. Still, I agree that a lot of senior commanders failed in their duties then.”

The group was then silent until one of the last pictures of the first part, showing a British supersonic jet bomber. The picture besides it showed what was left of Berlin after a British nuclear bomb had obliterated it.

“So, the British had the atomic bomb in early 1945 and used it to kill Adolf Hitler and the rest of the Nazi leadership.” Said Michael Stone.

“Thanks to my information.” Replied Nancy, sounding bitter. “I was responsible for the first military use ever of nuclear weapons. I will never forget myself for that.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Nancy.” Said softly Johanna Fink. “You tried your best to shorten that war.”

“But at what cost? Over forty million people still died in the war and I accelerated the development of nuclear weapons, at least for the British. Well, it’s too late for regrets now. Let’s see the rest of this book.”

There were actually four more parts to the book: one was on Nancy and on her influence on British equipment and operations; two were concentrating respectively on atrocities committed by the Germans and the Japanese, while the last part showed the state of the world at the end of the war. Nancy then slowly closed the book and put it aside.

“A very informative book, Fred. What else do you have?”

“I bought these annual reviews of world events, covering the years 1941 to 1945 inclusively. The 1946 edition was still not available at the time. I also have another TIME-LIFE pictorial book, titled ‘Women in World War II’...”

That last book was nearly thorn from Fred’s hands by the five female apprentices present, who had to be called to order by a smiling Nancy.

“Please calm down, ladies. We will have ample time to review this book at leisure. Is that it, Fred?”

“Not quite. I have also this political science book analyzing the state of post-war Europe and its relationship with the United States. Then, last but not least, I have an interesting essay written by a British reporter from the DAILY TELEGRAPH, titled ‘Nancy Laplante: the true story behind the mystery’. I understand that his book was prohibited from being published in England and he had to go to the United States to publish his story.”

It was Nancy’s turn to grab the book out of Fred’s hands, to scan the outer covers of the small book with avid interest. Fred grinned and produced an extra copy of the book.

“I thought that you would be interested in it, so I bought a copy just for you. It was a top bestseller and the sales clerk told me they had a hard time keeping up with the demand for it.”

“No kidding! Thanks, Fred.”

Nancy was still absorbed in the book written by Peter O’Neal when Samuel Goldman and Lilya Litvyak showed up with their travel suitcases, prompting a joyous greeting from Amelia Earhart.

“Hi, Lilya! How was Paris in 1966 ‘B’?”

The petite Russian aviator sighed with both content and regret.

“It was wonderful. We could have stayed another week there. It was a true vacation.”

Ingrid Weiss and Tom Allen, looking the part of teenage backpackers, then entered the readiness room. Contrary to Samuel and Lilya, they appeared glum and sad, which alarmed Nancy and the others.

“What happened in 1982 ‘B’ Montreal, Ingrid?”

“A monstrosity! Read this.”

She then threw a newspaper on the low table in front of Nancy. It was a copy of the MONTREAL GAZETTE, dated June 14 of 1982, with a big, bold-letter title on the front page. Nancy’s heart sank at the sight of the front-page picture, which showed a scene of carnage in an hospital nursery.

“Baby Nancy Laplante and her parents murdered by CIA assassins in Maisonneuve-Rosemont hospital.”

Nancy’s voice choked as she read the title. She could barely finish before she started crying, her head bowed and her hands shaking. Ingrid gently held her, trying to console her. She finally convinced her to go to her suite to rest, accompanying her on the way. The apprentices kept an embarrassed silence until the two women were out of the room. Amelia Earhart then picked up the newspaper and, hesitantly at first, read aloud the article on the assassination.

“At about four in the afternoon yesterday, six armed men burst inside the nursery room of the Maisonneuve-Rosemont hospital. After a short battle with three undercover police officers present, the six assassins killed one day-old Nancy Laplante and her parents, Pierre and Suzanne Laplante. Also killed in the crossfire were the three police officers, a nurse and two babies, while two more nurses and a mother were wounded. One of the attackers, wounded while retreating with his accomplices, was arrested and taken into custody. At ten O’clock last night, a Royal Canadian Mounted Police spokesman declared in a public statement that the captured gunman was an American CIA agent sent to eliminate the historically famous Nancy Laplante before she could grow up and travel to the past, where her knowledge helped keep the British Empire as the top world power. The United States, which had aspired to become the dominant world power, has in fact been smarting for years under British military and economic dominance. Washington has denied any responsibility in yesterday’s incident, while the British government has expressed its outrage.”

“The bastards! To kill a baby...” Said William Anderson. “We should go back in time to prevent this.”

“No!” Replied Amelia. “This is now established history, whether we like it or not. I suspect that Nancy will agree with me on this. Still, to lose both of your parents twice. What a shock for poor Nancy.”

09:02 (North America Central Time)

Monday, September 26, 3385 ‘A’

Main conference room

Time Patrol headquarters

Farah Tolkonen banged her gavel three times, bringing silence to the crowded conference room. Apart of the department heads, all the apprentices and aircrews were present for the conference called by Farah.

“May I have your attention, please? We have now had five days to analyze the data collected on the historical period from 1941 to 1985 of timeline ‘B’. While we are still doing some in-depth analysis, we can now draw some conclusions. Firstly, post-war Timeline ‘B’ is vastly different from post-war Timeline ‘A’. The global balance of power, instead of shifting towards the United States, stayed firmly in the hands of the British, while the Soviet Union was deterred from taking over Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the advanced technology given to the British by Nancy in 1940 has allowed Great Britain to follow its military victory with an aggressive economic post-war campaign. This was helped by the fact that the British Empire stayed mostly intact and even tightened the links between its member states. India, while gaining officially independence, stayed under the British influence, while Pakistan does not exist in timeline ‘B’. By 1982 ‘B’, Great Britain was the biggest nuclear power in the world, with ballistic missiles based in the British Isles, Canada, Australia and India and with more missiles based on nuclear ships and submarines. Because of the tensions between the United States and Great Britain, Canada had become heavily militarized along its southern border. The incident about baby Nancy’s murder is bound to further strain already tense American-Canadian relations. Are there any questions so far?”

Indira Saduranidrasekar’s hand shot up immediately.

“Farah, about baby Nancy, it strikes me as statistically impossible that she could have existed in such a changed world. The chances of both her parents meeting and

marrying were already microscopic, but to be born on the same date as Nancy 'A' is downright mind boggling."

"Normally, you would be right, Indira. However, this is further proof of the 'split trunk' theory of the timelines. When timeline 'B' was created out of timeline 'A', it didn't simply grow out of the original timeline. Rather, the whole of timeline 'A' split in two like a tree log hit by an axe, with the base of the split in 1940. All the persons living in timeline 'A' onward from 1940 were duplicated and subsequently modified as historical changes directly affecting them swept through their respective time periods. I myself saw my own counterpart when the timelines split. She in turn saw me, proving that, for a moment, both timelines were interlinked along their whole length. This said, it would in fact have been surprising not to have a Nancy Laplante born on June 13 of 1982 'B'.

"This is all fine and dandy," interjected Peter Stilwell, "but what do we do about baby Nancy's death?"

"Nothing." Replied Farah gravely. "We will not tamper with timeline 'B' unless something drastic forces us to do it. We will however continue to explore cautiously timeline 'B'. Nancy will thus depart for 1986 'B' Montreal this afternoon. If nobody else has questions or comments, we will adjourn this conference until we have more data on the future of timeline 'B'. We will however refrain from exploring it beyond the mid 21st century, for obvious reasons. We do not want to send our people in the aftermath of a nuclear war."

13:14 (North America Central Time)

Scooter hall, Time Patrol headquarters

"All systems are nominal. I am ready to lift off, Nancy."

"I am ready as well, Mona. Let's see what 1986 'B' Montreal looks like." Replied Nancy, sitting behind Mona Zirel inside the time scooter. Mona then closed the sliding Armorglass hood and lifted her machine from the hall's concrete floor.

"I am now set to jump to Boucherville on December 19 of 1986 'B', a Friday. We will appear at two O'clock in the morning, at an altitude of 200 meters. Jumping now!"

They reappeared in total darkness, with no stars or moon visible through the overcast night sky. Suddenly alarmed, Nancy was about to comment on the total absence of electrical lights on the ground when a high pitch alarm sounded.

“RADIATION WARNING!” Shouted Mona, tensing up. “The readings show a rate of 9,000 milligrays per hour, enough for a semi-lethal dose in less than forty minutes. Let’s get out of here!”

“Wait, don’t jump yet! Climb to 3,000 meters instead. We need to see if there are any artificial lights visible in the region.”

“As you wish, Nancy, but we won’t be able to stay for very long.”

Mona made her machine climb quickly, but they still saw no lights. Nancy then took a quick decision.

“Mona, jump ahead by ten hours. I need to confirm visually what I think happened here.”

“Alright. Here we go.”

To the dismay of both women, the jump to the afternoon brought little extra light. It was however clear enough for them to see that the whole of the Greater Montreal area was devastated. A huge flooded crater straddled the St-Lawrence River where the canal locks of the St-Lawrence Maritime Seaway, a strategic maritime communication link, had been.

“Nuclear winter.” Said Nancy softly, her voice nearly choking with emotion. “That overcast sky is full of radioactive dust blocking the sun rays. Mona, I know that we must hurry, but I need you to jump in succession to Washington, Paris, Moscow, Beijing and, last, London. Make it 30 seconds over each city.”

“You’re the boss.” Said Mona resignedly. Their next four jumps showed the same dark desolation. Their last jump, to London, was another thing. While the sky was still dark in the middle of the afternoon, numerous lights were visible on the ground. While their number was meager in comparison to what one would expect over a big city like London, their pattern was clearly artificial. Also, the city seemed intact. Nancy’s heart accelerated.

“How are the radiation readings here, Mona?”

“Only 340 milligrays per hour. It seems... wait! A radar just scanned us.”

“Thank God! Humanity is not totally destroyed...yet.”

“Should I head towards a specific point?”

“Try the airfield in Northolt. As a military installation, it would be better equipped to survive a nuclear attack.”

“Got it!”

Instead of jumping spacetime, Mona started flying southeast towards Northolt. Less than a minute later, a clear radio message in English was heard on the scooter's dash speaker.

"Unknown aircraft flying southeast over London, this is Northolt control. Identify yourself immediately or you will be shot down."

"Don't answer them, Mona. Let's get out now: this is a job for one of our ships."

"With pleasure."

Both women sighed with relief when they reappeared over New Lake City. Instead of flying towards the Time Patrol headquarters, though, Mona dived towards the waters of Lake Michigan, slowing down to a near hover before splashing the scooter in the lake. She turned her head around and smiled to Nancy while wading her machine just under the surface.

"Just a quick cleaning job to get rid of the worst of the radioactive dust."

"Good thinking, Mona. Let's hope that we haven't absorbed too much of that shit."

"That makes the two of us. We will still have to go to the ship decontamination facility in New Lake City Astroport for a full check."

"I know." Replied glumly Nancy. Radiation contamination was not something one could treat lightly. The Global Council Space Directorate had thorough and severe protocols in place concerning decontamination, something she had seen during the Io incident. Mona pulled their scooter out of the water and activated her radio.

"New Lake City Astroport, this is Time Patrol scooter 036. We were exposed to severe radiations and will need full decontamination procedures. I assess our total hull exposure at about 800 milligrays or more."

"Time Patrol scooter 036, this is astroport control. What was the source of the contamination, over?"

"A nuclear war in the past, over."

There was a pause before the air controller's voice came back.

"Astroport control understood. The decontamination team will be waiting for you, Time Patrol scooter 036. Out!"

Mona next called the Time Patrol headquarters to warn Farah Tolkonen of what they had found in 1986 'B'. Those news understandably rattled the scientist.

"Are you alright? How much radiations did you absorb?"

“The scooter’s outer surface may have taken about 800 milligrays. Me and Nancy never left the scooter and were on recycled air, so our body exposure must be much smaller, maybe around 100 milligrays.”

“That is still quite unhealthy. I will meet you at the astroport decontamination station. Out!”

Mona and Nancy were then silent until their arrival at the astroport’s decontamination facility. It was actually a huge hangar able to accommodate a large ship. Inside, in a corner, sat a small decontamination station meant for light vehicles. Their scooter was directed inside the smaller station, then the entrance door shut tight and a set of tractor beams kept the scooter suspended in midair. Two specialized robots flew slowly around the scooter, taking detector readings of their outer hull. A technician watching the process from an armored control cabin soon contacted Mona by radio.

“Your machine absorbed 863 milligrays. It will be usable again after decontamination and a month of quarantine. We will take care of you once your scooter is cleaned up.”

“Thanks!”

The two robots then started spraying a special solution over the scooter, followed by a clean water rinsing. The process was repeated twice, with readings taken after each cycle, before the scooter was declared safe to exit. Mona then landed it and slid open the canopy. Two technicians in bulky protective suits met Mona and Nancy as they stepped out. One of them, a woman, passed a detector over them, getting positive readings.

“You’re both hot, but not by much. Take off all your clothes now: they will be destroyed right away.”

Both women complied readily, anxious about the final results. The technician passed her detector again over their naked bodies.

“I read a total exposure of 65 milligrays for you, Miss Zirel. As for you, Miss Laplante, you absorbed 72 milligrays. It must be because of your hair. These are however low dosages, with no biological or medical effects, either immediate or long-term. We will now show you to the decontamination shower.”

The said shower was close by and was big enough to handle four to six persons at a time. Stepping inside, Mona and Nancy were warned to close their mouths and eyes just before a foul smelling solution was sprayed on them from all sides, including from

underneath their feet. The solution was followed by warm water, then warm air jets that dried their bodies.

“You may step out of the shower now.”

The two women, still naked, were met by the female technician, who offered to each of them a glass of milky liquid.

“Please drink this: it is a radiation-absorbing solution that will remove any radioactive particle from the inside of your bowels.”

Taking the glass offered to her, Nancy drank the liquid in one shot and made an awful grimace.

“God, what a vile taste.”

“That is the price to pay to stay healthy, miss.” Said the technician, dead serious. “I have brought spare clothes for both of you, so that you can dress.”

“Thank you, miss.”

Putting on quickly the baggy jumpsuits and sandals provided by the technician, Mona and Nancy had time to dress before Farah Tolkonen, followed by an anxious Mike Crawford, showed up. Letting Nancy and Mike share a warm embrace, Farah went to Mona and had her tell in detail what they had encountered in 1986 ‘B’. That information made her grimace.

“A nuclear war so early? It doesn’t sound good, especially if a single world power survived it.”

“What do you mean? We should be grateful to have at least one country being left functioning.”

“What I meant is that it shows how quickly technology had advanced then, while social progress had obviously not followed at the same pace. Also, that single surviving government then had a golden opportunity to gain world dominance for the centuries to come. Knowing how ruthless at times the British Empire has been in its pursuit of power and territory, this makes much more possible the future appearance in timeline ‘B’ of a militaristic world empire with a high degree of technology: the perfect recipe for a future clash with us over time travel. As much as I hate to say this, Mona, we may have to keep war close in our minds in the months and years to come.”

09:04 (Central Europe Time)
Monday, October 10, 3385 'A'
High Council Chamber
Global Council government headquarters
Zurich, Central Europe

“Order, please! This session of the High Council is now declared open.”

As the 24 members of the High Council grew quiet around their large oval conference table, Farah Tolkonen shifted nervously in her seat, situated along the ring of seats surrounding the table and reserved for assistants of Council members and visitors. This meeting could prove crucial to the future of the Time Patrol, for many reasons.

With Boran Kern leading the session, the first hour or so was spent expediting current business and follow-ups to problems presented at the previous monthly session. After a short recess, the Council reconvened and started looking at the new items on the agenda. Third on that part of the agenda was a strange entry titled ‘Religious disturbances’ that had been entered by the Global Chief of Security, Golen Bartok. Everybody looked curious as Bartok’s turn to speak came. Farah personally didn’t like him, finding him both arrogant and self-serving. He was however the sole member of the Council that was aggressive enough by 34th century standards to be able to take on the job of Chief of Security. Bartok spoke in a strong but calm voice in his microphone while looking around the table.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Council, I have been receiving in the past few months a growing number of reports from all continents and outposts about what I call ‘religious disturbances’. Those reports concern people who show weird behavior in public, claim supernatural powers and in general cause public disorder and disturbances. One case concerned a man in Brazil who pretended he could fly and threw himself down from a bridge. That man died, unfortunately. These incidents, after inquiring about them, all seem connected to Nancy Laplante, the Chief of Operations of the Time Patrol. While all the persons involved mentioned God or pretended to follow his guidance, many also spoke of Miss Laplante as a sort of messiah. Some also speak of a baby boy living with his mother at the Time Patrol headquarters as being the quote Second Christ unquote. After investigating this last point, I found out that this baby boy, named simply David, is the son of a young woman brought from the first century C.E. a

year ago by Miss Laplante. Miss Laplante was in fact suspended temporarily for that act, until cleared of wrongdoing by the Chief Administrator. However, the really significant factor here is that the father of this David was Yeshua of Nazareth, a religious prophet of tremendous historical significance who inspired in the distant past the creation of the Christian religion. He was commonly called by his followers Jesus Christ and our present calendar system is based on his alleged birth date, which Miss Laplante proved to be off by two years, by the way. To resume my presentation, I contend that Miss Laplante has caused the emergence of these groups of religious fanatics by her words and behavior and has further inflamed those fanatics, who call themselves New Christians, by bringing from the past the companion of a famous religious prophet, whose son is now being acclaimed as a new Christ. I thus recommend that Miss Laplante be censured and dismissed from the Time Patrol for creating social instability and disturbing the peace.”

Boran Kern was about to reply to this when he saw on the computer screen showing the seating arrangement of the High Council the spot of Sten Vargas, the Global Justice Administrator, turn yellow, signifying that he was requesting permission to speak.

“The floor is now open to the Honorable Justice Administrator.”

“Thank you, Chief Administrator.”

The 215 year-old man, renowned for his patience and wisdom, took the time to gather his thoughts before speaking in a slow, deliberate tone while looking around at the other members of the Council.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Council, I disagree profoundly with the opinion of the Honorable Chief of Security and I will tell you why. First, there is a thing in our society called freedom of expression. That freedom allows anyone to express his or her ideas, opinions or beliefs, as long as they are not direct encouragement to violence or criminal acts. Now, I have also received reports about those so-called acts of religious disturbance and have studied them carefully, since they show something quite new in our society. Apart from what a common citizen may find to be bizarre behavior or beliefs, these acts didn’t lead to violence or death, except in the single case mentioned by the Chief of Security. These religious activists have thus committed no criminal or illegal act and were in fact not prosecuted for them. This however raises the question of the concept of religion in our society, which was thoroughly atheist until now.”

“Was?” Interrupted Golen Bartok, surprised.

“Yes, was. You see, Miss Laplante is a living proof that there is something out there, some kind of superior, immaterial being that may affect us all. Her powers, especially that of mental healing, are well proven now and are unexplainable through simple science. We also have recordings of mental messages directed to her by what she calls ‘The One’, the supreme being she believes into. You must have all seen the various media interviews of Miss Laplante where she was questioned on this One. Again, what Miss Laplante said in those interviews was perfectly legal and never was an incitement towards violence or crime. In fact, she repeatedly stressed that The One promoted tolerance, kindness and compassion. Those words I can certainly live with as Global Justice Administrator. Since I was personally intrigued by her beliefs, I invited a few times Miss Laplante to my house or met her in New Lake City, to discuss the subject with her. While I acknowledge her to be a woman capable of violence when necessary and one who has killed countless times, she is also a most decent person who would risk her life without question to save others, as she proved in the lo shuttle incident. Punishing her for her beliefs would not only be profoundly unwise: it would also be unjust and plain illegal. As for these ‘New Christians’ who disturb Mister Bartok so much, they represent the normal cross section of society that would be attracted to a religion or philosophy. Most are law-abiding citizens, while some who have already seeds of anti-social behavior or who are somewhat dimwitted will do the more extreme acts. A healthy, respectful public discussion on this subject would in my opinion be much more productive than simply trying to repress this new religious trend.”

“But don’t you see what this Laplante is up to?” Replied Bartok, raising his voice and looking exasperated. “She is an ambitious and cunning woman ready to commit violence to attain her goals. What tells us that she will not try one day to seize power from this council through violence? She and her agents are after all the only people in the Solar System to possess lethal weapons, weapons they flaunt around freely. How would we resist her then?”

Farah Tolkonen shot up from her seat in an instant, raising her hand high to ask the right to speak as animated whispers went around the Council table. Boran Kern saw her and banged his gavel twice.

“Doctor Tolkonen, Chief Administrator of the Time Patrol, has the floor.”

“Thank you, Chief Administrator. I must first protest vigorously the insinuations and accusations from Mister Bartok. Nancy Laplante has repeatedly risked her life and sustained grave injuries in the past in order to protect or save citizens of the Global

Council, apart of risking her life further in the accomplishment of missions assigned to her by me on request from this council. Her integrity and devotion to duty are already legendary and the fact that she is doing what we may call our dirty work should not be held against her. As for leading a mutiny against the Council and taking power by force, she could have done that a long time ago, by herself and unarmed. She is that powerful, ladies and gentlemen, yet she never even threatened violence on any lawful citizen of the Global Council. Nancy Laplante is perfectly content where she is, enforcing the rules on time travel and protecting our society. In fact, a later item on today's agenda will cover a concern of hers about the safety of our civilization. I will let you judge her motives then."

"I still don't trust her or her associates, Doctor! I..."

The banging of Kern's gavel then cut Bartok off.

"Chief Bartok, we will discuss further this whole subject in private after this session is over. We will now go to the next item on the agenda. The honorable Rina Kappel, Global Industries Administrator, has the floor."

Bartok, visibly containing his anger, sat back and kept quiet while Rina Kappel presented her review of industrial points of interest. Dana Rox, the Earth Rehabilitation Administrator, was next. Rox's job was one of immense scope and an endless one: to rehabilitate the parts of Earth still contaminated and left lifeless by the nuclear holocaust of 2052. Her position was one that had heavy repercussions on the future of the Global Council and was thus considered a senior position in the High Council. A map of North America with a zone highlighted in green appeared on the giant viewing screen on a wall of the High Council chamber.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the Council, this zone centered around Lake Winnipeg, in what had been Canada, was declared decontaminated five years ago. Since then, rehabilitation teams have been busy seeding the ground with long grass and other plants suitable for that area, along with planting trees and seeding the lakes and rivers with fish. This zone is now ready to accept animal life, but on a small scale, in order not to risk the balance of this new, still fragile ecosystem. We however had a dilemma in that we knew little about the precise nature of the ecosystem that had previously occupied that area. Our problems were solved a year ago by the Time Patrol, which was able to film and study the original ecosystem as it existed 2,000 years ago, when only nomadic hunter-gatherers lived there. The fact that one of Miss Laplante's earlier incarnations was as one of those primitive men helped us a lot, with her providing a unique hindsight

of the plant and animal life of the time. With the Council's approval, I would like now to put in practice a suggestion from Miss Laplante: to repopulate the zone around Lake Winnipeg with specimens of animals who lived there in the past. I wanted us at first to import only vegetarian specimens which would not represent a danger to humans but Miss Laplante strongly disagreed, pointing out that the lack of animal predators would eventually result in a cycle of uncontrolled population explosions and mass famines. We thus have selected for importation from the past specimens of buffalos, dears, moose, black and brown bears, wolves, foxes, hares, ducks, Canadian geese, pheasants and of seven other types of indigenous birds. I have to say that most of these species do not exist anymore at present on Earth and that only insects and fish now inhabit this zone." As Dana Rox enumerated the animal species, a picture of each animal appeared along the periphery of the screen, attracting a concert of interested whispers. After a short group discussion, Rox's motion was accepted by the Council, with Global Science Administrator Daran Mien, who was overseeing the mandate of the Time Patrol, directed to enlist the help of the Time Patrol for the project. Dana Rox was not finished, though.

"Thank you for your confidence, ladies and gentlemen. I now have a further suggestion to present, one that would concern directly a few of you. As you know well, our citizens generally know little about past animal species, due to mass extinctions and the destruction of most archives in 2052. There is however a sharp revival of interest for such matters following the creation of the Time Patrol one and a half years ago. If we decide to, we have the means to build zoos and reserves where past species could be brought in to live, for the benefit of our citizens' education and entertainment. Such species would be carefully selected and then kept in a strictly controlled environment, both for their comfort and for avoiding cross-contamination with other areas and species. I would thus like to know your opinion on this."

The council members looked at each other, unsure what to think. The first question came from Xen Shon Wa, the Chief Administrator for Asia.

"From what time period would these animals be taken, Administrator Rox?"

"From any time period we wished, sir. We could even import dinosaurs from as far as 200 million years in the past. Nothing stops us from actually creating a number of zoos, each dedicated to a certain fauna. What would the citizens of Asia think about being able to see live specimens of Siberian tigers, Panda bears and Indian elephants, for example?"

“They would love it. Hell, I would love it! This would be a fantastic educational opportunity for our citizens, especially our children. Count me in on this, Miss Rox.” The discussion quickly degenerated into an animated, excited exchange of comments and suggestions, prompting a smiling Boran Kern to call the Council to order with his gavel.

“My, I haven’t seen you so excited about a project for a long time, ladies and gentlemen. I thus take it that you approve of it. Science and Education Administrator Mien, you and Administrator Rox will coordinate the creation of this project, with Miss Rox in overall charge. I will ask you to canvass the suggestions and wishes of the Regional Administrators before establishing the list of zoos to be created and of the types of fauna to be imported. The next item on the agenda was requested by Doctor Tolkonen, of the Time Patrol. Doctor, if you may please join us at the table.”

Leaving her seat, Farah went to one of the three empty chairs at one end of the oval table that were reserved for witnesses and visiting dignitaries. She then inserted a data chip in the computer facing her seat and made a diagram appear on the giant viewing screen of the chamber.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the High Council, what you see now is a diagram of the Time Patrol’s organization and establishment. It counts at the present a total of 386 members, 64 of which are ancestors. That total includes the field agents, the aircrews, ground crews, technicians and the support staff. Out of that total, only 62 are or will be field agents, each due to carry special implants, with 61 of them still in training. These field agents are the ones designated to go into combat or on ground missions in the past when needed. The Time Patrol also counts a total of 270 family members, some of whom hold non-combat support positions. We also have three young teenagers who are officially classified as Time Patrol cadets. As ships goes, the Time Patrol possesses one converted cruiser, the KRONOS; nine armed scoutships; one research ship, the BABYLON, and one heavy shuttle, the HERMES. This flotilla is supplemented by five unarmed time shuttles and forty time scooters. We are going to be supplemented in about two months with one heavy time transport ship, the GILGAMESH, and one extra scoutship. We also possess at this time a grand total of 800 combat robots and 40 point defense robots as a supplementary ground combat force. While this may sound more than enough for the missions assigned to the Time Patrol, there is a big caveat to this: in case of a major military threat followed by an invasion, we will not be able to offer more than a furious but short-lived resistance.”

“Why so?” Asked Rina Kappel, the Industries Administrator.

“Because, after maybe a few hours of combat, we will have been overwhelmed and killed, Miss Kappel. As it is, we would be hard pressed to even defend adequately our headquarters in New Lake City against a ground attack, as we have only a grand total of twelve ground assault specialists in our ranks.”

Golen Bartok spoke up as exclamations and comments went around the table.

“Isn’t this a rather hypothetical question, since there is no one to attack us here in the 34th century?”

“That is where you may be mistaken, Mister Bartok. This council already knows about the existence of another time-traveling civilization of unknown origin that was responsible for the birth of Yeshua of Nazareth in the first century. The fact that we never detected them proves that they possess some kind of cloaking device that makes them impervious to our detectors. They may also possess mental powers broadly similar to those of Nancy Laplante, albeit at a weaker level. That civilization could be from the future of this timeline or from timeline ‘B’, but we have no way to know for sure at this time. Also, our recent discovery of a nuclear war in timeline ‘B’ as early as 1986 reinforces the possibility of the emergence of a militaristic, highly technical society sometimes in the future of timeline ‘B’. My own vision of an armed counterpart of myself standing in a time laboratory as our timeline split in two tends to support that possibility. This hypothesis is in fact considered now a strong probability by the Time Patrol. In view of all this, we consider it likely that, in the months and years to come, we will meet with that civilization, probably during a mission or a reconnaissance in the past. Depending on the mindset of that civilization, such an encounter could degenerate into war.”

Everybody around Farah stared at her with horror, everybody except Bartok that is, who showed a skeptical smirk.

“And I suppose that, based on that hypothetical threat, you are going to ask for more armed ancestors around us.”

“Not exactly, Mister Bartok.” Replied icily Farah. “What I am requesting from this Council is the production of 10,000 additional combat robots, plus 500 additional point defense robots, or PDRs, that will be used to reinforce the defenses of the Global Council. More may be ordered later if the threat becomes proven.”

Bartok shot out of his chair as many of the Council members started protesting loudly.

“And who will control all these robots? Your precious Nancy Laplante, I presume?”

“She will have tactical command over them once activated, but their activation will be decided by this Council and not her, like we do now for our existing combat robots. Imbedded command protocols are contained inside these robots that prevent them from harming any unarmed Global Council citizen. Using them for a so-called mutiny will thus be impossible and these robots will in fact be able to stop a military coup if properly programmed. We plan to keep the combat robots and PDRs assigned to the static defense of the Global Council in storage until an invasion or attack justifies their activation. As for the combat robots and PDRs already in service, they will be used to defend our new secret base in the past, which is close to completion, or will be embarked on our patrol ships during missions.”

That considerably calmed the spirits of the Council members. Bartok himself hesitated, then looked at Boran Kern.

“If those restrictions are abided to, then I withdraw my objections to this project, Chief Administrator.”

Boran Kern nodded in acknowledgement, secretly relieved that this argument was over. It could have turned into a major split of opinion in the High Council and could have forced the use of a public referendum on the question.

“Alright, Doctor Tolkonen, how much is this going to cost?”

“According to early estimates, these additional robots and PDRs should cost approximately 800 million solars. These robots use standardized parts already in mass production for other models of robots, except for the weapons on them. Since those weapons will be taken for free from abandoned military depots in the 21st century, save for the lasers, that will help keep the costs down. I thus request an initial budget of 800 million solars for this project.”

All eyes then turned towards Pedro Salmash, the Global Finance Administrator, who shrugged.

“An appropriation of 800 million solars is actually no problem with me. The finances of the Global Council are healthy and could accommodate much bigger expenditures if need be.”

“Then, if there are no other questions or comments, we will now vote on this proposition.” Declared Boran Kern. With Farah, who didn't have voting powers at the High Council, looking on anxiously, the members entered their votes electronically. She held her breath when the vote came to a tie. As Chairman of the High Council, Boran Kern now could vote to break the tie, which he promptly did in favor of Farah's request.

“The proposition for the acquisition of 10,000 armed robots and 500 PRDs for the Time Patrol is thus approved, on the condition that the command protocol limitations discussed today are incorporated in the design of these robots. Further production of additional robots will be subject to prior approval by me. Thank you for your time, Doctor Tolkonen.”

08:52 (North America Central Time)

Time Patrol headquarters

New Lake City University campus

Farah, just back from Zurich via a time scooter, caught Nancy as the latter was heading towards a classroom to teach a period on military history. Nancy watched her approach with an anxious look.

“How did it go in Zurich, Farah?”

“Can’t you read it in my mind, Nancy?” Replied Farah, getting a hurt look from her friend.

“You know that I refrain from reading the minds of my friends unless they want to, Farah. Since you don’t look all pissed off, I will take it that you won the argument.”

“Correct, Nancy. The first batch of additional robots meant to defend the Global Council should be delivered within two months, minus the 21st century weapons to be fitted to them.”

“Then I will schedule a large pickup detail for next Saturday, to get enough weapons and ammunition for our robots in 2054 ‘A’.”

“Which depots will you pick this time?”

“The ones in the San Francisco area. There are three army depots, two army ammunition plants and two army bases there. There were as well a number of big defense equipment manufacturing plants in the area, along with storage warehouses and defense maintenance facilities and workshops. They will contain all that we need, and more.”

Farah couldn’t help shake her head in wonderment.

“I still have a problem believing the volume of weapons and war equipment stored on Earth in 2052. It seems...obscene, especially when looking at the famine and privations endured by so many people then.

“I know and I agree with you, Farah. It is only ironic that those stocks now will help us keep the peace.”

“Indeed! Have a good day, Nancy.”

“You too, Farah.”

14:03 (North America Central Time)

Tuesday, December 6, 3385 ‘A’

Time Patrol headquarters

Elizabeth Windsor was on her way to a tutorial class on advanced mathematics when she encountered Ingrid Weiss ‘B’ in the hallways of the headquarters building. The German teenager, who was now eighteen years old biologically, was watching something through one of the large windows of the second level. Intrigued, Elizabeth looked outside as well and saw a sight that truly impressed her: rolling on their tracks along the road coming from the nearby landing pad were 400 combat robots in two parallel columns. The machines moved as one, perfectly aligned, in a way that would have made British royal guardsmen envious. The few university students and visitors to the Time Patrol museum present outside watched the machines go by, fascinated, with some taking pictures of them. The robots then turned a corner, heading towards the vehicles garage and maintenance complex and going out of sight of Elizabeth and Ingrid. Elizabeth smiled to the German.

“Impressive machines, aren’t they?”

“They are, effectively. Wait until they are fitted with their weapons and receive their camouflage paint scheme, though.”

“Are you heading towards a class?”

Ingrid shook her head slowly, thoughtful.

“No! I was heading towards the university’s medical center: I am due to receive my implants this afternoon, along with Tom. We will also get our longevity treatment at the same time.”

“Lucky you! I am not due for my implants for another two weeks. Uh, how is Tom doing, by the way?”

Ingrid couldn’t help smile at Elizabeth’s thinly veiled interest in her relationship with Tom Allen. The handsome seventeen year-old boy had been going out steadily with Ingrid for a month now, sparking widespread rumors of a solid romance between them. The fact

was that the rumors were right: both teenagers were truly in love with each other. That relationship was helped in no small part by the fact that they constituted the regular crew of the scoutship TEEN TEAM, an aptly chosen ship's name in this case.

"Tom is just fine, Elizabeth. How about you? Any boys interested in you yet?" Elizabeth hesitated before answering: any commoner who would have asked her that kind of question two years ago would have been expelled from Buckingham Palace for rudeness, but she was not a royalty anymore and felt on a par with the others around her now. She still missed terribly her family but the close comradeship in the Time Patrol had drastically changed her outlook on social classes and personal relationships. Now sixteen and still a virgin, she was starting to become envious of the other young women of the Time Patrol, who were having a good time after work hours. A few of them had even married already, like Susanna Berghof, who had tied the knot with Sven Larsen, the hulking blond Norwegian ex-fighter pilot. Many people from both sexes had sighed in envy at the marriage of those two. Even Bobo MacDonald, Elizabeth's ex-dressing lady, was going out at night now, dating Peter Stilwell.

"Uh, I'm not sure: I'm too shy still with boys, I'm afraid."

"It will come one day, Elizabeth. Have a good day."

"You too, Ingrid."

Walking at a quick pace, Ingrid left the headquarters building after putting a coat on and went to the medical center, 400 meters away. Going to the reception lounge first, where she notified a clerk of her arrival for a scheduled operation, she was then directed to the third floor, where Tom Allen was already waiting in a small patients' lounge. The British teenager, wearing only a patient's gown, grinned at her arrival in the lounge.

"Ready for your big day, Ingrid?"

"I am, Tom. When are you going into the operation room?"

"Any time now. I can't help feel nervous, though."

"You should be. We are about to become full-fledged field agents, after all."

"Minus the special training. Nancy did tell us that it would take a good month to become fully proficient with our implants."

"Still, it is a special day indeed."

Tom nodded, then looked up from his chair as two medics came in with a gurney. One of the medics patted the gurney's mattress while looking at Tom.

“Time for your ride, Mister Allen. Hop in!”

Tom did so, then waved at Ingrid as he was rolled out.

“See you later, Ingrid.”

A nurse entered the lounge as soon as the gurney was out of the way. Going to Ingrid, she presented her with a folded patient’s gown and a pair of paper slippers.

“Miss Ingrid Weiss? I would ask you to change into this now. There is a changing room with storage lockers next door, to the left. You will be picked up here in about ten minutes.”

“Thank you, miss.”

The gown and slippers in her hands, Ingrid followed the nurse out of the lounge and went to the changing room, which had individual cabins. Changing rapidly, she then folded carefully her uniform and put it with her boots and coat in one of the lockers. The lockers were equipped with fingerprint recognition pads activated in turn by each successive user, thus ensuring that nobody would steal her clothes while she was in the operation room. Ingrid returned in the lounge and sat after selecting a magazine from a wall rack. She had to wait only five minutes before two medics showed up with a gurney.

“Miss Ingrid Weiss?”

“That’s me!”

Jumping deftly on the gurney with the agility of a cat, Ingrid let herself be wheeled to an operation block. Farah Tolkonen, Rebecca Milner and Patricia Wilson were waiting for her there, along with two hospital nurses. Farah smiled through her surgeon’s mask as Ingrid was transferred to the operating table.

“This is going to be relatively short, Ingrid. You will be conscious all the time and will wear a pain inhibitor. Nancy will heal you at the end of the operation, so that you and Tom could be in full shape tonight.”

Ingrid smiled as the other woman laughed.

“You’re all jealous.”

“No, we’re only happy that you are happy. Now, turn on your belly, please.”

Once Ingrid was on her belly, one of the nurses undid the girl’s gown and draped sterile sheets around the area of her back to be operated on. Patricia Wilson then applied a disinfectant solution on the exposed skin area. A nurse put a pain inhibitor headband on Ingrid’s head before Farah showed a small rectangular object with wires leading out of it to the German.

“This is your time distorter and computer module that I will put in you. It will rest against the inner surface of your lower dorsal spine and will be held in place by composite pins and brackets. The module is nearly undetectable by normal X-Ray scans and works out of your bio energy, so you won’t have to worry about the power source. Since you already have a radio module implanted inside your cranium, this will leave only your hand stun circuits and ear directional microphone to put in place afterwards. Do you have any questions?”

“Uh, yes: when will you do the longevity treatment?”

“It will run concurrently with the operation. If you want to go to sleep, that is fine with me.”

“I may just do that, so that I could have lots of energy tonight.”

They again laughed together before Farah moved into position besides Ingrid. She waited until the nurses had plugged an intravenous needle and put in place various sensors and an oxygen mask, then initiated the operation.

“Activate the pain inhibitor. Scalpel, please.”

Carefully locating the correct vertebra first, Farah quickly cut the skin and tissues covering it in order to open a passage besides the vertebra to slip in the distorter module. It took her 25 minutes to put the module in place, fix it solidly to the inner face of the vertebra and extend and tie down the energy gathering wires. The job of installing the two hand stun circuits took longer, as it meant grafting long wires and two small boxes inside Ingrid’s hands. Installing the ear directional microphone was in comparison easy. By the time Farah was doing that last task, Nancy showed up in surgical garb. Her hands were however bare of gloves. Going to Ingrid’s head, Nancy bent and smiled to her.

“Hello my sweet adopted daughter. I am pleased to tell you that Tom’s operation is finished. I healed his surgical cuts and he is well, resting for an hour in a room.”

“Thank you, Nancy.”

Nancy caressed her hair before taking position over her back. Nancy’s hands glowed faintly for half a minute, then she moved to Ingrid’s hands, healing them as well. As soon as Farah was finished grafting the microphone, Nancy healed the cuts in the hearing canal. Farah looked at her hands with envy.

“I would give a lot to have your healing powers, Nancy. They make medical treatment so much easier.”

“You will have to ask the big guy upstairs for that, Farah. Sorry.”

Ten minutes later, Ingrid was wheeled out of the operation room and brought to the same room as Tom, who waited until the medics were gone and the door of the room closed before going to Ingrid's bed and slipping besides her under the bed sheet. They kissed each other passionately and exchanged caresses for a minute before Ingrid whispered something in Tom's ear. Tom grinned and kissed her before answering her.

"You have a deal."

19:11 (North America Central Time)

'Lynda's Hair Salon'

Time Patrol residential tower

New Lake City University campus

Elizabeth Windsor was sitting under a hair dryer in the sole hair salon that existed in the 34th century when Ingrid Weiss 'B' entered the establishment and went to Lynda Crawford, the owner of the salon.

"High, Lynda! Could you accommodate me tonight? I need a shampoo and a new haircut."

"No problem: it's a slow evening. Miriam can give you your shampoo while I finish here with James."

"Thanks!"

Going towards the back of the salon, Ingrid found Miriam of Magdala and Elizabeth Windsor there.

"High, Elizabeth! Hello, Miriam! Could I have a shampoo, medium hair?"

"Sure! Sit in this chair here."

As Ingrid sat down, she noticed the baby park a few meters away, behind a glass partition, with little David apparently asleep in it.

"Oh, you have David here. I find him so cute."

Miriam smiled with pride as she put a towel around Ingrid's neck.

"He is an angel, truly. Everybody is spoiling him, though."

"You can never spoil enough a baby like this. So, how do you like your life here, Miriam?"

"I couldn't possibly ask for better, Ingrid. Compared to my Palestine, I feel so free, so respected as a woman here. I also love this job. Lynda is a really nice woman

and is teaching me modern hair care on her spare time. She says that I will soon be able to replace her from time to time, when she will take vacations, but I'm not sure that I am really ready for that."

"Miriam, Lynda is right. Don't sell yourself short."

Both women then kept silent as Miriam washed Ingrid's hair. Once the shampoo was done, Miriam led Ingrid to the hair dryer next to Elizabeth, who was reading a thick book. Ingrid sat down and let Miriam adjust the hair dryer over her head, then looked at Elizabeth.

"How are the studies going, Elizabeth?"

The British teenager sighed softly and stopped reading for a few seconds.

"I won't pretend that I find advanced mathematics easy, Ingrid. However, I am already miles ahead of where I was in term of education two years ago. My parents would have a hard time believing what I can do now."

"Hey, Doug Wilson keeps telling me that you are a very good scoutship copilot. Coming from an ex-RAF fighter pilot with three confirmed victories during the Battle of Britain, I would take that as quite a compliment, Elizabeth."

"I'm still no match for you, though. Hell, you nearly beat Lilya Litvyak in a simulated dogfight the other day."

"Nearly is the key word, Elizabeth: there are no second-place winners in a dogfight. I promised myself to beat Lilya at least once before graduation day, though."

"Talking of dogfights, did you hear about that twenty minute encounter between Hanna Reitsch and Carmen Sanchez? The Chief Instructor Pilot, Voran Tess, was said to have become nearly airsick just by watching it. He said something about not taking bets ever again against ancestor fighter pilots."

"He did? Tell me more about that."

Miriam shook her head in amusement as the two teenagers talked excitedly about dogfights, air combat and something they called 'hot-dogging', whatever that meant.

10:33 (North America Central Time)

Friday, February 17, 3386 'A'

Main gymnasium, Time Patrol sports complex

New Lake City University campus

Nancy cleared her throat, then spoke calmly in the lectern's microphone as she faced the 61 apprentices lined up in two ranks for their graduation parade. Behind her, seated on portable stands, were most of the other members of the Time Patrol and their families, plus many university students who had been admitted as visitors. A few reporters, including a crew from GNN, moved around the periphery of the gymnasium, filming and taking pictures. Behind Nancy sat the Time Patrol's heads and a few dignitaries, including Global Chief Administrator Kern and his wife.

"Chief Administrator Kern, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to this graduation ceremony for field agent apprentices of the Time Patrol. I will keep this speech short, as our new agents are undoubtedly anxious to leave on a well-earned vacation after all those months of hard work, discomfort and stress. I only wish to say this: I am truly proud of our new agents. I will now ask Chief Administrator Kern to walk through the ranks of our new agents with me to pin on their uniforms their field agent insignias and hand them their badges."

On cue, Boran Kern got up from his chair and approached Nancy, while thirteen year-old cadets Carolyn Anderson and Baran Mishtar lined up behind him, carrying cushions bearing silver insignias and badges. Like the rest of the Time Patrol members, the two young cadets wore light gray parade uniforms with gold trimmings. Those who had received military medals and decorations in the past also wore them with their uniforms. Nancy, having returned her British medals in protest to Prime Minister Churchill in 1941, wore her Canadian Forces medals and her Afghan valor medal, plus the Valor Cluster from the Global Council.

The four of them walked at a solemn pace to the front rank of new agents and stopped in front of the first one in line, Mona Zirel. Boran Kern shook hands with her while smiling warmly to the young giant.

"Congratulation, Agent Mona Zirel. I am proud to see that Global Council citizens were able to complete such a grueling training."

"Thank you, Chief Administrator."

Kern then picked up one of the gold insignias of field agent from the cushion held by Carolyn Anderson and pinned it to Mona's collar. He next picked up a large silvery badge in its black leather holder from the cushion held by young Baran Mishtar and presented it to the engineer, again shaking her hand.

"Be proud and do honor to this badge, Agent Zirel. I'm sure you will."

Kern, followed by Nancy and the two cadets, then went to the next graduate, repeating the whole process. It took a good forty minutes to review all 61 graduates, after which Boran and Nancy returned to the lectern, behind which Boran took place. Opening a folder, the Chief Administrator then smiled at the graduates, still lined up and standing easy.

“This is now the time to honor those graduates who distinguished themselves in particular fields of their training as field agents. Since your talents will be put to the test mostly in the distant past, some of those specialties may not mean much to an average citizen of the Global Council. After personally watching some of the training of this fine group of men and women, I can assure the visitors present that what the graduates I am about to call forward accomplished took long months of training and much dedication and effort to achieve. I will start with the graduate who achieved the top score as air combat pilot: Agent Carmen Sanchez!”

As the crowd and graduates applauded while Sanchez walked to the podium, Boran Kern added a few words in the microphone.

“I was told that this particular honor was quite ferociously contested during training. I would thus wish to publicly commend Agents Lilya Litvyak, Hanna Reitsch and Katya Budanova, who came respectively close second, third and fourth for that title.” Stepping in front of the podium, Kern then shook hands with Carmen Sanchez and handed her an engraved silver trophy cup with wings. The pretty Puerto Rican then turned around and walked back to the group of graduates as Kern spoke again in his microphone.

“The next prize is for the top score as air gunner and goes to Agent Tom Allen, who shot a perfect score on his final practical test, despite the belief held by his instructors that such a performance was impossible to achieve.”

More applause rang while the British teenager proudly walked to the podium. His prize was a plaque with a golden crosshair.

“Next, ladies and gentlemen, I will call forward the top shipboard sensors operator, Agent Bertha Reinholdt.”

The next one to be called afterwards was Otto Skorzeni, as the top sniper of the class. Jack Crawford followed behind him.

“Agent Jack Crawford has the distinction of topping his class in two specialties: unarmed combat and nature survival techniques.”

As Jack Crawford swaggered back into the ranks, Kern cleared his throat again.

“The next candidate to be called forward is a very special case indeed. Formerly a royal heir in 1941 ‘B’ and with practically no formal schooling, she managed through very hard work to overcome her academic handicap and achieved good grades in all her subject studies. Further to that, she managed to top the class in three specialties: blade weapons fighting; archery and, finally, horse riding. Ladies and gentlemen, please applaud ex-Princess Elizabeth of England, now Agent Elizabeth Windsor.”

Nearly intimidated, Elizabeth slowly got out of the ranks, patted on the back and encouraged by the other graduates. Once she was stopped in front of Boran Kern, the giant shook her hand warmly and spoke in a low voice to her.

“I understand that you have quite an interesting past in term of incarnations, miss. Still, it doesn’t diminish in any way your achievements on this course.”

Kern then gave her in succession a beautifully crafted Japanese Katana sword, a silver plaque and a small silver horse statue, all with her name and class number engraved on them. Nancy bent forward and whispered to the teenager.

“By the way, do you know the nickname the others now use for you, in your back of course?”

“Uh, no. What is it?”

“Cutthroat Lilibet!”

“What? Oooh, the buggers!” Said Elizabeth before smiling after a few seconds. “Hey, it does have a ring to it, though. Thanks, Nancy.”

Giving back her trophies to a waiting Carolyn Anderson, she then returned to the group of graduates as Ingrid Weiss was called forward as top gymnast of the class.

The ceremony concluded five minutes later with the departure of Boran Kern and the dismissal of the graduates for their vacation. Ingrid Weiss ‘B’ and Tom Allen ‘B’ ran to Farah Tolkonen as she was about to leave with Nancy, catching both near the exit.

“Farah, we would need a service from you before we leave this afternoon.”

“Anything you want, Ingrid. What is it?”

Ingrid glanced at Tom, then swallowed hard.

“Me and Tom want to get married. Could you perform a civil marriage ceremony for us?”

Both Farah and Nancy were speechless for an instant, then exploded with enthusiasm.

“Of course I will marry you two. That’s great news. We could do it right away in my office, if it is convenient for you.”

“That would be perfect, Farah.” Replied Ingrid, overjoyed. She then gave an apologetic smile to Nancy, who was grinning from hear to hear. “Uh, sorry for keeping this a secret even from you, Nancy. I hope that you will approve of this.”

“Approve? Hell, I’ll pay for your honeymoon, Ingrid.”

“Uh, no need for that, actually: we chose to spend our vacation on the Polynesian island of Bora Bora...in 10,000 B.C.E.. Nobody will bother us and we will be as free as the wind. We will go well equipped, though.”

Nancy then kissed both teenagers on the cheek, tears starting to roll on her face.

“I am so happy for you two. You deserve the best in life.”

CHAPTER 13 – ACTION!

11:46 (California Time)

Wednesday, February 26, 2014 'A'

'CROSSROADS' movie set, Universal Productions studios

Universal City, Los Angeles County

California, U.S.A.

"CUT!... AND PRINT! Good job, people. Let's break for lunch. Be back on the set for one O'clock."

On the word of movie director Anthony Gilroy, Channing Tatum picked himself up from the broken furniture debris, accepting the helping hand of Nancy, who pulled him up to his feet.

"Thanks, Nancy. I have to say that I barely saw that last kick coming. Remind me never to get into a real fight with you."

Nancy chuckled at that and brushed quickly with one hand Chanum's back, full of plaster fragments.

"The Shadow Dancer is supposed to be a tough girl, Chan."

"Yeah, but you're the first actress I met that is as dangerous in reality as her fictional character. I have to say that it is a bit intimidating."

Nancy grinned while eyeing the handsome, hulking actor.

"You? Intimidated by me? I was expecting another kind of reaction than that."

Channing in turn eyed her athletic but also sensual body before replying.

"Now now! You know that I am a happily married man, Nancy. Besides, Jenna is jealously watching over me, especially when you are around. This said, let's have lunch together, if you would like."

"Of course I would like it, Chan."

The both of them then went off the set, going to an adjacent lounge where a studio caterer had prepared a mixed buffet. They joined the short lineup at the buffet table, ending up behind one of their co-stars, Krysten Ritter, who made a point of inspecting Tatum from head to toe.

"So, the big bad Nancy didn't rough you up too much, Chan?"

"It could have been worst, Krysten."

"It will be worst before I am finished with him." Added Nancy with a malicious smile. Krysten, who played Channing's love interest in the movie, laughed briefly at that.

"They should create a new Oscar category just for you, Nancy: Badass of the Year."

Both Nancy and Channing laughed at that before serving themselves quickly at the buffet and going with Krysten to an empty table, sitting down to eat. Channing ate a few bites before looking cautiously at Nancy and asking her a question.

"Uh, what is happening with those Israeli accusations against you, Nancy? Are they still holding a grudge against you, even after being basically forced to sign an armistice with Iran?"

"More than ever, unfortunately." Said Nancy, sighing. "On the other hand, Interpol has cleared me from its wanted list and even those idiots at TSA and DHS finally saw the light. At least, I can now travel around the World without being arrested at every airport...as long as I avoid Israel."

Krysten Ritter, a thin, delicate-looking woman of 32 who was a bit shorter than Nancy and who was more accustomed to play in comedies, hesitated a bit before speaking.

"I know that this may sound wrong, Nancy, but could I ask you how many people you had to kill in your life?"

While Channing Tatum eyed Kristen a bit crossly, probably thinking that she shouldn't have asked such a question in public, Nancy noted the fact that a few studio set technicians and assistants sitting at a nearby table were suddenly paying attention discreetly to their conversation. Nancy didn't however take offense at Krysten's curiosity: she after all had been the talk of the studio since her arrival on set, thanks to her impressive physique and her risk-filled other jobs.

"You may ask, Krysten. While most of my overseas tours as a Canadian Army officer were as part of peacekeeping missions, I saw combat in Darfur and during my three tours in Afghanistan, where I killed either in self-defense or as part of combat operations a total of close to a hundred men, most of them Taliban extremists. It could have been more, but I didn't keep a count, contrary to some deranged nut jobs I met over there. When you throw grenades at night, it is quite hard to figure how many enemies you cut down. I also had on one occasion to kill a few men at the point of my bayonet, during a rather desperate fight against an enemy much superior in numbers. As a war correspondent, I saw even more combat, but was of course unarmed."

"With your martial arts skills, I am sure that you could have killed with your bare hands, Nancy."

Nancy made a devilish grin at Krysten, pointing her with one finger.

"Which reminds me: I am due to have a one-on-one explanation with your Jane Hearst in a coming scene, if I remember well the script."

"Oops!" Said Krysten, making a face before passing an arm around Channing's shoulders. "Hopefully, my boyfriend will come to my rescue."

"Good! More lumps to give away."

The trio then burst out laughing before continuing to eat, their talk switching to the coming scenes to play. Nancy ate lightly, knowing that she was going to have to do more action scenes this afternoon and not wanting to fight with a full stomach. She returned to the floor of the set ten minutes before one, to stretch a bit and warm up before her scenes.

At around five O'clock, as she was resting a bit and reviewing her dialogue, two men that she had seen shake hands earlier with the movie director and had talked with him between two takes came to see her. One of the two men looked quite old, with white hair and moustache and wrinkles on his face. She definitely got the impression that she had seen his picture before and got up from her chair as they approached. The younger of the two men, who was still easily in his advanced fifties, had an awed look as he eyed her from head to toe.

"My God! She would be perfect. She even has green eyes."

The older man also eyed Nancy with obvious satisfaction before presenting his hand.

"Miss Laplante, my name is Stan Lee, of Marvel Comics, and this is John Buscema, also from Marvel Comics. Could we talk for a minute with you?"

Nancy's face lit up as she shook hands with them.

"Stan Lee? As The Stan Lee who created most of the superheroes of Marvel Comics, like Iron Man, The Hulk, Thor and Black Widow? This is quite a honor to meet you. I am not due back in front of the camera for at least another half hour, but let's move to the lounge next door, in order not to disrupt the filming due to start in five minutes."

"Of course! I wouldn't want to ruin some of Tony Gilroy's work. Lead the way, miss."

Once in the resting lounge, Nancy invited her two visitors to sit with her at one table, then eyed them with curiosity.

“Well, what could I do for such a prestigious writer as you, Mister Lee? You are here on behalf of Marvel Comics, I suppose?”

“Uh, not exactly, miss.” Replied Lee, surprising Nancy. “I and John do work for Marvel Comics, but we came here today to explore an issue interesting the Marvel Studios and Disney Pictures.”

“The Marvel Studios? The ones who produced the blockbuster ‘THE AVENGERS’ in 2012?”

“That’s correct, miss. We did talk with Universal executives before coming to see you and they told us that you only have at the moment a single film contract on a trial basis with them.”

“That’s right, Mister Lee. In theory I am free after this film, but Universal Productions could ask me for more films if ‘CROSSROADS’ turns out well. I also have a part-time job as a war correspondent with CNN. As for my military career with the Canadian Army, I officially left the service this January. As you can see, I have some time available, but I have to schedule it carefully. So, what can I do for you and Mister Buscema?”

Stan Lee looked quickly around him, then lowered his voice, speaking in a conspiratorial tone.

“You will not be surprised to learn that the Marvel Studios, in view of the huge success of ‘THE AVENGERS’, have decided to produce a sequel to it. However, both the Marvel and Disney executives and Director Joss Whedon want to add another female superhero to the group’s lineup and that has created a heated discussion, which has delayed the writing of the script quite a lot already. One superhero character that they would want to add to that future movie is the She-Hulk, which I created decades ago and which John here drew first in cartoon form in 1980. You do know what the She-Hulk is, do you?”

Nancy grinned, seeing now what Lee was getting at.

“Yes, I do know, Mister Lee. In normal form, she is Jennifer Walters, a cousin of Bruce Banner, the alter-ego of Hulk. She once received a blood transfusion from Bruce Banner, which gave her some of his powers. I understand that her story and character since 1980 has changed many times, but that she is now a high-flight, principled lawyer

in normal life, and that she can control her changes into the She-Hulk and back as Jennifer Walters.”

Stan Lee nodded approvingly, obviously satisfied.

“Excellent, miss. You should then know as well that the She-Hulk is one of the most popular comic book characters and is ranked 11th sexiest woman in comics by the Comics Buyer’s Guide.”

“Really?” Said Nancy, grinning even more widely. “I am starting to see where your problem is, Mister Lee. You want a powerful-looking and also pretty, intelligent and sexy actress to play the She-Hulk, but have only found either muscle-bound monstrosities without much of a personality or with zero acting talents, or beautiful ones that are too wimpy-looking. Am I right on that?”

“You’re bang on the money, miss. The catch is that Disney is not ready to include the She-Hulk in their lineup unless they find a suitable actress for the role. When we heard the rumors floating about you around the Universal studios, we came to see by ourselves. We watched some of your takes this afternoon and I have to say that, even though you are a novice at acting according to your résumé, you actually played your scenes very professionally.”

“Uh, what kind of rumors did you hear about me, Mister Lee?” Asked Nancy, her smile fading. Lee gave her a reassuring smile.

“Oh, only the kind that we were hoping to hear about you, Miss Laplante. You are said to have the body of an Olympic athlete, but also a quick-witted mind and a lot of personal charm. I watched last December the debate on CNN in which you participated after returning from Iran and the Middle East. You then verbally skewered your critics on camera in grand style indeed. That kind of sharp, quick-witted tongue would go perfectly with the personae of Jennifer Walters, the high-flight lawyer. On the other hand, your powerful but feminine physique, with some CGI remodeling of course, would be perfect to play the She-Hulk. After seeing you on scene, I also know now that you have the necessary acting talents for that role. So, would you be interested in presenting your candidacy for the casting of the She-Hulk, with my warmest personal recommendations in your support of course?”

“I suppose that I would have to be painted green all over, plus have my hair dyed dark green?”

“That would be one price to pay temporarily, miss. One word of caution: if you accept the role and you are approved by the Marvel Studios and Disney for it, then you

are to keep that strictly confidential. The fact that the She-Hulk will be in 'THE AVENGERS 2' is to stay secret until the first promotional trailers are produced and published online."

"That is quite understandable. Very well, Mister Lee. You can tell Marvel Studios that I am very interested in taking the role of the She-Hulk. The production of 'CROSSROADS' should be completed in about two months, but if you need to take some casting shots of me, I will have a few days free in two weeks, when my Shadow Dancer character is not required for a few days."

"Excellent!" Replied Lee happily. "A photographer and makeup artist from Marvel Studios will contact you this weekend to arrange a session with you here in Los Angeles."

"I will be awaiting eagerly their call, Mister Lee. Here is my card, by the way."

"Thank you! Hopefully, I will see you again...on the floor of the Marvel Studios, miss."

"I hope so too, Mister Lee. Mister Buscema, it was also a pleasure to meet you. You are a great artist indeed."

"Thank you, miss." Replied Buscema, shaking hands with her before leaving with Stan Lee. Nancy watched them leave, her mind already dreaming what it would be like to play the She-Hulk.

14:15 (New York City Time)

Sunday, April 27, 2014 'A'

Roof parapet of 1, World Trade Center (417 meters above street level)

New World Trade Center complex, Lower Manhattan

New York City, U.S.A.

Krysten Ritter, firmly held by her belt by Channing Tatum while she looked down over the guardrail of the parapet, became as white as a sheet, while she tensed up from a near-panic fear: the cars below at street-level looked like mere specs from the altitude of 417 meters of the parapet. Her head was nearly swimming and her heart was beating furiously when she was finally able to break free of that near-hypnotic sight. She straightened up to look with horror at Nancy, standing with her and Channing on the parapet, which itself stood ten meters above the roof of the top floor of the tallest tower of the New World Trade Center complex.

“You...you really want to do this, Nancy?”

Nancy, her face most serious, nodded once and spoke up to be heard above the owl of the wind blowing around at the top of the giant tower.

“Yes, I do, Krysten. It should make quite a scene for the grand finale of the movie. But don’t worry too much: I am a very experienced skydiver and the winds are presently favorable for this. Talking of winds, I think that we should take our positions for the big take, before they change direction.”

Krysten didn’t say a word then, giving instead a last ‘be careful’ look at Nancy before Channing escorted her to the safety ladder connecting the parapet to the roof of the 104th floor of the building. Nancy turned around and gave a thumbs-up signal to Tony Gilroy, who was sitting on a chair put on a large elevated platform built especially for these scenes filmed on the roof. Two cameras and a sound gaffe also were on that platform, while more cameras and sound gaffes were strategically placed along the parapet that surrounded the roof with its wide glass panes held in stainless steel frames. Tony Gilroy returned Nancy’s signal, but his face still reflected some misgivings. This particular scene had been suggested by Nancy herself as a modification to the original script, with the goal of providing a truly stunning finale to the film. While Gilroy had recognized the tremendous potential impact of such a scene, he was still deeply worried for the safety of Nancy, who had become well-liked by the whole production crew during the three months of filming.

Walking to her designated start position, near the South corner of the parapet, where the façade of the tower formed a vertical wall all the way to street level, Nancy checked for the last time that the opening handle of her parachute, hidden under her specially made ample, long leather coat, was easily accessible. The coat’s back was actually split in two pieces held by thin Velcro bands, to allow her back parachute to open after she pulled the coat apart. Satisfied, she took a last look down over the parapet and took a deep breath to calm her heartbeat: even for her, this stunt was a crazy, risky one.

“Nancy, you are one serious nut case.” She told herself before facing Channing Tatum, who also stood on the parapet, about ten meters away and with a pistol in his hands. Tony Gilroy first made sure that all the cameras and sound gaffes were properly positioned and pointed, while he also ordered by radio for the cameraman sitting in a helicopter hovering nearby and below the roof level to be ready: there would be no

second or third take for this scene. He had no intention of forcing Nancy to perform this mad stunt more than once.

“ALRIGHT! EVERYBODY READY? THEN...ACTION!”

On cue, Channing Tatum pointed his pistol at Nancy in a two-hand stance and looked fiercely at her.

“GIVE IT UP, SHADOW DANCER! THERE IS NO WAY OUT FOR YOU NOW.”

Nancy, her acting helped by her centuries of life experiences, including more than a few lives as a dancer and musician, slowly raised both hands to hip level while looking resolutely at Channing.

“THERE IS NO WAY THAT I AM GOING TO SPEND THE REST OF MY LIFE IN A JAIL, KEN.”

“THE ONLY WAY YOU WILL ESCAPE JAIL IS IF I KILL YOU. DON'T FOOL YOURSELF: I WILL NOT HESITATE TO SHOOT YOU.”

Nancy made a devilish smile as she tensed her body.

“I KNOW, KEN. NO HARD FEELINGS, THOUGH: YOU SIMPLY DID WHAT YOU HAD TO DO, WHILE I DID WHAT I WAS PAID FOR. SEE YOU IN HELL.”

She then quickly turned around and ran a few steps along the parapet towards the corner, then jumped, landing one boot on the top guardrail and propelling herself forward over the grounds of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum, 417 meters below. She immediately adopted a swan dive stance while falling head first, her arms extended to the sides and with both feet together. Followed from various angles by a total of six cameras, including the one aboard the helicopter hovering a hundred meters away, she watched the ground rise towards her, her heart beating furiously under the flow of adrenaline rushing through her veins. The danger now was that the wind would push her towards the glass façade of the tower and make her slide against it, something that would be fatal for her. Her levitating power came handy now, making it possible for her to use it discreetly if need be to keep away from the façade. She however didn't need it, being able to stay away from the tower by positioning her hands to act like the ailerons of a plane.

Up above, on the parapet, Channing Tatum leaned against the guardrail to watch her fall, doing his role and also praying mentally for Nancy's safety. However this would turn out, it was going to be definitely a breathtaking scene and a worthy finale to the movie, especially when viewed in 3-D. Standing besides Director Gilroy on his platform,

Krysten Ritter also followed anxiously Nancy's fall on the TV monitors that showed what the various cameras were filming.

"God, please, make Nancy come out of this alive and well." She said fervently in a low voice to herself. On his part, Tony Gilroy tried to keep his mind on the professional aspect of this, taking notes on which camera takes seemed the best choice for various moments of Nancy's fall. Twenty seconds after her jump started, Nancy was still falling, still in a swan dive stance, and was approaching the 200 meter altitude mark. By now, Krysten was nearly hysterical with fear.

"Come on, Nancy! Open your damn parachute, now!"

Another four seconds passed, raising further her anxiety and making even Gilroy nervous. A white spot finally appeared in Nancy's back, opening up and quickly becoming a white rectangle. Everybody on the set blew air out in relief then, Krysten first. Wild cheers and applauses went around when Nancy was seen on a ground-level camera to land smoothly on the pavement, a huge grin on her face. Gilroy let his people cheer for a moment, then called for them to quiet down.

"ALRIGHT! WE WILL CELEBRATE THIS LATER. NOW, WE HAVE A FEW FINAL TAKES TO DO UP HERE. CHANNING, KRYPSTEN, TAKE YOUR POSITIONS."

Those last takes went well and were all completed to Gilroy's satisfaction by the time that Nancy was back on the roof, her parachute stuffed inside a duffel bag. Krysten ran to her at once and hugged her emotionally.

"My God, Nancy, I was terrified for you."

Nancy returned her hug, still feeling some of the adrenaline from her jump.

"Thank you for caring like this, Krysten. How about celebrating together tonight, the bunch of us. I believe that this deserves a few drinks."

She then shook hands with Tony Gilroy, who had come to her.

"How was the take, Tony?"

"Perfect!" Exulted the director. "It will make a spectacular finale for our movie. I have to say that, in my whole cinema career, I never saw a stunt as crazy and spectacular as this."

Michael Cerveris, who had played the role of the Shadow Dancer's employer and whose character had been killed earlier on by Channing's character, also came to shake hands with Nancy.

“That was a great stunt, but also great acting, Nancy. You are a real pro at this, despite your previous lack of experience or training in acting. This will make your name in the industry.”

Nancy smiled to the bald actor, truly appreciating his compliment. Apart from having played many roles in films and on television, notably in the Fox series ‘FRINGE’, Cerveris was a consummate theater actor. He was also a great human being. The fact that he was rumored to be a homosexual was totally irrelevant for Nancy.

“Thanks, MC.” She replied, using Michael Cerveris’ nickname. “Coming from you, that’s quite a compliment. You will come celebrate with us tonight, I hope?”

“It will be a pleasure, Nancy. Count on me.”

Nancy then smiled to Channing Tatum, who was waiting next in line to congratulate her.

“Come here for a hug, you nice hunk.”

Tony Gilroy grinned while watching his main actors, happy and hugging each other as a photographer was taking shots that would later be put into the movie production’s album.

“Well, that leaves us with the film editing and soundtrack arrangement work. If everything goes well, we should be able to release this film at the planned date, this July. I hope that you will be present at the premiere, Nancy?”

“Me, missing the premiere of the first ever movie I played in? No way!”

Krysten Ritter looked at her, curiosity on her face.

“What will you do until then, Nancy?”

“Well, I will stay around for another week or two, in case a scene has to be redone, then I will go pay myself a trip in Syria, in order to cover the civil war there for CNN. But don’t worry about me, Krysten: I will come back from there in one piece. I wouldn’t miss the premiere of our movie for all the gold in the World.”

“You better, or I will kill you!” Replied Krysten, making Nancy and the others laugh.

19:20 (California Time)

Thursday, July 17, 2014 ‘A’

Red carpet premiere of the movie ‘CROSSROADS’

Egyptian Theatre, 6712 Hollywood Boulevard

Hollywood, California

“THAT’S TATUM AND HIS WIFE!”

The shout from a paparazzi waiting at the gate of the courtyard of the Egyptian Theatre immediately made a dozen more paparazzi rush in with their cameras at the ready, as a valet opened the rear right side door of a limousine that had pulled to a stop in front of the gate. Channing Tatum, dressed in black tie suit, stepped out first, then helped out his wife Jenna. The couple then smiled and waved a hand for the benefit of the press photographers and of the onlookers gathered around the main gate. Channing made a point of taking the time to give autographs to fans and admirers, the majority of them girls and women, before walking through the open gate with his wife, entering the courtyard and following the large red carpet, laid along its close to fifty meters of length and bordered on both sides by palm trees. There were more fans, press reporters and photographers along the courtyard's sides, plus a few television cameramen, all standing behind red velvet-covered chain barriers.

The next limousine to stop in front of the gate made many of the reporters and paparazzi perplex, them not recognizing at first the tall woman that got out first until a photographer shouted.

“THAT’S NANCY LAPLANTE, THE NEWBIE THAT PLAYED THE TOP VILLAIN IN THE MOVIE.”

The paparazzi, along with the fans, then flashed away at Nancy, who was wearing a magnificent emerald green dress with a long side slit and a very revealing cleavage. They took more photos when a tall, powerfully built man and a very beautiful teenage girl with reddish-brown hair stepped out as well from the limousine. The trio paused for a moment to let the photographers take all the shots they wanted, then walked through the gate of the theatre, with Nancy stopping frequently to give autographs. Finally entering the theatre lobby proper through its antique Egyptian style doors, Nancy led Mike Crawford ‘B’ and Ingrid Weiss ‘B’ towards a large group of persons that included Channing Tatum and his wife Jenna. The couple stared at once with interest at Nancy’s trio as it approached them: Nancy had never told anyone on the movie set about either Mike or Ingrid. While Jenna Dewan discreetly admired the hulking Mike, who stood even taller than her husband, Channing and the other men in the group frankly devoured with their eyes Ingrid, who was wearing a beautiful Chinese embroidered silk dress with a long slit on each side of the skirt.

“Well, Nancy, you sure are in nice company tonight, if I may say.”

Nancy smiled proudly and presented her companions.

“Sorry if I was a bit discreet about them until now, Chan. May I present to you and Jenna my boyfriend cum unofficial husband, Mike Crawford, as well as a very good friend I consider like my adopted daughter, Ingrid Weiss. Mike, Ingrid, I present you Channing Tatum and his wife Jenna.”

They exchanged handshakes and, in the case of the women, kisses on the cheeks, before Chan spoke again, showing the rest of his group.

“Since you are new to the cinema industry, Nancy, I suppose that you wouldn’t know these ladies and gentlemen, who happen to be some of the top cinema critics in the country. First, here is Owen Gleiberman, from Entertainment Weekly. Then, you have Claudia Puig, of USA Today, Betsy Sharkey of the Los Angeles Times, Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun-Times and Alynda Wheat of People Magazine.”

There was a new round of handshakes before Jenna Dewan looked at Nancy.

“So, won’t you tell us about your friends, Nancy?”

“Well, what is there to say? Mike is an ex-Corps of Engineers ordnance specialist, whom I met during one of my stints as a war correspondent, while Ingrid studies Oriental history in Berlin. She was orphaned at the age of fourteen and, when I met her, we became instant friends. I then gave her my support so that she could go to university. That’s it in a nutshell.”

Jenna then looked soberly at Ingrid.

“I am sorry to hear about your loss, Miss Weiss.”

“Thank you, miss. I have now mostly gone over that. I was however very lucky to have met Nancy: she gave me a new shot at life and is like a mother to me. But tonight should be about her, your husband and their movie. Have any of the critics in this group seen parts of this movie yet?”

“Only a couple of trailers, just enough to wet their appetites.” Answered at once Channing. “Universal wanted to keep the punch for tonight.”

“And we certainly are impatient to see the complete movie.” Replied Owen Gleiberman, of Entertainment Weekly. “So, Miss Laplante, if this movie does well at the box office, do you intend to continue on as an actress full time?”

“Full time, no. While acting in this movie was fun, I will still work part-time as a war correspondent. It will help keep me current on how to dodge bullets and shells for my next action movies...if I get other role offers. After all, I am still a complete newbie in Hollywood, despite my reporting on CNN. Building a reputation as an actress, so that I could attract contract offers, takes time.”

"True, Miss Laplante." Said Alynda Wheat, of People Magazine. "So, you haven't had any other role offers yet?"

The malicious smile Nancy then made got her the complete attention of the five cinema critics around her.

"Let's say that I may be sitting on a surprise, ladies and gentlemen. I am however not at liberty to discuss that subject further. Sorry."

"Not even a little hint, miss?" Asked Alynda Wheat, her curiosity now piqued. Nancy shook her head at that.

"The only thing I will say is that I may play next in another action movie."

"Oooh, this is going to start some wild rumors." Said Jenna Dewan, smiling. Nancy laughed at that, then excused herself with the group, so that she could present Mike and Ingrid to the other actors and crew of the movie present in the lobby.

Just before eight O'clock, the crowd of actors, film crewmembers, critics and reporters, mixed in with a few invited celebrities and local personalities, was invited to go sit down in the 616-seat Lloyd E. Rigler theatre for the projection of the movie. Ingrid and Mike got to sit in the first rows, with the other actors and main movie staffs, flanking Nancy on each side. Mike thus got to sit next to Krysten Ritter, who was obviously pleased to have the powerful, handsome engineer near her. Nancy smiled at that, then gently pressed the hands of both Mike and Ingrid as the movie projection started. The joy and pride of having both of them with her for this very special moment in her life made her forget about her earlier misgivings at making them appear in this century. Not having seen the finished, edited product yet, she genuinely enjoyed the movie, even more so while experiencing Mike's and Ingrid's reactions to it. Her big finale, with her death dive from the top of 1 WTC tower, drew sucked-in breaths and horrified gasps from the whole audience, as the added 3-D effects for that scene only made that jump look even more terrifying. Nancy felt a wave of happiness wash over her when the end of the film brought unanimous applause and cheers from the spectators. The moment she was out of the theatre and back in the lobby with the rest of the audience, she became surrounded by reporters and critics who wanted to congratulate her and tell her how her finale had blown them away. Tony Gilroy and the executives from Universal that were present also basked into what appeared to be an overwhelmingly positive response from the critics and guests. Daniel Whitfield, who had hired Nancy for the movie, gave her a happy thumbs up signal from a distance while discussing the film with

a few critics, making her grin and return his signal. Raising her glass of champagne, Nancy exchanged a toast with her costars and their family members, along with Mike and Ingrid.

“Next stop: the box office. May this movie make the millions it deserves.”

“Amen to that.” Replied Channing Tatum. “And may this mark the start of a successful career for a talented new actress.”

“Hear, hear!” Was the collective response.

CHAPTER 14 – ASYLUM

09:47 (GMT)

Monday, June 18, 3386 ‘B’

Imperium Security Ministry laboratories

Greenwich, Outer London Area

Senior Scientist First Class Farah Tolkonen looked around for a last time at the laboratory where she had literally slaved for the last years on her time machine project. While she had been treated with deference and respect by the Security Ministry guards controlling the Greenwich scientific complex, Farah knew too well that she had kept her status solely because of the importance accorded to her project by General Alan Veck, head of the feared Imperium Security Ministry. She had too often shown a desire for independence in her work to expect much good from Veck once her project was completed. Farah's suspicions had been recently confirmed when the prototype time ship she had helped conceive and build had been seized by Veck as soon as it had proved itself on a short trip to the past. Veck had also taken with him all the data he needed to build a fleet of time ships. Farah had managed to stay in her laboratory only by inventing a story about investigating the possibility of multiple, parallel timelines. While plausible enough for Veck to accept her story, that concept was still purely theoretical and one Farah didn't believe possible to prove or demonstrate. Her worst fear now was that Veck would use her invention to go back in time and eliminate his opponents before they could even grow up to adulthood, in order to consolidate his grip on the Imperium. Even if Veck proceeded with caution and did only the minimum while in the past, Farah knew how destabilizing that could be to the spacetime continuum, with consequences impossible to predict. She didn't even put Veck above going back in time to kill King Stan the Sixth, the last serious obstacle in his path towards absolute power. Farah would have herself asked the protection of the King, who was still widely respected, if not for the fact that the King was now down to being not much more than a figurehead, his faithful royal guardsmen the only ones still protecting the royal family of the Imperium from Veck's monstrous ambition.

The door of her laboratory now firmly locked from the inside, Farah then hurried to accomplish her ultimate plan: seeking safety and asylum in the distant past. Once there, she could probably influence enough the evolution of history to change its course and maybe erase the monstrosity that the Imperium had become in the last decades, and this before Veck could find her. She knew too well what kind of slow tortures she would go through if she was ever captured alive after initiating this escape. Going to the large locker containing her personalized spacesuit, Farah opened it and, opening the rear access hatch of the suit, slipped inside before closing the hatch. Unknown to Veck or any of his guards, she had secretly modified her spacesuit to turn it into a personal, one-person time machine. Since, like all Imperium spacesuits, it was already equipped with an anti-gravity system and a directed gravity drive, she had now the perfect autonomous escape vehicle to fill her needs. A mini-computer and data chips containing the scientific and historical data she would need in the past were already inside her suit, along with some gold coins, one stun pistol and one change of clothes. She could however spare no more space inside. Outside of the suit, in a belly pouch, were a machine pistol and spare ammunition, various tools and a mini-probe with its control box. Activating her suit's systems, she then checked the data she had entered yesterday in the onboard computer: she was not jumping to some date chosen at random. Farah had in fact a date and place to start her search for maybe the only person who could possibly help her once in the past. Backing out of the locker, Farah then went to a storage cabinet that contained a number of chemicals, some of which could burn fiercely. Grabbing a particular plastic container, she opened it and poured the powder inside it all over the floor, counters and workstations of the laboratory. Once that was done, she fetched an electrical extension chord and plugged it to a wall outlet. She then threw the live wire's denuded connector on top of one of the patches of powder on the floor. A blinding flash and a sheet of flames erupted immediately, making her step back. As the fire quickly spread, Farah mentally prayed for some luck and initiated her spacetime jump, disappearing in a flash of white light.

20:54 (GMT)

Monday, October 27, 1941 'B'

'Café le Parisien', Wardour Street

Soho District, London

England

Peter O'Neal hid a smile of satisfaction when two French Army officers who had been drinking with a third one finally got up and exited the drinking club, leaving the target of his attention alone. He had used a lot of his personal time to track down that particular Frenchman, but he had precious few leads left to him now in his quest to find out what really happened to Nancy Laplante after her capture. Nearly everywhere else he had hit a wall of officially enforced silence and fabricated stories for close to four months. His first real break had come two months ago, when he had received an anonymous letter addressed to him at the editorial room of the DAILY TELEGRAPH newspaper. That letter had obviously been from someone who had an intense hatred of Nancy Laplante and who had been pissed by the hero cult the government had built around her. However much Peter had disagreed with the tone of the anonymous letter, it had nonetheless provided him with a brand new lead for his quest. Much of the inquiring that had followed had to be done on his personal time, though, as his editor didn't want him to waste more of his work time hours on Laplante's case.

Getting up from his chair, Peter went quickly to the French officer's table and took a seat facing him. Peter then spoke in a low, urgent tone, using his passable French.

"Excuse me for intruding like this, Major Bertrand, but I need to speak privately with you...about Nancy Laplante. My name is Peter O'Neal, reporter at the DAILY TELEGRAPH."

Bertrand, a tough-looking man with a crooked nose, eyed him with both irritation and suspicion before starting to get up.

"I am sorry, mister, but I can't talk to you about that. You should avoid it too if you don't want trouble."

"I only want to make sure that her name is not soiled by a few jealous assholes, Major. I promise you complete confidentiality. You have my word on that."

Bertrand hesitated for a moment before sitting back. Peter immediately ordered two more beers from a passing waitress, then spoke again in a low voice.

"Major, I received two months ago an anonymous letter that contradicted totally the officially accepted story on the death of Nancy Laplante. While the writer seemed to hate Laplante with a passion, he said in his letter that she had not been killed by the Gestapo and that she had been sent to Colditz Castle after her capture. That same

writer pretended that Nancy Laplante had turned into a collaborator for the Germans and that she should be shot as a traitor instead of having a statue of her placed in Trafalgar Square.”

Bertrand shook his head in angry denial as he raised his pint.

“Was that writer British?”

“Yes, he wrote like one. Why?”

“Lieutenant Colonel Robertson. He’s one first class asshole alright. When Laplante arrived in Colditz at the end of June in a wheelchair and covered with hideous wounds, Robertson took less than a day to declare her a collaborator and to order the other prisoners to shun her.”

“Why?” Asked Peter, frankly shocked and angered.

“Because she didn’t act like a person who hated Germans and because the Germans treated her very correctly in Colditz. I myself was skeptical about her conduct, but a few events quickly convinced me that she was something entirely different.”

“Like what?”

“Don’t laugh, but I think that she is an angel.”

Peter smiled at that.

“A lot of men have said that of her before, Major.”

“No! I mean a real angel, one that can fly, heal wounds with her mind and make miracles.”

Peter’s smile faded abruptly at those words.

“You...you can’t be serious, Major.”

“I am very serious, mister. Here are a few of the things she did...”

Bertrand spoke for a good ten minutes, with the flabbergasted Peter taking notes as fast as he could. At the end of it, the reporter couldn’t help shake his head in disbelief.

“And you say that she is alive and well now, probably in the future.”

“With the kind of uniform she was wearing? You bet!”

“Well, that certainly was helpful, Major. Thank you very much!”

The Frenchman shook his hand while getting up.

“Hey, if it can protect that woman’s reputation from the slanders of idiots like Robertson, then it was well worth it.”

Peter waited a few minutes after Bertrand’s departure, then left a tip for the waitress and left. The night air outside was fresh and damp and made him shiver in his old trench coat as he walked home to his little apartment on Bedford Avenue. The long walk let

him plenty of time to think about what Bertrand had told him. One thing was for sure now: if he published what he now knew, he would get into big trouble with the government. He was not sure either that many people would believe him, so fantastic was Bertrand's story. He needed more before he could publish anything.

Peter sighed with delight at the warmth of his apartment, taking off his trench coat and hanging it in the small closet by the door. The next thing he did was to carefully hide his precious notepad behind a loose plank in his bedroom closet. He was heating up some water for a cup of tea when someone knocked on his door. Opening it cautiously while leaving the safety chain on, he found himself facing three big men in civilian suits. One of them flashed an identity card.

"Mister Peter O'Neal? We are from the M.I.5¹⁸. We would like to speak to you."

"Uh, sure! One moment, please."

His heart accelerating, he undid the door safety chain and opened the door wide. The three men walked in as if they owned the place, then faced Peter, their expression stern.

"Mister O'Neal, did you receive an anonymous letter concerning the late Brigadier Laplante a few weeks ago?"

Now as tense as a loaded spring, Peter hesitated slightly before answering.

"I am a reporter, sir. I often receive anonymous letters. I did get such a letter, but its content didn't make sense, so I threw it away."

The senior agent, who had noticed his nervousness and hesitation, frowned.

"You threw it away? Mister O'Neal, all your colleagues say that you had a nearly obsessive interest in Nancy Laplante. You also have been asking a lot of questions around lately concerning Laplante. Where were you tonight, by the way?"

"I was simply having a beer at a pub in Soho." Replied Peter, getting testy. "Is that a crime?"

"No, but divulging state secrets is. I will have to ask you to follow us to M.I.5 headquarters. We will also have to search your apartment."

"But that's preposterous! Where is your search warrant?"

"We are at war, sir! We don't need a warrant." Said brusquely the senior agent before looking at his two partners. "Search the place but don't make a mess of it."

¹⁸ M.I.5: British counter-intelligence service

Peter, a mix of anger and fear rising in him, could do nothing but watch as the two M.I.5 men searched his apartment carefully. After fifteen minutes, the two men came back to their leader.

“Nothing, sir.”

“Alright, let’s go back to headquarters with Mister O’Neal.”

Thankfully, they did not handcuff Peter before going down to their car, a big black Bentley, where another agent was waiting behind the steering wheel. Peter ended up sandwiched between two men on the rear bench for the short drive to M.I.5 headquarters. Once there, Peter was brought to a basement section closed off by a steel door, then to a bare room with a small table and two chairs. A large mirror covered part of a wall. Peter understood quickly that it had to be a false mirror, with people watching him from behind it. A newcomer came in the room as soon as Peter sat down at the table. A tall but lean man with short black hair and a cold expression, he took time to stare at Peter before speaking.

“Mister O’Neal, I am told that you have been asking a lot of questions about Nancy Laplante lately.”

“So? I am a reporter and she was one of my prime sources of stories.”

“But she is dead now. Why do you persist in asking questions about her?”

“Because, as I told these men, I received about two months ago an anonymous letter with a wild story about Laplante in it. So I made a few inquiries about those allegations but found nothing to substantiate them.”

Peter then spoke for a few minutes, telling nearly everything that he had done so that he would sound truthful, but not all and certainly nothing about his encounter with Major Bertrand. His listener seemed to believe him when he concluded, nodding his head once.

“That corresponds pretty much with what others have told us. We found the author of that anonymous letter, by the way: he made the mistake of sending quite a few of them around. He really seemed peeved about Nancy Laplante.”

“The idiot! Another one who couldn’t stomach the fact that a woman could do great things.”

Peter’s deliberate slip got him a strange look from his interlocutor.

“Maybe. We will still need to check a few things. In the meantime, I am afraid that you will have to stay here for a day or two.”

“A day or two?” Exclaimed Peter. “What about my work? I have to warn my editor about this.”

“No!” Replied firmly the M.I.5 man. “We will call your editor in your place. This investigation is too sensitive at this stage to let you call anybody.”

“What about a lawyer, dammit? I am entitled to one under British law, after all.”

“Not in this case, mister. We are at war and the security of the state is at risk. Count yourself lucky not to find yourself locked up in the Tower of London under charges of spying or treason.”

“I don't believe this! All this fuss for a dead woman? What is it about Laplante that scares you so much?”

“We are not afraid of that trait...” started to reply angrily the agent before he held his tongue. Now furious at his own slip, he pointed a menacing finger at Peter, who was smiling in triumph. “You are becoming too smart for your own good, mister. Since you like that bitch so much, you will end up where she should have been sent. Jack, have him locked up in the Tower on charges of breaking the Official Secrets Act.”

Peter glared at the agent, understanding finally what this was all about as two agents took hold of him by his arms.

“I should have known. You bastards really tried to kill her in Colditz Castle, then tried to silence her to cover your own treacherous ways. I bet that you are after the secret of time travel and that she stopped you from getting it, isn't it?”

The sudden fury on the face of the senior agent was enough of an answer for Peter before they dragged him out of the room. His hands were roughly handcuffed in his back, then he was pushed along the basement hallway, ending up exiting the building through a rear door. The black Bentley was waiting for them there. Peter was pushed inside and, with two agents sandwiching him on the backbench seat, the car drove off in the night. Nobody spoke up during the short trip, which gave time to Peter to seriously think over everything that had happened today. He was now sure that the British government had something very embarrassing to hide from public knowledge, something that involved both Nancy Laplante and time travel. If what Major Bertrand had told him about Nancy was true, then those M.I.5 idiots probably got hammered by her in whatever encounter they had with her after the bombing of Colditz. That would explain the senior agent's characterization of Nancy as a 'bitch'. Peter then realized something that made him smile: since he was going to be in the Tower of London, he was going to be able to meet at least some of the German women held there, who

happened to have spent quite a lot of time with Nancy if his sources in the Army were correct. The idea of trying to get information on Nancy out of German prisoners of war felt bizarre to him, but those women were supposedly a pretty decent lot, particularly in the case of a teenager named Ingrid Weiss. In fact, his Army sources had often mentioned a sort of special relationship that had been apparent between that young Ingrid and Nancy.

Peter got back to reality when the car stopped in front of the gate tower of the old fortress. Two agents pulled him out and escorted him to the gate, where an officer and two soldiers were waiting for them. One of the agents showed his identification card to the officer.

“Agent Jones, M.I.5. This man is to be kept in strict isolation until further notice. Sensitive government secrets are involved.”

“You bet there are. You tried to kill Brigadier Laplante.”

A mean hook to the stomach silenced him, making Peter bend in two. The officer however interposed himself immediately.

“Easy there, mister! We will take it from here.”

The two agents backed off reluctantly after taking the cuffs off Peter, then returned to their car, which drove off shortly thereafter. The officer, a captain, helped Peter straighten up.

“Are you alright, mister?”

“I will be.” Said Peter with difficulty, still getting his breath back.

“What is your name, mister?”

“Peter O’Neal, reporter at the DAILY TELEGRAPH.”

If he was curious about all this, the officer didn’t let it show, ordering his soldiers to escort Peter inside the fortress. They passed through the gate towers of both the outer and inner walls before entering a guardroom set up in the Bloody Tower, where Peter was thoroughly searched and his possessions save for his clothes taken away. The captain then led him, still escorted by the two soldiers, to the Beauchamp Tower, where they climbed the steep stone stairs to the second floor. Peter was pushed inside a small, cold and damp cell, with the iron bar door closed behind him. The officer then dismissed the two soldiers. The captain waited until the soldiers were out of sight before approaching the bars and speaking in a low voice.

“What you said earlier about Brigadier Laplante, did you mean it?”

Peter nodded gravely, also answering in a low voice.

“Yes, I did!. As far as I can figure out, Nancy Laplante was tortured by the Gestapo but wasn't killed by them. She was sent to Colditz Castle as a prisoner of war, but our own air force bombed the place to rubble shortly afterwards, probably to avoid the possibility that she would divulge secrets to the Germans. She apparently survived the raid and escaped but, for some reason, our government is trying to hide the whole thing. I personally believe that Laplante may have returned to England after her escape and that the M.I.5 tried to get the secrets of time travel from her, but got nowhere. As for where she is now, I frankly don't have a clue.”

“The bloody lying bastards!” Said the captain through his clenched teeth. He then looked straight into Peter's eyes. “What you just told me cleared up a lot of questions I had in my mind for a few months. It is only just that I give you something in return. In early July, all the German women prisoners of war held here vanished without a trace overnight, including three of them being held in this tower. One of the girls told one of my soldiers just before vanishing that she was going to the future. My soldier was then knocked out from behind and couldn't see what happened next. Please don't tell anybody where you got that information, though.”

“Don't worry, Captain: I will be mum on that. Thanks for the information.”

“The best way to thank me will be to publish your findings on Brigadier Laplante one day, Mister O'Neal. She is too good a soldier to let government bureaucrats and politicians fuck around with her name.”

“I will gladly do that, Captain.”

“Then, good night! If you need anything, just shout: a soldier will be posted downstairs.”

The captain then left Peter alone in his cell. The reporter looked around his small cell, which was illuminated by the light from a single ceiling lamp in the narrow passage that separated the two rows of cells on the second floor. Apart of a steel-framed bed, there was only a covered chamber pot in it. A barred window gave a view of the inner courtyard of the fortress. Resigning himself to a possibly long and uncomfortable stay in this cell, Peter took off his jacket, tie and shoes and slipped under the rough wool blanket of the bed. Tired by his rough evening, he quickly fell asleep.

10:02 (North America Central Time)

Monday, June 18, 3386 'A'

Surveillance center, Time Patrol headquarters

New Lake City University campus

American Great Lakes area

"DANA, I HAVE AN UNIDENTIFIED SPACETIME EMERGENCE OVER LONDON IN THE YEAR 1941 OF TIMELINE 'B'!"

The excited shout from the young sensors technician watching the spacetime surveillance system's twin giant screens attracted at a run his supervisor, while the two other technicians on duty in the surveillance center abruptly turned their heads around to look at the screens. This was the first time ever that such an emergence had been detected in either of the timelines. Dana Mulano looked at the spacetime coordinates of the emergence.

"The early morning of October 28, just over the Tower of London. The detected signature was very weak: it must be a small craft, maybe a type of time scooter." Looking at the data pad she carried around, she then went to the nearest videophone and activated it, connecting with the readiness lounge two floors up.

"Alert level Orange! Man the standby scoutship! We have a single, weak unidentified emergence over London on October 28 of 1941 'B'. More data will be sent directly to the LATIN STING."

"We are on our way." Replied after a short delay Carmen Sanchez, the pilot of the scoutship LATIN STING. She, her copilot Samuel Goldman, her sensors operator Ilsa Bauman and the assault trooper on duty, Jean Bigras, then quickly grabbed their equipment and weapons and slid down to the scooter hall using an old-fashioned fireman's sliding pole. Once there, they took place on the duty time scooter parked in a reserved spot and jumped spacetime directly to the cargo bay of their scoutship, which was sitting on the tarmac of the New Lake City astroport, twenty kilometers away. Letting a robotic arm controlled by the ship's computer do the job of securing the time scooter in a proper parking spot, Sanchez, Goldman and Bauman ran upstairs to the crew sphere while Bigras stayed in the cargo bay to activate the ten combat robots kept there in special alcoves. In the meantime, back in the surveillance center, Dana Mulano

contacted Farah Tolkonen, who was in her office, and explained the situation to her. Farah couldn't help swear in frustration.

"Damn! This has to happen when Nancy is back in 2014 'A', playing the war correspondent and actress. Alright, Dana, inform Mike Crawford of this and tell him to send a second assault trooper to the LATIN STING. Make sure that Carmen Sanchez does not depart without that second trooper."

"Got that."

Two minutes later, Jack Crawford was rushing out of the cafeteria, where he had been having a coffee with other Time Patrol members. The crew of the scoutship ANGEL OF MERCY was close behind him.

01:36 (GMT)

Tuesday, October 28, 1941 'B'

Peter O'Neal's cell, Beauchamp Tower

Tower of London

A hand firmly applying itself over his mouth awakened Peter O'Neal. He opened his eyes at once, startled, to see with panic a huge silhouette kneeling besides his bed. The stranger, a real giant, wore a sort of bulky suit and helmet that reminded him vaguely of the diving suits used by the navy, with their globular helmets and air hoses. The poor light didn't let him detail the face of the person, though. He was then surprised to hear a female voice.

"Don't be afraid, Mister O'Neal: I have no wish to harm you. I am now going to withdraw my hand. Please do not scream or I will have to disappear."

Peter kept quiet as the hand covering his mouth was lifted. With his eyes now getting accustomed to the low light level, he could see that the giant was a pretty woman wearing a fantastic suit worthy of the best Flash Gordon comics.

"Who...who are you?"

"My name is not important, Mister O'Neal. I came here to ask you about a certain Nancy Laplante."

"You too?" Replied Peter, unable to hide some irritation. "Everybody around here wants to know about her, starting with me. Why do you want to talk about her? To find her in order to kill her?"

"Nothing of the sort, mister. I simply want to find her."

“Then you are out of luck: she probably is somewhere in the future.”

Farah Tolkonen frowned at that answer: how could Laplante be in the future, considering the fact that a nuclear war was going to erase most of Humanity in 45 years? Farah didn't have time to ask another question before a stun beam struck O'Neal, knocking him unconscious. Her heart accelerating madly, she turned around quickly while going for the machine pistol in her belly pack. Two ancestor men stood in the hallway, holding stun pistols pointed at her. Contrary to what one would expect of ancestors, these two wore advanced uniforms and equipment, including multi-function helmets and molded body armor. The taller of the ancestors firmed his grip on his pistol.

“One more move and I will have to stun you. Identify yourself, including your spacetime of origin.”

Farah was tempted to simply jump spacetime and disappear, which she could do with a single word. That would however not help her in her quest for Nancy Laplante. Besides, given their equipment and appearances, those men may very well be the link she had been looking for. She slowly raised her hands up and got on her feet while answering the ancestor with as calm a voice as she could muster.

“I am Senior Scientist First Class Farah Tolkonen, from the Imperium Ministry of Science. I departed the Imperium on June 18 of the year 3386 of the Common Era.” As soon as she had said her name, the two men lowered their pistols, intense surprise on their faces. The taller one then approached her slowly, stopping one pace in front of her and raising a hand to caress her face.

“Farah, my God! Do you come from this timeline?”

The stunning truth then descended on Farah.

“Don't tell me that this crazy notion of parallel, multiple timelines is actually a reality?”

“It is, Doctor Tolkonen. Our own Farah Tolkonen will be dying to meet you, I bet. By the way, why did you travel to the past like this, with the risks of changing history?” Farah took a deep breath before answering.

“Because life was becoming untenable in the Imperium and because the head of the Imperium Ministry of Security has plans to use time travel for his personal benefit, something which I refused to help in. Where do you come from?”

Jack Crawford, still digesting what the new Farah had said, pointed at his uniform's shoulder patch.

“We are from the Time Patrol, an organization dedicated to protect history from irresponsible time travel. We are based in the 34th century of a parallel timeline we call timeline ‘A’. We call this timeline you are in now timeline ‘B’.”

“Wait! Isn’t this the main timeline?”

Jack shook his head gravely, understanding the magnitude of the shock this piece of news would cause to Farah ‘B’.

“No, Doctor Tolkonen. Timeline ‘B’ was involuntarily created out of timeline ‘A’ by Nancy Laplante in 1940, when two scientists from the Global Council of the 34th century kidnapped her and dropped her in the past.”

Farah was silent for a moment, stunned by this. Finally regaining some composure, she looked down into the eyes of Jack.

“Mister, I formally request political asylum and the protection of your Time Patrol.”

“You will have our protection, Doctor. As for asylum, the High Council will have to decide on that.”

“Then I am ready to follow you, gentlemen.”

10:17 (North America Central Time)

Monday, June 18, 3386 ‘A’

Scooter hall, Time Patrol headquarters

New Lake City University campus

Farah ‘B’ looked around the scooter hall with intense curiosity once the time scooter transporting her, Jack Crawford and Jean Bigras had landed on the polished stone floor of the big room. Once they had stepped off the machine, Jack showed her a series of alcoves that contained spacesuits quite similar to Farah’s own suit. Five of the alcoves were empty.

“If you may take your suit off and get more comfortable, Doctor.”

Farah complied readily enough, going to one alcove and making it lean forward against the support braces of the alcove. She then opened the rear exit hatch and deftly pulled herself out of the spacesuit. Jack, who was watching her every move, noticed immediately the physical differences between this Farah and Farah ‘A’. While Farah ‘A’ was a slender woman with a graceful but nearly frail body, Farah ‘B’ had the body of a strong athlete, with well-developed biceps and muscular legs. Farah ‘B’ wore a skintight

royal blue uniform with red and white trimmings and a pair of black short boots. She also wore a leather equipment belt with a stun pistol holstered in place.

“I will have to ask you to leave your weapon inside your spacesuit, Doctor, until someone can clear you for weapon carrying here.”

“As you wish. What will we do next?”

Jack gave her a big grin.

“We go see Farah Tolkonen ‘A’. She still doesn’t know about you. We only announced by radio that we were bringing in one time traveler from timeline ‘B’.”

Farah ‘B’ smiled herself, imagining the scene to come.

“Then lead on.”

Farah ‘B’ followed the two men, who had holstered their pistols, out of the scooter hall and up a staircase. The few persons they met on their way, a mix of ancestors and of what Farah considered normal people, all stared at her with unmitigated surprise and curiosity. Farah ‘B’ was nearly enjoying herself when they arrived in front of a polished wood sliding door and Jack pressed the door buzzer. A female voice answered through an intercom.

“Come in!”

Jack opened the door, then signaled Farah ‘B’ to step in first. The Imperium scientist gingerly walked in and stopped in front of a big work desk, looking down at the stunned woman sitting behind it.

“Hello me!”

13:03 (Central Europe Time)

Friday, June 22, 3386 ‘A’

High Council chamber, Global Council government complex

Zurich, Central Europe area

An excited buzz went around the High Council conference table when both Farah ‘A’ and ‘B’ were introduced in the chamber, followed by Nancy Laplante. Farah ‘B’ was wearing her Imperium uniform, contrasting with Farah ‘A’, who wore her usual civilian long dress. All three sat at the end of the table reserved for visitors and witnesses, watched by the 24 members of the High Council. Chief Administrator Kern was the first to speak, smiling to Farah ‘B’.

“In the name of the Global Council, I would like to welcome Doctor Farah Tolkonen ‘B’ of the Imperium to this special meeting of the High Council. I hope that your stay has been an agreeable one so far, Doctor.”

“The hospitality of the Global Council has proved to be flawless up to now, Chief Administrator.” Replied Farah ‘B’.

“I am pleased to hear that. Now, ladies and gentlemen of the High Council, I will ask our Farah Tolkonen to briefly relate how Doctor Tolkonen ‘B’ came to us.”

Farah ‘A’ nodded her head and spoke for about three minutes, explaining how Farah ‘B’ had been detected and then intercepted in 1941 ‘B’ London. All eyes then turned back to Farah ‘B’.

“Doctor Tolkonen ‘B’,” said Boran Kern politely, “would you explain to the High Council why you felt that you had to flee from your Imperium?”

“Certainly, Chief Administrator.”

Farah ‘B’ looked around the expectant faces of the members of the council, trying to gauge them, before speaking again.

“First of, I have to emphasize strongly the following point: while the people of the Imperium and of the Global Council are physically similar and are roughly on a par technologically, our two societies are socially and politically totally different. Your Global Council is a democratic oligarchy, while the Imperium has been a functioning monarchy for fourteen centuries. The biggest difference is in the respective social context, though. You have not known war for centuries, while the central government of the Imperium has been constantly fighting armed separatist and nationalist groups and even breakaway entities since its creation. We of the Imperium are a highly militaristic society with low regard given to individual rights. Torture and the death penalty are legal instruments of the state in the Imperium, instruments that are yielded with little restraint by the Ministry of Security, the most powerful body of the Imperium government by far. A simple suspicion of treason or sedition will normally result in the accused being jailed and tortured, often to death. Such a harsh, repressive government has actually perpetuated the existence of pockets of rebellion around the Earth, with rebels vowing to fight to the death rather than submit to Imperium power. This sorry state of affair has not always been the case in the Imperium, though. The present king of the Imperium, King Stan the Sixth, is widely acknowledged to be a fair, albeit ruthless ruler, and is a direct descendant of the British royalty of the 20th century. He however does not hold the real power anymore in the Imperium: the head of the Ministry of Security, General Alan Veck,

does. King Stan is actually little more than a figurehead, with a mostly administrative and ceremonial role in the government. The Ministry of Security actually controls the police, army and navy of the Imperium. It also influences the Royal Council, supposedly the seat of power of the Imperium, through bribes, blackmail and outright threats. The only things protecting the Royal Family from the Ministry of Security are the Corps of Royal Guardsmen and the popularity of the king with the population. Since weapons are easy to obtain in the Imperium for various reasons, a coup to depose the king would probably result in the mass revolt of many of the citizens of the Imperium. The Ministry of Security is not yet ready to face such a revolt, while the king is unwilling to be the cause of the bloodbath that a revolt would entail. General Veck has however found what he thinks is a way to get rid of his opponents without causing a major rebellion: me and my time machine project. Without bragging, ladies and gentlemen, I am the sole inventor in the Imperium of the time distorter, the key element of any time machine. As soon as he heard of my project, Veck took control of it and literally forced me to work for him. Then, a month ago, the first time travel test of my experimental prototype ship proved successful and Veck immediately seized it, along with all the documentation and data needed to produce more time ships. The only reason he kept me alive was an excuse I invented about having to research the possibility of parallel timelines. Veck's intent is to use time travel to selectively eliminate his opponents before they could grow up to adult age and become nuisances. I finally had enough of this and decided to exile myself in the past. An ancient book about Nancy Laplante gave me an idea where to start looking for a refuge from the Imperium."

An awful silence followed, broken after a few seconds by a question from Sten Vargas, the old Justice Administrator.

"If I understood you well, Doctor, this General Veck was ready to go back in time and kill innocent children because they would one day represent a threat to him, is that it?"

"You are correct, sir. I tried to explain to him that such actions, apart of being heinous by themselves, risked disturbing gravely the fabric of the timeline, possibly resulting in either erasing part of it or splitting it. He ignored me."

"Doctor," said Golen Bartok, the Global Chief of Security, "why did you accept to work for such a man in the first place? Did he pressure you in any way?"

Farah 'B' gave him a jaundiced look.

“Pressure me? Sir, he had me detained and briefly tortured, just to show me what I would go through if I didn’t collaborate.”

“What a barbaric way to treat people.” Exclaimed Sten Vargas while horrified whispers went around the table. Golen Bartok then cut in.

“Doctor, we understand why you had to flee your Imperium but why did you go to 1941 London? That was a time of war, after all.”

“I fully realized that, sir. As I said, I was trying to find Nancy Laplante, the first ever recorded time traveler, and ask for her help. The fact that there was a war on then was also a factor: I thought that the Imperium would not think of searching for me there and then.”

Her last words made Bartok and a few other members of the High Council tense up.

“You mean that your Imperium will be looking for you through time?”

“Absolutely! I now represent a mortal danger to them, since I would have the opportunity to change history in the past and thus would be able to erase them and create something new that would replace the Imperium.”

“You would be ready to do that to your own civilization, Doctor?” Asked hesitantly Dana Rox. Farah ‘B’ nodded her head resolutely.

“Miss, at the stage of evolution the Imperium is at in 3386 ‘B’, I would call it a cancer rather than a civilization. While there are certainly still a lot of decent people over there, the whole system is too corrupt, too uncaring and cruel to make it worth salvaging. Even if someone would eliminate the monstrosity called the Ministry of Security, it would leave plenty of very mean people around, including the various organized crime groups, crooked cops and judges and business conglomerates bent on profit by any means. Even King Stan the Sixth is no angel by any stretch of the imagination. The cancer is terminal, believe me.”

“Let’s go back to the point about the Imperium looking for you, Doctor.” Said Bartok. “Do you think that they would be able to find you?”

“I doubt it very much, sir. I started a fire in my laboratory just before I left for the past and they wouldn’t have a clue as to where to start their search for me. Besides, nobody in the Imperium, not even me until a few days ago, believe that other timelines exist. Even if they theorized about it, they would need to find the particular spacetime resonance frequency of this timeline to be able to come here. Finding the right frequency would be no small feat for the Imperium.”

“But,” insisted Bartok, “if they were ever able to find you here, what would the Imperium do then in your opinion, Doctor?”

“They would invade you, of course.” Replied without hesitation Farah ‘B’, sending a chill around the table. “They would eradicate any group or individual that knows about time travel or that could oppose them and would leave behind an occupation force in order to ensure that your society could never become a threat to the Imperium.”

Dismay on his face, Bartok looked at Nancy Laplante and Farah ‘A’.

“Did you realize the threat you were creating to our society when you brought her here? I hope that you can protect us from this Imperium if they ever show up.”

“Not with our present means, Mister Bartok.” Replied Farah ‘A’. “According to my timeline counterpart, the Imperium navy counts a total of over 1200 warships, including 75 battleships and 153 heavy cruisers. We wouldn’t last more than a few minutes in a straight fight against such odds. As for bringing Farah ‘B’ here, we simply filled our mandate: we investigated an unidentified spacetime disturbance, found Farah ‘B’ and then accepted to give her our protection, since leaving her in 1941 would have changed drastically the history of timeline ‘B’.”

“But we could end up being invaded for this.” Raged Bartok, half getting up from his seat. “You irresponsible fools could cause our doom.”

“What is the point of claiming to hold beliefs if you are not ready to risk anything for those said beliefs, Mister Bartok?” Fired back Nancy. “The Global Council stood for decency, kindness and human solidarity, or so I thought. Are you going to forget all these noble words at the first possible threat that shows up and abandon a woman to face torture and death?”

Bartok then looked at Boran Kern as the members of the High Council started chattering nervously between them.

“We must find another place of refuge at once for Doctor Tolkonen ‘B’ before this Imperium starts looking for her here, Chief Administrator.”

More than a few other members echoed Bartok’s line of thinking as Kern got up from his seat.

“No! Miss Laplante is right. We cannot morally put a person back in danger of death just to keep us safe. Besides, I strongly suspect that this Imperium will eventually find a way to our timeline and that it will then invade us, whether we hold Doctor

Tolkonen 'B' or not. What we should do now is to discuss the various ways we could use to avoid or repel such a threat.”

“But the Time Patrol can't protect us from the Imperium. They are the first to recognize it.”

“Not in a straight fight, I agree.” Said Nancy, attracting all eyes to her. “We can however use time itself as an ally.”

“I'm all ears, Miss Laplante!” Replied Boran Kern, regaining some hope.

14:25 (GMT)

Friday, June 22, 3386 'B'

Minister's office, Security Ministry headquarters

London, Imperium

“Come in, Major Kossov. I have orders and a mission for you and your guards.” Major Iani Kossov walked to General Veck's work desk, stopping two paces in front of it and saluting. Veck returned his salute and pointed a nearby chair to Kossov.

“Have a seat, Major.”

The officer from the Scientific Division of the Ministry of Security took the offered seat and tried to relax as best he could while Veck stared at him with a cold, calculating gaze. Veck then took hold of an old style book and showed it to Kossov.

“Do you remember this book, Major?”

“Of course, General!. We found it hidden in Doctor Tolkonen's apartment when we searched it after her disappearance. A rare and probably very valuable piece of antique, actually.”

“More valuable than you think, my dear major. I think that it is the clue to where and when our traitor went after setting fire to her lab. I used the last three days to read through it carefully and to research the time period involved. This Nancy Laplante was a fascinating woman of great abilities. Did you know that an old statue of her still stands in Trafalgar Square?”

“Uh, I didn't, General. How is she involved with Doctor Tolkonen?”

“She isn't, at least directly. I actually believe that Doctor Tolkonen went to the past with the idea of finding her, maybe to ask for Laplante's protection. You see, Laplante happens to be the first ever officially known time traveler in history. She originated from the year 2012 and appeared in 1940 near London. She then helped the

British government of the time to win its war against Germany, until she was captured and officially killed by the Germans in the summer of 1941. I say officially because the author of this book makes the case that Laplante actually survived and escaped the Germans. What happens next is a bit nebulous, as the author only had rumors and second-hand stories to go by. His final conclusion is that Laplante actually returned to the future after escaping the Germans. What is especially interesting is his theory that Laplante may have abandoned the British cause after they supposedly tried to steal a time machine from her.”

“Uh, I didn’t know that they had invented the time machine as early as 2012, sir.” Veck shook his head as if Kossov had understood nothing.

“Major, please remember your history classes. The Great Nuclear Holocaust happened in 1986. Laplante could not come from the year 2012, unless she rewrote history by her actions in 1940-1941 and set the world up for the war of 1986. That war probably never happened in Laplante’s history, so I doubt that she did that on purpose. It just shows how tricky playing with history could be. It also shows how easily Doctor Tolkonen could manipulate history back in the past and change it, erasing you, me and the whole Imperium in the process if she wanted to. We thus have no choice but to try retrieving her in the past before she causes irreparable damage.”

“But...where and when will we search for her, sir? She could be about anywhere.”

“The where is actually simple, Major. She will most probably seek refuge with the only person that could have protected her here: the King. In this instance it will of course be King George the Sixth, the then King of England during the Second World War. The when is more complicated. According to this old book, Nancy Laplante was either killed or disappeared from history on or around July 1 of 1941. Since the book doesn’t say where that happened with any certainty, I doubt that Doctor Tolkonen would have jumped for that date. Her best bet would be to seek asylum at the royal palace and then enquire about Laplante. Even if she cannot find her, Tolkonen would still at least enjoy the protection of the British who, I suspect, will consider her worth easily her weight in gold and will milk her of her scientific knowledge. If I had to pick a date, I would choose mid-May of 1942, when the British and their allies were at their lowest in the war, according to the author of the book. Tolkonen would then be in position to ask the most out of the British in return for her knowledge. We will thus try to intercept her at Buckingham Palace in May of 1942. Even if she arrived in London earlier than that date,

we will simply pressure the British into handing her back to us. This is where you and your guards come in, Major.”

10:31 (North America Central Time)

Tuesday, June 26, 3386 ‘A’

Surveillance center, Time Patrol headquarters

New Lake City University campus

American Great Lakes area

“DANA, I HAVE THREE UNIDENTIFIED SHIPS EMERGING OVER LONDON ON MAY 20 OF 1942 ‘B!’”

“Damn! It seems that all the excitement happens on my shift.” Said Dana Mulano to herself as she ran to the timeline ‘B’ surveillance console. She looked at the data for a few seconds, then punched a big red button on the console. A loud alarm horn started blaring as Dana activated the station’s videophone.

“Ready lounge, this is the surveillance center: three ships have materialized over Buckingham Palace at 23:40 GMT on Wednesday, May 20 of 1942 ‘B’. One appears to be the size of a shuttle, while the two other ships are quite large.”

Dana’s next call was to Farah Tolkonen ‘A’, to whom she repeated the information she had just passed to the ready lounge. Farah’s response was swift, as she expected this.

“Thanks, Dana. Tell our scoutship on alert to wait before lifting off. We will send a task force to deal with this. Advise Nancy Laplante immediately.”

Closing the link with the surveillance center, Farah ‘A’ then called the office of the Global Chief Administrator in Zurich, getting a secretary to answer on the second ring.

“Global Chief Administrator’s office, may I help you?”

“Yes! This is Doctor Tolkonen, at Time Patrol headquarters. I need to speak urgently to the Chief Administrator.”

“Certainly. Please hold the line.”

“No, don’t...” said Farah urgently just as recorded music started playing on the line. A good two minutes went by before an increasingly impatient Farah got the secretary back on the videophone.

“I am sorry, Doctor, but the Chief Administrator is out of his office at the moment. Would you like to call him back later?”

“No, miss: I need to speak to him, now! Half of our fleet is about to scramble on a combat mission and I need his authority to activate our combat robots, so I don’t care if you have to chase him all the way to the washrooms or have to page him. And please don’t put me on hold again.”

“Uh, I will see what I can do.” Replied the now rattled secretary before walking away from the videophone screen. Boran Kern appeared on the screen two minutes later, running to it.

“Doctor Tolkonen? Sorry for the delay: you actually caught me with my pants down. What is it?”

“What we believe to be three Imperium ships just emerged over London on May 20 of 1942 ‘B’. We are now scrambling six ships to intercept them but we need your release authority to activate our combat robots.”

“Let me just go to my personal computer, Doctor. 1942, you said? So they really went back to get your counterpart.”

“It appears so, sir.”

Farah then waited a few seconds while Boran Kern transferred the call to his desk videophone.

“I am activating the robots now, Doctor. You should have full control of them now.”

Farah saw effectively the activation status board of the robots switch from red to green on her desk console.

“I have, sir. Thank you! I will report back to you as soon as I have more news.”

“Then good luck to your people, Doctor.”

23:47 (GMT)

Wednesday, May 20, 1942 ‘B’

Old Nursery, 2nd floor of Buckingham Palace

London, England

Margaret Windsor woke up with a startle when a large hand roughly covered her mouth. Opening her eyes, she saw a huge silhouette bending over her bed in the dark room. Besides her in the bed, she could feel Ruby MacDonald, her maid, trying to resist another attacker. The giant man standing over Margaret then spoke in a low but forceful tone.

“Keep quiet, both of you, or we will have to play rough.”

Ruby quickly stopped moving after those words.

“That’s better! Now, identify yourselves and don’t speak loudly or you will regret it.”

“I...I’m Ruby MacDonald, maid to Princess Margaret.” Stuttered the frightened servant. Margaret didn’t feel much braver than her maid when she spoke up.

“I’m Princess Margaret. Who are you?”

“That’s none of your business for the moment, girl.” Replied the giant brusquely. Margaret could now see that at least six armed giants, wearing some kind of armored suits, were in the old nursery room that had been temporarily turned into her bedroom. The man over Margaret spoke again.

“You, the maid! You will take this note and give it to your king once we are gone. We...”

A beeping noise then interrupted the giant, who then apparently spoke in a microphone that was probably part of the helmet he wore. The man used a language that sounded a bit like English but was actually unintelligible to Margaret and Ruby.

“Major Kossov here!... What?...five ships! Hell, buy us some time, we are about finished here.”

Kossov then looked down at the frightened maid and switched back to English while giving her an envelope.

“As I said, you will give this to your king once we are gone. Tell him that the life of his daughter will depend on his cooperation.”

Another giant that Margaret had not noticed yet suddenly shouted with alarm from the window besides which he stood, partly hidden by the curtains.

“Major, I see at least a dozen silhouettes flying down towards us.”

A yellow stun beam then struck the Imperium guard in the chest, knocking him unconscious. Kossov immediately stepped away from Margaret’s bed and activated the individual shield generator integrated into his body armor.

“Activate your shields! Privates Tonen and Votek, lead the way out through the hallway towards the destroyed North Wing. The rest will hold here and cover our retreat with the princess.”

Turning sideways, so that his frontal shield would not be in the way, Kossov then grabbed the left hand of Princess Margaret and roughly pulled the young teenager out of her bed. He was forcibly dragging her towards the nursery’s door when four of his

guards posted at the windows opened fire with their assault rifles. Margaret screamed in fear at the ear-splitting noise and tried to break away, but Kossov's grip was too strong for her. The two troopers preceding Kossov and the princess rushed into the hallway and faced a British officer wearing the blue uniform of a R.A.F. group captain coming at a run. The British braked to a halt and took out his service revolver but a stun discharge from Tonen's rifle knocked him out before he could fire. Margaret's eyes widened in horror at that sight.

"Nooo! Not Mister Townsend!"

"He's only knocked unconscious, girl." Replied Kossov. "Who is he anyway?"

"He's the King's equerry, you bastard!"

"The equerry, you say? Good! Private Votek, grab that man: we are bringing him with us."

The big, powerful guard quickly grabbed the inert British and threw him over his left shoulder as if he weighed next to nothing. His partner, Private Rina Tonen, then shouted in alarm.

"What the... WATCH OUT!"

Kossov looked back towards the door of the nursery and felt instant fear: an impressive machine mounted on two tracks had emerged from the room, a weapons turret mounted on its upper part now pointed at them. Tonen fired a long burst of automatic rifle fire at the machine but the bullets ricocheted on an invisible obstacle.

"Damn! These things have shields too."

A bright blue-green beam of light then sizzled from the machine's turret, hitting Tonen's body armor at the left shoulder and causing an explosion of sparks. Tonen screamed with pain and staggered back but stayed up.

"Go now, Major! I will hold it."

Kossov hated the idea of leaving his troopers behind like this but he had to accomplish the main goal of his mission: bring back a royal hostage to the Imperium. He thus lifted Margaret in his left arm and ran towards the demolished North wing of the palace, preceded by Private Votek, still carrying the British officer. He heard Tonen fire two more bursts before the robot's laser sizzled again and the female guard screamed in pain. To her credit, Tonen kept firing even while down on the floor, forcing the robot into concentrating its attention on her. Two more laser beams burned through Tonen's armor before she passed out from the pain of her burns. By then, Kossov and Votek had emerged in the open, on the edge of what was left of the hallway. Kossov swore at

the sight of one of the two Imperium Navy destroyers that were supposed to provide protection to the prototype time ship: the eighty meter-long ship now lay on the lawn of Green Park, smoking holes in its hull and with its crew scrambling out by a number of hatches. The prototype time ship taken from Doctor Tolkonen was still near the palace, though, resting on its landing gear and with its rear access ramp still down.

“Let’s go!” Shouted Kossov, then activating his directed gravity drive and leaping in the air, flying towards the ship. Young Margaret screamed with fright while they flew six meters off the ground but Kossov ignored her until he landed on the ship’s access ramp and ran inside, where two troopers were waiting with rifles at the ready. Kossov, seeing that Votek and his prisoner were aboard as well, shouted at the pilot, visible in the forward section of the small ship.

“TAKE OFF AND JUMP BACK TO THE IMPERIUM, NOW!”

The pilot hesitated and looked at him.

“But...the others, sir?”

“THEY ARE GONERS! TAKE OFF NOW!”

The pilot did not insist, grabbing his controls and lifting his ship off the ground. He jumped back to the future as soon as the ship had risen ten meters in the air. They all blew out air in relief when they saw the familiar background of 3386 ‘B’ London through the viewing screens.

“I saw the destroyer CROWN PRINCE KODOS crashed near Buckingham Palace.” Said Kossov to the pilot. “What happened to the destroyer GENERAL TESSLOV?”

“It blew up high above the old London, sir. The enemy used weapons we could not detect. What happened inside the palace, sir?”

“Robots attacked us, mean machines with individual shields, lasers, stun rifles and other weapons. Only the sacrifice of Private Tonen allowed me and Private Votek to escape with our prisoners.”

The pilot then looked at Princess Margaret, cowering in a corner of the cabin.

“She’s so small and young. It feels nearly indecent to take a prisoner like her.”

Kossov also looked critically at Margaret. He knew from historical data that she was not even twelve years old yet. She was also the size of an Imperium girl half her age and had a frail body but an attractive face, especially with her hair, which added an exotic touch to her appearance. Kossov silently agreed with the pilot but, to her bad fortune, the girl was now a puppet in General Veck’s plans.

23:50 (GMT)

Wednesday, May 20, 1942 'B'

Buckingham Palace, London

England

The officer of the Royal Welsh Guards leading the charge up the staircase to the second floor swore and stopped dead in his track, crouching and pointing his pistol at the intimidating machine that had just rolled on its tracks to the top edge of the stairs.

“DON'T SHOOT! WE ARE HERE TO HELP.”

The female voice coming from the entrance of the old nursery made the officer look that way nervously. He then saw a tall woman that wore some kind of body armor and a complicated helmet over a gray uniform. The officer's mouth opened wide with surprise.

“Brigadier Laplante? But you are supposed to be dead.”

Nancy smiled wryly and lowered her TERMINATOR assault rifle.

“A wild exaggeration, Captain. Tell your men to relax: the enemies still in the palace are either dead or taken prisoner by my people.”

“You call that steel thing a person, Brigadier?”

“No, that's one of my combat robots. I have my own organization in the future, Captain. We tried to stop those attackers from the future but two of them managed to escape in their remaining ship with Princess Margaret and Group Captain Townsend.”

“Shit! She's the sole remaining heir to the throne. Who are these assholes anyway?”

“They are from the Imperium, a militaristic society of the 34th century. Please advise the King that I need to speak to him urgently.”

“Right away, Brigadier.”

As the British officer ran down the stairs, leaving four soldiers standing in the staircase, Nancy went to Private Tonen, still lying unconscious in the hallway. Crouching besides the giant woman, she checked her pulse and found a strong, regular one. The last laser blast had burned through the trooper's shield generator, so Nancy was able to remove Tonen's body armor to check her wounds. The Imperium woman sported four laser wounds, deep, localized burns that were going to be very painful once she woke up. Applying her hands on the wounds of the trooper, Nancy mentally healed them in a bit

over a minute. Tonen woke up just before Nancy was finishing to heal her. She looked at Nancy's glowing hands, then into her eyes.

"What...what are you? How did you do this?"

"It's a long story, miss. What is your name and rank?"

"Tonen, Private Rina Tonen. What do you plan to do with me now? Torture me for information?"

Nancy shook her head at Tonen's defiant tone.

"The Time Patrol does not torture or mistreat prisoners, Private. Get up!"

Seeing a pistol on Nancy's belt, Rina tried to grab it in a flash. Nancy's hand slapped away Rina's hand before she grabbed the much bigger Imperium trooper by the front of her uniform belt and slammed her effortlessly against the wall, knocking the breath out of Rina.

"Don't try anything smart, Private Tonen. You fought bravely but you still participated in the kidnapping of a young girl who happens to be the heir to the throne of England."

Rina looked down at Nancy with disbelief: that small woman was actually lifting her off the ground with the strength of a single arm.

"How could you be so strong? Are you a cyborg or what?"

"Call it a gift from above." Replied Nancy before letting her down and looking at the nearest robot.

"Unit 317, watch this prisoner. If she tries to escape, stun her."

"Understood, Nancy!" Answered the robot in a deep male voice that sounded fully human. Nancy then looked towards the staircase, where a dozen British soldiers were watching her and her robots, unsure what to do.

"Don't just stand there! Sweep the palace for other giant intruders, but be careful not to mess with my own men or robots. Is the King coming?"

"I am right here, Brigadier Laplante." Said the King, his head emerging from the stairwell. Climbing the last steps, he approached Nancy as she knelt in deference to him.

"Please stand, Brigadier. I am the one who should bow to you to repair all the wrongs we did to you. Please tell me that Margaret is safe."

Nancy got back on her feet and slung her assault rifle, facing the anxious monarch.

"I am afraid that she was kidnapped by those giants, Your Majesty, along with Group Captain Townsend."

“But why? Isn’t fighting the Germans enough? Who are these giants anyway?”

“They are from a future military empire called the Imperium, Your Majesty. As for the why, I believe that I know the answer to that.”

Just then, Jean Bigras showed up with a still shaking Ruby MacDonald. The servant, still wearing only a nightgown, curtsied to the King and handed him a letter.

“I am awfully sorry that I couldn’t protect the princess, Your Majesty. One of our attackers gave me this, to be handed to you.”

The King quickly opened the envelope and extracted a sheet of paper, unfolding it and reading it twice. His face was ashen when he looked back at Nancy.

“This Imperium wants the return of a certain Doctor Farah Tolkonen, also from the Imperium, in exchange for the return of Margaret. They are going to send an emissary for our answer in two weeks. Now, why would this Doctor Tolkonen be here, Brigadier?”

“She came to 1941 to look for me and to ask for asylum from the Imperium, Your Majesty. She is presently under my protection. I am sorry that it resulted in this but I didn’t think that the Imperium would be stupid enough to pull such a stunt.”

“Talk for yourself, Laplante!” Shouted Rina Tonen from a few paces away. “That traitor has to be returned to the Imperium to face her just punishment.”

Both the king and Nancy looked at her with irritation.

“One day you will see your Imperium for what it is, Private: a corrupt and autocratic society ready to self-destruct. Your Majesty, they attacked you. It is thus only just that the prisoners we have be handed to British authorities. I will only ask that they be treated humanely and according to the laws and customs of war.”

“I will certainly agree with your suggestion, Brigadier. Soldiers, take the giant prisoners to the Tower of London.”

Nancy immediately spoke into her helmet microphone.

“All units, release custody of the prisoners to the British soldiers who will approach you. Otto, how is the sweep of that crashed ship going?”

The voice of the Austrian came in on the radio after a second.

“We are half done, Nancy. We have 26 crewmembers in custody, including six lightly wounded, ready to be handed over to the British.”

“Excellent! KRONOS, give me a status report please.”

“All our ships and people are accounted for, Nancy. The scoutship ANGEL OF MERCY suffered some minor damage from laser fire but is still fully operational. The GILGAMESH will tow that crashed Imperium ship back to base once it is fully swept.”

“Good! Nancy, out!”

The King was looking with intense curiosity at her when she finished speaking in her microphone.

“I don’t know for who you work right now, Brigadier, but you appear to be our only hope in this crisis. Some in the government and military view you as a traitor but know that I still have the utmost respect for you and will trust your advice.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. I truly appreciate your trust in me. I must tell you that the members of the Time Patrol, of which I am the chief of operations, come from three different centuries and that many are Germans in whom I have utter confidence. They, like me, now work for the good of all of Humanity and do not bear allegiance to a particular country anymore. Will you still trust us after knowing this, Your Majesty?”

George the Sixth hesitated for a moment before replying with a forced smile.

“If you vouch for their loyalty, then I will trust them, Brigadier. Now, how shall we resolve this crisis and get back Margaret and Group Captain Townsend alive and well?”

“This would be best discussed with the Prime Minister, Your Majesty. Until we are able to have a meeting with him, I would ask that the palace personnel keep quiet about this whole thing: no point in spreading panic through London.”

“A sensible proposition, Brigadier. I will order the utter discretion on this and will advise the Prime Minister. What about you?”

“I will supervise the cleanup operation in the meantime. Please advise me when we will have a firm time for a meeting with the Prime Minister, Your Majesty.”

The king nodded once and walked away, letting Nancy free to go check on the progress of Otto Skorzeni and his team of agents and robots. A total of 39 Imperium prisoners, including 14 wounded, were now lined up on the lawn on the north side of the palace, near their crashed ship. Nancy scanned visually the hulk, using the low light vision camera integrated to her helmet: it was shaped like an elongated egg with bulbous cruciform appendages and was about eighty meters long. It was well armed with what appeared to be missile launchers, gun turrets and laser batteries. Two gaping holes were visible in the rear section, where missiles had struck. Nancy went next to the prisoners, who were guarded by over twenty British royal guardsmen. Patricia Wilson and Sylvie Comeau were assisting Doctors Rebecca Milner and Keiko Miramoto in

giving first aid to the wounded prisoners. The Imperium woman being treated by Keiko and Sylvie was a very frightened-looking young Eurasian beauty who had burns on her arms and hands. Somehow, Nancy felt instant sympathy towards the baby-faced woman. Nancy knelt besides her and gave her best smile.

“What is your name, miss?”

“Ship Technician First Class Tina Barat, maam.”

“Then, don’t be afraid, Tina. You will be treated decently, like the rest of your comrades.”

“Why did you attack us? Who are you?” Asked Tina timidly.

“We are the Time Patrol, an organization dedicated to the protection of history from illegal tampering. Your attack on Buckingham Palace was placing history at a grave risk of disruption and gave us no choice but to counter you.”

Otto Skorzeni joined up with Nancy then, his assault rifle still at the ready. He gave a suspicious look at the nearby British soldiers before reporting to Nancy.

“The ship has been swept, Nancy. We only found six dead crewmembers apart of those 39 prisoners. The bodies have just been brought out.”

“Thanks! Excellent job, Otto. Regroup your team and reembark on the ANGEL OF MERCY. Tell Angie to go back to base and to have her battle damage repaired on a top priority basis.”

“Yawoll!” Answered Otto out of habit, attracting black looks from the nearest British soldiers, before running towards his group of assault troopers and combat robots. Nancy got up and activated her helmet radio.

“GILGAMESH, this is Nancy. The Imperium derelict is ready for pickup. Tow it back to base and ask Farah to have a technical inspection team go through it.”

“Understood! GILGAMESH, out!”

A minute later, the huge dark mass of the GILGAMESH floated down silently from the sky, stopping to a hover above the crashed Imperium ship. That was when the British anti-aircraft defense crews protecting London reacted belatedly, directing a number of searchlights on the 300 meter-wide, saucer-shaped heavy transport ship. Nancy swore violently when a dozen anti-aircraft guns opened fire on the GILGAMESH. Thankfully, the ship was still protected by its shields and the shells exploded harmlessly away from its hull.

“The idiots!” Raged Nancy. Turning towards the officer in charge of the British soldiers guarding the prisoners, she shouted at him.

“LIEUTENANT, GET THOSE DAMN GUNNERS TO STOP FIRING: THEY ARE SHOOTING AT FRIENDLY FORCES.”

The officer ran away towards the palace, letting Nancy wait impatiently as the GILGAMESH ignored the shelling and started lifting the Imperium ship with a tractor beam. The guns were still firing when the heavy transport ship and its load rose into the sky and disappeared in a giant flash of white light. The British guns then shifted their fire to the scoutship ANGEL OF MERCY, which was approaching the palace in order to pick up Otto Skorzeni’s group. By then, Nancy had had enough of this nonsense.

“KRONOS, this is Nancy! I want you to stun those dimwits firing at our ships right now. I don’t care if you have to stun half of London to do it. Nancy out!”

One of the prisoners, an officer, laughed at her anger.

“That’s what you get for helping ancestors, little woman.”

Nancy, thoroughly pissed by now, walked quickly to the officer and grabbed him by the collar, forcing him on his feet.

“It’s Miss Laplante to you, buster! Keep in mind that those ancestors are the ones who will be your jailers, so don’t laugh too hard.”

Putting him down, Nancy then watched as the KRONOS methodically silenced the British guns with wide stun beams. The ANGEL OF MERCY was finally able to land and embark Skorzeni’s group, departing as soon as they were on board. The British lieutenant ordered to call by Nancy came back at a run a minute later, an apologetic look on his face as he stopped in front of her and saluted her.

“I’m awfully sorry about this, maam, but the air defense command refused to believe me or my captain.”

“Don’t worry about it anymore, Lieutenant: those gunners just won a strong headache for their troubles. When will those prisoners be taken away?”

“The trucks should be here shortly, maam.”

“Good! Dismissed!”

Nancy next returned to her medical team, which was about finished providing first aid to the wounded prisoners, and helped them care for a prisoner with shrapnel wounds. King George the Sixth, solidly escorted by royal guardsmen, joined her there a few minutes later. Nancy immediately got up and bowed her head in respect.

“Any news from the Prime Minister, Your Majesty?”

The King looked embarrassed as he answered her.

“Sort of, Brigadier: the Prime Minister is in a deep slumber right now. I was made to understand that he abused the bottle a bit tonight before going to bed. Foreign Minister Eden is however on his way to the palace right now.”

Nancy sighed: Winston Churchill was notorious for being a heavy drinker, albeit one with an incredible capacity to absorb alcohol. On the other hand, Anthony Eden was a senior minister with a lot of clout and a decisive personality.

“Foreign Minister Eden will do fine, Your Majesty.”

“Brigadier, I would like to speak to you in private for a few minutes.”

Surprised, Nancy stared into the King's eyes, then nodded her head once.

“As you wish, Your Majesty.”

Both walked away from the prisoners and their guards, with the king's escort keeping a respectful distance. The King stopped besides a tree and faced Nancy, speaking in a low voice.

“Brigadier, I am fully aware of the accusations of treason made against you and of you wounding the head of M.I.5 to free a person from the future illegally held and abused. I know also that you gave up your British medals. I would like you to accept them back.”

“For what purpose, Your Majesty?” Replied Nancy softly, unwilling to be rough with this most honest and decent monarch. “I consider myself neutral in this war and feel no particular loyalty towards the British government, which sacrificed me and betrayed my trust. My duty is now to history and its protection. Be sure however that I will do my utmost to save your daughter and Group Captain Townsend.”

“I know, Brigadier. That is precisely why I want you to take back your medals as one of the bravest soldiers the British Empire ever had. If you are to risk your life to save Margaret, then I want you to do it as the heroine you are to my family and me. I have already signed a secret declaration of royal pardon for you a few months ago, even though the Prime Minister disagreed with it.”

Touched more than she wanted to show, Nancy hesitated for a long moment, conflicting emotions running through her. She finally looked back at the King.

“Your Majesty, you must understand that I am no longer a soldier of your empire. Know also that some of the people who will assist me on this rescue mission are ex-German soldiers. How is the British cabinet going to react to that?”

It was the King's turn to be surprised and hesitant.

“Uh, I frankly don’t know, Brigadier. I suppose that some may use that as further proof that you are a traitor.”

“I thought so, Your Majesty. As long as the British government will not be able to accept all my people as they are, then I see no point in taking back my British medals. The best for the moment would be to keep this whole thing under wraps, let my Time Patrol get Princess Margaret and Group Captain Townsend back and part with a handshake afterwards.”

The King, a bit disappointed, chose to change the subject of the conversation.

“And how do you propose to get Margaret back, Brigadier?”

“Let’s wait for Mister Eden before we talk about that, Your Majesty.”

Nancy’s expression then changed and she looked at the British monarch with something akin to embarrassment.

“Uh, Your Majesty, while we are alone together right now, I do have a confidence to tell you. It is about one of my combat pilots.”

King George VI looked confused by that, not seeing why she was telling him about a particular pilot.

“What about him, Brigadier?”

“Well, it’s a her, Your Majesty. I saved her from certain death a year ago, then took her in my Time Patrol. You know her well, I believe...”

CHAPTER 15 – DOUBLE-CROSS

09:52 (GMT)

Tuesday, June 26, 3386 'B'

Basement detention and interrogation block

Headquarters building, Ministry of Security

London, Imperium

Group Captain Peter Townsend was still unconscious when he and a terrified Princess Margaret were brought in a large room with padded walls furnished with an assortment of sinister tools. Waiting for them and their four escorts there were General Veck himself and three experienced interrogators. Despite his loyalty towards his superior, Major Kossov didn't like the way things were going. Veck, in full uniform, looked down coldly at the two British prisoners before concentrating his attention on Kossov.

"Report, Major!"

Kossov handed Princess Margaret to one of his guards, then came to attention.

"We have succeeded in capturing those two prisoners and delivering our ultimatum, sir. The girl is Princess Margaret Windsor, heir to the throne of England, while the man is the equerry to King George the Sixth. We were however attacked by at least five ships, which launched some sort of combat robots against us. Those ships hailed our ships and told them to leave immediately, then opened fire when we refused to do so. They belonged to something called the Time Patrol. Both of our destroyers were shot down and I lost six of my ground troopers during the fight inside the palace. Those robots were extremely dangerous and were equipped with shields and lasers, among other weapons."

Veck was silent for a moment, digesting the bad news and trying to figure out what to do next.

"So, our Doctor Tolkonen did succeed in finding someone to protect her, then mounted an ambush against us. Did you see any of your human attackers, Major?"

"Our ship's pilot saw the video transmission from the enemy ships, sir: an ancestor spoke to us. Also, I heard on my radio one of my troopers before he was shot,

saying that he had just recognized this Nancy Laplante as the human leading the combat robots. While being ancestors, our enemies however operated with a technology at least as advanced as ours, sir.”

“Damn, we need to know more about this Time Patrol and Nancy Laplante.” Said Veck angrily before looking at the prisoners, then at the chief interrogator.

“Wake that man up and prepare both prisoners for interrogation.”
Kossov, suddenly uneasy, tried to change Veck’s mind as both the man and the girl were roughly stripped of their clothes. Torturing a young teenage girl was not what he considered an act worthy of a soldier.

“Sir, if I may. The historical consequences of harming the princess could be severe, maybe enough to rewrite history.”

“I know what I am doing, Major. You and your men are dismissed. I want your full mission report on my desk in four hours.”

“Yes sir!” Replied Kossov, hiding his displeasure. He saluted and left with his three remaining guards. Veck then approached Princess Margaret, who was crying from the humiliation of being stripped in public.

“If you think that this is bad, young girl, prepare yourself for much worse, unless you cooperate with us.”

Veck watched on as the chief interrogator made Group Captain Townsend smell a small bottle of strong salts. The British officer soon woke up and looked around him in confusion as he had both of his hands solidly attached to chains hanging from pulleys fixed to the ceiling.

“What...what is all this? What are you doing?”
Townsend then saw Princess Margaret, naked and held by an interrogator, and stared angrily at Veck.

“How dare you humiliate the Princess like this? Who the hell are you?”
“I am General Alan Veck, Minister of Security of the Imperium. You are now in the London of the year 3386, so you can forget about getting any help here. Now, I will need you to answer a few questions.”

Townsend briefly looked around him, eyeing the various torture instruments visible in the room, and looked back at Veck, hiding his fear behind a mask of defiance.

“Like hell I will!”
“I thought so.” Said calmly Veck before turning towards the interrogator holding Princess Margaret. “Suspend her facing this man.”

Like Townsend, the princess was soon pulled off the ground, naked and spread-eagled by four chains. A female interrogator then grabbed a steel-tipped rod connected by a wire to an electrical control box and stood at the ready near the two prisoners. Veck approached Townsend, who was now sweating and appeared much less sure of himself.

“Here is the deal, mister: you answer my questions fully and you and the girl won’t suffer. If you refuse to answer or try to lie, then both of you will pay for it. If you really care about your princess, then you will answer me. First, though, here is a small taste of the things to come.”

On his signal, the female interrogator applied the tip of her electric rod on the equerry’s genitals, making him scream horribly for a few seconds. Veck let Townsend recover from the shock before speaking again.

“So, are you ready to answer me, mister?”

“What the hell do you want anyway?” Answered Townsend, unable to stand the idea of the young princess being tortured because of him.

“First, I want to know if you heard anything about a giant woman called Farah Tolkonen that would have showed up in your London.”

Townsend swallowed hard before answering: he had read with the king the Prime Minister’s report about the M.I.5 illegal arrest of a giant from the future. Since that giant was now gone, presumably to the future with Nancy Laplante, there could be little harm in revealing that, especially if it could save the princess from being tortured.

“I am not sure about the name, but I know that last summer a giant, bald woman, was arrested by our counter-intelligence service and briefly held. Brigadier Laplante reportedly freed that giant and left with her, presumably for the future.”

Anger flared in Veck’s face at those words.

“A giant? Describe her to me.”

“Please, the report didn’t say much about her, except that she was bald and had six fingers per hands. She appeared near London by using a portable device.”

“Damn! Tolkonen probably built that device secretly.” Said Veck to himself. He then looked back at Townsend.

“When was that woman arrested, then freed by Laplante?”

“I don’t remember the exact dates, I swear. The report was dated from mid July of 1941.”

Veck made another signal to the female interrogator, who raised the voltage before using her rod for a second time. Townsend screamed again horribly, while Princess Margaret could only squeal with terror.

“Refresh your memory quickly, or the princess will have a taste of it.”

“I don’t know! The report didn’t say.”

“As you wish.”

Veck was going to signal the female interrogator to give a shock to the young girl when the door of the room opened, letting in King Stan the Sixth and ten of his royal guardsmen. Veck looked angrily at him as the King approached at a fast walk but didn’t dare chase him away. The King may have held little real power but, individually, he was still a formidable opponent. Even with forty security guards lining up in the back of his royal guardsmen, Stan the Sixth looked at both prisoners before eyeing angrily Veck.

“I just heard about your latest stupidity, General. Did you ever consider the possible consequences of this mission in the past? Do you really want to change history so badly that we end up erased from it?”

“Your Majesty, Doctor Tolkonen left us little choice but to chase after her. If left alone in the past, she is liable to change history herself and get rid of us that way.”

King Stan frowned at those words: Veck had just given the only justification that would force him to back his actions. Still, he didn’t like the idea of having to support that megalomaniac.

“Who are these two ancestors, Veck, and why are they here?”

“We took them to oblige the British in 1942 to cooperate with us in finding and giving back Doctor Tolkonen. We just found from this man that Tolkonen was actually picked up in 1941 London by Nancy Laplante, the first recorded time traveler in history. That same Laplante intervened again when we raided Buckingham Palace, with her ships shooting down two of our destroyers over London in 1942.”

King Stan was about to ask again for the identity of the prisoners when the young girl pleaded to him, tears in her eyes.

“Please sir, if you are their King, save...”

The female interrogator then decided on her own to give a jolt to the Princess, making the girl scream horribly with pain. King Stan drew his pistol in a flash and shot once the interrogator in the head, splattering her brains around. The forty security guards raised their weapons at once, pointing them at the King, while the royal guardsmen raised their own rifles and pointed them at Veck, who broke in a nervous sweat.

“Let’s be sensible here. Lower your weapons, all of you.” He said in a shaky voice.

The security guards obeyed, followed only then by the royal guardsmen. King Stan then went to the sobbing girl and gently caressed her hair.

“I am King Stan the Sixth. What is your name, child?”

“Margaret...Princess Margaret of Windsor, daughter of King George the Sixth. My friend over there is Group Captain Peter Townsend, Equerry to King George. Please help us.”

Cold rage filled Stan as he slowly faced Veck. The fact that the idiot had kidnapped such a historically important person was only part of the reason for his anger, which was very real.

“I want custody of those two, immediately!”

“But that’s impossible. We need answers badly about Tolkonen and the ones who helped her in the past and this man knows a lot. I am however ready to release the girl in your care, as long as she is prevented from escaping.”

Stan knew that, despite his own bravado, his power was very limited compared to that of Veck. He thus nodded his head once, even if he didn’t like that bargain one bit.

“Alright, you can have the man, but go easy on him: we will need him alive for any deal we do with the British of 1942.”

Veck then looked at his two remaining interrogators.

“Take the girl down and dress her up.”

The two men obeyed promptly, watching nervously King Stan’s pistol while freeing and dressing Margaret. Stan then took the small girl in his powerful arms and whispered in her ear.

“Be quiet now, Princess: my powers are limited here and I can’t afford you to make more fuss about your friend. I am sorry but I have to leave him here.”

“But he’s my friend and my father’s equerry. We can’t let him be tortured like this.”

“We have no other choice, Margaret. Come, I will bring you to my palace, where you will be safe.”

Surrounded by his royal guardsmen, King Stan then hurried out of the interrogation room, covering Margaret’s mouth with one hand to muffle her protests. After a last bitter look at the departing King, Veck turned to face again Townsend.

“Now, about those dates...”

10:36 (GMT)

King's apartments, Royal Palace

London, Imperium

Miri Goshenk, advised by King Stan via radio, had two young maids and the palace doctor ready when the king's party arrived at the palace with Princess Margaret. Celebrated as one of the most beautiful women in the Imperium, Miri was also First Mistress to the king and in charge of the palace household. She felt instant pity for the tiny girl Stan held in his arms when he entered the royal apartments with her.

"Come, little Margaret, let us take care of you. Doctor Voonlar will first examine you."

The girl, her eyes red from crying, didn't protest as Miri took her in her arms and brought her to a guest bedroom where Voonlar was waiting. The old physician took ten minutes to examine Margaret, noting the electrical burn on her chest, before looking at Miri.

"She is mostly alright, Milady. That electrical burn will be painful for a while but is not severe. I will treat it right away."

"Thank you, Doctor."

Miri then smiled in encouragement at Margaret and spoke to her in Neo-English.

"Do you understand me, Margaret?"

When the girl shook her head in confusion, Miri switched to English, which was still a widely studied old language in Imperium schools.

"Is that better, Margaret?"

"Yes." Answered timidly the girl. "Who are you, miss?"

"My name is Miri Goshenk, First Mistress to King Stan the Sixth. I will be taking care of you during your stay."

"First Mistress? Your king has more than one wife?"

"The king has no wives per say, but he has actually six official mistresses. I am the current favorite in the lot. Enough about me. Once the doctor is finished with you, we will find clothes more appropriate for a royal princess like you."

As soon as Voonlar was finished treating Margaret, Miri put her two maids in charge of dressing the little girl and went to see the king, who was working on his computer in his study. Stan looked up at Miri when she hugged his back and caressed his face.

"I'm sorry if I don't feel like returning your attention, Miri: I fear that Veck put all of us in very big trouble this time. One of our scientists fled to the past and supposedly enlisted the help of an advanced organization, with which Veck's ships clashed in 1942 London. Two of our three ships were lost and there is now a real threat of having the Imperium erased from history by either our renegade scientist or this mysterious organization. From my hidden sources in the Ministry of Security, I know that Doctor Tolkonen, our renegade, was trying to find a Nancy Laplante, a woman reputed to be the first ever recorded time traveler. Ah, here is the entry file on her."

Both Stan and Miri looked at the picture of Nancy, taken during an investiture ceremony, and read the one-page text on her. Stan couldn't help smile in appreciation as he read.

"She won the Victoria Cross three times? If I am not mistaken, this is a feat unequaled in history. If she is really the one behind that mysterious time traveling organization, then we will be facing quite a foe. A beautiful woman, though."

"Is she your type?" Asked Miri softly.

"She certainly has all the qualities to attract me: beautiful, intelligent, strong-willed and athletic. The important question about her however is if she is our foe or only Veck's foe?"

"Probably the latter, but she could become the former if the Imperium is not careful about its next moves, my dear. This entry on her is a short one, but she seems to have a strong sense of honor. Maybe she should be made aware of the different factions in the Imperium: she could then think twice before deciding to erase the lot of us."

"A good point, Miri, but if she really met our Doctor Tolkonen, then she probably knows already about my power struggle with Veck. Talking of Tolkonen, I have extracted her personnel file. Read it and tell me what you think."

The file that Stan called up on his screen was much more substantial than the entry on Laplante and it took Miri a good ten minutes to read it carefully. As a doctor in psychology, Miri was able to form a fair idea about the personality of Farah Tolkonen.

"She doesn't strike me as a revolutionary type at all, Stan. She seems totally apolitical and is no sociopath, so I would say that Veck was the one responsible for pushing her into voluntary exile. You know how cruel and power hungry that man is."

"Do I ever. So, we have a top scientist who was our sole expert on time travel technology and who has been pushed into exiling herself in the past by Veck's excesses. We also have a soldier from the past who is also the first recorded time

traveler and who may head a time traveling organization with a technology at least equal to ours. The crucial question now is what will that Laplante do next? I doubt that she will let Tolkonen erase us as long as we hold Princess Margaret here, though.”

“But, Stan, we can’t hold this poor girl here indefinitely. Apart of being a cruel move, her prolonged absence or even disappearance could be enough to disturb history and erase the Imperium. Don’t forget that Margaret is the sole direct heir left to King George the Sixth and that she is supposed to be Empress of the British Empire when the nuclear war of 1986 struck. She must be returned to her time as soon as possible. If not, we would be erasing ourselves anyway.”

Stan looked up tenderly at Miri and caressed her cheek.

“You are right, as always. What would I do without your advice?”

“Oh, you would muddle through, by sheer brute force if need be, my dear Stan.”

“Then, what do you think we should do about the other British prisoner, King George’s equerry?”

“What is his name again? Do a historical search on him, please.”

Stan soon found a few entries on Peter Townsend and, opening the one from Encyclopedia Britannica, read it avidly with Miri. What they saw made Stan swear violently.

“Holy shit! He is supposed to marry Princess Margaret and then become the first Prince Consort of the British Empire. If Veck kills him or maims him permanently, we’re as good as erased.”

Jumping on his videophone, Stan formed the confidential number of General Veck and waited impatiently for him to answer. Veck did so after the third ring, his face impassive on the videophone screen.

“What now, Your Majesty? Since you took away the girl, my sole prisoner has become much less cooperative.”

As if to underline his words, a horrific scream was heard from the background, making Miri flinch. As for Stan, he looked at Veck with murder in his eyes.

“Stop that interrogation at once, Veck! If that man dies or is maimed permanently, it will change history enough to erase us all.”

“How could you believe that?” Replied Veck, clearly skeptical. “He is only an equerry, no more.”

“Can’t you do your homework correctly for once, Veck? Go check the entry on Group Captain Peter Townsend in the Encyclopedia Britannica, and tell your goons to hold on in the meantime.”

Now looking unsure, Veck hesitated for a moment, then turned around to shout a brief order before returning his attention to his wrist videophone.

“I will check this, but it better be worth it, Your Majesty.”

Veck then terminated the connection, leaving Stan furious and frustrated.

“How could the Imperium Royal Council trust so much power in the hands of such a fool? I will never understand it.”

“I do!” Said Miri, her voice bitter. “It is a combination of greed, fear and the hidden interests of the biggest crime cartels in the Imperium. Veck has quite a few nasty vices that some crime syndicates were quick enough to exploit to their profit. As long as he lets them a free hand and protects them from our corrupt justice system, they will back him, even terrorizing other members of the Royal Council if need be.”

Stan looked at his First Mistress with renewed respect.

“You should run my secret intelligence service, my dear Miri. What kind of vices did you allude to?”

“Well, for starters, Veck has a taste for some very special kind of sex, the type that involves young girls and lots of pain. The man is the perfect psychological example of a sadistic psychopath, Stan, apart from being a megalomaniac.”

Stan grimaced in disgust.

“The bastard! I should have killed him a long time ago.”

They were silent for a long moment, thinking about their way out of the present situation. The king’s videophone then rang. Stan activated it, to face Veck, who now looked much less arrogant.

“Your Majesty, I did as you suggested. Group Captain Townsend will be sent shortly to the royal palace by ambulance. What do we do next, Your Majesty?”

“What do we do next?” Said Stan, exploding. “You put us in that shit pit and you ask ME what to do next? I will call an emergency session of the Royal Council for three O’clock this afternoon. Be there and be ready to explain yourself, General.”

Stan then switched off the line and looked up at Miri.

“You better tell Doctor Voonlar that he will soon get a patient in a severe state.”

“I’m on it, Stan.”

Once Miri was gone from his study, Stan then did a few more calls to arrange the impromptu session of the Royal Council in the afternoon. He was soon done with that and slumped in his seat, trying to relax for a moment. Then his videophone buzzed again.

“What now?” He said with annoyance while switching his videophone on. To his utter surprise, the face of an ancestor apparently sitting in a shuttlecraft appeared on the screen. The man was handsome, sported a thin moustache and was dressed in an old-fashioned dark blue suit with a white shirt and a tie.

“Good morning, Your Majesty.” Said the man in a heavily accented Neo-English. “My name is Anthony Eden, Foreign Minister of Great Britain in 1942. I am now in a craft heading towards your palace and request access to your airspace under a flag of diplomatic truce.”

Controlling his excitement as best he could, Stan quickly activated a link to the Imperium Navy headquarters on his secure command videophone while facing the ancestor.

“Minister Eden, this is truly a surprise. Where is your craft now?”

“One moment, please: I will pass you my pilot. I’m afraid that I am a bit new at this space travel business.”

The face of a middle-aged woman with curly blond hair and wearing a dark gray uniform then appeared besides that of Eden.

“We have just appeared mid-way to the Moon, Your Majesty, and are heading directly towards Earth at a speed of fifteen kilometers per second. We request safe passage through your orbital defense systems.”

An alarm rang in Stan’s head at those words.

“What would you know about our defense systems, miss?”

“My name is Amelia Earhart, Your Majesty. We know enough about them. Could we expect safe passage, sir?”

“One moment, please.” Said Stan before putting that line on hold and facing the screen where the duty officer at the Navy headquarters appeared.

“Commander, I have on my private line a shuttlecraft transporting a diplomatic party from the past. They claim to be now halfway from the Moon, heading towards Earth. Do you have them on your sensors?”

“We just detected them, Your Majesty. Should we fire on them?”

“No! Send two destroyers to escort them to London but nobody is to shoot at it unless I say so or it becomes an obvious threat.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

Stan then switched back to the line with the shuttlecraft.

“Minister Eden, do you have someone else apart of your pilot onboard your craft?”

“As a matter of fact, I do, Your Majesty. I also have a junior secretary, Misses Jennifer Collins, with me, plus someone who is most interested to meet you.”

Another ancestor, a woman, then stepped in the field of view of the videophone. She wore a dark gray uniform similar to that of the pilot and sported neck-length black hair and green eyes. Stan's eyes widened at her sight.

“Nancy Laplante! I will indeed be interested to speak with you.”

“First things first, Your Majesty: are Princess Margaret and Group Captain Townsend alive and well?”

“Alive, yes. The princess is well enough but your Townsend has been badly tortured by the Ministry of Security before I could win his release. I expect him to arrive by ambulance at the palace soon. As for the princess, she is already here and being cared for by my First Mistress.”

The faces of both Eden and Laplante hardened at the news on Townsend. Eden was the one to speak next.

“Your Majesty, we are here to prevent more such unpleasantness between ourselves. My government is holding prisoner 43 of your people, taken during your raid on Buckingham Palace. We also have on board our craft the bodies of seven of your people killed during the same raid. More of your people were blown up with their ship over London but their bodies could not be recovered. Be assured that my government has no wish to continue with these hostilities and is ready to forget this regrettable incident and return your people in exchange for the return of our two people and the signing of a mutual treaty of non-aggression.”

“I commend the position of your government, Minister Eden, but what about the forces controlled by Miss Laplante? They are the ones who represent a real threat to us.”

“The position of the Time Patrol is the same as that of the British government, Your Majesty.” Answered Nancy Laplante. “We are ready to sign a mutual treaty of non-aggression as long as Princess Margaret and Group Captain Townsend are returned safely and that the Imperium refrains from incursions into the past from now on. Know that the Time Patrol has the mandate to regulate time travel in order to protect

history from irresponsible manipulations. Your ships were warned to jump back to the future but they answered us by firing at our ships, so we had no choice but to engage them.”

“What about a certain Doctor Farah Tolkonen, Miss Laplante? Do you hold her?”

“Holding is not the correct word, Your Majesty. She actually asked for my protection, which she got. She is intent on living peacefully with us and wants nothing further to do with the Imperium. Consider her as having retired to greener pastures.”

“Alright! I have already called for an emergency session of the Imperium Royal Council this afternoon, at three. You will be able to present your respective positions then. I will expect you on the roof landing pad of the royal palace.”

Cutting the communication, Stan then called Colonel Xitak, the commander of the palace guards, to order that an honor guard be prepared for the impending arrival of a diplomatic delegation. Stan next left his study and went in search of Miri, to be told by a servant that she was at the palace infirmary with Princess Margaret. Stan took an elevator to the second floor, where the infirmary was situated, and found the two of them inside the infirmary, besides a regenerative tank where Peter Townsend floated up to his chin, an inflated cushion holding his head over the level of the amber regenerative solution. His naked body showed a number of burns and wounds. Miri was actually holding Margaret in her arms, so that the small girl could reach and caress the man’s head. Stan looked on for a few seconds, then touched Miri’s shoulder to attract her attention.

“Miri, could I speak with you for a second?”

“Sure! Just let me put down Margaret first.”

Letting Margaret alone besides the tank, the royal couple walked to a far corner, where Stan told Miri in a low voice about the arriving delegation. After a first reaction of surprise, Miri made a tentative smile.

“Then, we could have a peaceful way out of this mess? That’s great!”

“We can’t gloat yet, Miri: while I find the demands of both the British and of the Time Patrol reasonable, the Royal Council may think otherwise. Also, there is always the danger that Laplante would renege on her word and change history to erase us after she is safely out of here with the princess. I myself am loath to run that risk, however infinitesimal it could be. The very existence of our Imperium is at stake, after all.”

“You would be ready to lie to them and set a trap for a diplomatic delegation? Stan, I can’t believe that you could think about doing this.”

“Sometimes, reasons of state security can force you to act like a bastard, Miri.”

“I see!” Replied Miri, frostily. “If you will excuse me, I will go try comforting a little girl, Your Majesty.”

“But...Miri...”

Miri ignored him and went to Margaret, crouching besides her. The girl actually had tears in her eyes while looking at Townsend’s battered body. Miri gently touched her shoulder to make the girl look at her.

“Margaret, I have good news for you and your friend. A diplomatic delegation from Britain is about to arrive here soon to negotiate your release. Nancy Laplante is with that delegation.”

That name alone seemed to act like a stimulant for the girl, who jumped up and down with joy.

“Yeah! Brigadier Laplante is alive! We are saved!”

That reaction surprised Miri to no small degree.

“Uh, why do you think that she can save you by herself?”

“Because she’s the best!” Exclaimed joyfully Margaret. “Wait until you meet her.”

“Well, we are about to meet her soon. Do you want to come with me for her arrival?”

“Yes, please! I would love that.”

Miri escorted Margaret back to the guestroom of the royal apartments, where she helped the girl put on a nice gown, even lending her a pearl necklace for the occasion. Miri then changed herself into a ceremonial gown and a set of expensive diamond and emerald jewels. By the time they were both ready a servant came to announce that the delegation’s shuttlecraft was on final approach. Hurrying to the rooftop landing pad, they arrived there to find King Stan waiting with a number of dignitaries and an honor guard of forty royal guardsmen. A dozen medical specialists were also waiting on the sides, ready to collect the bodies of the dead Imperium members reportedly on the shuttlecraft. Miri went to stand besides the king, still holding Margaret’s hand.

“You’re just in time, my dear. Here is the shuttlecraft and its escort ships.” Whispered Stan to Miri. Miri didn’t reply, still miffed at him. The two escort destroyers were actually visible earlier than the much smaller shuttlecraft. The latter turned 180 degrees at the last moment, presenting its rear access ramp to the dignitaries before touching down smoothly. Princess Margaret was nearly jumping with anticipation as the

ramp went down. The first to go down the ramp was Anthony Eden, followed by Jennifer Collins and Nancy Laplante. The latter was pushing an anti-gravity cart loaded with suitcases. The trio stood at attention at the foot of the ramp as the music of the British national anthem played out of loudspeakers. The Imperium's anthem followed, which Nancy saluted as well. They then walked to the King, to whom they bowed.

"Your Majesty, let me present myself: Sir Anthony Eden, Foreign Minister of Great-Britain. This is my secretary, Misses Jennifer Collins."

"Welcome to the Imperium. I am King Stan the Sixth and this is my First Mistress, Dame Miri Goshenk. As you can see, Princess Margaret is well and under my protection."

Little Margaret then broke free from Miri and ran to Eden, hugging him tightly. Moved, the politician hugged her as well.

"Don't worry anymore, Your Highness, you will be soon home, I promise."

Eden then returned his attention to King Stan.

"Your Majesty, I would now like to present you Miss Nancy Laplante, representing the Time Patrol."

Stan smiled as Nancy advanced and stopped in front of him, saluting him.

"Miss Laplante, I have heard a lot about you lately, but there are still many things unclear concerning you. I hope that we will be able to talk about this together at lunch."

"I would be pleased to, Your Majesty, to a point. If you would concur, I would like to hand over the bodies of seven Imperium members killed in combat."

King Stan, now grim, nodded and gave a sign to the waiting medical personnel. The twelve specialists approached the shuttlecraft with anti-gravity gurneys and were invited inside by Amelia Earhart. Stan saw Nancy tense up as the specialists disappeared inside, but she relaxed as soon as they got out with seven body bags on their gurneys. A solemn hymn played out while the specialists left the landing pad with the bodies. Ordering a servant to follow with the luggage cart, Stan then invited the delegation inside the roof access building, to take an elevator down to the level of the royal apartments. He didn't miss the fact that Princess Margaret was now in the arms of Nancy Laplante and looking much more reassured than before. As the cabin was going down, Stan glanced at Nancy Laplante, who looked perfectly calm despite the obvious risks to herself.

"I noticed that your pilot stayed inside the shuttlecraft, Miss Laplante. Isn't she going to stay at the palace overnight?"

“No, Your Majesty. She has to stay in the shuttlecraft to ensure its safety. By the way, how long do you expect it to be before we could get a preliminary response from your Royal Council?”

“Well, this afternoon session will be used to present the situation to the members and for your delegation to make its case, then there will be a closed discussion reserved to Imperium members to take a decision. If your delegation agrees with that decision, then a formal treaty will be prepared by our legal department, ready for you to bring back to the British government for ratification tomorrow morning. If, at the worse, we cannot arrive at an agreement today, a second round of discussion will take place tomorrow morning.”

“Then I will advise my pilot to take off and to jump forward in time to reappear at nine O’clock tomorrow morning. No sense in making Amelia spend a night in such a small craft.”

“Hmm, decidedly this time travel business has its advantages.”

“And it has also its risks, which is why it has to be regulated and controlled, Your Majesty. Can you imagine having totally unregulated time travel, where for example time traveling tourists would show up on the sidelines at the battle of Waterloo to enjoy the spectacle?”

The metaphor made Stan smile in amusement as they left the elevator and walked down a richly decorated hallway.

“You will have to meet my son Len, Miss Laplante: he is only sixteen but he is already a history nut and has a true passion for the subject.”

“Is he?” Replied Nancy, also smiling. She then took a standard data cube in its protective plastic container out of one pocket and handed it to the king. “Then he may want to view this with you tonight. It is a historical documentary the Time Patrol produced about a famous person of the first century.”

“Can I see it too, Nancy?” Immediately asked Princess Margaret, taking Nancy unprepared for that: she had meant the documentary to be seen only by Imperium members, not by 20th century British persons. It would be hard however to refuse the girl’s request now, especially after what she had gone through. Resigning herself to the consequences, she smiled to the princess in her arms.

“Of course you can, Your Highness. You showed yourself to be a brave girl and deserves a break in return.”

King Stan, who had noticed Nancy's initial reluctance about Margaret's request, gave her an inquisitive look.

"Is there something controversial about this documentary, Miss Laplante?"

"For people with strong religious beliefs, yes, Your Majesty. In 20th century England, this documentary would probably start a religious storm."

"Hell, Nancy," said Jennifer Collins, who had been working at the Hourglass Section under Nancy until the latter's disappearance, "what is this documentary about?"

"The life and death of Jesus Christ." Replied quickly Nancy before changing the subject and looking at Stan. "Would it be possible to see Group Captain Townsend soon, Your Majesty?"

"Certainly, Miss Laplante. Once you are assigned your rooms and had time to unpack, I will lead you to the palace infirmary."

"Could I stay with you tonight, Nancy?" Asked timidly Margaret. "I would feel safer with you."

Nancy smiled and kissed her.

"I would be honored, Your Highness."

Their group then turned into a secondary hallway guarded by two royal guardsmen. Stan designated the doors on the left side of the hallway.

"These are the guest rooms. Miri will take care of assigning a room to each of you. She will also transfer Princess Margaret's new wardrobe to Miss Laplante's room. She will then guide you to the infirmary. You are of course invited to have lunch with my family and me afterwards. In the meantime, I have a few things to attend to."

Miri Goshenk immediately took over as the king walked away, showing Nancy, Anthony Eden and Jennifer Collins their respective rooms and dropping their luggage in their proper place. Once everybody was installed properly, she led them towards the infirmary, where Doctor Voonlar met them. The old doctor bowed to Margaret, then spoke to Anthony Eden.

"I have good news about Group Captain Townsend, sir: while it will take a few more days of regenerative bath to fully heal him, he has sustained no permanent damage."

"A few days? But, we are due to leave tomorrow. How essential is this... regenerative bath?"

“Very! Without it, the group captain will be left with some nasty scars. Uh, I suppose that you don’t have regenerative baths in 1942, no?”

“The Time Patrol does, Doctor.” Cut in Nancy, making the others look at her. “We will take care of Group Captain Townsend’s treatment after his release and will return him to 1942 London once he is fully healed. Was Princess Margaret subjected to any mistreatment during her captivity?”

“She received some electric shocks early on, I was told, but I examined and treated her and she is now fine, miss.”

Eden’s face reddened with anger at those words but he was able to control himself.

“Just show us Mister Townsend, Doctor.”

Voonlar nodded once and, turning around, led them to a large Plexiglas tub filled with an amber liquid where Peter Townsend floated. Jennifer Collins gasped at seeing that the man was naked in the tub.

“Oh my!” She said before looking away. Nancy touched her shoulder.

“Interrogators rarely care about the modesty of their prisoners, Jennifer. Don’t be afraid to look at the reality of things.”

“But the princess shouldn’t look. She’s too young for this.”

“She probably was stripped naked like Townsend by her interrogators, Jennifer. Look at her: she only cares about comforting Mister Townsend now.”

Jennifer saw effectively that Margaret, still in Nancy’s arms, had bent forward to caress Townsend’s forehead. The R.A.F. officer was apparently in a deep sleep and didn’t react to her touch. Fighting her prudishness, Jennifer contemplated the man, noting the various wounds on his body.

“I nearly went mad with grief when they published the picture of you, when you supposedly died from the Gestapo’s tortures. How could anybody be so cruel?”

“Cruelty has been a constant in humanity’s history, Jennifer. You will see it in the documentary tonight.”

Miri, who had been listening carefully to all this, looked hesitantly at Nancy.

“You were tortured yourself once, miss?”

“Yes, in 1941, by the German secret police. They worked on me for two days, trying everything, but I managed to resist them, barely. It is not an episode I want to think about.”

“By the way,” said Eden, “your courage under torture earned you a posthumous second bar to your Victoria Cross, Brigadier. I don’t know if anybody had told you that yet.”

Nancy gave him a dubious look, a flash of anger surging through her. She did stay calm, though.

“Was that for the benefit of the British public’s morale or was it really meant as a reward, Sir Anthony?”

“It was meant as a reward, Brigadier.” Answered Eden, embarrassed. “General Ismay reviewed the films taken by the Germans during your interrogations and demanded that you be considered for a second bar to your VC. The King also reviewed those films before signing the award act. Some in the cabinet objected to this but the king berated them personally at a special cabinet session I am not about to forget. I would urge you again to reconsider your refusal to take back your medals, my friend: you earned them with your blood and pain.”

“Please, take them back, Nancy.” Urged Princess Margaret. “You are my heroine.”

Miri saw a tear roll on Nancy’s cheek as she bowed her head and looked away.

“I...I can’t! I have men and women working for me in the Time Patrol that are as deserving of recognition as me, yet the British government would never honor them, since many of them are German. I will accept back my medals when all of my people will be accepted for what they are: people of honor and courage who are risking their lives to help you, even though they had fought you before.”

“And what convinced these Germans to fight for us for a change?” Asked Eden, skeptical. He and the others then saw a strange expression appear on Nancy’s face.

“Because they, like me and all the other members of the Time Patrol, are now changed people. Something happened to me in 1941, something that opened my mind to the souvenirs of my past incarnations. I since developed a technique to open the souvenirs of my people as well. I myself remember 9,000 years of history, lived as both man and woman, warrior and peasant, noble and merchant, German and English, Japanese and French. My people and me are timeless and have no ties except with Humanity as a whole. We are nomads wandering through time, with our ships being our homes. Those are the people helping you now to preserve the integrity of history, Sir Anthony.”

The others were silent for a moment, Miri in particular being hit hard by Nancy's words: if true, then her Time Patrol would be that much more difficult to deal with. She definitely had to report this to Stan.

"Uh, I believe that lunch is about to be served. If you will follow me to the King's private dining room."

Nobody spoke on the way to the dining room, with many glancing from time to time at Nancy. The King's so-called private dining room was actually a large hall richly decorated and with paintings, works of arts and ancient weapons and armors lining the walls. Five women and eleven children ranging in age from preteens to late teenagers were already sitting around the long table, with eight servants busy preparing a hot buffet in a corner of the hall. The persons around the table rose from their chairs when Miri entered with her guests.

"Princess Margaret, Minister Eden, Miss Laplante, may I present you the five other mistresses of the king and eleven of his fourteen children."

An exchange of greetings and polite words followed for the next minute, then everybody took place at the table. Nancy sat next to Prince Len, at sixteen the eldest son of the king and a handsome boy of high intelligence and pleasant personality. Nancy took an instant liking to the young history buff and both were engaged in an animated conversation about the history of the Second World War when the King entered the dining hall. Everybody again rose, making Stan smile.

"Perfect! Now that you are up, we can all raid the buffet table together: I'm famished."

Everybody formed a line behind King Stan, the Imperium royals mixing freely with the members of the delegation. Prince Len clung to Nancy's side as they filled their plates, continuing to talk with her about history. While they were going down the buffet table, Nancy saw Miri Goshenk whisper at length with King Stan, with the latter glancing briefly at Nancy. They were soon all sitting at the table, eating and drinking while chatting. Nancy took a moment to caress the hair of young Margaret, who was sitting to the left of her. The girl was eating quietly, looking both tired and tense.

"Relax, Your Highness: nobody will hurt you now. You should take a good nap after lunch. After all, you kind of skipped your night's sleep yesterday."

"What about Mister Townsend, Nancy? They were so cruel with him. Will he be alright?"

“Physically, he will recover soon. It is always longer with the psyche, though.”

“I was told that the Germans were even more cruel with you, yet you look fine now.”

“I got some help from above, Your Highness.” Said Nancy in a low voice. Margaret’s eyes widened.

“From God?”

“Something close to that, Your Highness.”

Prince Len, who had been listening discreetly, then touched Nancy’s arm.

“Miss Laplante, while I have read much about the part played by religion in history, I have some problems understanding how people could act so violently and illogically when under its influence. Isn’t religion supposed to be mostly about peace and love?”

“That’s true of monotheist religions, Your Highness. However, polytheist religions often thrived on war and blood. Also, many religions that were well meaning at first had their teachings distorted to fit the views and ambitions of a few. The Christian religion is a good case in point.”

Len looked frustrated as he tried to remember his historical notions about Christianity.

“It is an interesting subject, miss, but the background information about it is so vague...”

“Not anymore, Your Highness. I gave your father a copy of a video documentary on the life and death of Jesus Christ, produced by the Time Patrol. Viewing is scheduled for after supper.”

“You did?” Replied the overjoyed teenager. “How was it produced? Is it based on reconstruction of old evidence?”

“Not at all, Your Highness. All the scenes were recorded live in Palestine during the life of Jesus, whose proper name by the way was Yeshua. I spent a total of four years in ancient Palestine to record those scenes.”

“So you saw Jesus Christ?”

“You will see for yourself tonight, Your Highness.” Said Nancy, chiding him a bit. Jennifer Collins, sitting opposite and to the right of Nancy, looked at her with envy.

“To be able to meet Jesus Christ. You lucky you! He must have been a fascinating man.”

“He was.” Agreed softly Nancy before looking at King Stan. “Your Majesty, how are we going to proceed with this afternoon session of the Royal Council?”

Stan took the time to wipe his mouth and hands before answering.

“The session will start at three, with only Imperium members present. That part will be used to put the members of the council abreast of the latest events. Your delegation will then be allowed in, to present its case and discuss any possible way to settle this crisis. Your delegation will leave the room after that, so that the council can debate and vote on the options proposed. I will personally inform you of the outcome afterwards.”

“Will a certain General Veck be present at the session, Your Majesty?” Asked Eden.

“He will, since he unfortunately is a high ranking member of the council. Why?”

“Then, I would rather have Princess Margaret stay away from that man, Your Majesty.”

“A very sensible and understandable position, Sir Anthony.” Agreed Stan readily. “Now, lets finish this nice meal without repeating that general’s name: it tends to make my stomach turn acid.”

Twenty minutes later, the king declared himself full and left the table, giving the signal that the meal was at an end. Excusing herself with Prince Len, who would have discussed more history with her, Nancy escorted Margaret to their room and put her into the huge bed. She was about to leave when the young girl looked at her imploringly.

“Please don’t leave me alone, Nancy. I’m scared of these giants.”

“But many of them are nice people, like Prince Len and Dame Goshenk.”

“I’m still scared, Nancy.”

Hesitating only briefly, Nancy then smiled to the princess and undressed before getting into bed herself and passing a protective arm around the girl.

“Is that better, Your Highness?”

“It would be even better if you called me simply Margaret, Nancy.”

“Then Margaret it is. Sweet dreams, my pretty little princess.”

In a special surveillance room two levels above Nancy’s room, a psychologist sitting in front of a bank of video monitors and recorders nodded her head and took a few notes on an electronic pad before turning to look at King Stan.

“A very interesting character so far, this Nancy Laplante, Your Majesty. The princess is also obviously infatuated with her as a sort of heroine.”

“You might as well take a break and get a relief while Laplante sleeps, Lieutenant. I want you to be in top shape to watch and analyze a documentary that will be viewed in my apartments tonight. It was produced by Laplante’s organization.”

“I will certainly watch it with interest, Your Majesty.”

15: 46 (GMT)

Antechamber of the Royal Council Chamber

Royal Palace

London, Imperium

“Ah, at last!” Said Anthony Eden in a low voice when the master of ceremony had the twin doors of the Royal Council Chamber opened by the four guards standing in front of them. The distinguished old man then approached Eden and bowed to him.

“Your delegation is now welcome to enter the chamber, Sir Anthony.”

“Thank you, Lord Carnavon.”

With Nancy Laplante to his right and Jennifer Collins two paces behind, Eden walked calmly in the chamber, a large room with walls painted royal blue and with a huge conference table in the middle. Four wide video screens adorned the corners of the chamber, while each of the positions at the table had a computer and a viewing screen. A total of 29 persons, including King Stan, sat around the table. Lord Carnavon showed to Eden three unoccupied seats at the table’s end opposite the king. The seats sported booster cushions, to let the smaller than usual visitors sit at an appropriate height.

“Please take place, Sir Anthony.”

Thanking him again, Eden sat down and looked at the faces around the table. One face in particular, that of a thin man with cold eyes and wearing a green uniform, caught his eyes.

“So, there is that General Veck.” He whispered to Nancy, who nodded her head.

“I have him already covered, Minister Eden.”

King Stan then spoke up in his table microphone.

“Welcome to this session of the Royal Council, Sir Anthony. You may present your delegation now.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. Ladies and gentlemen of the council, I am Sir Anthony Eden, Foreign Minister of Great Britain in 1942 and Special Envoy of King

George the Sixth. To my left is Misses Jennifer Collins, my travel secretary, and to my right is Miss Nancy Laplante, Chief of Operations of the Time Patrol.”

All eyes stared at Nancy, many of them frankly hostile, as Eden went on.

“We have come here with two main goals in mind: first, to win the safe release of Princess Margaret of Windsor and of Group Captain Peter Townsend, Equerry to King George the Sixth, who were kidnapped without provocation in Buckingham Palace on the night of May 20th of 1942; and to try to prevent further hostilities between us. We hope that, in exchange with the return of our two people, we could return to you the 42 members of the Imperium presently held in London in 1942 and sign a treaty of non-aggression between Great-Britain and the Imperium. This whole business had no reason to happen and the consequences of further hostilities are too grave to consider, especially for the Imperium.”

A man in a dark blue uniform with gold braid seemed to take exception to Eden’s last words.

“What do you mean by this, Sir Anthony? That you can win over the Imperium in a fight? My navy could walk over the Great Britain of 1942 in a hour.”

“Your victory would be a Pyrrhic one indeed, sir.” Replied coldly Eden. “You would then return to the year 3386 to find the Imperium erased from history and replaced by something probably entirely different. I will however let Miss Laplante, who is an expert on this subject, explain the logic behind this.”

“Thank you, Sir Anthony. Your Majesty, ladies and gentlemen of the Royal Council, history could be described in this case as a high rise building with fragile foundations. You kick these foundations away and the whole building will collapse and will have to be rebuilt from scratch. Attacking and devastating Great Britain in 1942 would irremediably change history and start something nobody could even guess how it would end looking like. The British would not even need to resist you to destroy you, since you would essentially destroy yourselves. Believe me when I say that history cannot be tampered with lightly. On the other hand, if you refuse to hand over Princess Margaret and Group Captain Townsend, the result would be about the same. With its sole remaining direct heir gone, the House of Windsor would eventually fade away in a constitutional crisis, the history of Great Britain would be heavily affected and the resulting historical distortion shockwave would either erase or heavily modify the Imperium you know. Another option would be that Great Britain fights back, not militarily per say, but by actively steering its long-term policies in a way that would result in the

ultimate disappearance from history of the Imperium. This may justly sound alarming to you, but things don't need to happen that way. In fact, this crisis is the creation of a single man: General Alan Veck, your Minister of Security."

Veck banged his fist on the table, his eyes shooting bolts at Nancy.

"How dare you accuse me here, Miss Laplante? You are the one who took away our scientist and who shot down our two ships over London. As far as I'm concerned, you are the enemy, not the British."

"And you emphasized that point by kidnapping the heir to the British throne, General? You didn't even know that the Time Patrol existed when you launched your attack on Buckingham Palace. As for taking away Doctor Tolkonen, I would rather call it offering protection to a desperate woman who was pushed into an impossible situation by your own thirst for power."

"WATCH YOUR MOUTH, MISS, OR..."

"ENOUGH!" Shouted King Stan. "General Veck, you will let Miss Laplante complete her presentation. Miss, I would appreciate if you could proceed with a bit less spunk."

"Please excuse me, Your Majesty: I was never good at turning around the pot. I would now like to present as evidence a recorded statement made by Doctor Farah Tolkonen. That statement should be self-explanatory."

Veck reddened with anger, while the King hesitated for a moment. Stan finally nodded his head.

"You may play that recording, miss."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Taking a data chip from one pocket, Nancy inserted it in the reader unit of the computer facing her and selected a file for viewing.

"The statement you will see and hear was made by Doctor Tolkonen in the room we provided to her onboard one of our ships."

The King and the members of the council grew silent as Farah Tolkonen 'B', wearing her Imperium scientist uniform, appeared on the wall viewing screens, sitting behind a desk inside a large ship's cabin. Farah looked straight at the camera as she spoke.

"Your Majesty, ladies and gentlemen of the Royal Council, I am Senior Scientist First Class Farah Tolkonen, employed until recently at the Greenwich scientific complex under the authority of General Veck, Minister of Security. Four years ago, I started working on a project concerning the feasibility of time travel. As I progressed and

proved theoretically that time travel was possible, the project was taken over by the Ministry of Security and I was made to answer directly to General Veck. I say that I was made to answer to him because, two years ago, I was briefly detained and tortured on orders from General Veck. There were no charges to justify those acts. Rather, General Veck told me himself as I was being tortured that he wanted to show me what would happen to me if I refused to do whatever he asked. He then told me that he needed a working time machine so that he could have the capability to go back in time and eliminate in advance any enemy or political opponent he deemed too dangerous to his goals and ambitions. I then continued working with my two young assistants on the time ship project, but I was starting to ask myself where all this would stop. My two assistants were moved to other projects by General Veck shortly after the first test of my prototype time ship proved successful a month ago. My prototype ship was then requisitioned by Veck, along with all the data and plans pertaining to it. That was when I resolved myself to flee to the past before I ended up dead in some unfortunate but convenient accident, along with my assistants. I put my plan to execution and escaped to the past on June 18, 3386, going back in time to the London of 1941 with my two assistants. There, we were able to find Miss Laplante, who was then kind enough to provide political asylum to us.”

Whispers and exclamations went around the room when a young couple walked in the field of view of the camera and stood behind Farah. Nancy smiled discreetly to herself: the two young giants who had just appeared on the screen were not Mona Zirel ‘B’ and Maran Tolvek ‘B’, the assistants of Farah ‘B’. Rather, they were Mona ‘A’ and Maran ‘A’, the assistants of Farah ‘A’. The real assistants of Farah ‘B’ had actually been evacuated discreetly only two days ago via transit probes controlled by the scoutship WALKUREN, operating under cloak over the Imperium. The shuttlecraft that had brought Nancy, Eden and Jennifer Collins had not actually come alone, far from it. The message on the screens was not finished, however.

“Your Majesty, me and my assistants wish no harm to the Imperium. We would have been content to keep working for it if not for the megalomaniac ambitions of one man who is ready to rip apart the historical fabric of the Imperium solely for his own personal profit. We are deeply sorry that our escape resulted in heavy losses of life, but General Veck left us little choice but to flee. I would like to end this statement by solemnly swearing that I would never do anything to hurt the good people of the Imperium. I am also ready to say that Nancy Laplante is a person of honor whose word

can be trusted. She knows the true value of history and has no reason to hurt the Imperium, as long as the Imperium does not engage in acts that would endanger the integrity of history. We now say goodbye to you all.”

The heavy silence that followed was broken by Nancy’s voice.

“Your Majesty, ladies and gentlemen, I could not have said it better. There are no reasons to continue with this unnecessary crisis, which would bring only doom to the Imperium and suffering to the people of Great Britain. In exchange for the release of Princess Margaret and of Group Captain Townsend and for a pledge of non-aggression, the Time Patrol and the government of Sir Anthony Eden would return to you all the Imperium members currently held as prisoners in 1942 and would sign a treaty of non-aggression and non-interference with the Imperium. I believe that those demands are reasonable. The choice is now yours.”

Many members of the council, including the King, were now throwing black looks at General Veck as Nancy sat back. The chief of the Imperium Navy however appeared still defiant, probably stung by Eden’s previous challenge. Veck lost no time to fight back, though. Rising from his seat, he pointed an accusing finger.

“Members of the council, what you have heard is a few easy promises from a woman we know next to nothing about and outrageous accusations from a traitor that couldn’t offer a single proof about what she said. Let’s look at Miss Laplante’s Time Patrol first. What do we know about it apart of the fact that it killed Imperium members? Who gave them the mandate to regulate time travel? Did anyone actually give them such a mandate or are they nothing more than a band of mercenaries plundering history for their own profit and interests? What tells us that Miss Laplante will not simply disappear somewhere in time after giving us an empty promise or, even worse, modify history in order to eliminate a potential competitor to her Time Patrol? I say that the Time Patrol is a mortal threat to the Imperium and must be run down and destroyed, along with whoever supports it. Yes, there probably is someone who is providing support to the Time Patrol. How could they get their ships otherwise? Since that someone can’t obviously be in our past, it must be somewhere in a distant future, or even in a parallel timeline that we know nothing of yet. As for the British, I agree that we will have to return the two prisoners we hold in order to preserve our place in history. I recognize that tactical errors were made, but our raid did succeed in flushing out this Time Patrol and our renegades, Doctor Tolkonen and her assistants. I thus recommend that we free Princess Margaret and Group Captain Townsend and sign a non-

aggression treaty with the Great Britain of 1942, while at the same time arresting Miss Laplante for acts of war against the Imperium, so that we could get the information needed to find and destroy her Time Patrol.”

Eden was about to jump out of his seat with indignation when Nancy held him down and whispered to him.

“Let it be, sir. I was kind of expecting something like this. The question now is whether the other members will follow his recommendations. That is not a given yet.”

Another member of the council, a mature woman with a sharp, inquisitive look, then asked and got permission to speak from the king.

“Ladies and gentlemen, as the Minister of Science and Technology, something General Veck said is in my mind of crucial importance, even if it was only mentioned quickly. I am talking about the possibility that one or more parallel timelines exist in this universe. In fact, I believe that Doctor Tolkonen was reportedly researching that theory when she disappeared in the past. If it were a valid theory, then it would explain many things. Lets not forget that Miss Laplante, as the first recorded time traveler, appeared in Great Britain in 1940 and supposedly came from the year 2012. We all know that by 2012 the world was little more than a radioactive desert. Yet, from the belongings she brought with her, including a ground vehicle, it appears that her world was far from being a wasteland. Also, a civilization comparable technologically to ours could exist in parallel to us and be the source of support to the Time Patrol. Remember the strange phenomenons we experienced three years ago, including widespread hallucinations. These could have been manifestations of such a parallel timeline. Am I right on this, Miss Laplante?”

Nancy silently swore to herself: the minister’s logic was flawless. Acknowledging the truth would blow away all the disinformation work she had done so far, while refusing to comment on this would be as good as confessing the truth. Keeping a straight face and a calm voice, she rose from her seat and faced the minister.

“Minister, while the theory of parallel timelines is interesting, it is still only a theory. In my history in 2012, before I was kidnapped by scientists from the far future, to be used as a guinea pig, there had been no nuclear war in the 20th century. My actions in 1940, when I was not yet aware how and why I had ended up there, probably rewrote history and set the stage for the nuclear war of 1986. When Farah Tolkonen showed up with her two assistants, searching for me, she unknowingly closed what I would call a time causality loop: she was the one who provided me the means to go back to the

future and settle accounts with the civilization from which my kidnappers came from. That civilization then helped me create the Time Patrol. However, the Time Patrol is no longer fixed to a single location or time. We wander up and down time on our ships, which render us nearly invulnerable to surprise attacks. That is all I can tell you at this time.”

Nancy then sat back, satisfied that she had provided a plausible enough story to the council. She however didn't realize that she had just made a big mistake: she had underestimated the level of treachery and plotting to which the Imperium was accustomed. Unknown to her or Eden, the visitors' positions at the conference table were equipped with sensors that could remotely scan and analyze various body parameters in the same way an old polygraph test machine would, enabling King Stan, who was monitoring discreetly the data from the sensors, to know when Nancy lied or told the truth. Stan kept a straight face during her presentation, rising from his seat when she sat down and addressing the council.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I believe that we can now go to the third phase of this meeting, to discuss our options and take a vote. Sir Anthony, if I may ask your delegation to go wait in the antechamber for our decision.”

“We will leave now, Your Majesty.”

Followed by Jennifer and Nancy, Eden left the council chamber and went to a comfortable sofa in a corner of the antechamber. Nancy sat next to him, so they could speak without being heard. They waited until a waiter had served them cups of Champagne and had walked away to speak in near whispers.

“What do you think they will decide, Miss Laplante?”

“I am not sure yet, Sir Anthony. That minister of science made me worried for a moment. If you don't mind, I will ask you to let me concentrate, so that I could listen to the council's discussion.”

“Listen? But we can't hear a thing from here. That room is heavily sound-proofed.”

“Sir Anthony, here is a confidence to be kept strictly to yourself: I am a telepath.”

“A telepath? Dear God, this could actually be handy right now.”

“Indeed! Please excuse me if I don't speak to you for a while.”

In the palace surveillance center, the specialist watching Nancy's every moves tensed up in his chair: while he couldn't hear what she and Eden said, he could read on their lips, a talent that was a prerequisite for a surveillance specialist.

"I am a telepath..." Repeated the specialist to himself, feeling a chill go down his spine. He then grabbed his videophone and, without even bothering going through his shift supervisor, called the King. In the council chamber, Stan was watching the others argue animatedly between themselves when his wrist videophone buzzed. Activating it, he looked with annoyance at the junior specialist visible on the small screen.

"This better be good, mister."

"Your Majesty, I intercepted something that Nancy Laplante just said to Foreign Minister Eden. First, though, I must warn you to empty your mind and to control your thoughts: Laplante is a telepath."

A sense of dread and betrayal fell on the King at those words. In the 29th century, a scientist had created through genetic manipulations a number of persons with supernatural mental powers. Telepathy had been one of those powers. The general reaction to those mutants had been violent, with mutants, also called 'psyonics', mercilessly hunted down and killed. Even to this day, being a psyonic in the Imperium was a sure ticket to a quick execution. Forcing himself to keep his mind empty, Stan answered the specialist instinctively, without thinking his words.

"Thank you, Specialist, and good job. Keep her under tight watch."

Stan then switched off his wrist videophone and got up from his seat.

"Ladies and gentlemen, there is obviously a lot of controversy on the present subject. I thus propose that we adjourn this meeting until eight O'clock tomorrow morning, to let you time to think this problem overnight. I will however ask the ministers of security and science and the head of the navy to stay behind for a moment. Thank you for your time. By the way, I will ask you not to speak with the British delegation on your way out."

Then moving quickly, Stan preceded the council members out of the chamber and went to Nancy and Eden, who got up from their sofa.

"That was a short debate, Your Majesty." Remarked Eden, making Stan smile.

"That's because the debate is not closed yet, Sir Anthony. In view of the level of feelings involved, I have decided to postpone the vote until tomorrow morning, to let heads cool down."

"An understandable delay indeed, Your Majesty."

“Isn’t it? I am afraid that I now have a few things to attend to. May I ask you to return to my private lounge in the meantime? A servant will show you the way.”

“That won’t be necessary, Your Majesty: I remember where it is.”

“Excellent! Then I will see you in less than one hour.”

Making sure that the delegation left the antechamber first, Stan then returned to Veck and the two other members of the council waiting inside the chamber.

“What is happening, Your Majesty?” Asked an intrigued Admiral Vortak as the King led him and the others out of the chamber via a hidden door.

“Don’t ask and don’t think about it, Admiral!. Trust me on this.”

They followed a narrow hallway devoid of doors for a good fifty paces before encountering a steel security door. Stan put his hand on a fingerprint recognition pad and made the door slide open, revealing a small hangar housing three aircars. He then motioned to the duty driver sitting at a desk and reading an electronic book.

“Ben, we are going out for a ride. We will head East towards the sea at top speed.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Answered the duty driver, jumping on his feet and running towards a big black aircar and opening its doors. Stan and the three others piled in the rear section and barely had time to buckle their seat belts before the aircar flew out of its second level hangar and climbed in the sky. After one minute of flying at top speed, Stan sighed with relief and looked gravely at the others.

“I am sorry about this little mystery but I was just informed that Laplante is a telepath: her words were intercepted as she confided to Eden in the antechamber.”

“A psyonic!” Spat out Veck with revulsion. “Then she came here to spy on us under the cover of a diplomatic mission.”

“Probably. We will now have to be extremely cautious with her. Minister Daewo, if I remember well, they had developed a technique in the 29th century to neutralize the special mental powers of the psyonics, no?”

“They did, Your Majesty. It was a sort of emitter that produced a specific wavelength that interfered with the special brain activity of the psyonics. It also gave them headaches as a side effect.”

“Then we need such an emitter. How long would it take to manufacture one?”

The minister of science and technology thought for a moment.

“We may not need to manufacture one, Your Majesty. If I remember well, there is still a working model exposed in the London Museum of Science.”

Stan immediately turned his head to look at the driver.

“Ben, head to the London Museum of Science now.”

He then looked back at the three members of the council, a mean smile on his face.

“Once we will have something to counter Miss Laplante’s powers, we will turn the tables on her. Here is what I propose we do...”

18:57 (GMT)

The King’s private dining room

Royal Palace

“Now, that was an excellent lamb roast, wasn’t it, Miss Laplante?” Said merrily Stan while wiping his mouth and hands. Nancy, not feeling well and with a constant buzz inside her head, smiled weakly.

“It was, Your Majesty, but I seem to have developed a persistent headache. Would you mind if I skipped the dessert?”

“It’s your loss. We could review your historical documentary once we are all finished eating.”

“Yes! I would love that.” Exclaimed Princess Margaret.

“Then we will do so.” Pronounced Stan. “No point in making our dear Margaret wait much longer.”

“I have to say that I am myself quite interested in it, Your Majesty.” Said Anthony Eden. “I may add that your son Len is positively jumping with impatience in his chair.”

“Surprise, surprise.” Replied Stan, amused. “Then let’s devour the chocolate cake quickly.”

The chocolate cake was eaten with nearly indecent haste, then the royal family and the British joined Nancy on the sofas facing the big viewing screen of the king’s private lounge. Stan noticed that young Margaret sat besides Nancy, gluing herself to her in search of a feeling of security. Despite knowing that Nancy was a psyonic, Stan still could not get himself to hate or despise her: she had shown too much decency and care as a person for that. Grabbing the remote control of the viewing unit, Stan started the documentary, which started with a choice of sound and video features.

“Hmm, do we listen to this in the original ancient languages, with subtitles in English, or do you guys prefer English only?”

“Go with the ancient languages, Dad.” Said Prince Len. “It will put us in the proper context and will be more authentic.”

“You’re right, Son, as always.”

They then sat mostly in silence through the long documentary. Stan, while truly fascinated by it, was surprised to see how deeply it struck the three British present, especially young Margaret. The young princess burst into tears on a number of occasions but was always comforted by Laplante, even if the latter still suffered from headaches. Near the end, when Yeshua was shown dying on his cross while a number of female disciples, including Nancy, were looking on and crying, all the British burst in tears, along with Nancy. Stan himself had a lump in his throat while watching that scene and Yeshua’s subsequent burial. His sadness turned to amazement when Yeshua was resurrected and appeared to Miriam of Magdala and others. The final scene showed Nancy and Miriam, astride Pegasus, flying off and away. Stan’s interest went up again as the credits appeared on the screen. There were however obvious blanks and missing information in the credits, showing that the documentary had been carefully edited to take out any indication of where and when it had been produced. Stan’s attention returned to Nancy, who was holding an awed Margaret while Eden and Jennifer Collins were staring at her.

“Saint Mary Magdalene is living with the Time Patrol, Nancy?” Asked Jennifer Collins in a weak voice nearly choked by sobs. Nancy nodded slowly her head.

“She is. How could I refuse Yeshua’s last request?”

“That Miriam of Magdala, she seemed pregnant to me at the end, wasn’t she?” Remarked one of Stan’s mistresses. While Nancy gave her an annoyed look, Jennifer’s mouth opened wide as she realized the implications of this.

“She...she’s not carrying a child from Jesus Christ, Nancy?”

Seeing that it was pointless to deny it, Nancy bowed her head and sighed in resignation.

“Yes she was. That was one of the reasons I gave her my protection. Her son would have become the target of Yeshua’s enemies. Besides, history had no place for him.”

“The son of Jesus Christ...” said weakly Anthony Eden. Jennifer knelt in front of Nancy, taking hold of her hands. She had tears in her eyes as she looked up at her friend.

“What is his name, Nancy?”

“David. Look, you, Sir Anthony and Princess Margaret must promise not to tell others back in England about what you saw in this documentary or learned from me tonight. You know what kind of religious storm would be created by such news.”

“You can count on my discretion.” Said Jennifer.

“On mine too, Miss Laplante, or should I say Nava, disciple of Jesus.” Said Eden.

“Just Nancy will do, Sir Anthony. What about you, Margaret?”

“Can’t I tell at least my parents?” Asked timidly the girl, attracting a smile from Nancy.

“Alright, you can tell the King and the Queen, but nobody else. You promise?”

“I promise!”

“Uh, Miss Laplante,” cut in Prince Len, “how do you explain Yeshua’s resurrection? I see no scientific explanation to this.”

“That’s because there are none, Your Highness. Yeshua was resurrected by The One, an immaterial being of infinite power but also of great kindness and compassion.”

“The One?”

“Yes! Others may call him ‘God’, even though that would be a misrepresentation. The One helped and transformed me while I was held in Colditz Castle.”

“Transformed you?” Said Stan, suddenly tense. Nancy nodded, her expression grave.

“He healed my wounds and made me a better person. Since then, I have vowed to promote compassion, kindness and tolerance and to protect the innocents. Recalling my past lives was something I got from The One. In turn, The One resurrected Yeshua and transformed him into an angel. Now, if you will excuse me, I think that I will go to bed early: my migraines are still hunting me.”

“Could I sleep with you, Nancy?” Asked Margaret. “Maybe you could tell me more about Jesus.”

“You have a deal, Your Highness.”

Stan waited until Nancy and Margaret had left the lounge, then looked at Eden.

“How important is this Jesus Christ for the people of Great Britain, Sir Anthony?”

“Very important, Your Majesty, and not only in Great Britain. The King of England also happens to be the secular head of the Church of England and has to be a good Christian. I never would have called Miss Laplante a saint, but her being a disciple of Jesus...”

Stan went to bed himself relatively early, joined there by Miri. She quickly noticed how tense he was and inquired why. Stan caressed her cheek while looking in her yellow eyes.

“Miri, tomorrow I will be forced to do something I will not be proud of. We found out today that Laplante is a psyonic and was spying on the debates of the council. We can't trust her anymore, which means that we will have to find and destroy her Time Patrol in order to ensure the survival of the Imperium.”

“A psyonic? But, those were mutants with deranged minds. Laplante is not that kind of person.”

“I know, but can we risk the Imperium just on her word? No! We will also have to find and destroy the people who support the Time Patrol.”

“But that could mean having to kill millions, maybe even billions of people.” Said Miri, horror on her face. “These people have done no harm to us.”

“Not yet, Miri, but we can't afford to wait until they decide to modify history and erase us that way. I know that it sounds despicable but it is a question of sheer survival for us.”

Throwing the bed sheets away, Miri got out of bed and pointed an accusing finger at him.

“If you are going to do this, then you will do it without me, Stan. I will not be an accomplice to genocide.”

“Wait!” Shouted Stan, jumping out of bed and catching her by an arm. “What are you going to do?”

“I am leaving the palace, that's what I am going to do. There are still lots of jobs as psychologists available in London and you still have your five other mistresses. Goodbye!”

“But...I love you!” Pleaded Stan as she started to leave. Miri turned around to look at him with bitterness.

“If you really do, then you will trust Laplante's word and abandon this monstrosity of a plan for a genocide. If not, I'm out of here.”

Something crumbled inside Stan as Miri stormed out of the royal bedroom. Going back to the bed and sitting on it, he started crying in frustration and grief.

07:52 (GMT)

Wednesday, June 27, 3386 'B'

Antechamber to the Royal Council Chamber

Royal Palace

London, Imperium

“You look like hell if I may say so, Your Majesty.” Said softly Nancy to Stan as the King was about to enter the council chamber. The King looked haggard and his eyes were red. He smiled weakly at Nancy, who didn’t look too fresh herself.

“You look like hell too, Miss Laplante. Your headaches?”

“Still having them. I barely slept last night. By the way, have you seen Dame Goshenk this morning?”

A hurt look came across the king’s face at that question.

“She...she is away from the palace today. If you will excuse me now, I have a meeting to direct.”

To his surprise, Nancy quickly but gently took hold of his left hand while looking directly in his eyes.

“Please, Your Majesty, think about the fate of all the people that are in the balance today. Peace is so much better than war.”

The warmth of her touch and her concerned look, added to his own remorse, nearly bent him. Angry at himself for being weak at such a time, he withdrew his hand and stared down hard at Nancy.

“What do I have apart of your word to sway my decision, Miss Laplante?”

“Just my solemn word, Your Majesty. I was hoping that it would be enough.”

“Not when the survival of the Imperium is at stake. Hope that the rest of the council is ready to believe you.”

Stan then walked away, leaving Nancy alone with Anthony Eden and Jennifer Collins, who had been watching the exchange from a few meters away. Now deeply concerned, Nancy returned to the two British, facing Eden.

“Sir Anthony, I have a bad feeling about this. Whatever happens next, I want you to grab your chance to leave with Jennifer, the princess and Group Captain Townsend, even if it means leaving me behind. Please promise me that you will do that, Sir Anthony.”

“But, we can’t abandon you, Miss Laplante.”

“Yes, you can! You must safeguard Princess Margaret at all cost.”

Eden bowed his head, not liking this one bit.

“Maybe they will decide to sign for peace, miss. Can you sense what they are saying now?”

Nancy concentrated in order to detect the thoughts inside the council chamber but immediately felt intense pain inside her head and had to stop her efforts.

“I...I can't! My headaches only get stronger.”

The truth then struck her squarely in the face, chilling her.

“Oh my God! They must know that I am a telepath and have found a way to counter it.”

A nasty suspicion on her mind, she then discreetly tried to move a nearby glass by telekinesis. The headaches redoubled immediately.

“Damn! It is worse than I thought: all my special mental functions are affected.”

Nancy then started to be worried: if this turned out to be a trap, then she would be nearly powerless to help the British that were with her, especially since she was unarmed on this diplomatic mission. Resigned to the worst, she sat down and waited nervously for the council to take its decision.

Half an hour later, the master of ceremony invited them in the chamber. Walking inside, Nancy and the two British faced the members of the council, who were all standing and looking at her. King Stan, appearing stern, addressed them in a strong voice.

“Sir Anthony, Miss Laplante, the Imperium Royal Council has taken its decision. Princess Margaret of Windsor and Group Captain Townsend will be allowed to return to Great Britain and we will pursue a treaty of non-aggression and non-intervention with the British government of 1942. In exchange, we expect the prompt return of all members of the Imperium presently held prisoner in Great Britain. Until they are returned, Miss Laplante will have to stay here as a guarantee in case your government or the Time Patrol reneges on this deal. We also want the return of Doctor Tolkonen and of her two assistants, Mona Zirel and Maran Tolvek, who are presently with the Time Patrol.”

Jennifer Collins stopped taking notes and nervously searched for Nancy's hand, pressing it as Eden replied to the King.

“Your Majesty, I thank you for allowing Princess Margaret and Group Captain Townsend to go free, but I must protest your demand for Miss Laplante to stay here.

She came unarmed under a diplomatic truce agreed to by you and by all conventions must enjoy the protection of such a diplomatic status.”

“We appreciate her status, Sir Anthony, but she is the only guarantee we have of seeing our captive members again.”

Eden was about to fire back another objection but Nancy cut him short.

“Your Majesty, since our word of honor doesn’t seem to be enough for you and this council, I will willingly stay here until all the Imperium personnel held in Great Britain is safely back in the Imperium. As for your demand for the return of Doctor Tolkonen and of her two assistants I, as Chief of Operations of the Time Patrol, must refuse. These three persons requested and obtained political asylum and will not be put back at the mercy of the same man who started this whole crisis.”

King Stan looked in exasperation at her.

“Then, you will force us to keep you until our three renegades are returned to us.”

“Such a move, Your Majesty, would be interpreted by the Time Patrol as a declaration of war by the Imperium. Think again about the consequences of your demands, Your Majesty. Is the persecution of three innocent people worth risking the existence of your Imperium?”

From the various reactions of the council members and of the King, Nancy knew that her last argument had struck hard. After a short hesitation, the King looked back at Nancy.

“That last point could be discussed while we await the return of our personnel. In the meantime, you may go collect Group Captain Townsend at the infirmary.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. Be advised that our shuttlecraft due to pick up our delegation will be bringing back five of your Ministry of Security troopers captured in Buckingham Palace, as a gesture of good faith.”

“That gesture is appreciated, Miss Laplante. Colonel Xitak, commander of the palace guards, will escort you now to the infirmary.”

As the delegation turned around and left the council chamber behind a big royal guards senior officer, Jennifer pleaded with Nancy.

“You can’t seriously stay here, Nancy. God knows what they could do to you.”

“I must stay, Jennifer. Do you prefer that they hold on to all of us, including the Princess? Where is the Princess anyway?”

“With the royal family in the King’s private lounge.”

“Then go get her and bring her to the infirmary right now. We must stay together from now on until your departure.”

Jennifer nodded and was about to peel away from the group when one of the four soldiers following close behind cut her path off and pushed her back towards Nancy.

“Hey! What...”

Nancy reacted immediately out of sheer frustration. She pushed the soldier back hard with one arm, sending the 130 kilogram man slamming loudly against a wall as if he was a small puppet.

“Stop pushing us around! We are still supposed to be treated like a diplomatic delegation, or don’t you know what this means?”

The three other soldiers pointed nervously their rifles at Nancy as their comrade, half knocked out, slid down to the floor while grimacing with pain. Colonel Xitak then intervened, barking an order at the soldiers.

“Lower your rifles! Private Koresh, pick up Private Jerkins and help him to the infirmary.”

Xitak then faced Nancy and looked at her hard.

“I don’t know how you managed to push Jerkins so hard, but I would appreciate if you would not use violence on my men, miss.”

“And I would appreciate that our diplomatic status be respected, Colonel. Misses Collins was simply going to fetch Princess Margaret. We are not prisoners yet, I believe.”

After a short hesitation, Xitak looked at his two remaining soldiers.

“You may return to your duties. Dismissed!”

With the soldiers walking away, Jennifer finally could break off and head towards the King’s private lounge while Nancy, Eden and Xitak continued towards the infirmary, arriving there just behind Koresh and Jerkins. Doctor Voonlar, who was waiting besides a gurney on which Peter Townsend lay, looked with surprise as the wounded soldier was laid on a bed by a medic.

“What happened to that man?”

“I’m in my period of the month and he pissed me off, Doc.” Answered Nancy, attracting a giggle from Eden. “How is Mister Townsend?”

“Uh, he is stable and conscious. I made a copy of his medical treatment file and put it in an envelope under his pillow. You can wheel him out when you wish so, miss.”

“Doctor,” called the medic examining the wounded soldier, “could you come here? I think that this soldier has a dislocated shoulder and two broken ribs.”

“What the hell?” Said Xitak, looking with wonderment at Nancy before joining the doctor besides the wounded soldier. Ignoring Eden’s own questioning look, Nancy went to Townsend, who was half covered with bandages and was half sitting on the gurney, which had its head and back part raised.

“How do you feel, Mister Townsend?”

“I have felt better before, Brigadier. Thanks for helping us...again.”

“It was a pleasure. Princess Margaret is safe and well and will join us here shortly. Then we will collect our luggage and go take our air ride out of here, minus myself: they won’t let me go until their people held prisoner in London are returned here.”

Townsend put a bandaged hand on her arm while looking at her with concern.

“Don’t stay here, Brigadier. These people can’t be trusted. That Veck in particular is a sadist of the worst kind. He would torture you just for the fun of it.”

“I know: I’ve met his type before. He will pay soon for his crimes, this I swear. You are ready to leave this pit of jackals, mister?”

“The faster the better, Brigadier.”

Nancy went behind the head of the gurney and started pushing it towards the door of the infirmary, followed by Anthony Eden. She was nearly at the door when Jennifer Collins and Princess Margaret showed up, having obviously run. Margaret immediately went to Townsend and kissed him repeatedly on the cheeks.

“Thank God, we are leaving at last, Mister Townsend.”

She then stayed close besides the gurney as it rolled, her right hand on Townsend’s left arm. With Xitak following them closely, Nancy pushed the gurney towards the visitors’ suites. Once there, she parked the gurney in the hallway and looked at Jennifer and Sir Anthony.

“Sir Anthony, you stay here with the Princess and Mister Townsend. I will collect the luggage cart. Jennifer, you help me load our luggage on the cart. Let’s go!”

Less than five minutes later they were on their way to the rooftop landing pad, Nancy pushing the anti-gravity cart while Eden pushed the gurney. When they emerged in the open on the roof, they found Amelia’s shuttlecraft already on the pad, but with its ramp still closed. Fifty royal guardsmen, a few dignitaries and the King were standing around the pad. Nancy also noticed General Veck, with ten security guards, waiting near the King. Ignoring him, Nancy led her group towards the shuttlecraft, whose rear ramp was now opening. Nancy stopped her group twenty meters from the craft, not wanting to

make the Imperium soldiers trigger-happy by making them think that she would try to leave without respecting her end of the bargain. She was happy to see Otto Skorzeni, in full body armor and armed with a TERMINATOR assault rifle, walk down the ramp and survey calmly the people around the landing pad. With all the Imperium troopers around pointing their rifles at Otto, the big German walked to Nancy and came to attention, clicking his heels together before speaking loudly in German, spooking the four British near Nancy.

“The five Imperium prisoners are ready to disembark, Nancy. What are your orders?”

“You can let them out now, Otto. Before that, though, listen carefully: our conversation is probably being monitored. There is something that is blocking my mental powers here and I suspect that it is some kind of device activated since yesterday. We have won the release of Princess Margaret and of Group Captain Townsend, but they won’t let me go back with you and the others until the rest of the Imperium prisoners are returned. Don’t say that it is a trap: I already suspect so much but I have no other choice. The Princess must be evacuated to safety at all cost.”

“But, they will probably torture you for information, then execute you.” Protested Skorzeni. Nancy nodded her head gravely.

“They may just do that. I still want to give this deal a chance, though: the price of war would be too horrific to contemplate. They also wanted the return of Doctor Tolkonen and of her two assistants but I told them that was a non-starter. Tell Mike that any attempt to grab those three back should be considered as an act of war on the part of the Imperium.”

“Himmel, Nancy, I still don’t like this deal. You should come back with us and forget those bastards.”

“Otto, if you looked closely at this pad, you would notice that there are at least two tractor beam generators and four laser batteries hidden around it. This shuttlecraft would stand no chance if it tried to leave with me now. Just make sure to come back for me when you will bring back the rest of the prisoners.”

Otto saw her blink one eye as she spoke and understood her silent message.

“I will be back, Nancy. When do they want to conduct the second exchange?”

“I will have to ask the King. Escort the prisoners out in the meantime, Otto.”

As Skorzeni returned to the shuttlecraft, Anthony Eden got closer to Nancy and spoke to her in a low voice.

“Where did you get that big bruise of a German, Miss Laplante?”

Nancy couldn't help smile at the irony of the situation.

“That is SS-Hauptsturmführer Otto Skorzeni, of the Waffen SS division ‘Reich’. I collected him in Norway while he was fighting to the death with a major of the British Royal Commandos. That commando major is also a member of the Time Patrol now.”

“A SS officer?” Said Townsend, shocked, from his gurney. “And you trust him?”

“With my life. He is about the best soldier I have ever met in my 9,000 years of life experiences. Don't worry about him: he was an English woman in one of his previous lives.”

“Anybody we would have heard about?” Asked Jennifer.

“You could say that. Otto's spirit was once that of Queen Mary Tudor, better known as ‘Bloody Mary’.”

“Yuck! That man definitely has a past drenched in blood.”

“Maybe, but you want him on your side, especially now. If you will excuse me, I will go speak with the King.”

As she left the British, she heard Otto shout in Neo-English to the prisoners inside the shuttlecraft.

“ALRIGHT, YOU LOAFERS! GET OFF YOUR BUNS AND MOVE YOUR ASSES OUT!”

Giggling to herself, she walked to King Stan and came to attention in front of him. The King was actually looking at Skorzeni with irritation.

“Where did you get that man, Miss Laplante? He could at least show some respect to our people here.”

“Excuse him, Your Majesty, but they don't teach much good manners in the German Waffen SS. He is a hell of a soldier, though. This said, when do you want to conduct the second exchange of prisoners?”

“You mean the return of our remaining personnel?”

Nancy shook her head emphatically.

“No, Your Majesty. I meant the exchange of your people against me.”

King Stan's eyes narrowed as he stared down at her.

“What about Doctor Tolkonen and her assistants?”

“You won't get those three back, Your Majesty. That point is not open to discussion. So, when do we do the second exchange?”

To General Veck's fury, King Stan then nodded his head resignedly.

“Have it your way, Miss Laplante. Tell your shuttlecraft to be back with our remaining people in three days, at eleven in the morning. That will give us sufficient time to prepare all the documents pertaining to a pact of non-aggression and non-interference that Sir Anthony could then sign.”

A chill then went down Nancy’s spine: three days was going to be a long wait for her, especially if they used that time to torture her. She however had no choice if she really wanted to give peace a chance.

“Three days it will be, Your Majesty.”

She then pivoted on her heels and walked towards Skorzeni, who was waiting near Townsend’s Gurney. Veck approached King Stan and whispered in his ear.

“That little idiot seems to have fallen for our trap, after all.”

Stan gave him a look of utter contempt.

“Veck, she perfectly knows what is awaiting her. I saw it on her face. She simply is ready to sacrifice herself in order to ensure the safety of Princess Margaret. I don’t expect you to be able to understand people of her caliber, though.”

The five Imperium troopers just released by Skorzeni then came to attention in front of the king and saluted him.

“Corporal Makinen and four subalterns reporting back for duty, Your Majesty.”

“Welcome back, all of you.” Replied Stan, returning the salutes. “Were you well treated in captivity?”

“The conditions were primitive but within acceptable limits, Your Majesty. We were questioned verbally by the British but no brutality was involved.”

“Good! Is there anything that you noticed that could be of interest, especially concerning the Time Patrol?”

A female trooper stepped forward immediately.

“Private Rina Tonen, Your Majesty. While fighting inside Buckingham Palace, I encountered Nancy Laplante, who was leading the Time Patrol robots. I was at the time seriously wounded by four laser hits and was out of action. Laplante put her hands on me and concentrated. Her hands started glowing and my wounds healed by themselves in about a minute. She also possesses a monstrous strength: she picked me up and lifted me off the floor with one arm without apparent effort. When I asked her how she could do that, she answered that it was a gift from above. I know it doesn’t make sense, Your Majesty, but that’s what she said.”

"I actually understand quite well, Private." Said Stan gravely, remembering the documentary he had seen yesterday. The conclusions he was arriving at now were hair-raising. He then looked at Corporal Makinen.

"Corporal, report back with your troopers to the Ministry of Security for detailed mission debriefings. You are dismissed."

The five troopers saluted again and, pivoting to their right, walked away in cadence. Stan then returned his attention to Laplante and the British. Anthony Eden was right now pushing Townsend's gurney inside the shuttlecraft, with Princess Margaret and Jennifer Collins close on his heels. With Nancy Laplante standing thirty meters away, Otto Skorzeni, standing at the top of the ramp, saluted Nancy before closing the ramp. The shuttlecraft soon lifted off the pad and rose quickly in the sky, disappearing in a flash of white light a few seconds later. Stan watched Nancy intensely as she calmly walked back towards him. He had to give her credit for her courage and sense of self-sacrifice, but he could not let his feelings towards her affect his plans. Veck, still standing besides him and with ten Ministry of Security soldiers at his back, was nearly gloating as Nancy stopped in front of Stan.

"I am now at your mercy for three days, Your Majesty. Do you intend to keep our bargain or do you want to go back on your word and cause a war?"

Stan examined in silence the woman facing him, trying to read her state of mind. It was clear to him that she felt fear right now, something he could hardly blame her for. She was however controlling that fear and was defying him. Her beautiful green eyes didn't flinch as she stared back at him and there was quiet resolve on her smooth face. Stan hated himself for what he was going to do next.

"I'm sorry, miss, but I have to ensure the survival of the Imperium. There will be war. Guards, seize her!"

Two huge troopers, each twice as big as her, stepped forward and grabbed her arms solidly. That was when Veck stepped forward too, intent on showing off.

"You are going to give us the secrets of the Time Patrol, miss, or I will make you regret the day you were born."

She looked up with contempt at him, fear replaced by hatred.

"Once a jackal, always a jackal."

Then, in one swift motion, she violently pushed away the two guards holding her, making them fly off their feet as if they were simple rag dolls, and threw a single punch at Veck. Her fist connected with his plexus with a noise of crushed bones, smashing through the

breastbone and exploding Veck's heart into pulp. His eyes bulging out and blood pouring out of his mouth and nose, the Imperium Minister of Security fell back without a word or scream, dead before he hit the ground. Before the stunned onlookers could react, Nancy then rushed furiously in the pack of dignitaries and officers standing behind Veck, bowling over a number of them and clearing a path through the now panicked crowd. The guards around the King didn't dare fire for fear of hitting some of the dignitaries, something she took full advantage of. Ripping a pistol out of an officer's gun belt, she then simply vanished into thin air, to the stupor of everybody around. Left speechless at first by all this, Stan then yelled at his guards.

"WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? FIND HER!"

Utter pandemonium followed, with guards running in all directions while panicky dignitaries were stampeding towards the roof exits. Stan was soon left alone with four bodyguards, Colonel Xitak, who was shouting orders in his wrist videophone, and Veck's body. His own pistol drawn out, Stan approached the dead man and looked down at it with contempt.

"You got what was coming to you, Veck. I should thank Laplante for this before killing her."

Closely surrounded by his bodyguards, Stan then returned inside the palace. He was thinking furiously as the elevator went down towards the level of the palace command center, situated deep underground. Veck's death actually made things much easier for Stan: he could now gain back true control of the Imperium in this time of crisis, as crisis this definitely was. If he didn't find and neutralize quickly Laplante, he would end up facing the Time Patrol in three days without having a clue how to find and destroy that organization or its sponsors. The Time Patrol was then certainly going to erase the Imperium by manipulating past history. He thus had to ensure that at least part of the Imperium forces and command structure survived such manipulations by withdrawing to the past, in order to be able to fight another day. He was still planning inside his head when he entered the palace command center, a heavily protected underground bunker that was the nerve center of the palace's security and defense systems. Going to the enclosed office reserved for his use, Stan activated the secure videophone on the desk, calling the head of the Imperium Navy, Admiral Vortak. Vortak, sitting in an aircar and appearing agitated, answered him after the second buzz.

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Admiral Vortak, do we have any ships left equipped for time travel?"

“Uh, we have of course the original prototype time ship, a small affair actually. Veck had however initiated a crash refit program for select ships of our navy, Your Majesty. Our fleet flagship, the super battleship ROYAL SOVEREIGN, was just finished being adapted for time travel yesterday. Fourteen heavy cruisers are presently being refitted at the Bristol shipyards and should be ready in one to two weeks. We will eventually retrofit the whole fleet with time distorters, of course.”

“What business had Veck ordering this program?” Fired back Stan angrily. “You are supposed to be the head of the navy, not him! Veck’s initiative may have been a correct one, but I will expect some real leadership on your part from now on. You work for me, not for Veck’s dirty little circle of friends. Is that understood, Admiral?”

“Uh, yes Your Majesty. Have we found Laplante yet?”

“Not a trace of her since she killed Veck. I want you to make sure that the ROYAL SOVEREIGN is ready for departure on a moment’s notice and that it can accommodate a large command staff. If we are not able to counter the Time Patrol within three days, then we will have to send a force in the past, to avoid the complete eradication of the Imperium. In the meantime, push the retrofit program as hard as you can.”

Stan then cut that link and called Veck’s Chief of Staff.

“Brigadier Corona, I gather that you got the news about General Veck.”

“I just did, Your Majesty.” Said Corona, a man Stan knew to have few professional qualities but who had landed his position mostly through blind obedience to Veck. “I was planning to declare an Imperium-wide alert concerning this Nancy Laplante, with your permission of course, Your Majesty.”

“Go ahead! Have also all the public video channels pass hourly warning notices about her until further notice. She is to be considered as an extremely dangerous terrorist to be shot on sight.”

“Your Majesty, shouldn’t we try to catch her alive, so that we could interrogate her?”

“If you can catch her alive, great, but don’t take any chances with her: she really is extremely dangerous. I don’t even know yet how she managed to disappear the way she did. On the other hand, certain indications tend to make me believe that she has a number of special powers that could be of supernatural origin.”

“Supernatural origin? Are you serious, Your Majesty?”

“Very! We are talking about a woman that has 9,000 years of experience to draw on and can do things like healing wounds by the power of her mind alone. She also possesses the strength of ten men.”

Corona started visibly sweating on the video screen.

“Uh, I will pass the word, Your Majesty.”

Stan cut again the video link and thought about his next move. Unfortunately, his choice of actions was severely limited right now.

11:39 (GMT)

Friday, May 22, 1942 ‘B’

Inner courtyard, Buckingham Palace

London, England

Margaret barely waited until the access ramp of the shuttlecraft was fully down before running out and climbing the wide steps of the palace’s Grand Entrance. The King and Queen, who were arriving at a run from their apartments, where they had been advised of the shuttlecraft’s arrival, shouted in joy and relief at her sight. The King was first to catch his daughter and hug her frantically.

“Margaret, thank God you’re safe! Are you alright?”

“Yes, father! Those giants hurt Mister Townsend bad, though.”

“Where is he?”

“In the plane, father.”

Letting Margaret in the arms of the Queen, King George the Sixth walked down the steps and towards the shuttlecraft, the rear ramp of which faced him. Anthony Eden and Jennifer Collins were emerging from the craft at that time and bowed to him in respect.

“Please, this is no time for formalities. How is Group Captain Townsend?”

“He was partly treated while in the Imperium but the Time Patrol will have to continue the treatment for a few days to finish healing his torture wounds, Your Majesty.” Answered Eden while pointing at Townsend on his gurney. The King went to his equerry and looked down with concern at the bandages covering him.

“God, what have they done to you, my poor friend?”

“I would rather not give you the details, Your Majesty. They were ready to torture the Princess as well but the King of the Imperium intervened in extremis and took her

under his protection. I am afraid though that Brigadier Laplante may be enduring now what I went through.”

Only then did the King realize that Nancy was not aboard the shuttlecraft.

“She stayed behind? Why?”

It was Otto Skorzeni who answered him in a glum voice.

“It was the only way to ensure the safe departure of Princess Margaret and of Group Captain Townsend, Your Majesty. The Imperium is officially holding on to her until we return all the other Imperium prisoners we have. Personally, I believe that they will renege on their word and will try to get vital information out of Nancy, apart of probably preparing an ambush for the return of our shuttlecraft.”

“The bloody bastards!” Said the King in an atypical public outburst of rage. “We must get her back safely. Do you feel that your Time Patrol can snatch her back?”

“We will get her back, Your Majesty.” Replied firmly Otto. “I will now go back to our base to brief my superior on this. We will also bring Herr Townsend with us to complete his medical treatment. You should have him back in top shape in a few days.” The King then looked at Eden, who nodded his head.

“I agree with the assessment of Agent Skorzeni, Your Majesty. Miss Laplante suspected as well that she was falling into a trap but felt that this was the only way to get the Princess out safely.”

“Dear God!” Said the King, discouraged. “She sacrifices herself for us...again. When I think that some members of the cabinet still think of her as a traitor. Will there ever be justice done to her name?”

“Your Majesty,” said Eden softly, “after this, nobody will be able to call her a traitor. That is if we can get her out of the Imperium alive.”

“Nancy is not dead yet. She has more than one trick under her hat, Your Majesty.” Replied Skorzeni with conviction. “We will find her and get her back.”

On that, Otto had the British stand clear of the shuttlecraft, then closed the access ramp. The King was watching the craft fly off when Eden spoke softly to him.

“Your Majesty, there is something you should know about Miss Laplante.”

Eden then told him about the documentary on Yeshua they had viewed in the Imperium royal palace. The King was staring at Eden in disbelief when Margaret, who had approached them with the Queen in tow, added on to the story with juvenile enthusiasm.

“That’s right, Father, and Saint Mary Magdalene is now living with the Time Patrol with the son of Jesus.”

13:09 (Central Europe Time)
Wednesday, June 27, 3386 'A'
Global government headquarters
Zurich, Central Europe

The secretary nodded his head to signify to Boran Kern that the videoconference was set up and all the links had been established. Kern looked briefly around at the 24 live screens on the bank of monitors facing him, then spoke in a clear, strong voice.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the High Council, please excuse the haste with which I called this videoconference but some urgent developments concerning the Time Patrol are necessitating the taking of some important decisions. I will now let Doctor Farah Tolkonen brief us all on the latest news.”

“Thank you, Chief Administrator.” Said politely Farah from her own video link. She then spent a good ten minutes exposing the situation concerning the Imperium, finishing with a request for the authorization of the High Council to launch a rescue mission to save Nancy Laplante. She had personally thought that the need for such a mission was self-evident, thus she was quite shocked at the storm of protestations and negative reactions from the council members. The most vehement one was Golen Bartok, Global Chief of Security.

“Doctor Tolkonen, you are telling us that Miss Laplante was ready to go to war to protect those three Imperium scientists. Now you want to launch an operation that would be surely considered an act of war by the Imperium? Are you crazy? You are asking us to risk the security, even the sheer survival of our whole society just to protect three persons and save another one.”

“But, isn't it obvious to you? The Imperium is intent on attacking us anyway as soon as they will know how to find us. Nancy Laplante may be in the process of being tortured right now by the Imperium to extract from her that information. Besides, how many lives are you ready to throw away to appease the Imperium, Mister Bartok? What will the Imperium ask for next time as a price for not attacking us?”

“I warned the council before about not approaching this Imperium for any reason. Now, look at the mess your Laplante has put us in.”
Farah became livid with anger.

“We were simply filling our mandate given by this council, which is to protect history from illegal tampering. The Imperium raid on 1942 ‘B’ London was just such an illegal tampering, and of the first magnitude to say the least. We used the minimum force possible to thwart that raid and Nancy risked her life on a diplomatic mission to try resolving peacefully this crisis. Now you would be ready to dump her in order not to take risks yourself? You disgust me, Mister Bartok.”

“Please, let’s keep this debate civil.” Interjected Boran Kern. “Mister Bartok, I agree with Doctor Tolkonen that the Time Patrol filled its mission strictly according to the mandate we gave it.”

“Then let’s change that mandate right now.” Replied Bartok. “The Time Patrol should from now on be confined strictly to the direct defense of the Global Council and should be barred from returning into Imperium space. The chances are that the Imperium will then either ignore us or will not be able to find us.”

To Farah’s anger and disbelief, the majority of the council members voiced their agreement for Bartok’s suggestion. Boran Kern and a mere handful of members tried to sway the others towards supporting the Time Patrol, but were overruled in a snap vote called on the question by Bartok. Boran Kern tried a last plea to change the mind of the council.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have created the Time Patrol to protect us from the effects of illegal manipulations of history. It has done its job superbly up to now, taking risks and facing dangers none of us would be either ready or able to face. Since its creation I have carefully studied the history of humanity and if there is one major lesson that can be arrived at from it, it is that cowering away from a potential aggressor only brings more grief later on. I know that we are a pacifist society but I would urge you to let the professionals of the Time Patrol handle this crisis the best way they see fit.”

“Chief Administrator,” replied Bartok, now feeling more audacious with the support of most of the council members, “you authorized the creation of the Time Patrol! You supported Miss Laplante even when she made grave errors of judgment. Now you want to risk the survival of the Global Council for her. I suggest that your judgment is greatly clouded when it comes to matters concerning Miss Laplante and the Time Patrol and that you should step down as Global Chief Administrator as a result of your poor judgment.”

“I second the motion for a vote of non-confidence concerning Chief Administrator Kern.” Said Daran Mien, the Global Science and Education Administrator and direct

superior of Farah Tolkonen. His heart heavy, Kern had no choice but to conduct the vote called for by Bartok and Mien. His shoulders sagged when he lost the vote by a margin of 16 to 7. According to Global Council constitutional rules, he now had to transfer power in the hands of the Global Vice-Chief Administrator, Tran Ming, until a Global Council-wide election could be conducted. Unfortunately, Tran Ming was one of the council members who had voted for barring the Time Patrol from returning to Imperium space.

“Mister Tran Ming, you are now officially the interim Global Chief Administrator until such time that a public election could be held for the post. The formal exchange of duties will take place tomorrow morning in my Zurich office.”

“Thank you Mister Kern.” Replied Tran, obviously satisfied with himself. He then addressed Farah. “Doctor Tolkonen, I now order you to bar your ships and your members from Imperium space and to organize defensive patrols around the Solar System. Your combat robots are to be put under the direct command of Chief of Security Bartok, who will deploy them as protection around key government and public facilities.”

“What if I refuse to do so?” Replied Farah bitterly.

“Then I will direct our security services to impound the ships of the Time Patrol and to disarm your members. Don’t force me to use our robots to do so, Doctor.” Tears of rage and disappointment rolling on her cheeks, Farah stared at her video camera.

“Mister Tran, you are ordering me to abandon my best friend, who may be tortured to death right now. That person once saved my life, plus the lives of many other citizens of the Global Council. On top of that, you are taking away some of our best defensive assets, to put them under the control of an incompetent who couldn’t fight his way out of a paper bag and who never risked his life to defend anybody else. The decisions of the High Council today will doom the Global Council to an eventual invasion and takeover by the Imperium. I cannot possibly obey such foolish and unjust orders.” As Tran Ming was left speechless for a moment by Farah’s defiance, Boran Kern activated his computer and opened a secure program protected by a codeword only known by him. That codeword, along with others, was due to be passed on to Tran next morning at the official exchange of authority. Kern had never thought that he would be pushed into doing what he intended to do now, but the stupidity and cowardice of Bartok and of other members of the council left him no choice. Selecting an option in the

secure program, he typed in the codeword that would enable it, then pushed the 'enter' button after a short hesitation. The command signal took only a second to reach its intended targets, modifying the programming of the command protocols controlling the Time Patrol combat robots. The option he had just enabled had been intended to prevent an invader who would have gained access to Global government command facilities from gaining control of the combat robots. Those robots were now going to obey only members of the Time Patrol. Boran Kern completed his work by entering another codeword and erasing the secure program from the government databanks. Tran Ming was ranting and raving at Tolkonen when Boran returned his attention to the video screens.

"Doctor Tolkonen... Doctor Tolkonen!"

"Uh, what, Mister Kern?"

"Would you accept me in your Time Patrol?"

His question, asked in a calm voice, surprised Farah.

"Now? We could be about to be shut down by our own robots, Mister Kern. What would be the point of joining us?"

"That won't happen, Doctor: I just turned full control of all our combat robots to the Time Patrol. I made that a permanent arrangement. When are we going to get Miss Laplante?"

Joy appeared on Farah's face, while disbelief showed on the faces of Ming, Bartok and many others.

"Mister Kern, I could kiss your four cheeks. Do you need quick transportation to New Lake City?"

"Yes, but give me an hour to pack and say goodbye to my wife first. I will be at my Zurich home."

"Mister Kern, what do you think that you are doing?" Shouted Tran Ming, furious. Kern looked with disdain at the screen showing Ming.

"I'm doing what I hope many citizens of the Global Council will do: show some backbone at last. In all my years of political life, I had not realized how low we had sunk in terms of moral fiber and courage. Gentlemen, in earlier centuries, your cowardice would have earned you a sentence of death by firing squad. Now, I will join the people of the Time Patrol to try to protect all of the Global Council from your own stupidity. If I die, then I will at least have done my part. Goodbye, Mister Ming."

Ignoring Ming's protests, Kern got up from his seat, then switched off the monitors before looking at his technical secretary.

"Please pass the word around, Mister Ganter: those who want to join the Time Patrol in the defense of our society are welcome to go to New Lake City. Technicians and engineers will be especially needed, along with qualified pilots."

"It will be done, sir." Said the young man timidly. "Good luck, sir!"

"Thank you, Mister Ganter."

Kern was about to leave the videoconference room when two men of the security services, the same ones who provided protection to him until now, burst in, stun pistols at the ready.

"Mister Kern, I am sorry about this but we have to arrest you for being accomplice to an act of mutiny against the High Council."

"Correction, gentlemen: you are the ones who are about to be stopped."

The two men were confused for a second, until a voice came from behind them.

"Drop the pistols, gentlemen, slowly and gently."

The two security men looked behind them and saw an ancestor in full body armor pointing a stun pistol at them. Two combat robots stood at the ready besides him, their weapons turrets pointed at them. The security men immediately dropped their pistols, which Kern picked up and slid inside his belt. Bypassing the two men, Kern went to the ancestor, a young German man named Michel Hofmann.

"I must commend your timing, young man. Did you come in a time scooter?"

"I did, sir. I will get you to your home and secure it, so that you can pack up quietly, then will bring you to our base."

Without warning, Hofmann shot in quick succession both security agents, who fell unconscious on the floor. Kern was a bit shocked by that.

"Why did you do this?"

"So they couldn't hear what I wanted to tell you and thus alert the High Council. We are pulling out of this century entirely with all our ships and equipment."

08:27 (North America Central Time)

Wednesday, June 27, 3386 'A'

Time Patrol headquarters

New Lake City University campus

American Great Lakes area

Boran Kern found Farah Tolkonen 'A' in her office, surrounded by a whirlwind of activity. Everybody seemed to be either running around with things, passing or receiving directives or dismantling equipment and packing it prior to moving out. Filling most of the view out of the windows of Farah's office was the gigantic mass of the heavy time transport ship GILGAMESH, resting on its landing legs on the lawn adjacent to the headquarters building and with its cargo ramps deployed. Anti-gravity platforms and forklifts loaded with pallets of equipment and supplies kept going to and fro the big ship. On seeing Kern, Farah got up with a big grin and went to him to shake his hand.

"It is a true honor to have you with us, sir. I still can't thank you enough for releasing the command authority over our combat robots to us."

"I figured that you would need all the help you could get to face the Imperium, Doctor. Besides, Bartok wouldn't have a clue on how to use them properly. It would have been a waste of 10,000 perfectly good robots."

"Quite true. We are loading most of them now on the GILGAMESH, apart from 200 robots who will secure our facilities until we are ready to depart."

Looking out through the bay windows of Farah's office, Boran saw something that sent a rush of blood to his brain: advancing in four perfectly lined up columns towards the transport ship were thousands of combat robots, emerging from the hangar where they had been stored. The university students watching from a distance the camouflage-painted war machines had their mouths gaping in awe at the spectacle.

"Now, that is what I call military power." Said Boran. Farah nodded, somber.

"Let's hope that we won't have to use them much: they represent a lot of destructive power, especially the point defense robots."

"Point defense robots? What are those?"

"Four hundred very mean machines, sir. They were part of the last batch of robots we ordered and you may not have been aware of them. They are much bigger and heavier than our standard combat robots and are meant to protect fixed installations against attacks from warships. You can see some of them now emerging from their hangar."

Boran Kern had no difficulty spotting them at the end of the columns of robots: they nearly were the size of a heavy truck and sported armored turrets with very long gun barrels.

“The point defense robots, or PDRs in short, weigh 38 tons and move on twelve large wheels but can fly and jump spacetime, like our other robots. Their main armament is a four-barreled hypervelocity rail gun that shoots 20mm high-density shells at muzzle velocities of five kilometers per second. With that kind of kinetic energy, the shells will rip clean through any ship. Added to their rail gun is a missile launcher with eight ready-to-fire missiles, plus four small close-in defense turrets with machine guns and grenade launchers. There is also a 150 megawatts pulsed laser and protective shields. We will keep twenty PDRs deployed around our installations until our departure, in case the Imperium shows up.”

“Damn! All this weaponry scares me.”

“Welcome to war, sir. By the way, isn't your wife Tomi coming with you?”

Boran shook his head sadly.

“No! She decided to stay here and try to repair the political mess created by the High Council. She is hoping to eventually reverse the decision of the High Council, maybe through public opinion. I will miss her, though.”

Boran quickly went over his bout of nostalgia and looked back at Farah.

“What do we do next? Can I help in any way?”

“Once packed up and ready to go, we will leave for our new secret base in the distant past, while a small expedition will precede us and go to 1982 'B' Montreal. As for helping, you could help support the morale of our members' families, who are finding themselves about to be exiled in time. If you could help them organize for departure and do things like escorting them into town, so that they could withdraw funds from their bank accounts and do some ultimate shopping for essential personal items of hygiene, it would be appreciated, especially since you are so well armed.”

Boran looked down at the two stun pistols still slipped inside his belt and smiled.

“I guess that I was asking for that. Uh, why are you sending people to 1982 'B' Montreal?”

“We have a baby to save.” Said Farah, dead serious.

08:13 (Montreal Time)

Monday, June 14, 1982 'B'

Maternity wing, Maisonneuve-Rosemont Hospital

Montreal, Province of Quebec

Canada

Constable Edouard Bertrand, of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, didn't pay much attention to the young nurse who entered the nursery he was watching discreetly from a chair in a corner of the hallway. The coming and going of nurses and doctors was constant around here and he was looking more for any suspicious-looking visitor to the nursery, especially fit men between the ages of twenty and forty. He was one of four undercover federal policemen keeping watch over a day-old baby that may or may not one day change history in a big way in 1940. Few people actually realized who little Nancy Laplante was, but the British government had been worried enough about her to ask the Canadian government to provide discreet protection to the infant and its parents.

Another young nurse soon showed up, leading Pierre Laplante, Nancy's father. Both entered the nursery, where the previous nurse was conversing with Suzan Laplante, who was breast-feeding her little Nancy. Bertrand then became suspicious when the conversation between the nurse and Nancy's parents, while still kept in a low voice because of the babies sleeping in the nursery, became somewhat agitated. He was rising from his chair when three big men emerged from a nearby elevator, flower boxes in their arms. An alarm bell immediately rang in Bertrand's mind: the men had hard expressions and their suits were clean and well pressed, contrary to the customarily shoddy looks of the mostly haggard and tired fathers that normally visited the nursery. Then things happened too quickly for Bertrand to think. As one, the three men opened their flower boxes and took out of them three pump-action shotguns. Bertrand was reaching for his holstered revolver when one of the men fired once at him, peppering his lower torso with pellets and projecting him backward against the wall. Dazed by pain and shock, Bertrand slid down to the floor as the three men repeatedly fired their shotguns at the other undercover policemen and at anybody who was in their way. With a supreme effort, he took out his revolver and fired once, hitting one of the attackers in the left leg. A second shotgun blast then hit Bertrand. He didn't see the two nurses disappear with the Laplantes in flashes of white light before he died.

09:08 (GMT)

Wednesday, June 27, 3386 'B'

Scoutship TEEN TEAM

London, Imperium

Ingrid Weiss made her scoutship emerge under cloak about half a kilometer from the Imperium royal palace, flying at low altitude. As soon as the palace was in sight, Tom Allen, sitting forward and down from Ingrid's pilot seat in his gunner's seat, directed a long-range camera towards the palace roof landing pad. The shuttlecraft with Princess Margaret on board had disappeared just one minute ago and Nancy should still be on the roof with King Stan. The TEEN TEAM had actually left New Lake City a good hour after the return of Amelia's shuttlecraft but had jumped to this precise moment with the hope of picking up Nancy before anything bad could happen to her. Otto Skorzeni, Klaus Manheim, Jack Crawford and George Townsend, sitting in the four observer seats besides and behind the pilot's seat, watched their video screens anxiously as the camera zoomed on the palace roof.

"There she is!" Shouted Tom Allen, making Ingrid's heart jump in her chest. "I knew it! Those Imperium bastards have just put her under arrest."

"Are you recording all this, Tom?"

"Yes, Ingrid. I even have sound from the directional microphone coupled to our camera. I'm putting the audio on loudspeaker."

They then listened and watched as General Veck taunted Nancy, only to be killed by her. A concert of cheers greeted that scene. What followed happened so quickly that they did not have the time to react before Nancy disappeared into thin air. Otto slammed his fist on his armrest in frustration.

"She went into phase shift. How the hell are we supposed to find or contact her now?"

"She will have to return to normal time soon enough, Otto." Replied Jack Crawford. "I suggest in the meantime that we send a cloaked probe to follow King Stan inside the palace in the meantime. What he will say and do in the next few hours could be of crucial importance to us. I will set it to record for the next twenty hours and then send the data on a compressed, encrypted burst transmission after it jumps to a remote location."

"Good idea, Jack." Said Ingrid approvingly. "Tom, send another cloaked probe on a programmed search for Nancy in and around the palace."

"Consider it done, Ingrid."

It took a minute or so for Tom to program his probe and send it on its way. By then King Stan was heading inside the palace with his bodyguards and his guards commander.

The two cloaked probes followed close to the king, gaining access to the inside of the palace and then splitting up, with one probe staying with King Stan and the other starting a methodical, floor-by-floor search for Nancy. It would complete and then repeat the search cycle for an hour before jumping back outside to report. The crew and passengers of the TEEN TEAM could now only wait nervously for either the results or a sign from Nancy. To their collective relief and joy, the voice of Nancy came in on the radio half an hour later, speaking in Hebrew.

“Any Time Patrol ship, this is the bitch! I will be at my first ever reemergence point for the next ten minutes. Do not acknowledge and proceed to pickup point, out!” After the first cheers, Otto looked questioningly at Ingrid.

“What would be that so-called first ever reemergence point, Ingrid?” Ingrid only had to think for a few seconds before smiling to herself.

“That could only be the spot near Northolt where she was abandoned with her car in September 1940 after being kidnapped near her Manitou Lake cottage in 2012. I know those coordinates nearly by memory.”

Punching in frantically the said coordinates on her control panel, Ingrid then grabbed her flight controls and put her index on the jump button incorporated to her joystick.

“Cross your fingers, guys.”

They emerged over a pasture field where a herd of cows was grazing. The cloaking generator kicked back in as soon as they had jumped, returning the scoutship to invisibility. Klaus Manheim, facing back in his rear observer seat, soon shouted out in excitement.

“I see her! She is standing between two cows to our five O’clock, maybe a hundred meters away.”

“Quick, get a transit probe on her!” Ordered Ingrid. “Bring her directly to the crew sphere.”

Two minutes later, Nancy appeared in a flash of light on the Plexiglas platform of the crew sphere, a transit probe glued to her belly. All six agents left their seats to go hug and kiss her, overjoyed. Nancy returned the kisses with dividend.

“Am I ever happy to see you guys. I was already seeing myself being strapped to a torture rack in the basement of the Imperium Ministry of Security. What were your actions since your arrival in the Imperium?”

Ingrid answered her, telling her about the two probes still inside the royal palace. Nancy nodded her head in approval at that.

“We will keep King Stan under surveillance. The few minutes I was following him inside the palace were enough to learn quite a few interesting things. As for our probe on a search mission, we will let it complete its cycle, then recuperate it. We will stay as discreet as possible while in Imperium space. I hope that I didn’t scare you guys too much.”

“Scared is not the word, Nancy.” Said Ingrid forcefully. “We were all having ulcers about you. Well, nearly all.”

“What do you mean?” Asked Nancy, intrigued by Ingrid’s last words. The young German bowed her head, glum.

“The Global Council was ready to dump you, Nancy. We had to mutiny to send this rescue mission in.”

Ingrid then spent a few minutes explaining the situation in the Global Council, leaving Nancy understandably bitter.

“Those cowardly rats of the High Council! Why should we keep taking orders from these idiots?”

“Basically, we are not anymore.” Said Otto firmly. “At least, Herr Kern was man enough to leave the High Council and join us into exile. Farah and Mike have agreed to a plan where we will move all our ships, equipment and stores, plus our personnel and their families, to our new secret base in the New Zealand of the year 3,000 B.C.E.. Once reassembled there, we will go establish temporary bases of operation in 1942 ‘B’. From there, we will be in a better position to erase this damn Imperium into historical oblivion. After that, we will have to play it by ear.”

“Otto, I still would prefer not to erase the Imperium if we could avoid it. Making a whole civilization disappear is not something I am ready to do lightly. I want to first hear what our probe spying King Stan will pick up before deciding on our next move. Maybe he will understand how desperate his position is and sue for real peace.”

“Don’t count on that, Nancy. That man is not the kind to back off: he is too proud for that. He will risk war and do everything to win it rather than capitulate to us.”

“Otto, I sincerely hope that you are wrong. I however have a nasty feeling that your analysis is correct. Ingrid, we will now jump forward in time to recuperate our search probe, then do a second jump in order to intercept and record the spying data accumulated by our other probe. We will study that data and decide then what to do.”

07:14 (GMT)

Thursday, June 28, 3386 'B'

Scoutship TEEN TEAM

London, Imperium

Nancy felt total discouragement as she finished analyzing the data from the spying probe: the actions and intentions of King Stan and of his command staff left the Time Patrol no choice but to erase the Imperium if the Global Council's survival was to be insured. According to the intercepted conversations and staff meetings, the Imperium was now gearing towards total mobilization of its forces and pushing for the emergency retrofitting of its ships with time distorters, with the ultimate goal of finding the Time Patrol and its supporters and eradicating both in a massive nuclear strike. Even the theory that another timeline could exist and harbor the Time Patrol was now being actively researched by the best scientists of the Imperium. These scientists had even announced to the King that they were close to a breakthrough on that matter. Nancy nearly had tears in her eyes when she looked at the others around her, who had also seen the data.

"How could they be so cold-blooded? There are still so many good and decent people down there who don't deserve to be condemned to oblivion."

"We know, Nancy." Said softly Ingrid, herself uneasy about what they had to do now. "But it is now a choice between either the Imperium or the Global Council. Both can't coexist, it's that simple."

"I still would like to try one last thing before committing ourselves. Our probe is now doing its second round of surveillance on the king. What I propose is for me to pay a visit late tonight to the king and try to put back some sense in him. If that fails, then we will proceed with our plan of action."

Otto Skorzeni frowned, clearly in disagreement with her.

"Nancy, that would alert the Imperium to our impending moves and may prompt them in sending a strike force earlier than expected. Don't forget that they already have a battleship outfitted for time travel. That ship could by itself cause immense damage if left a chance to leave Imperium space."

“I agree with Otto, Nancy.” Said Jack Crawford. “The ROYAL SOVEREIGN is a 800 meter-long behemoth loaded full of weapons and carrying squadrons of attack craft. It could devastate half of the Global Council by itself if given a chance.”

“Jack, are you ready to have the lives of four billion people on your conscience?” That made the ex-Navy SEAL commando hesitate. Nancy then looked at the others. “Who is for giving a last chance to King Stan?” After some hesitation, Ingrid, Tom and Klaus raised one hand. That left Nancy with the tie-breaking vote.

“Alright, I will then pay a nightly visit to King Stan. Jack, our probe will record my visit and the king’s answer, then we will pull it out before leaving ourselves. That way, we will be able to prove eventually to the Global Council that we tried everything humanly possible to avoid war. Ingrid, let’s jump forward to two O’clock next morning.”

02:03 (GMT)

Friday, June 29, 3386 ‘B’

The King’s bedroom

Imperium Royal Palace

Stan abruptly woke up when a hand went down over his mouth. Opening his eyes, he saw in the darkness a small female shape with hair on its head sitting astride of him on the bed. A voice he knew well then spoke in a low voice.

“Don’t scream and don’t try to raise any alarm, or I will be obliged to crush your throat, Your Majesty. You know that I am perfectly capable of doing that.”

The hand then went from his mouth to his throat. Stan swallowed hard and spoke in a near whisper.

“What do you want, Miss Laplante? You know what you are risking by coming here like this.”

“I am not the one playing with fate, Your Majesty: you are. What I want is peace between the Imperium and the Time Patrol, but not because I am afraid of losing. I am here to give you a last chance to reconsider your plans to attack us and to sue for real peace. Believe me when I tell you that I have no desire to erase your Imperium. There are still many people worth preserving in it, including your children. You should think about them before launching a war you cannot win.”

“Miss, I respect and trust your word, but you will not always be around to control the Time Patrol. What then will protect us from being erased on somebody’s whim?”

“Simple common decency, Your Majesty. Believe it or not, but not everybody is a heartless bastard like Veck was. You are now out of options and out of time. Will it be peace or will it be war?”

“Miss, you know that I cannot surrender the Imperium to you like this. As for us losing the war, don’t be so sure about that.”

Her grip on his throat relaxed, as she appeared discouraged by his answer.

“I was hoping so much for a better answer than this one, Your Majesty. I am truly sorry for what will happen next. Goodbye, Your Majesty.”

Laplante then got off Stan and stood briefly besides his bed before disappearing in a flash of white light. Throwing away the bed sheets, Stan sat on the edge of the bed for a moment, thinking about the conversation he just had. He then switched on his bedside lamp and grabbed the videophone on it, punching in a number. A sleepy female voice answered him after four rings but the screen stayed dark, his interlocutor having chosen not to activate her own screen.

“Yes? Who is it?”

“Miri, it’s me, Stan. Please, don’t hang up on me: this is a question of life or death.”

“Stan? But, it’s only a bit past two in the morning. What the hell is happening?”

“Nancy Laplante just visited me in my bedroom to deliver a final ultimatum: sign a peace treaty or be erased. I had to turn her down. She is now gone and probably went to the past to initiate whatever plan she has to erase us. We have one ship, the ROYAL SOVEREIGN, ready for time travel. I am going to put our children on board of it, so that they could be safeguarded, but I also want you aboard, Miri. If not for me, then at least save yourself so that our children could have you.”

Stan waited anxiously for Miri’s answer. Despite the differences between themselves in the last days, he still loved her deeply. His children were also really missing her very much. She finally answered after a few seconds.

“Alright, I will come. Should I go directly to the ship or come to the palace?”

“Grab an air cab and come to the palace. Don’t waste time packing a bunch of suitcases: hours, maybe minutes may count.”

“I will be there shortly.”

“Thanks, Miri.”

Stan then closed that connection and did a few more calls, alerting a few select key people. He then ran out of the bedroom to wake up his mistresses and children.

23:51 (Central Europe Time)

Wednesday, June 27, 3386 'A'

The Kern's residence

Zurich area, Central Europe

Tomi Kern's heart jumped when Boran quietly entered their living room as she was watching the GNN all-news channel on the large holographic television. Getting up and running to him, she hugged tightly her husband of so many years in silence before looking into his eyes.

"You are about to leave for the past, is that it, Boran?"

"I am leaving for war, along with the rest of the Time Patrol. I have one good news: Nancy Laplante was rescued, healthy, from the Imperium this morning. The Imperium is however still as bent as ever to wage war against the Time Patrol and us. The Time Patrol has thus no choice left but to change the history of timeline 'B' and erase the Imperium into oblivion. Nancy Laplante and her people were able to record the intentions of the Imperium concerning us. I have a copy of these recordings here. I would like you to contact Miss Kano at Global News Network while I will be gone and to show her these recordings. It will show the public what kind of threat is hanging over our head and the extent to which Nancy Laplante and her people went to protect us and prevent this war. Maybe it will sway the public opinion enough to shame the High Council in reversing its stupid policy concerning the Time Patrol."

Tomi took the data chip held by Boran and looked at it for a few seconds, then pocketed it.

"Will you come visiting me from time to time, Boran?" She said softly. That attracted tears to Boran's eyes.

"I will, Tomi, I promise. Take care of yourself."

"You too, Boran."

They kissed for a last time before Boran left the house. Tomi saw him get in a time scooter piloted by a young ancestor man and disappear in a flash of light. Her sadness then turned into resolution when she patted the pocket containing the data chip. Going

to her videophone, she placed a call to the GNN main offices on the Zeta Alpha orbital city, asking for Lori Kano.

CHAPTER 16 – EXILED IN TIME

09:03 (GMT)

Saturday, May 23, 1942 ‘B’

10 Downing Street, London

England

Nancy Laplante’s arrival in front of the Prime Minister’s official residence in the heart of Whitehall District didn’t go unnoticed: wearing full body armor and armed to the hilt, she came down from the sky and floated down to the sidewalk, using the built-in gravity drive of her body armor. The armed soldiers and policemen guarding the residence didn’t know how to react at first, pointing their weapons at Nancy until she raised the protective visor of her helmet. One soldier then came to attention and saluted, soon imitated by the others.

“Sorry, Brigadier: we didn’t recognize you.”

“At ease, soldiers! I am here simply to talk with the Prime Minister. Is he in?”

“I believe so, Brigadier.”

“Thank you!”

Going to the front door of the residence, Nancy knocked on it and waited. A butler soon opened the door and looked at her with surprise for a moment before bowing.

“I gather that the Brigadier would like to see the Prime Minister?”

“You gather right, Henry. Is he available?”

“He is upstairs with General Ismay, in his private office. I will go announce you. If you may please wait in the lobby, Brigadier.”

Nancy entered the residence and took a seat in the lobby while the butler went upstairs at a near run. He was back in barely a minute.

“The Prime Minister will receive you now, Brigadier.”

Getting up, Nancy negotiated the stairs two by two and marched in the Prime Minister’s office, stopping at attention and saluting Churchill and General Ismay. The latter returned her salute, then came to her with a wide smile to shake her hand.

“Thank God, you are safe and sound, Nancy. A splendid job you did, getting the return of Princess Margaret.”

In contrast, Winston Churchill was a lot more circumspect, staying behind his desk and looking reserved.

“Are you here to blast me verbally or to be nice with me, Brigadier? Prime Minister bashing has turned into a popular sport lately.”

“Sir, I am here to inform you on the status of our problem with the Imperium. By the way, you can call me simply Nancy, or Miss Laplante: I resigned my rank, remember?”

“You effectively did, Miss Laplante. So, where are we with the Imperium now?” Nancy spent a good ten minutes briefing him and Ismay on the situation, finishing with the mutiny staged by the Time Patrol against the Global Council orders not to rescue her. Churchill had to sit, struck by the enormity of that.

“You are telling me that, apart of still having to erase the Imperium, you were disavowed by your own Global Council and are now on the run?”

“Not on the run, sir. Just temporarily in exile. We pulled back to a new, secret base. From there, we plan to erase the Imperium by putting a quick end to this war. Such a drastic modification of history, especially if followed by a few other measures, should ensure that the Imperium disappears forever.”

Both Churchill and Ismay glanced at each other, unable to believe their luck. Nancy’s next words however cooled down somewhat their glee.

“I need to be honest with you on an important point, Mister Prime Minister. The Imperium came into being because the British Empire was kept whole after this war and grew in power, to the point of becoming the dominant superpower in the World, a role that would have normally been grabbed by the United States if not for my appearance in England in 1940. We also discussed many times in the past my views about the British Empire and the need for Great Britain to let go its colonies. Erasing the Imperium will necessitate that the British Empire fades in history, as it did in the original timeline. It doesn’t need to happen overnight and can, and should be done, progressively and carefully after this war is over. However, if Great Britain refuses to give up its empire, the Time Patrol will then be forced to do it for you. Don’t shout at me yet, Mister Prime Minister. The alternative to that is a worldwide nuclear war in the decades to come, a nuclear war that will nearly snuff out the Human race on this planet and will lead to the formation of the Imperium. That Imperium, apart from having kidnapped Princess Margaret, is now resolved to find and then destroy with nuclear weapons the Global Council. I will not let that happen, Mister Prime Minister. Dismantling the British Empire

would be indeed a small price to pay to prevent the death of all those billions of people in the future.”

Churchill looked at her with a bitter expression.

“Then, why come to us if you are intent anyway on forcing us to give up our colonies, Miss Laplante?”

“Because I would rather have it being done by you, voluntarily, than doing it for you. We can do this together and end this war quickly, or I can pull all the stops and act unilaterally to do what has to be done, for the sake of Humanity. Another reason to seek your cooperation is the fact that, even if we end this war quickly, there will still be hundreds of thousands, even millions of refugees and victims of the Nazis to care for. The Time Patrol has highly advanced technology, but it doesn’t have the resources or personnel to care for these masses. The main reason I came today is to ask your permission to use R.A.F. Northolt as a reception point for the people we will free from the Nazi jails and extermination camps we will shut down. This means installing a large refugee camp and a field hospital on its grounds. We also would like to install a mobile command post there, in order to better coordinate our actions in Europe.”

Churchill was silent for a long moment, obviously conflicted by the price England would have to pay for such a quick victory in this war. He finally nodded his head once and bit on his cigar.

“Very well, Miss Laplante. England will do what it must do. You can have Northolt. General Ismay will take care of the details for you.”

13:56 (GMT)

Control Tower

RAF Air Station Northolt, West of London

England

“You seem quite anxious, Mister Denison. You should try to relax a bit.”

Wing Commander Denison, base commander of RAF Northolt, stopped pacing the floor of the control tower long enough to look at Air Commodore Nicholls, commander of the Northolt Sector headquarters.

“Me, nervous, sir? I receive spaceships on my station all the time. Thank God that the Germans are quiet today.”

“Actually, they have been quiet for a long time...over England that is. I can't say that my fighter pilots are complaining about that, though.”

The two senior officers were then quiet, letting the three air controllers and the duty air operations officer do their job. A shout of surprise from one of the air controllers made them turn around quickly, in time to see Nancy Laplante, wearing a gray uniform, a helmet and body armor, float outside the tower at the level of the big windows of the watch room. Before they could react to that, Nancy disappeared from outside the tower, then reappeared inside, a few paces from Air Commodore Nicholls. She saluted him smartly while grinning to him.

“Sir, it is a pleasure to see you again.”

“The pleasure is mine, Brigadier.” Replied Nicholls, shaking her hand. “Are your ships about to arrive?”

“They just finished surveying and mapping your airfield from above, sir. The heavy transport GILGAMESH will be the first to come down. It is a saucer-shaped ship with a diameter of 300 meters.”

“Three hundred meters?” Exclaimed Wing Commander Denison. “I hope that you have only one ship that big, miss. If not, I will run out of space quickly.”

“Do not worry, Mister Denison: our next biggest ship is only 200 meter-long.”

“Only 200 meters, she said.” Said Denison while rolling his eyes up. A huge shadow then appeared on the vast grass area in front of the control tower. The British looked on in awe as the GILGAMESH made a smooth landing in one corner of the airfield, resting on twelve gigantic landing legs. To the British' astonishment, two huge hull sections of the massive transport ship then opened like a sea shell, revealing a cargo bay inside. In the cargo bay was actually what looked like a twenty storey-high building resting on multiple legs. The building then started floating out of the cargo bay and into the open as Nancy spoke.

“This is what we call the ALPHA mobile command and support module. It is basically a mobile field outpost, able to fly and to jump spacetime. It will be our command center while in Northolt. Do you mind if we position it in that empty parking lot near the sector headquarters, Mister Denison?”

“Uh, not at all, miss.”

As the flying building, towering over the other buildings in Northolt, floated down to its designated spot, a number of flying cranes emerged as well from the GILGAMESH,

transporting what looked like thick slabs measuring fifty meter-long, fifteen meter-wide and five meter-thick.

“Those slabs are actually expandable mobile storage shelters. We literally acquired them at the last minute before departing the 34th century. These are extensively used in the future as storage shelters for temporary, remote facilities. They sit on pneumatic legs that adjust to the terrain to let the shelter be perfectly level and they expand upwards like an accordion, their pneumatic sides inflating to make them very rigid. Four of these storage shelters will be positioned well away from all other buildings, as we will use them to store our ammunition supplies.”

Denison and Nicholls actually counted a total of fourteen such shelters flying out of the GILGAMESH. As soon as they were in position and ready to be dropped in place, pneumatic legs deployed from under the slabs, on which they rested. The roof panel of each shelter then slowly rose, revealing walls made of inflatable partitions. Ten minutes after deployment, the fourteen slabs were transformed into spacious, 3-storey shelters, complete with access ramps. An army of forklifts then started shuttling between the GILGAMESH and the shelters, moving pallets loaded with various supplies and equipment. Two big buses also rolled out of the giant transport ship and went to the ALPHA mobile module, where over sixty persons disembarked from the buses and entered the building. The attentions of Denison and Nicholls were then attracted to a big column of moving machines exiting the transport ship via the main ventral ramp.

“What are those, Colonel Laplante?” Asked Denison, intrigued.

“Combat robots, our main ground combat assets. We have with us 10,000 standard combat robots, plus 240 Point Defense Robots, bigger and meaner machines meant to protect against ship attacks. Our best weapons are still our ships, though.”

As if it had been a signal for them to appear, the thirteen other ships of the Time Patrol then floated down from the sky, landing in two widely spaced rows not far from the Northolt's control tower. Grabbing a pair of binoculars, Nicholls read the names painted on the nose of the ships.

“Hmmm...quite an eclectic bunch of ship names. I see one named BRITANNIA, while there is another named WALKÜREN and a third one named WHITE ROSE OF STALINGRAD. Your crews must be a real mixed bag.”

“You will soon have a chance to meet them, sir. I must warn you that some of them were Germans.”

“Germans, here?” Nearly shouted the old officer. He then caught on her choice of words. “Why did you say that they were Germans?”

“Because they are now, like all the other members of the Time Patrol, simply citizens of the Global Council, the future civilization which used to support us. Again, I will explain all that to you at a later time.”

Nancy then looked at Wing Commander Denison.

“Mister Denison, if that hangar you offered for our use is still available, we will gladly take possession of it so that we could park our shuttlecraft inside.”

“It certainly is, miss. Hangar number five is yours. What about the Quonset hut sitting empty near the Men’s Mess?”

“We won’t need it. You may thus regain the use of that Quonset hut. Be prepared however to have 340 extra persons to feed, starting tomorrow. That number will go down to 282 the day after, when part of our forces will leave for the Pacific theatre.”

Denison quickly noted down those numbers and bowed to Nancy.

“Well, you will excuse me now, so that I can arrange a few things on the base. Could I expect you at the Officers’ Mess for supper tonight, Brigadier?”

“I will be there, along with my combat aircrews and my field agents, Mister Denison.”

Once Denison had left, it was Nancy’s turn to excuse herself with Nicholls: she truly had a million things to check on right now.

06:49 (GMT)

Friday, June 29, 3386 ‘B’

HMIS ROYAL SOVEREIGN

Royal Imperium Navy Base Northolt

Despite the obvious haste and efficiency of everybody involved, King Stan still was wriggling with impatience in his command chair on the bridge of the ROYAL SOVEREIGN as the behemoth finally took off from its base just outside London. They had to clear Imperium space before the damn Time Patrol could have a chance to erase them along with the whole Imperium. He knew that his crew would be at a disadvantage against the Time Patrol despite the huge firepower of the fleet flagship: they were new at this time travel business, while Nancy Laplante had amply demonstrated that the Time

Patrol knew about every trick in the books on the subject. That was one of the reasons why the persons accompanying his family on this mission included the best historians and astrophysicists he could get on such short notice. Some of these illustrious scholars had been actually dragged out of bed by troopers with very strict orders. That thought made Stan look uncomfortably at the major from the Ministry of Security sitting in one of the observers' chairs of the bridge. Stan didn't know how much he could trust him or his contingent of security guards, even after the death of General Veck. That major and some of his troopers had however led the raid on Buckingham Palace in 1942 and were thus the only ones with real experience in dealing with the Time Patrol on the ground.

The super battleship climbed quickly to low Earth orbit, at which point the captain of the ship pivoted his command chair to face the King.

"What is our precise destination, Your Majesty?"

"Stay in orbit over England, Commodore Nousma, but jump back in time to, say, August 15 of 1940, at noon London time."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Ken Nousma then gave a series of curt orders to his bridge crew. When everything was set and ready, he pushed the large purple button on his control panel. A short flash of white light enveloped the whole bridge. Nousma was about to order a passive sensors sweep when the engineer in charge of monitoring the time distorter system shouted in alarm.

"SIR, WE ARE STILL IN 3386! THE COMPUTER REGISTERED AUGUST 15 OF 1940 AS A NON-EXISTENT DATE."

"What?" Exclaimed Nousma before leaving his seat and going to the engineer to review the indications on his workstation with him. He quickly had to agree with the engineer and turned to face the King, who was watching this with growing gloom.

"Your Majesty, our time distorter is apparently working fine but we bounced back when it could not complete the jump to the requested date. It was as if time itself did not exist then."

"But that's impossible!" Raged Stan. "Where then is all the rest of history?" Prince Len, who had paled on hearing all this, suddenly understood everything.

"Dad, I think I know why we can't go to August 15 of 1940: Nancy Laplante had not arrived yet from the future."

Stan stared at his eldest son, shocked by the implications of what the teenager had said. He however respected Len's opinions when it came to history: on that subject the young man was surprisingly knowledgeable for his age.

"Go on, Son."

"Well, Nancy Laplante arrived near London from the future on September 2 of 1940. What I suspect is that her actions then actually created the history we know. She probably created us, along with our whole timeline. Laplante probably comes from the main historical timeline, the one that goes back all the way to the creation of the Universe."

"Your son may very well be right, Your Majesty." Said one of the astrophysicists sitting in the rows of observers' seats. "In this case, we probably will be able to jump back only as far as September 2 of 1940. If this is true, then we will have to find the correct wave frequency of the main timeline and then modify our time distorter accordingly before we could jump to the main timeline."

"Which is where the Time Patrol and its supporters are probably sheltering, which means that they are for the time being out of reach from us." Said Stan, bitter. "How long would it take to find that frequency?"

"It could be a while, Your Majesty. We basically will be feeling our way in the dark."

"But we can't sit here and wait for results. We are vulnerable here and now."

"What about going to, say, October of 1940, Dad?" Suggested Len. "It would put us in a safe date when Laplante would not have had a chance yet to go back to the future to create the Time Patrol. We would however have to be careful not to touch or hurt Laplante then: she was still influencing heavily the British government of the time and thus shaping our eventual making."

"Remind me later to give you a medal, Len. Commodore Nousma, jump to October 15 of 1940."

"Right away, Your Majesty."

Entering the new date in the computer, the pilot of the battleship then nodded to Nousma, who pushed again the jump button. This time, the flash of light was longer and the view of Earth on the display screens changed noticeably. Nousma sighed quietly in relief.

"We are now over England on October 15 of 1940, Your Majesty. Communications officer, find the frequency for the BBC and put it on loudspeaker."

Some antiquated style of music mixed with radio static soon could be heard by the occupants of the bridge. King Stan relaxed visibly then: they were now safe from the threat of being erased. This was however only the start of their mission. He turned towards the scientists sitting behind him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, your next task is clear: find us a way to access the main historical timeline. In the meantime we will sit in orbit under strict electronic silence. Let’s get to work.”

09:31 (Paris Time)

Sunday, May 24, 1942 ‘B’

Champs Élisés, Paris

France

Jacques Bigot was enjoying one of the rare nice things left to him in this war: sipping a good wine at a quiet café in Paris. It helped him forget about the food rationing, the German occupation and the bleak war news. Today was an even worst day than usual for him, for the young British woman who had been his resistance cell’s clandestine radio operator had been arrested last evening by the Germans while she was having her suitcase radio repaired in an underground shop in Paris. Since the Germans were now undoubtedly torturing the unfortunate Mary Coleman to find out for whom she was working, Jacques had been forced to evacuate his farm near Paris, along with his wife Mariette and his assistant, Pierre Soulange. They were now hiding in the basement of a friend’s house until they could figure out what to do next. Unfortunately, trying to free Mary from the clutches of the Gestapo was not a realistic option. Remorse at being helpless to help Mary had pushed Jacques in going to this café, where he was probably going to get drunk in order to temporarily forget about war’s cruelties.

Exclamations from the persons around him and along the Champs Élisés made him look up like them. His jaw dropped at the sight of the fleet of fantastic flying ships now floating silently overhead at medium altitude. One of the ships in particular was gigantic, its shadow covering the whole center of Paris. A female voice then boomed down from the sky, speaking in perfect French.

“People of Paris, this is Nancy Laplante speaking on behalf of the Time Patrol. The German occupation of France and the war itself are soon to be put to an end. This

is a message of hope for you, but also one of caution: do not take precipitous actions now that could endanger you or others around you. The Time Patrol will take care of the German occupation forces in the next few days. For the Germans listening to this, I have only one thing to say: be ready to lay down your arms and to surrender when the Time Patrol will come back. If you do that, you will be spared and returned home. If you resist or, worst, commit atrocities against the French people, then you will be killed without mercy. To show you how futile it would be to resist, we will now take and destroy the headquarters of the German security and police forces in France, lodged on Avenue Foch, and the Gestapo center on Rue des Saussaies.”

Jacques Bigot, like the other French men and women around him, then shouted with joy as the noise of loud gunfights erupted from two separate spots in the city. The few German soldiers and officers visible around the Champs Élisés paled and either ran or jumped into their vehicles to head towards their respective garrisons and offices.

09:33 (Paris Time)

Gestapo interrogation centre

Rue des Saussaies, Paris

“WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR, YOU IDIOTS? LOCK ALL THE DOORS IMMEDIATELY!”

The panicked orders from the head of the Gestapo center made the SS soldiers guarding the main door push the big bolts in place. They were putting a thick wood beam across the heavy double doors when the doors blew in their faces, sending deadly wood splinters around the front lobby and killing or wounding the guards and the Gestapo officer. A squad of SS soldiers running down the stairs to the lobby stopped dead in their tracks when two intimidating machines the size of big men rolled inside the building. Twin bursts of machine gun fire cut down the soldiers within a second. The robots then headed up the stairs, floating up the staircase while firing at any German that showed himself up. A dozen more robots followed in their heels, splitting up and methodically exterminating the SS guards and the Gestapo staff, with only the unidentified civilians encountered by the robots being stunned instead of being shot or blown away. The few panicked Germans who tried to flee by the back door of the building were greeted by merciless fire from four waiting robots and cut down as soon as they showed up.

In one of the basement interrogation rooms, the two Gestapo men working on Mary Coleman left her at the sound of the first detonations, running out in the hallway only to be shot down by Nancy Laplante, who had jumped directly to the basement level with two combat robots. Her assault rifle at the ready, Nancy cautiously checked the doors lining the hallway one by one, finding most of them to be cells, some occupied by prisoners in mostly bad shape. She did not try to give those prisoners some first aid yet, as she had to make certain first that all the German personnel was disposed of. Once that was done, she activated her helmet microphone.

“BABYLON, this is Nancy. Send medical teams to my location in the basement at Rue des Saussaies: I have seven beaten up people in need of help.”

Nancy then entered the interrogation room where Mary Coleman was still tied naked to a chair and, crouching besides her, examined her with growing sadness. The young woman had obviously gone through about every torture technique in the Gestapo books, something Nancy was particularly qualified to judge. The woman was semi-conscious and couldn't even see Nancy, as her two eyes were swollen shut.

“The bastards!” Raged Nancy in a low voice. “Miss...miss, can you hear me?”

“Ye...yes.” Answered softly Mary through her puffy lips. “Who are you?”

“I am Nancy Laplante. My people and me are now exterminating the Gestapo staff. You will soon be out of here and transported to safety, miss. I will now untie you.” She was finished doing that when Rebecca Milner showed up with Sylvie Comeau and two Global Council aircrews pulling three anti-gravity gurneys that floated a meter off the ground. Rebecca quickly examined Mary, shaking her head in disgust at the end.

“She may be suffering from a cranial trauma, on top of everything else. She will need urgent medical treatment.”

Helped by one of the aircrews, Nancy put Mary on one of the gurneys, covering her and adjusting the safety harness over her before following Rebecca in the next-door cell. Another beaten up young woman lay on the hard floor there. She was however fully conscious, albeit in obvious pain.

“Miss Laplante, is that you?”

“Yes, I am Nancy Laplante. What is your name and why are you here?”

“My name is Claudette Besson. I ran a resistance cell until two weeks ago, when the Germans raided our hideout. Some of my fighters are still here: I could hear their screams as late as yesterday.”

“Some? Where are the others?”

“Mostly dead. My interrogator taunted me by telling me that three of my female agents had been sent to a camp called Ravensbrück.”

Nancy paled at the mention of that name.

“My God, the poor girls! That place is hell on Earth for women. What are the names of your agents, Claudette?”

“Lisette Devreux, Sylvie Masson and Maryse Renault. Could you really do something for them, Miss Laplante?”

“I will do the impossible for them, Claudette, I solemnly swear. We will now evacuate you. Please relax and let my friends take care of you.”

Claudette Besson was then loaded on a gurney and led away. The job of evacuating all seven prisoners took ten minutes, with the loaded gurneys brought outside the main entrance, where a shuttlecraft had landed vertically in the street. Two PDRs and eight combat robots were covering both ends of the street, engaged in a firefight with German army units trying to react to the assault on the Gestapo center. The Germans definitely were having the worst of the fight, their fire proving ineffective against the robots' electromagnetic shields. Once the freed prisoners had been loaded into the shuttlecraft, Nancy signaled its pilot to lift off, which she did promptly. Jean Bigras, armed with a TERMINATOR assault rifle-grenade launcher combo, then emerged from the building, followed by the combat robots that had stormed it. Heavy smoke was now pouring out of a number of windows. Jean went to Nancy and reported to her while standing at attention.

“All the Germans are dead and the Gestapo archives are now burning up.”

“Was there any French staff or visitors inside, Jean?”

“None, Nancy. All the civilians I searched had German identity papers on them.”

“Alright! How about cleaning up those two groups of German soldiers before leaving?”

A big grin appeared on Jean's face.

“I'm game, Nancy. They won't be able to say that they had not been warned, though.”

“Then take the left end of the street. I will clean up the other end.”

That took a mere minute to do, the Germans cut down in a heavy crossfire from both Nancy and Jean and from the robots. After a quick call to George Townsend's assault group to ensure that the attack on the headquarters on Avenue Foch was going

according to plan, Nancy regrouped her combat robots and her PDRs and flew off with them and Jean back towards the BABYLON. Less than twenty minutes after the start of the attack, the whole Time Patrol fleet flew away southward, leaving the Germans in Paris stunned and shaken.

The next stop of the fleet was over the city of Lyon, where a public message was read again before the Gestapo headquarters and the main jail there were assaulted, cleaned up and put on fire. The fleet then reversed course, heading North at top speed before paying successive visits to the French cities of Strasbourg and Metz, then to the Belgian capital of Brussels and to the Dutch cities of Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam. By then, a total of 687 persons had been freed and sent to England by shuttlecraft and hundreds of SS, SD and Gestapo members killed, with no losses on the Time Patrol's side. Nancy then gave her troops one hour to rest a bit and eat before the fleet headed towards Copenhagen, destroying the Gestapo and SD offices there before making stops in Riga, the capital of the now annexed state of Latvia, and Leningrad, in the Soviet Union. The stop over Leningrad was different from the previous ones, though. For one, the public announcement in Russian was followed by the sending of dozens of remotely controlled cargo platforms loaded with tons of flour intended for the starving population of the besieged city. While the ecstatic Soviets quickly unloaded the pallets dropped on the ground by the cargo platforms, the Germans' response was much less friendly. Their 88mm anti-aircraft guns opened a heavy fire aimed at the Time Patrol fleet, while the German field artillery tried to target the points where the food was being delivered. The anti-aircraft fire proved worthless against the electro-magnetic shields of the ships but the field artillery actually caused Soviet casualties on the ground, prompting Nancy into issuing a terse command to her scoutships.

"All scoutships, this is Nancy. Locate those artillery pieces, and then slice their barrels in two with your lasers."

For the sophisticated sensors on the scoutships, locating the German guns by detecting the shells they fired and calculating their trajectory and thus their point of origin was child's play. Laser beams then cut through the thick steel barrels like hot knives through butter, leaving the German gunners mostly unhurt but shaken and swearing. For good measure, Nancy ordered the anti-aircraft guns to be destroyed as well, as they could also be used against ground targets. Through all this, none of the German members of

the Time Patrol hesitated or faltered in carrying out their orders and directives, to Nancy's delight and relief.

The fleet's next two stops were Moscow and Stalingrad, where Nancy delivered messages of hope intended to boost the morale of the Soviet population. She however knew too well that the Soviet citizens would need a lot more than that before being able to enjoy lives that would be truly bearable. They would need first to be rid of both the German military menace and of a few monsters presently residing in Moscow. That was planned for later. Nancy did however use the stop over Moscow to have a number of spy probes placed discreetly inside the Kremlin and the headquarters of the NKVD, the Soviet secret police of the time. With that taken care of, the fleet moved once again, this time towards Warsaw.

The plan of action for Warsaw was actually more involved than the ones for the other cities so far. For one thing the situation there was a lot more delicate, with a crowded Jewish ghetto and the Polish population in general at the mercy of a ruthless German occupation force that would not hesitate for an instant in extracting a bloody revenge from defenseless civilians if attacked by the Time Patrol. Nancy thus had little choice but to hand quickly a decisive defeat to the German forces in Warsaw. That would in turn mean a strong and sustained effort by both air and ground forces. The fleet went under cloak well before arriving over Warsaw and spent the first hour observing the movements of the German forces in the city and pinpointing the locations of their barracks and depots. When she was satisfied that she had enough information to act, Nancy called Fernand Brunet, Sean Brady, George Townsend and Jack Crawford on the bridge of the BABYLON. The four men were joined there by Mona Zirel 'A' and Maran Tolvek 'A', the six of them facing Nancy across a tactical display table. Nancy looked at them with calm resolution.

"Lady and gentlemen, what you are about to accomplish will be crucial for the success of our overall mission. It will mean for you long, dangerous days of combat against a ruthless enemy that may not hesitate to shield its attacks with civilian hostages, or to threaten mass hostage executions in exchange for your surrender. The moral pressure on you will be extreme at times, with the very lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians depending on your actions. You will have to be hard and to keep in mind our ultimate objective: the liberation of Europe from tyranny. You may have to

sacrifice a few lives for that, but the truth is that we cannot afford to lose this battle. You will not be alone, however. Apart of the PDRs and combat robots that will go down with you, the scoutships TEEN TEAM and BRITANNIA will be temporarily detached from Task Force BABYLON and will stay under cloak over Warsaw, ready to provide you fire support on demand. Four reconnaissance probes will also be stationed over the city to provide you with continuous air and ground surveillance of Warsaw. In the first phase, you will discreetly go down to the Jewish ghetto and establish a command post there before positioning your robots while the fleet starts bombarding the main German garrisons and facilities. The second phase will start when the Germans decide to move in any way against the ghetto. That will be the time for you to show your full strength. You will then try to attract the Germans in a series of ambushes and kill zones, to both deplete their numbers and hopefully to convince them to leave Warsaw alone entirely. Fernand, you will be in charge of our forces in Warsaw, with George as your deputy. Mona and Maran will take turns at monitoring the sensors displays of your command post. Do you have any questions?"

"One, Nancy." Said Fernand Brunet. "What if the Germans try to starve the ghetto into submission?"

"That will not happen, Fernand, as we will be sending in regular shipments of food by shuttlecraft. One of your tasks on arrival in the ghetto will be to find and mark a reasonably protected landing zone for our shuttlecraft. Don't hesitate to use the knowledge the Jewish underground has of the ghetto. How is your Yiddish, by the way?"

Brunet smiled at her question.

"As good as it was 250 years ago. My Polish is also on a par."

"Excellent! Any other questions? Then get ready to go and good luck to you all. Advise me just before you depart."

Farah Tolkonen 'B', who had volunteered with her two assistants to be part of the fleet, watched the five men and one woman leave the bridge, then looked at Nancy, speaking softly to her.

"Nancy, from what I know about this war, I understand that the health conditions in the ghetto are atrocious. There will also probably be many civilian casualties once the fighting starts. I wish to be allowed to go down to the ghetto with the others with some medical supplies, to set up a first aid station there."

“But, you would need some assistance down there, Farah. You can’t be alone to care for patients for days.”

“Then lend me the use of one or two of your nurses. I am sure that there will be many volunteers if you ask around.”

Nancy was silent for a moment, mentally debating Farah’s request. Her own Girl Scout attitude then convinced her. Switching her radio to fleet-wide frequency, she then spoke calmly in her microphone.

“Attention all hands, this is Nancy. I am requesting two volunteers who are medically trained and who would be ready to go down to Warsaw and stay there to help Doctor Tolkonen ‘B’ take care of the wounded and sick in the Jewish ghetto. You have five minutes to make your mind and report by radio to me. Out!”

It took less than a minute for the first call to come in.

“Nancy, this is Patricia Wilson. I and Sylvie Comeau are ready to go down anytime.”

Nancy grinned: she didn’t expect less from the two ex-Canadian Army field nurses.

“Alright, Patricia: you’re on, along with Sylvie. Transfer to the BABYLON now, so that Farah ‘B’ could brief you two.”

Nancy then smiled to Farah.

“It seems that you were right, Farah. You can use a cargo platform and load it with medical supplies and equipment. Take at least two of our medical evacuation capsules as well: they will be useful in sending critical cases to Northolt. Make sure also that you and your nurses are armed: I don’t expect the Germans in Warsaw to play by the rules of the Geneva Conventions.”

Farah was about to turn around and leave the bridge when she nearly bumped into Natia Mindicor, the ship’s young stewardess.

“Oh, sorry, Natia.”

“Actually, I was coming to speak to you and Nancy.” Said timidly the giant teenager. “I wish to go down to Warsaw with you, Farah.”

“We were asking for medically trained personnel, Natia.” Cut in Nancy. Natia looked resolutely back at her.

“I am a qualified medic, Nancy. It is part of my formation as a stewardess. Besides, I would like to help people more than by simply serving food and drinks around. I may not be combat trained but I have seen you guys often enough during your field exercises to know what to do.”

“Oh, and what are you supposed to do if fired upon, Natia?”

“Duck!”

“That’s my girl. You’re signed on. Follow Farah, who will liaise with Fernand Brunet and his team. Good luck, girls.”

“Girls?” Said Farah in mock protest. “I am twice your age, kid.”

Natia giggled as she followed Farah out of the bridge.

17:22 (Warsaw time)

Gesia Street, the Jewish Ghetto

Warsaw, Poland

“I hate to say this, but I think that these houses are now available.”

Mona Zirel, at the controls of the time scooter transporting Fernand Brunet and Jack Crawford, winced at Jack’s remark: visible down in the street was a line of bodies lying on the sidewalk in front of what had probably been the homes of the unfortunate Jewish men, women and children now lying in pools of dried blood. Contrary to most of the houses and buildings of the Jewish Ghetto that they had flown over, nobody was visible at the windows or balconies of those four townhouses. Very few passersby were visible either, probably covered by this most recent display of Nazi act of random murder and terror. Brunet pointed at one of the houses, a solid-looking, four-storey apartment building made of stone blocks.

“Mona, fly around this house. I want to see its rear access.”

Mona did so, piloting the scooter to a hover above the rear courtyard of the building. They were presently cloaked, so they didn’t have to worry about being seen. Brunet scanned visually the area below, then smiled.

“This building will do just fine. Let’s take possession of it discreetly before someone else does. Mona, can you go down in that courtyard?”

“No problem, Fernand. I could even use the covered passage between the street and the courtyard. By the way, once cleared of debris, I believe that this courtyard will be suitable to land a shuttlecraft. It will be a tight fit but it will do.”

“I had that in mind too. Fly inside the covered passage.”

Once under the arched passage, which had its street-side end closed off by twin doors large enough for a horse carriage, Mona landed her scooter and switched off its cloaking field. All three then stepped off the machine and proceeded to unload their equipment

and weapons. Jack also put in place four time beacons to facilitate the arrival of the other members of their team and their robots. With Mona's scooter well out of the way of the beacons, Maran's scooter and Farah's cargo platform quickly joined them in the covered passage. Jack and George, their assault rifles at the ready, then entered the house via a connecting door that had been smashed open, probably by German SS troops. After a fifteen-minute search, the house was declared safe and the positioning of the group's equipment and supplies started. They occupied mainly rooms giving on the rear of the building, reserving the street-side rooms for firing positions. The ground level, with its floor sitting directly on stone foundations, was reserved for the storage of robots and other heavy supplies. The first floor went to Farah 'B' and her medical team, while the second floor became their command post. The third floor was turned into living quarters and safe storage rooms for medical supplies and the team's food and water reserves. When Fernand Brunet was satisfied that they were well established, he went down to the ground floor to find Sean Brady and Jack Crawford coordinating the arrival by spacetime jump of part of their force of combat robots. Over forty combat robots were already positioned in the rooms of the ground floor with a view on the street, while thirty robots faced the rear windows or secured the covered passage. Ten robots were busy as well cleaning up the debris clustering the courtyard, dumping them in a corner. The courtyard was soon ready to accommodate landings by shuttlecraft, prompting Fernand into calling the BABYLON via his helmet radio.

"BABYLON, this is TROJAN Team. We are now in position in a strong building with a rear courtyard just large enough to land a shuttlecraft. You may start ferrying in supplies, starting with ammunition reserves for our robots, followed by medical and food supplies for the Jewish population. I am now sending the precise coordinates of the corners of the courtyard."

Walking in succession to each corner of the yard, Brunet then read off the coordinates indicated by his personal locator system. A terse response by radio then followed from the BABYLON.

"We have your coordinates, TROJAN Team. We will first send you three loaded cargo platforms, along with a forklift robot and two technicians. Northolt has been advised and is now loading up a shuttlecraft with food supplies. I believe that canned pork wouldn't be accepted, right?"

“Definitely not!” Replied Fernand, happy that someone had not lost his sense of humor in the middle of this bleak business. “We will be awaiting your supplies, BABYLON.”

Backing off to the rear entrance of the covered passage, Fernand looked up at the windows of the opposite building sharing the courtyard with their building. Dozens of people of all ages were now looking down at him and at the robots, a mix of awe and fear on their faces. Fernand, who had expected this sooner or later, decided that this was the time to play the good neighbor and called Sean Brady on his radio.

“Sean, this is Fernand. I am going to liaise with our backdoor neighbors. Please take over from me here: supplies are about to arrive in the courtyard.”

“I’m on my way.” Replied the Irishman. Fernand, taking a squad of ten combat robots with him, crossed the courtyard and entered the opposite building via a door that gave access to a wide ground level hallway. A group of nine men and women, some of them old persons, backed off in fear, ready to flee upstairs. Fernand stopped and, smiling, spoke politely in fluent Yiddish.

“There is no need to fear me, ladies and gentlemen. Me and my friends are here to help and protect you.”

One of the men, a bearded one in his early thirties, stepped cautiously forward.

“What kind of things are your friends? Are they men inside small tanks?” Fernand couldn’t help smile at that analogy: it would have actually made sense to explain his robots in terms the present technology could understand.

“There are no men inside these machines. They are just that, machines, but ones that can think and act by themselves and even talk. I call them robots and they are formidable instruments of war that will soon be used against the Germans. I actually have nine friends with me who just established themselves in the building on the other side of the courtyard, plus I am expecting shortly more people bringing in supplies and food for the inhabitants of the Ghetto. We are from an organization called the Time Patrol and led by Nancy Laplante, the Canadian time traveler also known by the Germans as ‘Die Wolfin’. And no, Nancy Laplante is not dead.”

The Jewish man opened his eyes wide, while the people behind him started exchanging excited comments at the mention of food.

“You would bring food for us? Thank God! I am Rabbi Shimon Huberband, head of the house committee for this building. I know someone who runs a number of soup

kitchens and who could help distribute fairly your supplies. I can vouch for his absolute honesty and integrity.”

“I certainly would like to meet him in due time, Rabbi Huberband. Right now I am mostly concerned about keeping our arrival in the Ghetto discreet for a while yet, at least until our first loads of supplies are in and safely stored away.”

“How long are you planning to be here, mister...”

“Oh, excuse me: I forgot to present myself. Agent Fernand Brunet, of the Time Patrol.”

They exchanged a handshake, with Huberband eyeing with interest Fernand's equipment and weapons.

“A Frenchman? I do speak some French.”

“You may keep speaking Yiddish or Polish: I speak both fluently. To answer you, we will be here until the Germans are thrown out of Warsaw and the war is over, which should take a few days at the most.”

“A few days? Are you mad or hallucinating, mister?”

“Not one bit, Rabbi. Understand that we come from the 34th century and that the Germans are no match for our weapons and equipment. Talking of the Germans, would you mind if I position permanently a few of my robots inside your main entrance, to prevent any German or Jewish police from entering?”

“Uh, go ahead, sir. The 34th century you said?”

“That's it! Please give me a minute and I will then give you a tour of our command post.”

Fernand went quickly to the front door and opened it slightly, looking cautiously outside. On the opposite side of the street, thirty meters to the left, was a big, sinister-looking building with barred windows and surrounded by a tall perimeter wall, with two Jewish policemen guarding its main entrance. He was already aware of that building, which was the Ghetto's prison, controlled by the Jewish police, which was in turn collaborating with the Germans. Fernand was going to have to watch that building closely until he could deal with it properly. He turned around after closing the door and spoke to one of the robots in Neo-English.

“Unit 240, you and your squad will stand guard in this building until further notice and prevent any German or Jewish police from entering it. Try to minimize any disruption to the daily routine of the people living here. Rabbi Huberband will identify to

you the actual occupants and legitimate visitors to this building. Do you have any questions, Unit 240?"

"Yes, sir! Are we to stay covert for the moment?" Asked the robot in a normal male voice, making the Jews around it gasp with wonderment.

"You will effectively stay covert until told otherwise or until a direct threat forces you to expose yourself. You may now take your post with your squad."

"Yes, sir!"

The ten robots then split up, some staying in the hallway and the others going inside the apartments flanking the main entrance. Fernand Brunet then gently took Shimon Huberband by one arm, leading him towards the rear courtyard.

"Let me go and present you to the members of my team, Rabbi Huberband."

They exited the building just as a cargo platform appeared in the courtyard in a flash of light, making Huberband jump back from fright.

"Dear God! What kind of sorcery is this?"

"Not sorcery, Rabbi, but science of a very high level."

Fernand let Huberband watch for a moment the unloading operation, with a robotic forklift rolling off the cargo platform with a heavy pallet of ammunition already resting on its fork blades. While the forklift brought inside the team's building its pallet, two 34th century technicians presented themselves to Fernand. Thankfully, someone had thought about fitting them with helmets and body armor, along with backpacks containing some necessary field gear. Huberband could only look up in awe at the giant man and woman as they spoke in turn to Fernand in Neo-English.

"Robotics Technician First Class Ron Buran, sir."

"Robotics Technician Second Class Mira Althea, sir."

"Welcome to Warsaw and thank you for volunteering for this assignment. You do understand that we will be at risk here and that the living conditions will be quite Spartan?"

"We know the risks, sir." Said Buran softly, who then smiled. "We did join the Time Patrol to find a really challenging job after all, sir."

"That's the spirit. Follow me and I will give you the grand tour of our facilities, along with Rabbi Shimon Huberband here."

There was another exchange of name and handshakes between the technicians and Huberband before Brunet led them inside the team's building after being presented to Sean Brady. They met Jack Crawford in one of the rooms of the ground floor, busy

assigning arcs of fire to the robots covering the windows of that room. From there, they took the stairs to the first floor and entered a living room that had been turned into an improvised first aid station. Huberband eyed with envy the sophisticated medical equipment of the team and the ample medical supplies in evidence as Fernand presented him.

“Doctor Tolkonen, this is Rabbi Shimon Huberband, the head of the house committee for the building behind ours. Rabbi, these are Doctor Farah Tolkonen, Nurse Patricia Wilson and Nurse Sylvie Comeau. Starting this evening, they will be able to provide medical care to the wounded and critically sick, apart from distributing some medical supplies to the doctors already operating in the Ghetto. Uh, Farah, where is Natia?”

“Upstairs, preparing supper for the team.”

“Then we will meet her there.” Pronounced Fernand before leading Huberband out of the treatment room and up the stairs to the second floor. As they went up, the Rabbi asked something in a discreet voice.

“Pardon my curiosity, sir, but how come some of your people are normal, while the others are bald giants?”

“Simple, Rabbi: I and the other normal people are from the 20th or 21st century, while our giant members come from the 34th century. Humans evolved a lot during those thirteen centuries. Don’t forget that time travel is our specialty after all. Ah, here is our tactical command post.”

They were greeted in the small, converted living room by Mona Zirel, who looked up from her portable workstation and smiled politely to Huberband.

“Good evening, sir. My name is Mona Zirel.”

“A charming name for a beautiful young woman, Miss Zirel. I am Rabbi Shimon Huberband. I live in the building behind yours.”

“Pleased to meet you, Rabbi Huberband. I...”

An incoming signal on her workstation then cut her off, making her read quickly the message in red letters on one of the video screens of her console.

“Fernand, flash traffic from the BABYLON: the fleet will open fire in ten minutes, unless you deem that this is too early for us.”

Brunet immediately contacted by radio Sean Brady, down in the courtyard.

“Sean, this is Fernand. How are we doing with the supply drops?”

“All three cargo platforms have dropped their loads, which are now inside our building. The shuttlecraft from Northolt arrived two minutes ago and should be finished unloading in a few minutes at the most: that robotic forklift is a godsend.”

“Excellent! Warn the pilot of the shuttlecraft that the fleet is opening fire in less than ten minutes. He will have to jump as soon as he lifts off.”

Fernand then looked at Mona, who was still waiting for his decision.

“Tell the BABYLON that we are ready and that they can start sending the rest of our combat robots and our PDRs down, directly in the street in front of our building. Rabbi, I am afraid that I will have to cut your visit short. I will not send you away empty handed, though. Let’s go back down.”

Huberband, obviously malnourished and thin, had difficulty following the quick pace of Fernand as he was led down to one of the ground floor rooms, which was now packed with boxes, bags and containers of many kind. Grabbing an anti-gravity platform stored in one corner of the room and activating it, Fernand then selected a few bags and boxes, along with a large tin can, putting them on the anti-gravity platform.

“Rabbi, this is only the first load of food to be delivered. All this is for the occupants of your building. As soon as we can organize a proper distribution with your friend that runs soup kitchens, the rest of the food in this room will be given to the people of the Ghetto. There will be a lot more coming regularly.”

Huberband, unable to believe his good fortune, couldn’t stop tears from running out of his eyes as he contemplated the treasures on the platform.

“I...I can’t accept all this just for the people of my building, not when the whole Ghetto is starving to death.”

“Rabbi, there are maybe 300,000 people or more in the Ghetto right now. Dividing what is on this platform now won’t do any good. As soon as your friend shows up here, then a proper distribution will be done. Let this make a real difference to at least a few people.”

Fernand, not letting time to Huberband to protest further, started pushing the platform out of the storage room but stopped abruptly and went to a box, opening it and taking out a smaller box.

“I nearly forgot something. Let’s go!”

Crossing quickly the courtyard with Huberband in his heels, Fernand entered the apartment block and unloaded the food supplies in a corner of the entrance lobby, near the main staircase. He then looked gravely at the Rabbi.

“I will now let you in charge of distributing this food to the families of this building. Be advised that we are about to attack massively the Germans in Warsaw and that my robots will very soon start clearing the Ghetto of all the Germans in and around it. It should be safe for Jews to walk the streets of the Ghetto at leisure in less than two hours. Our ships will pass an announcement to that effect then. I now have to run: I have a battle to direct.”

“Wait! I didn’t thank you yet for all this.”

“You can do that later, Rabbi.”

As Fernand ran away with the anti-gravity platform, Shimon approached the bags and boxes and caressed them, as if to reassure himself that they were not mere figments of his imagination. He then saw the small box Fernand had taken last and opened it. He cried at the sight of the chocolate bars inside. Then, what sounded like the start of a brand new war erupted outside.

Appearing in quick succession along Gesia Street, twenty big and powerful Point Defense Robots, along with 740 combat robots, then split up and spread inside and around the Jewish Ghetto, following the general guidance from the TROJAN Team’s command post. The PDRs took fixed positions along the outer perimeter of the Ghetto, each provided close protection by ten robots, with the task of interdicting all the avenues of approach to the Ghetto to the Germans. Two hundred other robots spaced themselves along the outside of the ten-foot wall erected by the Germans to cut the Ghetto off from the rest of Warsaw, while 300 more robots actively searched and hunted down any German unlucky enough to be inside at that time. In the meantime, the Time Patrol fleet switched off its cloaking generators and appeared in the sky above Warsaw at the same time it fired a rain of projectiles and laser beams at the German installations in and around the city. The German armored vehicles, artillery guns and aircraft within fifteen kilometers of the city center were targeted, with only a very few escaping destruction. The barracks of the SS troops inside Warsaw were also flattened by fire from the cruiser KRONOS, which used its heavy Gatling rail guns for the first time, while the Gestapo office was raided by Nancy in a manner similar to that in the other cities previously attacked by the Time Patrol. A bit over 42 minutes after the appearance of the robots on Gesia Street, the Time Patrol fleet stopped firing, then delivered a minute-long message by loudspeaker before speeding westward, leaving the surviving

Germans, shocked and stunned, to contend with the two scoutships and the 820 PDRs and combat robots left behind to defend the Jewish Ghetto.

As soon as the fleet left for Berlin, Fernand Brunet sent Jack Crawford and twenty combat robots to the big, three-storey stone building housing the offices of the Ghetto's Jewish Council, also known as the 'Judenrat'. The Judenrat was tasked by the Germans to run the day-to-day administration of the Ghetto and enforce via the Jewish Ghetto police their rules and directives. Those directives included the rounding up of persons for deportation towards so-called work camps like Treblinka and the assignment of Jewish labor to the German-run armament factories in Warsaw. Those were all good reasons in Jack Crawford's mind to pay an early visit to the offices of the Jewish Council.

Jack actually flew with his robots to the council's office building on Grzybowska Street, surveying the streets under him for any German that could have survived through a miracle the sweeps by hundreds of robots. The sight of Jack and his robots approaching at low altitude was too much for the Jewish policemen cowering under the arched main entrance of the Judenrat's building: they ran inside to hide in the basement. Making a running touch down near the entrance, Jack then tried the heavy wooden door: it was unlocked. Simply pushing it, he then entered and went to the receptionist's desk, situated in a corner of the lobby. While apparently very calm and relaxed, his eyes scanned continuously his surroundings from behind his lowered helmet visor. Pulling up his visor, he then gave his best smile at the terrified young woman sitting at the reception desk, talking to her in good Yiddish.

"Excuse me, miss, but could you tell me if the Chairman of the Jewish Council is available?"

Looking first at the big automatic grenade launcher and rifle combination weapon held by Jack, then at the robots behind the ex-US Navy SEAL, the receptionist managed to answer in a shaky voice.

"Mister Czerniakow is in his office, sir. Who shall I announce?"

"Agent Jack Crawford, of the Time Patrol. Tell him that this is a bit of an urgent matter."

"Uh, yes sir!"

The young woman then picked up the telephone on her desk and formed a number, then spoke while involuntarily looking again at Jack.

“Hello, Mister Czerniakow? This is the front reception desk. A Mister Jack Crawford is here to see you urgently. He says that he is from the Time Patrol... No, sir: he is definitely not German... Yes, sir. I will do that.”

The woman then put down her telephone receiver and smiled weakly at Jack while getting up.

“I will lead you to Mister Czerniakow’s office: there are very few other employees left at this hour.”

“After you then, miss.”

They walked to the main lobby staircase and went up to the first floor, with the robots following close behind, floating over the stairs. Jack was finally introduced inside a relatively modest office, where a man in his sixties and wearing glasses greeted him cautiously, eyeing his equipment and the robots behind him while shaking hands with Jack. Jack noticed that the man was obviously better nourished than the other Jews he had seen up to now in the Ghetto.

“Good evening, Mister Crawford. I am Adam Czerniakow, Chairman of the Jewish Council. Would you like to sit down?”

“I will stand, if you don’t mind, sir. I won’t take much of your time anyway.”

“As you wish, mister.” Said Czerniakow, staying up as well. “Could you tell me more about your Time Patrol?”

“With pleasure, sir. We come from the future, from the 34th century to be more exact. Our leader is Nancy Laplante, whom you must certainly have heard about before.”

“How could I not have heard about Miss Laplante?” Replied Czerniakow, smiling. “She was our best hope until she supposedly died a year ago. I thus should assume that she is alive and well.”

“You certainly can, sir. For reasons that are too complicated and long to explain here, the Time Patrol has decided to put an end to this war and to try making a better world out of it for all to live in. Our fleet, which you saw in action just a few minutes ago, has been in action over the whole of Europe since early this morning. We have been concentrating in eradicating the offices of the German secret police and the SS security forces in occupied Europe. Our fleet is now over Berlin, and will have cleaned up the Nazi leadership by tomorrow morning. The war in Europe should then be over fairly quickly, probably in a few days.”

“But that’s excellent news! My people will owe you a great debt. How could I be of help?”

“For one thing, sir, you will refrain from now on from obeying or enforcing any order or directive coming from German authorities. Consider all their past edicts as null and void. You have a reputation as a decent and well-intentioned man, even though you carried out the Germans’ orders. Other members of the Jewish Council have rather less shining reputations, however. The Time Patrol is thus issuing a number of directives concerning the Ghetto. You may want to write them down, sir.”

“Of course! Give me a second, please.”

Czerniakow hurried behind his desk, sitting down and grabbing a sheet of paper and a pen.

“Go ahead, mister.”

“First, the Jewish Ghetto police is to cease all activities and will be disbanded. The Time Patrol will take charge of security and policing in the Ghetto until further notice. The members of the Jewish police who committed atrocities and violence on behalf of the Germans will be prosecuted and punished by us. Second, all participation in the German war effort is to be ended as of now. Those working in German-owned factories or in any factories producing war material shall stay home for the moment. In compensation, the Time Patrol will provide emergency food and medical aid to the inhabitants of the Ghetto. Third, there will now be free circulation between the Ghetto and the rest of Warsaw. Your people should be made aware however that there may be still pockets of German forces left around the city and should proceed with caution. The Germans may yet counter-attack by bringing in fresh forces, but we will be ready for them. Fourth, the Jewish Council will have no more say in the distribution of food, medical aid, work organization and housing until a democratically elected council can be voted in. There has been too much corruption and profiteering from certain members of the Jewish Council in the past and you have lost the confidence of your people. The Time Patrol will make temporary arrangements in the meantime.”

Czerniakow gave Jack a hurt look.

“Mister Crawford, I have always acted in the best interest of my people. Who will feed the people of the Ghetto and administer the distribution of services and goods, if not the Jewish Council?”

“The Time Patrol will work directly with the self-help organizations of the Ghetto and the soup kitchens in feeding and caring for the population of the Ghetto. Those who

have apartments or houses in other parts of Warsaw and who can go back to them are free to do so. The Time Patrol will coordinate with the Polish city authorities concerning this to gain their cooperation.”

“What tells you that they will be ready to help us Jews, mister?” Said Czerniakow in a bitter tone. “Too many Poles have been too happy to make a profit on our back or to sell us out to the Germans.”

“True, but many have also risked their lives to help you, like the people of the Rada Pomocy Zydom, also known as the Zegota. Leave the convincing to us, sir. If you will now excuse me, I will go take care of a few more things. Have a good evening, Mister Czerniakow.”

“You too, Mister Crawford.”

Czerniakow watched Jack leave with mixed feelings. Could his Time Patrol, even with its fantastic technology, defeat a military machine that counted millions of soldiers and which had conquered the whole of Europe in mere months? More importantly, would these people keep their promises? If Czerniakow had to go with his previous experiences, then he had doubts about that.

Leaving the Jewish Council building, Jack decided to walk this time, in order to have a better feel for the atmosphere of the Ghetto. Taking Zelazna Street and going north along the wall that enclosed the Ghetto, he soon crossed the footbridge linking the southern and northern parts of the Ghetto. His assault rifle was at the ready as he approached the gate in the wall on Chlodna Street. He however found only the four robots assigned to guard the gate. Continuing north and turning right on Ogradowa Street, Jack stopped in front of number 29. A plaque besides the door designated it as the Warsaw Jewish Orphanage. Thinking for a moment about his son Steve, now nearly four years old, Jack then decided to pay a visit to the orphanage and climbed the steps of the main entrance, ordering his robots to stay outside. A visibly fearful woman in her late thirties opened the door after his third knock and looked with wide eyes at his weapon, then at the robots down the stairs.

“Who...who are you?”

“Agent Jack Crawford, of the Time Patrol. We just threw the Germans out of the Ghetto and I was hoping to visit your orphanage, in order to see if we could provide some help.”

Hope appeared on the woman's face, who opened the door wide and let Jack enter. She then showed him to a big lobby full of children who were half-heartedly playing with a few toys. Jack saw immediately why the children showed so little energy: their thin bodies and emaciated faces were sure signs of slow starvation. Jack felt his heart break as the children recoiled in fear at the sight of his weapons despite the reassurances of the woman who had opened the door. Jack activated his helmet radio microphone as the woman left him to get the director of the orphanage.

"Farah, this is Jack, over."

The answer came after only a few seconds.

"This is Farah. Go ahead, Jack."

"Are you very busy at this time, Farah?"

"Not at all, Jack. In fact, we had only one little patient show up since we opened shop. What's up?"

"I am now at the Jewish Orphanage, at 29 Ogrodowa Street. There are over a hundred severely malnourished children here that could use medical attention and food. Do you think that you could come with some medical and food supplies quickly?"

"I would be delighted to, Jack. I will be there in less than fifteen minutes."

"Thanks! You can guide yourself on my twenty robots that are presently standing in front of the orphanage. Jack, out!"

The voice of Fernand Brunet immediately followed his conversation with Farah.

"Jack, this is Fernand. Be advised that the BRITANNIA has landed in Muranowski Square, so that its crew could rest a bit. I have assigned forty combat robots to guard it while it is on the ground. The TEEN TEAM is continuing to engage pockets of German forces in Warsaw. The BRITANNIA will replace it on station in six hours. How did it go at the Jewish Council?"

"Reasonably well. I met the chairman of the council, Adam Czerniakow, who seems to be a decent enough man. After I leave the orphanage, I will take care of the prison on Pawia Street."

"Good! You know our policy about those who collaborate in acts of atrocities, Jack."

"I certainly do. Jack, out!"

A man in his sixties with a goatee, moustache and balding head came to him as he finished speaking in his microphone. The man, wearing a tired but well cut three-piece suit, shook his hand while bowing.

“Mister Crawford, I am Janusz Korczak, director of the Jewish Orphanage. Is it true that the Germans have been chased out of the Ghetto?”

“It is, sir. The Time Patrol has started today a campaign to put an end to this war and has been raiding German occupying forces across Europe all day. Most of our fleet is now over Berlin, cleaning up the Nazi leadership, but I am part of a sizeable force left behind here to protect the Ghetto and finish cleaning Warsaw of the Germans. Before you ask, the Time Patrol originates from the 34th century and is led by Nancy Laplante, the Canadian time traveler.”

“Those are splendid news, sir. We will now be able to care for our children without fearing possible deportation. There are so many horrible stories going around about the German work camps where our people are being deported.”

“Sir, those so-called work camps are actually extermination camps. They are on our list of priority targets to be liberated, though. To come back on the subject of your children, one of our doctors is on her way to here to check on their health and to bring some supplies and food to them. I understand that you are a doctor yourself, sir?”

“I am. How did you know that?”

“Through historical files about this war, sir. Don’t forget that we travel through time.”

“Uh, of course. Please, let me show you around the orphanage.”

The tour given by Korczak showed to Jack that the orphanage was kept clean and well organized, with the staff being obviously devoted to their young charges, but it was also too obvious that both the children and the adults were slowly starving to death. While well equipped, there was precious little food in evidence in the kitchen and the pantry of the orphanage. Jack was still looking in shock at the five loaves of bread and the pot of watery cabbage soup that were supposed to be the supper of the close to 200 children of the establishment when he recognized the voice of Farah Tolkonen, coming from the lobby. Accompanied by Korczak, Jack went to the lobby and met there Farah, who was holding a large medical kit. Behind her was Sylvie Comeau, pushing an anti-gravity platform full of bags and boxes. Korczak, like his staff and the children, looked up with disbelief at the 220 centimeter-tall Imperium scientist and doctor. The director then saw what was on the anti-gravity platform and nearly burst into tears at that sight.

“May God bless you, good people! This is like life being restored to my children.”

“Don’t get excited too quickly, sir: this is only the first load out of our vehicle. There is at least five times as much still to be brought inside. Is your cook close at hand?”

“She is.” Said Korczak before turning around and yelling towards the kitchen. “ALINKA, COME HERE, QUICKLY!”

A woman in her forties came at a slow run, which was all that her little reserves of energy permitted her. Farah took four big rounds of cheese out of a box on the platform and presented them to the cook.

“Here is some mild cheddar cheese. Could you cut them in slices as appetizers for your children’s supper?”

“Here, I will help you carry them to the kitchen, Alinka.” Offered Jack, realizing that the thin woman didn’t have the strength to carry the cheese. Followed by the cook and Sylvie Comeau, still pushing her platform, Jack brought the cheese to the kitchen and put them on top of a counter, then searched through the platform’s load and grabbed a number of tins of corned beef, putting them on the counter as well.

“That should put some meat on the menu for tonight. Have a good supper, Misses Alinka. I have to run now.”

Leaving the kitchen, Jack joined Farah and Korczak in the lobby.

“If you will both excuse me now, I have something else to take care of. Farah, I will leave with you ten of my robots to keep an eye on your cargo platform and to watch over the orphanage afterwards. Take good care of the kids.”

“I certainly will, Jack. Be careful out there: it is quite spooky and the night is falling quickly.”

“Spooky? Farah, nothing can scare a US Navy SEAL.”

“Still, be careful. You’re a good man.”

“I know. My wife keeps telling that to me.” Replied jokingly Jack before walking out of the orphanage. Giving first new directives to ten of his robots, he then walked eastward on Ogrodowa Street, followed by his remaining ten robots. Darkness was effectively starting to fall, which filled the unlit street with shadows and dark corners where a German or a collaborator could hide from normal sight. Jack’s helmet was however equipped with both a low light level camera and a thermal imaging camera, which gave him about as good a view as if in full daylight. Turning north at the next corner, he then saw a group of bodies lying in the street, about fifty feet ahead. His weapon at the ready and scanning continuously the façades along the street, Jack

approached the bodies, soon recognizing them as seven dead German soldiers. By the multiple bullet impacts on them, he guessed that they had been killed by some of the robots that had swept through the Ghetto. Those Germans had however been stripped of their weapons, ammunition and web gear, raising a suspicion in Jack's mind. He then spoke in his helmet microphone.

"Fernand, this is Jack, over."

"Go ahead, Jack."

"I have just encountered a group of dead Germans off Ogródowa Street. Did you have our robots strip the Germans they killed from their weapons and gear? The ones I am looking at now have been disarmed."

"Our robots had no directives about stripping weapons from dead Germans, Jack. My guess would be that some Jews took their weapons. I was kind of expecting that."

"Me too, but I hope those Jews won't start shooting at everything they can't identify. We will have soon to contact the Jewish underground and liaise with them."

"Agreed! Are you heading towards the prison now?"

"I am. I will report back once I am finished there. Jack out!"

Resuming his advance, Jack walked past four street intersections, encountering or seeing only a few civilians who quickly hid or walked away on seeing him. Since they were not armed, Jack let them go, concentrating his attention on the corner of the Ghetto's prison visible a block away. He was about to turn the corner with Pawia Street, along which the prison stood, when a shout in Yiddish was followed quickly by a rifle shot, then by more shouts. Jack faced the leading robot while switching his weapon to the stun mode.

"Unit 230, your squad will use only stun beams for the moment. Do not fire until I say so or until I am hit. Deploy behind me in extended line."

A second shot rang out as Jack left the cover of the building's corner and walked resolutely towards the prison, his electro-magnetic shield switched on. Four men and one woman holding rifles and crouching in front of the wall surrounding the prison turned their rifles on Jack as soon as they saw him. Jack immediately shouted in Yiddish.

"THIS IS THE TIME PATROL. DROP YOUR WEAPONS IMMEDIATELY AND RAISE YOUR HANDS UP OR MY MACHINES WILL ATTACK."

While the four men complied fairly quickly, the woman took more time to put her rifle down, swearing in Yiddish as she got up. Jack, making her as the probable leader of the

group, walked straight to her, stopping two paces from her and examining her with a cold expression. The woman, a small one in her late twenties with hair cut short, looked back at him defiantly with fiery eyes. Jack had to recognize that she had guts aplenty, but spoke to her in a firm tone.

“Lady, the security inside the Ghetto is right now solely the business of the Time Patrol. Why were you attacking the prison?”

“Because the Jewish policemen inside are nothing but dirty collaborators who helped murder their own people. Who are you to stop us from punishing these criminals?”

Jack took one step forward, looking down at the Jewish woman as he towered over her by a full head.

“I am Agent Jack Crawford, of the Time Patrol, and I say that we will enforce law and order in the Ghetto for the time being. If you want those policemen punished, then you will have to present a case in front of a court. In the meantime, let us do our job.”

“Idealist!” She spat out, not impressed one bit. “What courts condemned all the Jews who were killed by the Germans? What were the crimes committed by those Jews apart of practicing their religion? Why should the bastards inside that building get any more chances than the old men, women and children they helped murder?”

Jack softened his attitude as the woman spoke with contained rage. Unknown to her, Jack had just received a radio message from Mona Zirel, who had been monitoring the whole incident via the video signal from one of the robots. Mona had also been able to match the woman’s face with an archive picture contained in the databanks of her computer.

“Miss Lubetkin, I fully understand your feelings about this and I don’t blame you for trying to kill those men. However, vigilante justice right now will only keep the Ghetto into chaos. If you want to go around Warsaw to hunt down Germans, or stand guard at soup kitchens to prevent the theft of food, that is fine with me. You may take back your rifle but I will ask you to leave this area now.”

“How could you know my name?” Asked the woman, truly stunned.

“Let’s say that the Time Patrol has extensive historical archives covering this whole war, miss. Would a certain Mordecai Anielewicz be with you by chance?”

“I’m here!” Said a thin young man in his early twenties before walking slowly to Jack, obviously worried about attracting a reaction from one of the robots. Jack then gave a curt order in Neo-English that made the robots point their weapons down at the

pavement, which helped relax the Jewish fighters. Anielewicz had a new look of hope on his face as he faced Jack.

“You really are here to help us Jews?”

“We are here to help everyone that had been suffering under the German occupation, Mister Anielewicz, not only the Jews. You just happened to be the ones most in need of help.”

“Maybe we could discuss a joint defense strategy for the Ghetto with you? After all, we know the place very well.”

“A sensible proposition. Please give me a few minutes and then I will lead you to the Time Patrol command post in the Ghetto.”

“Could I come too?” Asked quickly Zivia Lubetkin.

“Of course, miss. Now, please excuse me.”

Turning to face the prison, Jack then shouted at the top of his lungs.

“HEY, YOU ASSHOLES INSIDE! YOU HAVE ONE MINUTE TO COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP BEFORE WE BLOW THIS BUILDING TO BITS!”

Lubetkin giggled at that.

“You are, uh, quite eloquent, mister.”

“US Navy SEAL training is not conducive to good manners, Miss Lubetkin.”

“I thought that you were part of the Time Patrol.”

“I am! I also was in the US Navy before. We have a real international cocktail of members in the Time Patrol. We actually consider ourselves citizens of Humanity, not of any specific country.”

“Hmm, a nice utopia, but still an utopia.”

“You may think differently in a few years, miss. Ah, here they come.”

Jack had the twelve men that ran out of the prison line up in front of him on the sidewalk, spread-eagled against the wall, then searched them one by one. Reading carefully the identity papers and official passes he found on them, he separated five of them from the rest, with one man found with a whip on him being roughly pulled away by Jack. Raising his assault rifle, Jack quickly shot the five men standing in the middle of the street, then finished them off with shots to the head. Zivia Lubetkin stared at him with wide eyes when Jack turned around to face the other prisoners.

“And you lectured me about courts of justice?”

Jack looked back at her with a grave expression.

“These men have already been judged by the highest court on Earth: history. Their crimes were well documented in our historical archives.”

Jack looked at the remaining prisoners, now shaking with terror, and made a dismissing motion with his weapon.

“Consider yourselves unemployed from now on: the Jewish Ghetto police has been dissolved. Where are the keys to the cells?”

“In the guardroom, left after the main entrance. Can we go now?” Said one of the men, nearly stuttering with fear.

“Good! Now, fuck off!”

The seven Jewish policemen didn't waste any time and ran away, leaving Jack facing Zivia.

“What about letting your men free the prisoners while I lead you and Mister Anielewicz to our command post?”

“That sounds good to me, mister.”

Zivia gave a few directives to three of her men, then followed Jack with Mordecai besides her and the robots keeping the rear. It took them only a few minutes to arrive and enter the building occupied by the TROJAN Team. Zivia whistled in appreciation at the sight of the dozens of combat robots occupying the ground floor.

“You seem to control a respectable force here. I saw your machines at work: they ate the Germans raw.”

“We control a much larger force in Warsaw than what you just saw: we have a total of 800 combat robots similar to those following me, plus twenty big machines mounting heavy support weapons. We also have two spaceships in direct air support, one of which is presently on the ground in Muranowski Square while its crew is resting for a few hours.”

Zivia and Mordecai exchanged surprised looks: they would have never dreamed that those people had such an impressive force already in place. At least, the Ghetto was now secure from German attack. As if to contradict their thoughts, an explosion echoed from inside the Ghetto, quickly followed by two more explosions. Jack immediately ran up to the second floor command room, Zivia and Mordecai close behind him. Fernand Brunet looked up from the portable workstation manned by Mona Zirel, eyeing critically the two Jewish fighters before looking at Jack.

“The Germans have started firing randomly with mortars on the Ghetto. Three mortars are firing from this park near the Vistula River. The TEEN TEAM is already moving in for the kill.”

Zivia and Mordecai, like Jack, looked at the spot designated by Brunet on the city map showing on the main screen of the workstation. A multitude of various symbols were overlaid on the map, with one green symbol moving fast towards the park pointed by Brunet. Zivia shook her head in incomprehension.

“How could you locate these mortars so quickly? Do you have some of your machines observing them?”

“No, miss. Our robots and ships simply have detectors that have no equals in this time. We tracked down these mortars by tracing the trajectories of their bombs back to their point of origin. Watch this secondary screen: it is showing what the gunner of our scoutship is looking at.”

Three more explosions echoed in the night as they looked at the screen. The picture of a park quickly grew in clarity and size, to finally center on a group of 26 German soldiers manning three medium caliber mortars dispersed through the trees of the park. A shower of small explosions suddenly bracketed the Germans, shredding them to pieces. Blinding beams of light followed, stabbing directly the mortar tubes and melting them down. A young female voice then came out of the speaker of the workstation.

“TROJAN Team, this is TEEN TEAM: the mortars are now out of action for good.”

“Good work, Ingrid.” Replied Fernand in his microphone. “Keep patrolling that area for a while: there may be more Germans around.”

When Fernand looked back at Zivia and Mordecai, he saw that the Jews were now tense and had unslung their rifles.

“Ingrid, that’s a German name.” Said Zivia, suspicious. Fernand stared back calmly at her.

“First, miss, I would leave those rifles alone if I were you before my friend Jack makes you eat them. Second, yes, Ingrid Weiss is German, like many members of the Time Patrol, but that didn’t stop her from firing on German Army soldiers. Like me and many other members of the Time Patrol, Ingrid also happens to have been a Jew in a previous life. She also is the adopted daughter of Nancy Laplante.”

“A previous life?”

Patiently, Fernand took a minute to explain the concept of reincarnation as it applied to members of the Time Patrol, leaving Zivia and Mordecai deeply shaken.

“My God! Is this why your Time Patrol decided to help us in the Ghetto?” Asked Zivia.

“We will help and protect any innocent person in need as long as the integrity of history permits it, miss. However, Nancy Laplante does have a strong affinity with Palestine. Her first incarnation was born in Jericho over 9,000 years ago and three more of her incarnations were spent at least partly in Palestine. One of them was as Sarai of Ur, wife of the great patriarch Abraham. As for Ingrid Weiss, she was Agar, the Egyptian slave girl who had a son from Abraham, and was a Moroccan Jew in an ulterior life.”

A triumphant exclamation from Mona Zirel then made them all look at a secondary screen of her workstation.

“WE GOT HIM! Nancy just scooped up Hitler and some of his higher staff at his East Prussian headquarters.”

Her heart nearly jumping out of her chest in excitement, Zivia watched with glee the screen where a disgusted-looking Adolph Hitler was visible, his hands tied and with two combat robots escorting him out of a ship compartment. Both she and Mordecai then screamed in pure delight.

CHAPTER 17 – TASK FORCE BABYLON

13: 07 (Honolulu Time)

Sunday, May 24, 1942 ‘B’

U.S. Navy Pacific Fleet headquarters

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet, put down slowly the receiver of his telephone, still shaken by what President Roosevelt had just told him. Getting up from behind his desk, he walked out of his office and went down to the fleet operations center, situated in the basement of the headquarters building. Returning absent-mindedly the salutes from the personnel of the center, Nimitz went to Navy Captain Charles McMorris, the Operations Officer of the Pacific Fleet, who was reading a message besides the big chart table of the center. McMorris came to attention when he saw the admiral close to him.

“Is everything alright, sir? You look quite disturbed.”

“Actually, I should be happy but I still can’t believe our luck, Captain. The President just called me to pass on some pretty incredible information he in turn received from our embassy in London. You remember Nancy Laplante, the Canadian time traveler who supposedly died a year ago in Germany?”

“Supposedly? Is she alive, sir?”

“Yes, but that’s not the truly incredible part, though. She is back, along with a fleet of spaceships from the 34th century, and is bent on putting a quick end to this war.”

“But that’s great news, sir!” Said McMorris, genuinely pleased. Nimitz smiled weakly at that, not sure what to think personally.

“The President didn’t sound too enthusiastic about that, Captain. It seems that Brigadier Laplante and her force, which is called the ‘Time Patrol’, are doing things strictly their own way and that the British are somewhat miffed at her for that. Laplante has supposedly told the President that she has long term plans to shape the post-war world in specific ways, reportedly to avoid future conflicts. That means that the Germans and Japanese are going to be somewhat treated with kids gloves once they will surrender, if I understood the President correctly.”

“And how do we fit into that picture, sir?” Asked McMorris after a short hesitation.

“Well, I was told to expect the arrival in Hawaii of at least part of Brigadier Laplante’s fleet, from where it will operate against the Japanese. The President has asked me to accommodate Laplante but also to try to find out as much as possible what exactly her plans for the future are. According to our embassy in London, the British have learned something about Laplante and her people that they are not telling us.”

“Great! Intrigues between allies during times of war. Isn’t having to fight the enemy enough without having to lie to each other?”

“I agree fully with you, Captain, but we are the ones stuck with the hot potato. In the meantime, warn our units and air defense gunners that some friendly forces may be arriving soon by air and have space and facilities reserved for them at Hickam Field.”

“Uh, how are we going to recognize this Time Patrol when it shows up, sir?”

“Easy, Captain: look for some very big flying ships.”

Once the admiral was gone, McMorris had a warning passed to all the forces in and around Hawaii to watch for the Time Patrol, then advised the commander of Hickam Field to clear as much hangar space as he could for a number of big aircraft. He had reverted to his routine work for less than fifteen minutes when his intelligence officer, Lieutenant-Commander Charles Bailey, stuck his head in his office after quickly knocking on the doorframe.

“Sir, something weird just happened: the Japanese Navy and Army headquarters in Tokyo have just fallen abruptly silent at the same time.”

“What? How could that be? Couldn’t they just have gone into radio silence?”

“I don’t believe so, sir. Both were in the middle of some radio transmissions when they were literally cut off in mid-sentence.”

McMorris was about to say something when a Naval Intelligence petty officer came in and saluted both officers.

“Sirs, Radio Tokyo is also off the air.”

McMorris looked at Bailey and smiled.

“Laplante! The Time Patrol! It must be them screwing up the Japanese.”

“You mean that these people from the future may have destroyed Tokyo, sir?”

“Maybe not destroy Tokyo, but something serious anyway. Have the airwaves monitored closely and advise me if and when those headquarters are back on the air.”

“Yes, sir!”

Bailey actually showed back in McMorris’ office a bit over one hour later, a message in his hands.

“Sir, the Japanese Navy has resumed transmitting, but from a new location, probably Yokosuka. It is warning the whole Japanese fleet that a fleet of big flying ships has attacked Tokyo and has caused serious damage to a number of military facilities in the city. The message didn’t say more.”

Just then, McMorris’ telephone rang. The Fleet Operations Officer grabbed the receiver and answered, listening for a few seconds.

“...Alright! Advise Hickam Field to be ready for friendly visitors and make sure that all the air defense gunners are told not to shoot at anything until I say otherwise.” McMorris then looked at Bailey while putting down his receiver.

“Grab your hat, Mister Bailey: we are going to Hickam Field as soon as I can warn the admiral that the Time Patrol has called in and is about to arrive.”

14:58 (Honolulu Time)

Hickam Field

The two staff cars, solidly escorted by four jeeps armed with machine guns, screeched to a halt in front of the airfield’s control tower. Admiral Nimitz, his chief of staff, Rear Admiral Draemel, Captain McMorris and Lieutenant Commander Bailey stepped out of the staff cars and were about to enter the control tower when one of the Marines manning the jeeps’ machineguns shouted and pointed towards the western horizon.

“SIRS, SOMETHING HUGE IS APPROACHING!”

Turning around, Nimitz and his staff officers saw a saucer-like shape emerge from the underside of the clouds on the horizon. The fleet commander was an old, experienced navy man who was accustomed to judge the distance to far objects up to the horizon. Nimitz took a step back when he realized just how huge the approaching ship was.

“Dear God! How could such a thing fly?”

A second far object then emerged from the clouds, soon followed by a third one. While much smaller than the first one, the two last ships were quite big in their own right. Eight smaller dots followed the three large ships. Nimitz watched on, mesmerized, as the

spaceships made a silent high-speed flyby over the airfield. The smaller of the large ships, along with three of the minor ships, then left the formation and flew down towards the two hangars and the parking apron that had been reserved for the expected visitors.

“Hell,” said McMorris, “aren’t they going to use the runway to land?”

“It doesn’t look that way, Captain.” Replied Nimitz while watching the bigger ship in the lot starting a slow vertical descent while huge landing legs deployed out of its ovoid hull. He estimated its mass at no less than 6,000 tons, probably much more if it was built mostly of steel instead of aluminum, and was about eighty meters in length. The three small ships, which looked quite mean in general appearance, each measured about 35 meters in length. Something then happened that shook the old admiral: as the four ships were touching down, lining themselves up along the apron: another ship appeared over them in a flash of white light. The newcomer, which was of a different design from the others, then landed besides the big ship. All five ships were painted low visibility gray and sported an emblem made up of a hourglass drawn over the planet Earth. The ships’ names, painted in bold black letters near the noses of the ships, were also plainly visible.

“The HERMES, BABYLON, WALKÜREN, WHITE ROSE OF STALINGRAD and COSSACK’S DREAM.” Read aloud Charles Bailey. “Some strange names for ships, Admiral.”

“Well, let’s see how strange their crews are, gentlemen.”

Going back in the staff cars, they then drove up to the nose of the biggest ship. Seeing a tense Marine arm his machine gun, Nimitz shouted at his escort as he stepped out of his staff car.

“NOBODY IS TO SHOOT UNLESS I GIVE THE EXPRESS ORDER TO DO SO. STAND DOWN YOUR MACHINE GUNS!”

Somewhat reluctantly, the Marines obeyed and stood besides their jeeps as a sort of large tube started coming down from under the forward belly of the ship named BABYLON. Nimitz cautiously approached it, recognizing it as some sort of elevator cage. Effectively, a door soon slid open at the base of the tube, which now rested on the ground, and a man and a woman walked out of the tube. Both wore dark gray uniforms, helmets and molded body armor. They approached calmly Nimitz and his staff officers, stopping in front of the admiral and saluting him.

Nimitz returned their salute before presenting his hand to the woman.

“Brigadier Laplante, it is a pleasure to see that you are alive and well. Welcome to Hawaii.”

Nancy shook his hand and showed him the tall man besides her.

“Thank you, Admiral. May I present you Mister Michael Stone, Captain of the research ship BABYLON?”

Nimitz shook hands with Stone before returning his attention to Nancy.

“Did you say that this is a research ship, not a warship?”

“I did, sir. However, the BABYLON has some self-defense armament and its extensive sensors suite makes it a perfect flying command post and long-range reconnaissance ship. The HERMES, to your left, is a heavy cargo shuttle, which is currently carrying our combat supplies and our maintenance crews and equipment. Our main strike elements in the Pacific will be our scoutships, of which three are here. Two more scoutships will join our task force here once they are done with their work in Warsaw. We however have a lot to discuss about, Admiral, so how about coming inside the BABYLON, you and your officers. I can assure you that our crew lounge is not dry, contrary to the American Navy.”

Nimitz glanced at his officers, who appeared as eager as him to see the inside of the spaceship.

“Well, if you have a nice bottle of scotch hanging around, I may take you on your invitation.”

“We do have some 24 year-old Glen Grant malt scotch left in our bar, Admiral, along with some very old rum.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Said Nimitz with good humor. He followed Laplante and Stone back to the elevator tube, taking place with them and his staff officers in a large round cabin. The door of the cabin closed and Nimitz felt only a slight sensation of movement before the doors opened again, showing the inside of a long metallic passageway. The walls were painted a relaxing pastel blue-green and a sort of soft, rubbery non-skid mat covered the floor.

“Please follow me, Admiral.” Said politely Nancy before walking out of the elevator and following the passageway towards the aft parts of the ship. Walking besides the tall Canadian, Nimitz noticed that there were no doors visible along this passageway. Once at the end of it, Nancy put her hand on a black pad fixed to the wall besides the door closing the passageway. The door, a thick steel affair, slid open silently, letting them walk in a rotunda lined with seven doors and with a large vertical

shaft at its center. Nancy turned left and opened the first door they encountered, inviting her visitors inside. Nimitz and his officers then found themselves in a luxurious lounge with wall-to-wall carpeting and brass and silver fixtures and decorations. A bar stood in one corner, while what looked like a cinema projection screen covered half a wall. There were also numerous ancient artifacts, weapons and pieces of armor lining the walls.

“The V.I.P. lounge.” Said Nancy before pointing at a group of comfortable sofas surrounding a polished rare wood low table. “Please have a seat, gentlemen. What would you like to drink?”

“A scotch on the rocks, miss.” Answered Nimitz, echoed by Rear Admiral Draemel and Lieutenant Commander Bailey. Captain McMorris, on his part, went for a rum punch. As Nancy got busy behind the bar, Charles Bailey, who was an avid hunter, couldn’t help go examine the stuffed head of what looked like a huge lion, but with two long canine teeth going down past its chin.

“Uh, could I ask you what kind of beast this is, Brigadier Laplante?” Nancy answered from behind the bar, raising her voice so Bailey could hear from across the lounge.

“That is the head of a saber-tooth tiger, Mister Bailey. It was killed during one of our survival training sessions in 41,000 B.C.E. Canada.”

Bailey’s eyes opened wide at that. He kept looking at the various artifacts and trophies for a while, then joined the others around the low table when Nancy brought a serving tray with their drinks on it. She raised a glass of bubbling white wine once the others were served and seated.

“To peace, gentlemen.”

“To peace!” Repeated Nimitz and the others before taking a sip from their drinks. The admiral savored his scotch for a moment, then smiled at Nancy.

“Brigadier, I have to say that seeing you alive was a nice surprise for us. The sight of your ships was an even bigger one. Unfortunately, what I got from Washington concerning your intentions was vague, to say the least. Is it true that you want to stop this war quickly?”

“It is, Admiral. I know that you must have a million questions to ask me, so I will give you a quick update on what happened since I was reportedly killed a year ago.”

Nancy’s expression turned somber as she assembled mentally her words.

“First of, I was effectively tortured nearly to death by the Gestapo at the end of June, 1941. However, the Abwehr delivered me just in time, along with a very brave

scientist from the future who risked her life to save me but was captured and tortured as well. We both were brought to a hospital in Berlin, from which I was sent to Colditz Castle to be interned for the rest of the war, while my friend, Doctor Farah Tolkonen, stayed in Berlin. This is where it gets tricky, however. While Farah managed to escape to England by using a portable time travel device, the British decided that they couldn't risk that I gave any secrets to the Germans while in captivity and bombed Colditz Castle and the surrounding town to rubble in an effort to kill me. Fortunately for me, the Germans had brought me the same day back to the hospital in Berlin I was in before, which saved my life. That night, I escaped from the hospital and stole a plane at the nearby Tempelhof airfield, to arrive safely in England in the early morning. You will understand that, by then, I was less than convinced about the honesty of the British concerning me, so I returned incognito to London. There, I learned that my friend Farah was being held and brutalized by the British, who wanted to learn how to use her time machine. Mad as hell, I raided the M.I.5 headquarters and delivered my friend, roughing up a few British in the process, then escaped to the future. Once in the 34th century, I was restored to full health and created with Farah an organization dedicated to protecting the integrity of history from illegal or irresponsible time travel and manipulations. That organization is called the Time Patrol and employs both people from the 34th century and people from various centuries and nationalities.”

“Uh, if your task is to protect history, then why are you changing the course of this war? Aren't you breaking your own rules?” Asked Charles Bailey. Nancy nodded.

“A logical question, Mister Bailey. However, you must understand one basic thing about the world you, the admiral and all of you live in: it was involuntarily created by my actions in September of 1940, when I was marooned in the past against my will. This world is what I call Timeline 'B'. Where I come from is Timeline 'A', the original historical line. Farah comes from the future of timeline 'A', not from timeline 'B'. You are all mere modified copies of the persons found in timeline 'A'.”

The Americans were speechless for a moment while they assimilated that shocking information. Nancy used that chance to go on.

“Normally, the integrity of timeline 'B' would be considered by the Time Patrol as important as that of timeline 'A'. However, the timeline twin of Farah Tolkonen, herself an expert on the theory of time travel, recently fled from a future civilization called the Imperium, where she was being abused and threatened by the head of the Imperium security forces. She searched for a refuge in 1941 'B' London, where we found her and

brought her to our base in the 34th century. Unfortunately for everybody, the Imperium badly overreacted to her escape and raided Buckingham Palace on May 20 of this year, searching for Farah 'B'. Not finding her, the Imperium kidnapped Princess Margaret and the king's equerry, bringing them as hostages to their future London in order to force the British into turning over Farah 'B'. My Time Patrol intervened and we were able to win the release of the princess and of the king's equerry, but the Imperium laid a trap for us, which we were able to spring in advance. The Imperium has since vowed to find where we operate from and to eradicate the civilization that supported us, which is named the Global Council and is a totally pacifist society. The only way left to us to avoid the destruction of the Global Council by the Imperium is to change drastically the history of timeline 'B' and in this way prevent the creation of the Imperium in the future. We decided that the best way to do that would be to finish quickly this war and to ensure that the world that will emerge from it will be a balanced and peaceful one."

"Wait a minute, Brigadier." Said Bailey, thinking furiously. "The British and us would have probably won this war in the long run anyway. What makes you think that finishing it faster would prevent the creation of this Imperium?"

"For one thing, Mister Bailey, putting an end to the war our way will result in a fairer balance of power worldwide later on. Know that we have already explored the future of timeline 'B' up to the year 1986. What we saw was a world thoroughly dominated by a British Empire that gradually pushed aside both the United States and the Soviet Union, relegating them to the rank of secondary powers. Not content in winning the war thanks to the technology I gave to them in 1940, the British used that same technological edge after the war to compete economically with the United States, a contest you Americans lost badly over the decades following the war. While I was still working for the British in 1940-41, I had pushed for my technology to be shared equally between Great Britain and the United States; however it seems that the British kept the best for themselves. Tell me, Mister Bailey: how much transfer of technology did you see coming from the British during the last two years?"

"Uh, very little, actually. We do have plans for an improved carrier design, which I believe you passed on to us directly, along with notes on aircraft jet engines and some infantry weapons. I am not aware of anything else."

That was when Admiral Nimitz jumped in the conversation.

“So, what you are saying, miss, is that you want to stop this war in a way that will ensure a proper place for the United States and the Soviet Union in the post-war years, correct?”

“Not for the Soviet Union, Admiral. Stalin is a human monster and his communist party rule will create untold misery and suffering around Europe in the coming years if not kept in check. What I see after this war is a strong, pacified Europe that would include a mostly disarmed Germany and that could act as a buffer against any aggressive move by the Soviets. I also want to see a strong United States that would at least be the equal of the British Empire in terms of influence around the world. In exchange, I am hoping to see some much needed social changes in the United States, especially in terms of racial equality and justice. I don’t know about your own personal opinions on the subject, Admiral, but I find the fact that the United States still practices and enforces racial segregation truly abhorrent. I will not of course force such changes on your country but I will certainly encourage them. Please pardon me if all this sounds like interference in internal American affairs, but I want to be totally open about that.”

“May I say a word on that, Admiral?” Said Michael Stone, who had stayed silent up to now. “I was myself in the US Navy before I joined the Time Patrol in the year 2052. By then, segregation had been abolished in the United States for over eighty years and I had people from all races serving in harmony and mutual respect under me. There are other 21st century Americans in the Time Patrol and I can tell you that they find the present state of social affairs in our country a disgrace. What we wish for is to be able to visit the United States in the next few years and not be ashamed by what we see in it.”

The reaction of the American Navy officers to that was decidedly mixed, with Rear Admiral Draemel appearing the most annoyed.

“Mister Stone, may I remind you that you are presently on an American military airfield. Don’t expect us to change our laws and regulations just because you showed up.”

Stone stared at Draemel with barely concealed anger.

“My point, Admiral, is that I have members of my crew that are either German, Japanese or African-American. I will not tolerate having them treated any differently than the rest of my crew by your people.”

“African-American? Is that how you call your niggers in the future?”

Michael Stone would have jumped to his feet if not held down by Nancy's strong grip on his shoulder. Nancy then drilled Draemel with her eyes.

"Rear Admiral Draemel, I personally find your choice of words extremely offensive. If this is the kind of attitude my crews will encounter here, then we will simply leave and do our things alone."

"Please, Brigadier, I am sure that this will not be necessary." Hurriedly said Nimitz, trying to defuse the verbal confrontation. "My chief of staff was simply underlining the fact that the rules and regulations applying to our facilities are decided in Washington and are valid country-wide. I can however assure you that all your personnel will be treated with the utmost respect. I would now like to discuss your plan of operation with you, if you don't mind?"

Nancy kept fixing Draemel as she answered Nimitz.

"Alright, Admiral. We will discuss my plans but on the bridge, where our sensor stations are. Please follow me."

As they all got up from their seats, Nimitz got close to Draemel and whispered angrily in his ear.

"For God's sake, Bob, control your mouth for the rest of this visit."

Draemel didn't answer, instead tightening his jaws in repressed anger. Their group left the V.I.P. lounge and used one of the elevators housed in the central shaft of the rotunda. From there they followed a passageway lined with numerous doors that led to a second, smaller rotunda. Nancy led them in yet another elevator that went up three levels before stopping. When he got out of that elevator, Nimitz had to stop dead, stunned by the spectacle offered to him. He was now standing on a wide circular platform with workstations facing outwardly along its periphery. Two more platforms, each smaller in diameter and higher than the other, supported yet more workstations and command seats. The whole arrangement of successive platforms was in turn contained in the center of a large sphere. The internal surface of that sphere was however one big holographic projection screen, where the panorama outside of the ship was shown as realistically as if the platforms would have stood in the open air. Superimposed on the panorama were numerous color symbols and markers of unknown function. Charles Bailey's mouth opened wide with awe.

"My God! Look at that technology."

“We call this multi-sensor fusion.” Said Michael Stone. “Those workstations around us in turn can isolate a certain sector visible on the sphere and analyze it in greater detail.”

Captain McMorris then noticed the huge size and bald heads of most of the operators visible on the platforms.

“Brigadier, these people are real giants. How come?”

“They are from the 34th century, Captain.” Replied politely Nancy. “Everybody then is over two meter-tall, is bald and has six fingers per hand, all the result of selective genetic manipulations intended to ensure the survival of humanity after a devastating war that poisoned the air and ground of the whole planet. The people of the Global Council, while pacifists, are also socially and technically extremely advanced. Let’s go up to the command platform now.”

Nancy led the Americans to the topmost platform, which had roughly a diameter of ten meters. Only three padded seats with swiveling control panels stood higher than that platform. Stone pointed at them in turn.

“These two topmost, side-by-side seats are for the pilot and copilot/navigator, while the one just under and in front of them is my captain’s chair.”

Nimitz was however not listening to Stone, instead staring with disbelief at the woman in the pilot’s seat.

“Miss Earhart, is that you?”

He then went up quickly to her, hugging her joyfully.

“Thank God: you are alive! We searched for you for so long back in 1937. Nancy Laplante went back to save you, I suppose.”

Amelia Earhart returned his hug, moved by the admiral’s concern for her.

“She did, Admiral. She also saved from death many other members of the Time Patrol.”

“I must have you come to have supper with my wife tonight, Miss Earhart. It would be a true honor for us if you could come.”

“That will depend on Nancy, Admiral: we have plans to execute tonight.”

“That will be alright with me, Amelia.” Said Nancy with a smile. “We won’t start flying operations before late tonight. Just make sure that you are back and sober by nine O’clock.”

“I will have a staff car drop her back by then, Brigadier.” Promised Nimitz, happy, before looking back at Amelia. “A car will pick you up at five this afternoon. See you for supper, Miss Earhart.”

Nimitz then went back down to join Nancy and the others.

“Sorry for the interruption, miss.”

“You are more than excused, Admiral. Actually, our plan of action is quite simple. Since my crews have been in action for nearly fourteen straight hours now, I was going to let them rest until eleven tonight, when the task force will take off and head for Japanese-held waters. The first phase of our operation against Japan has already been completed when we raided a few spots around Tokyo earlier on today. The second phase will target both the carrier-borne and the land-based Japanese air power. The third phase will then target all the Japanese warships left and their commercial shipping. This way, the Japanese island garrisons will be cut off from each other and from their supply lines. The fourth phase will involve the systematic destruction of the Japanese fuel reserves and electric power grids in and around Japan. Japan will then be isolated, defenseless and out of supplies and will be forced to either surrender or starve in the dark. We will leave the island garrisons alone until they surrender out of starvation: my history has shown that, even when cut off, they will fight to the death if attacked and will cause an unacceptable number of casualties to any American force that would land.”

“But that could take months of waiting!” Objected Draemel. Nancy looked at him coldly.

“If you want, I could show you a number of documentaries made in my timeline about the results of assaulting such places as Saipan, Tarawa and Okinawa, sir. Why sacrifice tens of thousands of your men just to appear to be doing something? Besides, there will be a more important job to do in the meantime: save the hundreds of thousands of allied prisoners now held in horrible conditions by the Japanese all over the Pacific. That is when I will need your full support to care and treat those prisoners once we free them, Admiral Nimitz. Half of the Time Patrol fleet is actually busy taking on Germany and will soon free the inmates of the Nazi concentration camps in occupied Europe. We actually attach as much importance to humanitarian relief operations than to purely military operations in our plans, Admiral.”

"I can't fault you for that, miss, especially if you can really pull this all off. However, don't expect the Japanese to take all this lying down. They will react, one way or the other."

"Maybe, Admiral, but they will be leaderless: our raid on Tokyo had as a goal the capture of the main Japanese military and political leaders. Please look at this screen over here."

Nimitz turned towards the wide screen fixed to a swiveling base near the captain's chair and saw on it a sort of storage room. There was no equipment or supplies in that room, but it contained a number of men in various military uniforms angrily pacing around the room.

"General Tojo? I can also see Admiral Nagano, Admiral Shimada and General Anami, plus others I can't recognize. That's incredible! Were you able to get Admiral Yamamoto or Emperor Hirohito, miss?"

"We did capture Admiral Yamamoto, but I accepted his wish to be able to commit ritual suicide. As for the emperor, we left him in his palace: he is part of the solution, not of the problem."

"I'm afraid that I don't understand you, miss."

"What I meant to say is that Emperor Hirohito may be our best chance to put an end to the war in the Pacific while avoiding a horrible bloodbath, Admiral. Hirohito, like King George VI, has little real power and is mostly obliged to go along with the wishes of his government, but is highly respected by his people. With many of the hardliners in the Japanese government in our hands, the moderates may, with the emperor's support, be able to convince the army and the navy to stop fighting, especially if they have no hardware left to fight with."

"Hmm, not a bad idea actually. Maybe you should try that on the Germans, miss."

Nancy smiled enigmatically and had the view on the screen change to that of the inside of another storeroom. That one too contained a number of men in uniforms, plus two in civilian suits. Nimitz's jaw dropped to the floor at their sight.

"Sweet Jesus! I see Hitler, Himmler, Goering, Goebbels and a few others of whom I can't remember their names. Miss, you are incredible."

"It was actually fairly easy, Admiral, if you consider the level of our technology and our access to historical archives from the future. The hard part has still to be done,

hopefully with as little blood spilled as possible. Now, could I ask for a few little favors from you, Admiral?"

"After what you already accomplished? Ask and you will get!"

"Oh, I will not ask for much, Admiral. First, would you mind taking custody of my Japanese and German prisoners? We actually have no proper detention facilities on our ships."

"We will be more than happy to help you in that matter, miss." Said Nimitz before turning towards Rear Admiral Draemel. "As soon as we are off this ship, I want you to get a company of military policemen to take charge of those prisoners. Advise Washington and see to the prisoners' transfer to the continent as soon as possible."

"Yes, Admiral!"

Nimitz then faced back Nancy.

"What else, miss?"

"Could I ask for the loan of a few of your intelligence specialists for a few days, Admiral? While my aircrews are highly qualified, they are not familiar with Japanese forces and equipment. We would especially like five good observers current with Japanese equipment and a few linguists accustomed to listen to Japanese morse radio traffic."

"No problem! Lieutenant Commander Bailey will take care of that. Next?"

"Finally, would it be a big burden on you if my personnel would use your messing facilities in Pearl Harbor? We have a small stockpile of rations of our own but, since we don't know how long this campaign will take, I would rather save them for real emergencies."

"Is that really it, miss? You are not asking for much. How many people do you need to feed?"

"About eighty when my two other scoutships will join us from Warsaw. These are mostly aircrews, with a few ground crews and support personnel mixed in the lot. Since we do not have a formal rank system in the Time Patrol, I would be hard pressed to separate them into officers and non-officers, especially in the case of our scientists."

"Only eighty people? Then we will keep this simple: the Navy officers' cafeteria and mess at the naval base nearby will be opened to all your personnel. Do you need some of our Marines to stand guard around your ships, miss?"

“Thanks but that won’t be necessary, Admiral: we have brought our own watchdogs with us. Now that we are in agreement, I will guide you and your officers back to your staff cars. I am sure that you have as much to do as me.”

“You are too right on that, miss. Still, it is mighty nice to get some unexpected help like this. Feel free to use the two hangars behind your ships as you please.”

“I certainly will, Admiral. If you may follow me.”

Five minutes later, Nimitz and his staff officers were back at their waiting staff cars. Draemel immediately called by radio the base security officer to call some MPs in while Nimitz looked at McMorris and Bailey.

“So, what do you think, gentlemen?”

McMorris weighed his words carefully before answering the admiral.

“Their political outlook may be quite different from ours, but I believe that this Time Patrol can deliver the goods. My opinion is to support them as much as we can. Just by capturing all these Japanese and German leaders, they have already dealt a heavy blow to our enemies, sir.”

“Agreed! What about you, Mister Bailey?”

“Sir, we should jump on their bandwagon without question. These people could and probably will save the lives of tens of thousands of our men. We can’t afford not to use their help. Also, I would tend to believe Laplante’s story about being screwed by the British and her stated desire to balance world power sharing in a way that would be more favorable to us. I respect the British but I don’t doubt one minute that they will do everything to keep and even expand their empire as much as they can. Our future status in the world may be in the balance right now, sir.”

“And that is the truly critical point, gentlemen. While our present job is to win this war, we should not lose sight of what may be in store for our country in the future. These people have seen the future and, if they can be believed, what they saw is not at all to my liking, nor would it be to the President’s liking. We will thus give our honest support to Brigadier Laplante and her people. Captain McMorris, make sure that everybody on base understands that they are to assist to the fullest the Time Patrol. I don’t want in particular any racial incident between our people and their people, even if they are Japanese or German.”

“I will pass the word, sir.”

McMorris then noticed that a large ramp was going down at the back of the BABYLON and told Nimitz so. The three senior officers, soon joined by Draemel, watched on as a strange procession went down the ramp and came towards them. The procession advanced in three files, the center file being the Japanese and German prisoners and the two files flanking them being some sort of machines on tracks. A single man in the gray uniform of the Time Patrol led the lot. A tall, athletic man in his late twenties, he stopped in front of Nimitz and saluted him.

“Agent Heinrik Braun, ready to hand over our prisoners, sir!”

Nimitz saluted back and looked at the dejected prisoners, at the head of which were General Tojo and Adolph Hitler. One machine was pushing a gurney bearing a body bag.

“That’s the body of Admiral Yamamoto, sir.” Explained Braun, getting a satisfied nod from the fleet commander.

“Our association is indeed starting on a very good footing, Mister Braun. I suppose by your name that you are German?”

“I was part of the Abwehr, the German Army Intelligence, sir. However, I was accused of treason by the SS and tortured. Nancy Laplante saved me from being executed.”

“So, you have no love for the Nazis, Mister Braun?”

“None, sir! You may find that many Germans are not exactly hot either for the Nazi doctrine and ideas. Nancy told me to pass a warning to you about the prisoners: they should be put on a round-the-clock suicide watch if you wish them to arrive alive in Washington.”

“Thank you for the warning, mister. We will certainly heed it.”

Four trucks full of MPs, along with six cellular vehicles, then screeched to a halt besides the staff cars. A major of the military police presented himself to Nimitz, who quickly gave him some directives before letting him with Braun to conduct the prisoners’ transfer. Going to his staff car, Nimitz sat in the back seat and told his driver to return to fleet headquarters. The old navy officer was now feeling more optimistic than he ever had been about this hellish war.

17:49 (Honolulu Time)

Navy officers’ cafeteria

US Naval Station, Pearl Harbor

Navy Lieutenant Bill Conway, a tray of food in his hands, hesitated for an instant before heading towards a particular table in a corner of the big cafeteria frequented mostly by junior officers and pilots. Contrary to most of the tables in the usually busy cafeteria, that table had only one person sitting at it. Conway knew why, which had been the reason of his hesitation. He sat and put his tray on the table before smiling to the other occupant, a small but graceful and beautiful woman wearing the uniform of an ensign of Naval Intelligence. Ensign Jenny Kawena, a linguist employed like Bill at the Pacific Joint Intelligence Center, had committed the mortal sin of being born from an ethnic Japanese mother and a Polynesian father. While a skilled and loyal linguist, Jenny was shunned by most of the personnel around the base, something Bill found profoundly unjust. He knew that sitting with her in public would probably earn him more than a few nasty remarks later at the mess or in one of the city's clubs, but he had to talk to her. Her own smile warmed his heart: half-Japanese or not, she was one sweet young woman.

"Do you mind if I sit with you, Ensign Kawena?"

"Not at all, sir. In fact, I would be delighted."

"Thank you! I was just assigned as liaison observer to these people from the future. I also heard that you were assigned to them as well, as a linguist."

"That is true, sir. Believe me or not but my boss, Captain Holmes, actually grumbled at losing my services, even temporarily."

"I have no problem believing that, Ensign: linguists proficient in Japanese are far and few around here. You want to learn about the latest news concerning the Time Patrol?"

"If it is about the Japanese and German prisoners they brought in, sir, then I am already in the know: I helped interview General Tojo and the others."

"Oh!" Said Bill, his bombshell disarmed before he could set it off. "How did it go?"

To his surprise, sadness filled Jenny's delicate face.

"Not very well, sir. Having the MPs being suspicious of me was bad enough, but then Admiral Shimada berated me for, according to him, betraying my ancestors. I told him that I was American and not Japanese, but he replied by showing the MPs around and asking me if they made me feel like an American. I have to say that Admiral Shimada's remark hurt, deeply, because he was mostly right."

"I am truly sorry about that, Ensign. Know that some here appreciate you for your just value."

"Thank you, sir. You are too kind."

"No, I'm simply honest about it. By the way, did you know that two more ships of the Time Patrol arrived at Hickam Field less than half a hour ago?"

"No, sir." She replied, her face now reflecting intense curiosity. "Are they big ones?"

"Not really. They are similar to the three smaller ships already here. The new ships are named BRITANNIA and TEEN TEAM."

"Teen Team? What a weird name for a ship."

"Indeed! I was..."

Bill stopped in mid-sentence, his attention now on the entrance of the cafeteria: a long line of people wearing gray uniforms, about half of them huge giants standing at least two meters, were entering the cafeteria, heading towards the service counter. Jenny, turning her head around, saw them too.

"Look at how tall some of them are. They are also bald, even the women. How strange."

Both of them, like the other customers of the cafeteria, watched with intense curiosity the newcomers as they had their food trays filled up. Also mixed with the giants were about twenty ordinary people, all wearing helmets and molded body armor and with pistols at their belts. What was even more noticeable to the American Navy personnel was the fact that more than half of the newcomers were women, something that attracted some snide remarks in low voices. There were also more whispers at the sight of a couple of black persons and of a few Orientals in the Time Patrol group. Jenny suddenly started to feel good about her latest assignment.

"They seem to believe firmly in the equality of the sexes in war." Said Bill Conway, making Jenny Kawena smile.

"Do you find that good or bad, sir?"

"Uh, I wouldn't risk to give an answer just now."

Most of the newcomers then started heading their way, the corner they were in having the most empty seats at the time. Her heart accelerating, Jenny pretended to be interested with her food as a group of men and women of the Time Patrol approached their table and that of a group of three Navy nurses nearby. One of the newcomers grinned at the sight of Jenny and, walking quickly to her table, stopped besides Bill

Conway. Both eyed with utter surprise the small woman close to thirty: she was obviously Oriental and had a nametag on her right breast that spelled 'Keiko Miramoto'.

"Excuse me." She said in excellent English. "Can I sit?"

"Uh, of course, miss." Answered Jenny, not even waiting for Bill's permission. One man, one teenage boy and two teenage girls joined them as well after asking permission. They then quickly exchanged names and handshakes. Bill Conway nearly choked on his food when the teenage girl with a strong British accent presented herself.

"You...you don't mean Princess Elizabeth of England, do you?"

"Of course I do, Lieutenant. After all, all of us here are either officially dead or missing. The only exception would be Ingrid: she simply vanished from her cell in the Tower of London one night."

"And...what is your job exactly, Your Highness?"

"Please, no need to be formal. I am not in line for the throne anymore. I am dead, don't you remember? Anyway, my position is as copilot and weapons officer of the scoutship BRITANNIA. Doug Wilson over here is my pilot. As for Ingrid Weiss and Tom Allen, they are respectively pilot and copilot of the scoutship TEEN TEAM."

One look at the two teenagers made Bill understand why their ship had such a name.

"I see! What about you, Miss Miramoto?"

"I am a doctor on the BABYLON, mister. Now, it's your turn to talk about you, I believe."

"Well, I am simply a navy intelligence officer who was just assigned to your fleet as air observer."

"He's mine!" Said immediately Ingrid Weiss, beating Doug Wilson by a fraction of a second. That made Jenny giggle.

"I'm a linguist from navy intelligence also assigned to the Time Patrol. Do I get to be auctioned away too?"

"You bet, miss." Replied Ingrid. "I could use your services as well on my scoutship."

"Hey!" Protested Doug Wilson. "Don't be so greedy!"

"I'm not greedy! Besides, Elizabeth already speaks Japanese. You don't need a linguist."

"You speak Japanese, miss?" Asked Jenny, surprised, to Elizabeth Windsor, who nodded her head.

"I do. Two of my previous incarnations were as Japanese."

Before either Jenny or Bill could ask a question about what she meant, Elizabeth started explaining the concept of past incarnations as it applied to the members of the Time Patrol, spending a good three minutes on it and leaving both American officers speechless for a moment. Bill Conway was the first to recover his voice.

“This is...incredible! And how did Nancy Laplante manage to be able to wake up your souvenirs like this?”

“That is a bit of a touchy subject, Lieutenant. Let’s wait until you are aboard the TEEN TEAM before we say more on this.”

“As you wish, miss.” Said Bill, hiding his disappointment. He then concentrated his questions about how each the five members of the Time Patrol had ended up in that organization. The answers he got made Jenny Kawena say something on a wishful tone that wasn’t lost on anybody.

“So, you basically recruit people who are officially dead, missing or don’t fit in anymore.”

“Actually,” replied Ingrid Weiss while eyeing Jenny with interest, “Nancy does the recruitment selection and we certainly could use more people as it is. There is only one problem concerning that for the moment: the Time Patrol is actually on its own, exiled from the Global Council and turned into a band of time nomads. The Global Council was ready to abandon Nancy at the first sign of serious danger and tried to prevent us from rescuing her, so we cut our bridges with the Global Council and went to rescue her anyway. Those giants you see with us today are the few citizens of the Global Council that had the courage and will to be ready to go into exile in time as the price for supporting Nancy. They may be pacifists but I admire their courage nonetheless.”

“Exiled in time...” Said softly Jenny. “All that to save one of your own. That is truly admirable.”

“We would do anything for Nancy, because we know that she would do anything for us as well.” Said gravely Doug Wilson, getting nods from the others. Ingrid then spoke to nobody in particular.

“You know, we haven’t heard anything yet back from the Global Council or from our base in New Lake City. I wonder what could be going on there. They should have been able to detect any travel to the past by the flagship of King Stan or other ships of the Imperium. King Stan is not the type of man to sit down and do nothing, especially when he knows that we intend to erase him.”

17:28 (Universal Time)

Friday, June 29, 3386 'A'

Global News Network main studios

Zeta Alpha orbital city

Earth geosynchronous orbit

Lori Kano stared with disbelief for a moment at the woman facing her on the giant viewing screen of the GNN news studio, as she conducted an interview online with the personnel of the Time Patrol headquarters.

“Miss Mulano, are you telling me that you and the other people left behind at the headquarters of the Time Patrol have detected a probable Imperium warship around Earth in 1940 of timeline ‘B’ and that this information was not passed on to the ships of the Time Patrol?”

“That is essentially correct, Miss Kano.” Answered timidly Dana Mulano, looking unhappy on her chair back in New Lake City. “We were unable to relay that vital information because the High Council had our time emitter’s antenna disconnected. We can receive data from our time surveillance network but we can’t pass it back to the rest of the Time Patrol.”

“Why, in your opinion, would the High Council prevent you from warning the Time Patrol about this ship?”

“Because they are afraid that any time wave emitted by us could be detected by the Imperium and used to home on to our timeline.”

“Is that a real possibility, Miss Mulano?”

“It is possible but very unlikely, miss. Our signals are modulated in a way that makes them target a specific date and time. Our fleet is presently in May of 1942 ‘B’, while the probable Imperium warship is staying in October of 1940 ‘B’. Those dates are too far apart to permit spillage of our signals to be intercepted.”

“Are you sure that the ship presently in 1940 is not actually a ship of the Time Patrol?”

“Positive, Miss Kano. It is too massive for that. From its jump echo, we evaluated the mass of that ship at about eighteen million tons, which is over three times more than our biggest ship, the GILGAMESH.”

“Eighteen million tons? But that’s unbelievable! What kind of ship could be this heavy?”

“An Imperium super battleship, Miss Kano. In fact, from the surveillance probes used by our people when in Imperium space, I would guess that the ship in 1940 is the ROYAL SOVEREIGN, the flagship of the Imperium Navy. I will show you a picture of it if you want to.”

“I would like that, Miss Mulano.”

Dana Mulano was then seen on the screen typing quickly a few commands on her workstation's computer, making the picture of a ship appear on her own screen. The cameraman from GNN in the Time Patrol headquarters in New Lake City then zoomed in on that picture. Lori Kano felt a chill go down her spine as she detailed the massive, intimidating ship while Mulano described it.

“This is the ROYAL SOVEREIGN, covertly filmed from above while sitting on its landing pad near London in 3386 'B'. It is a heavily armored ship equipped with electromagnetic shield generators, of which we can see the antennas here and here. It is also heavily armed with defensive lasers, missile launchers and what appears to be a massive plasma canon in its nose. It also has hangars and launching bays for dozens of attack craft and interceptors. Apart from having enough firepower to vaporize half of the major cities on Earth, it can probably withstand about anything short of a direct hit by a nuclear weapon. I am not even sure if our whole fleet could win a straightforward battle against this behemoth.”

Lori swallowed hard before asking her next question, which could be crucial for the incoming evening news program.

“Miss Mulano, you have now been working for nearly two years for the Time Patrol and probably know its members well. Would the Time Patrol fleet be willing to fight that ship if it became a threat to the Global Council?”

“They would, even if it means their death, miss.” Said categorically Dana Mulano. “However, they would need to be informed about that ship first, which I can't do right now because of the actions of the High Council.”

Lori Kano let that sink in for a moment, then spoke more softly.

“Miss Mulano, what is exactly your present status?”

Dana bowed her head at that, showing some discouragement and uncertainty.

“Me and my team are officially unemployed, having been fired by the High Council, like the rest of the Time Patrol personnel who are now in the past. Our personal bank accounts have also been frozen on orders from the government. This headquarter is still open and functioning partially only because we are protected by a

few combat robots that have prevented the government security services from entering the building. Outside power and water to this building has been cut and we will probably be arrested if we step outside. We are now holding on with the help of an emergency generator and a supply of combat rations.”

“Your devotion to duty is commendable, Miss Mulano. Do you know what the Time Patrol is doing in 1942 ‘B’?”

“Yes! Our people are actively modifying the history of the Second World War in order to erase from timeline ‘B’ the Imperium and the threat it represents to the Global Council. That should be a done deal in a few days at most.”

“And yet you and the rest of the Time Patrol are being treated like criminals by the High Council. Thank you very much for your time, Miss Mulano, and good luck to you.”

“Thank you, Miss Kano. It was a pleasure speaking with you.”
Lori swiveled her chair to face the camera as the picture from New Lake City faded on the giant wall screen.

“This was Dana Mulano, the shift supervisor at the Time Patrol surveillance center in New Lake City. I will remind the viewers that, following a vote of non-confidence by the High Council the Chief Global Administrator, Boran Kern, who was supportive of the Time Patrol, was replaced yesterday by the Vice-Chief Administrator, Tran Ming. Mister Kern subsequently joined the Time Patrol and is now in the past, in the year 1942 of timeline ‘B’. Other members of the High Council have resigned in protest as well, including Chief Justice Sten Vargas, while a growing number of citizens have been publicly voicing their support for the Time Patrol. Some have even offered to join that organization if and when they could contact it. Up to now, the High Council has refused to comment on this crisis and keeps a tight blockade by ComSec officers around the Time Patrol headquarters in New Lake City. In fact, our GNN camera crew presently inside that building has been there since yesterday and has been threatened with arrest and prosecution if it does not vacate the premises soon. In view of the evidence presented by the Time Patrol concerning the decision by the Imperium to attack and destroy our civilization as soon as they can find us, the anti-Time Patrol stance of the High Council is hard to explain. After all, the Time Patrol is actively trying to neutralize the threat from the Imperium and is the only force available to us for our defense. Why then treat its members like common criminals? Some are saying that they refused a legitimate direct order and mutinied. Others say that the Time Patrol did the just thing

and saved a member who had risked her life repeatedly in the service of the Global Council, and that the present stance by the High Council is simply rank cowardice combined with stupidity. We invite you, the GNN listeners, to participate in an electronic instant poll, the results of which will be published on our evening news program today at 22:00 hours, universal time. The question is: who has acted properly in this crisis? The High Council or the Time Patrol? We will see tonight what the average citizen of the Global Council thinks about this. This is Lori Kano, speaking from the GNN main studios on Zeta Alpha.”

As soon as she was finished and the cameras were switched off, Lori’s news editor walked in on the set, smiling with satisfaction.

“That was great, Lori. This should create quite a juicy public controversy, which is always good for the ratings.”

Lori gave him a less than pleased look.

“Stan, is that all you see in this crisis, a juicy controversy? The existence of our society may be at stake here.”

“Come on, Lori. You don’t really believe that this Imperium would be capable of committing in cold blood such a genocide? They will look at us, see a planet full of peace-loving people and decide that we are no threat at all.”

“What about the covert recordings of that Imperium meeting where King Stan and his staff decided to restart mass production of nuclear weapons, so that they could be ready to deal with us?”

“It must have been meant as a defensive measure, Lori, to defend against the ships of the Time Patrol. Besides, are you so sure that the Time Patrol didn’t doctor those recordings to justify their actions?”

Lori shot out of her chair, anger on her face.

“Stan, I can’t believe that you just said that.”

Lori then stormed out of the set, leaving behind her flabbergasted editor. Going back to her office, she tried to work on her evening report but couldn’t concentrate properly, still too angry and disappointed. A call came in from the GNN offices in Zurich twenty minutes later. Silently thanking her caller for this chance to change her mindset, she switched on her videophone screen and looked at the face of the local news editor.

“What can I do for you, Mister Marek?”

“It is more what I can do for you, Miss Kano. I have just received some political news of great interest. First, the wife of ex-Chief Administrator Kern has launched a

global petition of non-confidence against the High Council for their handling of the Time Patrol crisis. The news on that petition is that it is gathering steam very rapidly and that things are not looking good for the present High Council. If your own evening poll turns out in favor of the Time Patrol, then the government may have no choice but to run a snap global election for the position of Global Chief Administrator. The other piece of news is about Misses Tomi Kern herself: she has publicly announced her intention to run for the post of Global Chief Administrator.”

“Yes! That should put a good fire under the High Council. If anybody can pull it off, it is Tomi Kern: she is one foxy lady. Thanks for the call, Mister Marek.”

Lori barely had the time to switch off her videophone before another call came in. That caller however was requesting to speak on the privacy mode, an option that allowed the scrambling of the signal so that only the two stations involved could get a clear transmission. By pushing the privacy button, Lori synchronized the random coding signals from the two videophones, making it impossible for anyone, even the government security services, to listen in on the conversation. If there was something that was sacred apart from individual rights in the Global Council, it was privacy. The man she then saw on her screen was totally unknown to her.

“Excuse me for disturbing you like this, Miss Kano, but your latest newscast just resolved a crisis of conscience I was going through. I believe that I have a way to pass on to the Time Patrol that information about the presumed Imperium ship being back in 1940 ‘B’.”

“Go on, sir.” Said Lori, suddenly very interested.

“Well, without giving my name, I can tell you that I am an independent contractor often used by the government for highly customized electronic repair work and that I live in the New Lake City area. About a week ago, one of the time scooters of the Time Patrol suffered extensive damage through an electrical fire that spread to nearly all its circuits. It was nearly declared scrap but I offered to rebuild it at a bargain cost that earned me the repair contract. Since I hold a clearance that lets me work on sensitive government equipment, that time scooter was simply brought to my shop and left there for repair. It seems that, in the confusion of the last few days, everybody kind of forgot about that time scooter. It is now fully repaired and operational and I was wondering if I should turn it over to the security services, that is until I saw your newscast. I contacted you instead of the people left at the Time Patrol headquarters because I figured out that

their communications lines would be tightly monitored. I can fly and operate that time scooter and am offering you a ride to the past, Miss Kano.”

“But, I thought that those time scooters could be operated only by certified members of the Time Patrol, via a system of fingerprint recognition.”

“True, miss, but the fingerprint recognition system of that time scooter was totally destroyed in the fire and was bypassed by the Time Patrol so that I could work on it. By giving you a ride to 1942 ‘B’ we will be able to accomplish three things: first, to pass that information about the Imperium ship to the Time Patrol; second, to let you produce an exclusive report on this crisis; and thirdly it will permit me to go join the Time Patrol. I don’t care what happens to me afterwards but I figure that these people could use all the help they could get.”

Lori looked fondly at the resolute face of the man, emotion making her speechless for a moment.

“Sir, what you are doing is admirable. How do you propose to pick me up?”

“I have obtained the precise coordinates for the number six arrival hangar of the Zeta Alpha orbital city and I know that no ship is scheduled to use that hangar for the next ten hours. I can jump directly into that hangar at the time of your choosing.”

It took only a second for Lori to make her mind.

“I will be in that hangar in exactly one hour. Thank you very much, sir. What you are doing takes a lot of guts.”

“Miss, I simply couldn’t just sit and do nothing, and please call me Greg.”

“Then, see you in one hour, Greg.”

Lori next called the GNN camera crew that was inside the Time Patrol headquarters and got the head cameraman to put Dana Mulano on the line. The sensors supervisor looked surprised to be called again so quickly.

“Miss Kano? What can I do for you?”

“Maybe a lot, miss. On what exact date is that Imperium warship located?”

“Well, it actually did jump to October 15 of 1940 ‘B’, but you have to understand that our system only detects spacetime jumps and not normal travel. That ship could stay for years in orbit around Earth and not be detected again until its next jump in time. To continuously track it down would take another ship to shadow it.”

“Fair enough. Now, could you give me the date and coordinates where your ships would be?”

“Uh, I don’t understand, miss. This info is useless unless...”

“Just give me the date and coordinates, miss.” Said Lori urgently, hoping that the security services were not monitoring this call. Mulano did go to her computer and copied some numbers on a piece of paper before returning to the GNN camera.

“Our ships’ original destination was the military airfield in Northolt, near London, England. They were scheduled to arrive there on May 23, 1942 ‘B’. Taking into account the time spent here since their departure, I would target the early morning of May 25, 1942 ‘B’, London time. Here are the actual spacetime jump coordinates...”

Lori carefully noted down the long combination of numbers and letters, then thanked Mulano and hung up. In a real hurry now and with possibly the government security services alerted to her next move, Lori grabbed the travel bag and equipment kit she always kept ready in her office in case of sudden departures for impromptu interviews, then quickly walked out of the GNN premises, telling the receptionist in the company’s reception lobby that she was going to meet a source in one of the food courts of the orbital city. As Lori was entering with other people an elevator to go to the hangar levels, she just had time to see a squad of ComSec officers running towards the GNN offices before the doors of the elevator cabin closed. Her heart now beating furiously, Lori surprised herself at finding her fear somewhat exhilarating. If that was what an adrenalin rush did to a person, then she started to understand the craving for adventure that seemed to possess the ancestor members of the Time Patrol. Once at the hangar level she sought, she left the elevator and went to the nearest women’s washroom, where she locked herself up in a toilet stall and proceeded to change clothes. Her business two-piece ensemble and fashionable shoes went in her travel bag and she put on instead a flashy, skin-tight outdoor outfit, complete with hiking boots and wide-brimmed jungle hat. A pair of large sunglasses that covered nearly half of her face completed her new appearance.

Once changed, Lori proceeded to Docking Hangar Number Six. Since there were no ships in it at the time, access to it was wide open, with only a few maintenance technicians and robots busy inside the huge space. Lori again went to a washroom, but this time one that was inside the hangar itself, and locked herself up. She then waited nervously until there was less than ten minutes left before the scheduled arrival of Greg and his time scooter. Cautiously leaving her hiding place, Lori looked around the empty hangar: still no ComSec officer in sight. She still stayed hidden behind a pile of cargo crates until a white flash of light in the middle of the hangar made her heart jump inside

her chest. Looking quickly from behind the crates, she saw a time scooter landing smoothly less than thirty meters from her. Sprinting to it with her luggage, she jumped on the middle seat, out of breath, and smiled to the man at the controls while giving him the paper with the jump coordinates given by Mulano.

“These are the spacetime coordinates given to me by Miss Mulano of the Time Patrol. We are heading for the airfield in Northolt, near London, in the early morning of May 25, 1942 ‘B’, London time.”

“Good job, Miss Kano! We will be there shortly.”

The Plexiglas canopy slid close as Greg punched in the coordinates on his control dash. A few seconds later a flash of light enveloped them as the first ComSec officers belatedly entered the hangar at a run.

The next thing Lori saw was darkness, punctuated by a few lights here and there. The place looked nothing like an airfield to her, accustomed as she was to brightly lit astroports. The only thing that attracted her attention was the mostly dark mass of a tall building with a few lights showing through some windows. Greg, who had switched on the scooter’s navigation lights, flew his machine towards that tower and soon landed besides it. Six intimidating machines immediately surrounded the scooter as its canopy slid open.

“Identify yourselves!” Shouted one of the machines while pointing what must have been weapons at Lori and Greg, who dared not move.

“I am Lori Kano, reporter at Global News Network, and this is my friend Greg. We came to bring an urgent message to the Time Patrol.”

There was a moment of silence before the robot spoke again.

“You are cleared to enter Time Patrol facilities. I will now lead you to Doctor Farah Tolkonen.”

Elated, Lori eagerly followed the robot, her bags in her hands and with Greg close behind her, carrying himself a large kit bag. The tower turned out to be of 34th century design and Farah Tolkonen met them in the reception lobby of the building. Lori shared a happy hug with her before presenting her companion to Farah.

“Farah, this is Greg, the man who made it possible for me to come here. He’s an electronics expert who was repairing one of your time scooters, which you left behind in your haste.”

Farah slapped her own forehead at those words.

“Scooter number 27, of course! How could we have forgotten it like this?”

“Well, it was a good thing you did, Doctor,” replied Greg, “because we would not have been able to come here and pass on some urgent news if you wouldn’t have forgotten it. By the way, my full name is Greg Thorgal.”

“What urgent news?” Asked Farah while shaking hands with Greg. Lori then took on her to explain in detail what had been happening in the Global Council in the last day. That brought a worried frown to Farah’s face.

“Those idiots of the High Council! Cutting our communications with our rear base could have spelled their own doom. That leaves us no choice but to send back a few scoutships and robots to help defend New Lake City and the Global Council against a possible Imperium attack. Damn! Our campaign here was going so well.”

“May I make a suggestion, Doctor?” Said Greg Thorgal.

“By all means, mister.”

“Well, it is not as if you need to send someone from here right away, no? You can always choose the moment you want to appear back in 3386 ‘A’. Why not simply send a team back to your rear base, secure it with your robots and repair your time emitter antenna? That way, your people there will be able to alert you the moment that Imperium ship jumps time.”

“True enough, Mister Thorgal. Let’s inform Nancy of this first, to see what she says about that. She is presently in Hawaii, preparing for a strike against the Japanese forces.”

Farah then led her two visitors to the tower’s operations center, situated on the third floor. There, she got Nancy on a secure radio link within a minute, then spent two minutes to explain the situation in 3386 ‘A’ to her. Nancy obviously didn’t like what she heard.

“One fine day, I will strangle that idiot of Golen Bartok. I concur with the idea of Mister Thorgal. However, I will send a good number of our PDRs back as well, along with a hundred combat robots. I will not have our support technicians, who did their jobs magnificently, be hounded like criminals. We will keep from now on two scoutships on ten-minute alert at all time, ready to respond to any alert from our rear base. I would also like to lead the rescue party for our rear base, Farah.”

“That’s fine with me, as long as you don’t use that chance to kill some members of the High Council, Nancy.”

“Don’t tempt me, Farah. Have 120 PDRs and one hundred combat robots loaded onboard the GILGAMESH, along with a technical team able to repair or replace our time emitter antenna. I will join you in a few minutes. Nancy, out!”

Putting down the microphone, Farah then looked with fondness at Lori and Greg.

“We owe you two a big one. How could we ever repay you?”

“Well,” said Greg, “as far as I am concerned, the main goal I had coming here, apart from helping Miss Kano warn you, was to enlist in the Time Patrol. I am an expert in electronics repair and I figured that you could use my talents.”

Farah grinned and patted his shoulder.

“Then consider yourself part of the team, Mister Thorgal. Mister Kern will put you through the paperwork after breakfast. What about you, Miss Kano? Will you need a lift back to Zeta Alpha?”

“So soon? Since you can always drop me back at the time of your choice, why shouldn’t I stay a bit and cover this war? Hell, I believe that nobody in the Global Council has reported on a war in over 500 years.”

Farah gave her a somber look then.

“Think well, Lori. You may see things in this war that may haunt you all your life.”

It was Lori’s turn to become somber.

“I will consider it as part of the hazards of being a reporter, Farah. If I am to tell my viewers about a possible war with the Imperium, then I better learn what war implies first. I really want to do this, Farah.”

“As you wish, Lori. Since you are already decked out in semi-tropical fashion, I might as well reserve you a place on one of our scoutships based in Hawaii. They will depart on a combat sweep in about four hours.”

22:47 (Honolulu Time)

Sunday, May 24, 1942 ‘B’

Time Patrol scoutship TEEN TEAM

Parking apron, Hickam Field

Oahu, Hawaii

Bill Conway couldn’t help discreetly admire the long, svelte body of the giant woman now being fitted with a helmet by Tom Allen. Her bright red, skin-tight jumpsuit made her even more appetizing, even though Bill was still somewhat put off by her bald

head. In the seat behind him, which faced aft, Jenny Kawena was learning how to use her control panel to monitor radio frequencies, with Ingrid Weiss coaching her. As for Bill himself, Tom Allen had shown him how to pinpoint an object on the holographic projection sphere of their scoutship's crew sphere, then to enhance and magnify it on his own control panel. Even as incredibly advanced as the technology of the scoutship was, it was also surprisingly easy to use. For one thing, the radio systems of the scoutship could be controlled by simply punching in the desired frequency, compared to the often long process used in the contemporary radios, where the operator had to first find the frequency and then carefully tune his radio to take out most of the parasite noise.

After fitting her mini-camera to her new helmet, Lori Kano took her seat on the side opposite from Bill's seat, with Ingrid's pilot seat between and slightly above them. Ingrid then made a quick intercom check with the four other occupants of the crew sphere. Bill could now see the four other scoutships of the task force taking off vertically one after the other, being plainly visible despite night having fallen. Tom had explained to him that the holographic sphere would be showing a blend of low level light imaging and of thermal imaging, coupled with radar and radio signatures. That had taken a good extra ten minutes of explanation for Bill to fully understand the terms used by Tom. He was still shaking his head at the quality of night viewing this gave to the crew of the scoutship. For once the Japanese, famed for their skills at naval night combat, would be at a disadvantage in the dark.

"What is our goal for tonight already, Ingrid?" Asked Lori on the intercom.

"The Japanese home islands. Our priority targets will be aircraft carriers and ground-based combat aircraft. Since we will be attacking at night, we will catch the Japanese aircraft on the ground, which will permit us to destroy them without having to kill their pilots."

Bill nearly remarked on how misplaced this consideration about sparing the lives of Japanese pilots was but shut his mouth in time. Apart from Jenny Kawena being present, Bill already had a few hours to measure how serious the people of the Time Patrol were about causing the absolute minimum of casualties in enemy ranks. After some reflection of his own, Bill had to recognize that the average Japanese soldier, sailor or airman was probably no guiltier of starting this war than the average American serviceman. Bill just wished that Japanese troops had shown less brutality towards the occupied civilian populations and their war prisoners than their dark reputation implied.

Being brave and skillful in war was one thing. To be cruel on top of that was another thing. Bill then concentrated back on the mission as the TEEN TEAM rose slowly from the parking apron. Once it was a good hundred meters above ground, Ingrid accelerated her scoutship forward at a rate that made Bill gasp, even though he didn't feel any crushing force from the acceleration. No Japanese aircraft would be able to catch up with this machine unless Ingrid wanted to. A flash of white light then enveloped the crew sphere, surprising both Bill and Jenny.

"What was that?" Exclaimed the Japanese-American ensign from her rear-facing seat.

"We just jumped spacetime." Explained calmly Ingrid. "We are now over the Bay of Tokyo, our first target area."

Looking downward on the holographic sphere, Bill saw with consternation that they were effectively over that area, which he had studied for countless hours before on charts and maps.

"This is incredible. How far exactly could you jump like this in one shot?"

"A maximum performance jump would bring us just short of the orbit of Jupiter, Bill, or we could travel through time and reach fifteen million years in the future or past. The farthest trip in time I made was when this scoutship was sent to document life on Earth 150 millions years ago. That was a very long way from home."

"It would also have been a very bad time to suffer a mechanical breakdown." Added Tom Allen from his forward gunner's seat.

"Yes," said Lori, "but the recordings and data you brought back then were truly invaluable scientifically. Just the historical knowledge and samples from the past the Time Patrol brought back to the Global Council more than paid up for the cost of equipping and running your organization. Because of you, vast areas of Earth that had lost their original fauna have been repopulated, and I am not even talking about the specimens you brought back to populate the new zoos recently built around the Earth. The New Lake City Zoo in particular is a real smash with tourists, with its mammoths, giant buffalos and cave bears."

"Damn!" said softly Bill. "Is there any chance that you could one day let us visit your Global Council for a few days?"

Ingrid looked down at him with an amused smile.

"I will pass your request to Nancy, Bill. If she says yes, then you are going too, Jenny."

“I really could?” Said the ensign, ecstatic.

“Of course! Now, let’s get back on our mission: I see two big juicy targets down there, near the Yokosuka naval base. Bill, could you confirm the identification on those two carriers?”

Bill, even though he already knew the answers, didn’t take any chance and flipped quickly through the naval equipment recognition guide he had brought with him.

“I confirm those two carriers to be the AKAGI and KAGA. The big battleship moored besides them is the YAMATO. I also count four cruisers and seven destroyers, plus three oil tankers. This is definitely one juicy target.”

“Alright! I am now activating our data link with Pearl Harbor, so that Admiral Nimitz could watch this on our portable workstation set up in his fleet headquarters.”

“How do you intend to proceed with your attack, Ingrid?” Asked Bill, who still didn’t know much about the capabilities of the scoutship’s weapons.

“We will go down to an altitude of 600 meters and use our laser to slice these ships like cheese. That way they will sink quickly but casualties should be minimal. Hopefully, most of their crews will be on shore leave.”

“You realize that, at that altitude, we will be within range of every anti-aircraft guns on these ships, do you?”

“I know, Bill, but our shields should be able to absorb that crap.”

“Should?” Said Lori, suddenly very nervous. “Aren’t you sure about that?”

“I was just kidding, Lori. Our shields will hold. Here we go.”

Bill held his breath as the scoutship descended rapidly on the anchored Japanese fleet. He had never been this close from the enemy before. The TEEN TEAM then stopped to a hover just above the carrier AKAGI. Bill could now see Japanese sailors scrambling to man their anti-aircraft guns. A blinding beam of blue-green light then stabbed the night, hitting the deck of the carrier on its forward port edge and creating a spectacular shower of sparks. Tom kept firing his laser continuously, slowly moving the beam across the carrier’s flight deck as the first Japanese shells impacted and exploded against the shields of the scoutship. Since outside noise was also retransmitted inside the crew sphere, Ingrid was soon forced to lower the volume level as more and more guns fired at them. Bill himself couldn’t help flinch a few times when heavier shells exploded against the shields. Apparently undisturbed by the hurricane of enemy fire, Tom kept directing methodically his laser beam across the carrier’s deck until it buckled up and the bow section broke away. Water rushed in the forward compartments of the big warship,

making it quickly taking a list by the bow. The carrier's gunners still kept firing, though, prompting a remark from Lori.

"These are brave men. They must know now that their ship will sink and yet they still stay at their posts."

"Nobody could accuse the Japanese of being cowards, Lori." Said Tom, even getting a nod from Bill.

"True! That carrier is now useless, but they could repair it in a few weeks. How about cutting its stern off as well? The propeller shafts will be much more difficult to repair."

"A sensible idea, Bill. Consider it done."

Ingrid moved her scoutship to above the stern of the carrier, which was now nearly completely out of the water due to the ship's list. That made Tom's job even easier, as he didn't have to dissipate some of his laser's power in burning through water. The carrier's stern separated with a noise of tortured metal and sank in the water after only a minute of firing. Despite all this, the gunners of the AKAGI were still firing at maximum rate.

"Scratch the AKAGI!" Announced Tom, while Ingrid flew towards the KAGA. Feeling elated by their easy victory against the AKAGI, Bill was now more confident as Tom started cutting the KAGA's bow off. The storm of anti-aircraft fire was as furious as ever as the luckless AKAGI capsized, its gunners still at their posts.

"By the stars!" Said softly a shaken Lori. "So many deaths in so short a time."

"That is unfortunately the sad reality of war, miss." Replied Bill. "Many more will die before...INGRID, CLIMB! CLIMB NOW!"

Ingrid reacted instinctively, trusting the experience of Bill Conway without discussion and making her scoutship jump up by a thousand meters before looking where Bill had been looking. A huge explosion under them then shook violently the scoutship, while a ball of searing flames accompanied by a shower of fragments expanded where the TEEN TEAM had been.

"What the hell was that?" Grumbled Ingrid, more shaken than she wanted to show.

"It was the battleship YAMATO. I saw its eighteen-inch guns elevate and point at us and I then remembered a report I saw once about the battleships of that class being fitted with special anti-aircraft shells for their big guns."

“Damn! They really could have blown us to bits this time: I doubt that our shields would have withstood a direct hit from a ton and a half shell. All right, Tom, let’s change our target priorities temporarily and make it a quick kill: the YAMATO’s guns are too dangerous to play around with.”

“Got that!” Replied the teenage boy while concentrating already on his new target. Having served for two years in the Royal Navy as a ship’s boy, Tom knew where the sensitive parts of a battleship were. He thus directed the beam of his 200-megawatt laser on the armored roof of the forward eighteen-inch gun turret, aiming to eventually burn through all the way to its ammunition room. After three seconds of firing, the forward half of the battleship blew up in a titanic explosion, projecting debris over kilometers in all directions and severely shaking the scoutship by the blast wave. One of the giant gun turrets flew off high enough to make a glancing blow against the shields of the scoutship. Lori Kano was as pale as a bed sheet when Ingrid looked around to see if everyone was unhurt.

“Lori, are you okay?”

“I...I think so.” Answered the reporter weakly. Satisfied that her crew was safe and sound, Ingrid flew back to her original position above the KAGA. As Tom resumed his ship’s cutting work, Ingrid spoke to Jenny on the intercom.

“Jenny, select the outside speakers on your control panel and crank up the volume to the maximum. I want you to warn the crews of those ships to start evacuating now before we sink their ships. Advise also those three oil tankers that they will be next after we destroy the warships in the bay. Repeat your warning at least twice.”

“Understood, Ingrid.”

Thanking mentally the young German for her sense of humanity, Jenny started broadcasting her warning in Japanese, fervently hoping that the Japanese sailors would heed it. Unfortunately, none of the warships’ crews evacuated their ships, leaving the crews of the three tankers alone to rush to their lifeboats. Jenny didn’t know if she had to feel happy or sad as Tom methodically sank every Japanese warship in the bay, using only the scoutship’s high power laser. As an American Navy officer she should have felt triumph at such a one-sided victory, but she could not help think about the plight of the common Japanese sailor as men died by the hundreds, manning their guns until it was too late for them to evacuate. The three tankers were destroyed last, a short laser burst being enough to turn each of them into a spectacular fireball. Lori Kano, like Jenny Kawena, was silent and downcast as she surveyed the chaos of burning debris and

broken ship hulls mixed in the water with hundreds of men swimming frantically to escape death. In contrast, Bill Conway felt only satisfaction as he wrote down the results of the battle on his notepad.

“Two carriers, one battleship, four cruisers, seven destroyers and three oil tankers sunk in less than forty minutes. I have never seen such a one-sided battle as this.”

“This is only the start, Bill. We will now target the military airfields around Tokyo before moving down the Japanese islands. With four other scoutships similarly busy around the Pacific tonight, there should be little to nothing left of Japanese air and sea power by the morning. If such a blow isn’t enough to make the Japanese leaders think about surrendering, then they will deserve a prize for stupidity.”

06:17 (Tokyo Time)

Tuesday, May 26, 1942 ‘B’

Scoutship TEEN TEAM

Kagoshima Bay, Kyushu Island

Japan

Ingrid and her crew, but especially Tom, were feeling dog-tired after flying over eight hours of non-stop combat operations. They were now leaving the area of the Kagoshima naval base, where they had just sunk the carriers SORYU and HIRYU, plus three battleships and a dozen lesser ships. The coming of the daylight had permitted for the first time the Japanese to launch fighters against the marauding scoutship. That had however been somewhat of an anti-climax, those fighters proving childishly easy to shoot down with short laser bursts. Everybody was looking forward to a good breakfast and some hours of sleep when a swarm of dots showed up on their sensors, coming straight towards the scoutship.

“I count easily over 140 aircraft coming from three directions.” Announced Tom, making Ingrid frown.

“Haven’t they learned their lesson yet? They should know that they stand no chance. Shooting them down would be little more than a senseless slaughter. Let’s go home, so that they can think about their surrender during the day.”

"If you do that, Ingrid," intervened Bill Conway, "they will think that they have scared you away and that will instead build up their morale. You will thus lose much of the psychological impact that you have been trying to cause all night."

Ingrid exchanged a look with Tom, unsure at first what to do. She finally relented.

"Alright, we will engage them, but I am not going to play the coward and simply shoot them down from long range. Tom, be ready for a dogfight."

"Yes! That will feel more like a fair fight this time."

Bill Conway bit his tongue, having hoped for a somewhat different decision from Ingrid. The German girl was however right: everything had been too easy up to now, making even Bill feel sorry for the Japanese. Jenny then spoke on the intercom, alarm in her voice.

"I have their air command net. These fighters have orders to shoot us down at any price. That could mean suicide ramming attacks."

"How could any person go to such extreme?" Asked Lori, horrified by that very idea.

"That is an accepted Japanese tradition, Lori." Answered Jenny. "Honor is more important than life itself."

"Hang on, everybody, and make sure that your safety harnesses are tightly on." Shouted Ingrid as she accelerated towards the mass of Japanese fighter aircraft. The combined approach speed was terrifying, leaving very little time for the pilots on both sides to react. Tom shot his laser twice before they mingled, making two of the fighters directly to their front burst in flames. The pilot of one of those fighters, already starting to burn alive and screaming with pain, concentrated his last living seconds into lining his burning aircraft with the trajectory of the scoutship. Both the fighter and the scoutship collided head on, the fighter disintegrating on impact with the scoutship's shields. The collision shook the crew of the TEEN TEAM to the bone, with Lori unable to keep in a scream of fear. The lights flickered inside the crew sphere for a fraction of a second. Before anybody could say a word, a second fighter pilot following behind the first one deliberately flew his still intact aircraft straight into the speeding scoutship. The energy of that impact proved too much for the scoutship's shield generator, which overloaded and burned out. Sparks flew out of circuit panels in the crew sphere as a loud alarm horn started blaring.

"FIRE IN THE MACHINERY COMPARTMENT!" Shouted Tom, still shaken by the collision. "OUR SHIELDS ARE GONE!"

“Activate the fire extinguishers!” Ordered Ingrid while assessing the damage to her wounded scoutship. A number of auxiliary systems were down, on top of the shield generator. The time distorter also appeared to be damaged. That would make any attempt at a spacetime jump dangerous at best. Tom spoke after a minute or so.

“The fire is out, Ingrid. The laser is off-line and my computerized fire control system is not responding. I can still however use our rail guns on purely manual pointing mode.”

“Then use that, Tom. We are not going to give up so easily.”
Ingrid then pulled up her scoutship into a tight half-loop that put her back towards the Japanese fighters.

“Ingrid, are you crazy?” Screamed a terrified Lori Kano. “We could get killed!”

“That is always a possibility in war, Lori.” Replied Ingrid through her clenched teeth. She started flying through the Japanese fighters, twisting, turning, diving and climbing in order to present manageable targets to Tom, who now had to calculate instinctively the lead he had to apply to his aim. That kind of shooting was however something the British teenage boy had mastered while serving as a machine gunner in the Royal Navy. Firing only short bursts from his forward 20mm Gatling rail gun, Tom managed to get on average two out of five bursts on target while Ingrid flew like a mad person. The Japanese were not taking it lying down either, firing their machineguns and cannons every time the scoutship zipped by them. The mere volume of their fire was enough to ensure that dozens of bullets and shells impacted on the scoutship. The thick titanium alloy hull of the TEEN TEAM was however tough enough to stop most of them. Ingrid still had to contend with other suicide ramming attacks on top of everything else. Only the adrenaline flowing through her body kept her going during the stressful fifteen minutes that followed. A Japanese fighter barely missed his ramming attack as Tom ran out of ammunition for his rail gun, the aircraft actually grazing the top of the scoutship’s hull and ripping off the hull plating along a good four meters. More red indicators lit up on Ingrid’s control panel as her scoutship started vibrating violently. She had no choice but to reduce speed to below the speed of sound in order to avoid additional structural damage from the relative wind rushing inside through the hull rip. Ingrid then turned her scoutship eastward and sped away from the surviving Japanese fighters.

“I think we did enough for today. What about you, guys?”

“I concur!” Replied quickly Tom, sighing with relief. “Hell, I was so stressed out concentrating on my firing that I lost count of how many I shot down this time.”

“Make it 28 Japanese fighter aircraft, kid.” Said Bill Conway, sweat still covering his face. “I am the observer, after all, so I kept the count for you. That was some pretty fancy shooting, Tom. Your flying wasn’t shabby either, Ingrid.”

“Thanks, Bill! How are you, Jenny?”

“Uh, with all that twisting and turning, I’m afraid that I got sick over my control panel. Sorry!”

Ingrid laughed at that, which helped relieve some of the nervous tension she still felt.

“That’s no problem, Jenny: at the slow speed we have to fly now, you will have a good eight hours to clean that mess up.”

Ingrid then looked down and to her left at Lori. The GNN reporter was still frozen with terror and was hyperventilating. Ingrid gently shook her shoulder to bring her back to reality. It took two shakes before Lori snapped out of it, looking up at Ingrid with a livid expression.

“I swear that I was never this scared before in my life.”

“Are you okay, Lori?”

“I...I think so. I think I peed in my jumpsuit.” Lori said sheepishly. Ingrid knew better than laugh at her.

“Look, Tom will escort you and Jenny down to the crew cabins, where you will be able to clean up and change. Take a few hours of rest until we arrive back in Pearl Harbor.”

“Thanks, Ingrid. You are one fine girl.”

As Tom went down to the lower deck with Lori and Jenny, Ingrid looked down at Bill.

“You may as well go have some rest, Bill. I will start sending a situation report now to Hawaii.”

The American officer smiled at the German while holding out his notepad.

“That’s alright, Ingrid: I have my own mission report to do. It should be one hell of an exciting document.”

12:41 (Honolulu Time) / 06:41 (Tokyo Time)

Monday, May 25, 1942 ‘B’ / Tuesday, May 26, 1942 ‘B’

Operations Center, Pacific Fleet Headquarters

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

Both Admiral Nimitz and Michael Stone had to sit, sweat on their forehead, as the battle between the TEEN TEAM and the swarm of Japanese fighters concluded over Kagoshima. There was now a small crowd of staff officers and operators looking at the workstation set up by the Time Patrol in the fleet operations center.

“Damn!” Swore Stone, still worried about Ingrid and her scoutship. “That was a hell of a close call.”

“It was also the craziest dogfight I could have even imagined.” Added Nimitz. “Your young scoutship crew makes a hell of a fighting team. Do you think that they will be able to make it back to Hickam Field?”

“I am not sure yet, Admiral. We are now receiving an electronic diagnostic from the TEEN TEAM. Mister Tolvek, what do you make of it?”

Maran Tolvek ‘B’, who was manning the workstation with young Cadet Lakshmi Saduranidrasekar ‘A’, looked carefully at the technical text now scrolling on one of the screens of the workstation linked to the TEEN TEAM.

“They have extensive damage to a number of secondary systems and to their shield generator. Their time distorter is also out of calibration and is unusable. Their main drive and stabilization systems are however apparently intact. They should make it back safely but it will then take at least a few days to repair all this damage. They were damn lucky...and brave.”

Admiral Nimitz was silent for a moment, looking at the image showing the inside of the crew sphere of the wounded scoutship, then looked up at Lieutenant Commander Bailey, who was holding a clipboard.

“Mister Bailey, what is your tally of ships sunk and aircraft destroyed by the scoutship TEEN TEAM?”

The naval intelligence officer shook his head as he read his notes.

“They accounted for the carriers AKAGI, KAGA, SORYU and HIRYU, the battleships YAMATO, KIRISHIMA, HIEI and FUSO, eight cruisers, twelve destroyers, three submarines and four oil tankers. They also destroyed in the air 39 Japanese fighters, plus 284 other aircraft on the ground. Those last don’t include the aircraft lost with the four carriers, sir.”

“As impressive as that kill count sounds, for me it is not as impressive as the dogfight I have just seen. These youngsters should be commended. Mister Stone, does your Time Patrol have rules against accepting foreign medals?”

“Not at all, Admiral. In fact, the four other scoutship pilots of our task force wear medals of either British, Soviet or German origin. I have my own medals from the American Navy of the 21st century, sir.”

“Good! Mister Bailey, what is left exactly of the Japanese air and sea power after this night massacre by the scoutships of the Time Patrol?”

“Damn little, if I may say so, Admiral. The Japanese have now only one small carrier left to them, the CHITOSE, while I estimate that less than thirty percent of all Japanese aircraft remain, those being mostly dispersed on small airfields around China and the north of Japan. As for sea power, the Japanese are now down to maybe five cruisers, a dozen destroyers and a motley collection of coastal patrol ships. Their only potent force left apart of the above is their submarine force, which will have to be flushed out from under the sea.”

Obviously delighted, Nimitz looked back at Michael Stone.

“That is indeed outstanding. What will be the next step in your plan, Mister Stone?”

“We will mostly let our crews rest during the day, Admiral, and give a chance to the Japanese to assess the damage, so that they could start thinking about surrendering. Then, tonight, we will concentrate our strikes on Japanese supply centers, oil storage sites, ammunition dumps and the like. The Japanese Army will then be mostly isolated and short on supplies, which should restrict greatly its operational options. We however expect the Japanese Army to be very stubborn and much harder to take out of the fight than their air force or navy. That is why we are hoping that common sense will prevail in Tokyo and that someone will push for surrender. If that does not happen, then your navy will be free to blockade the Japanese islands and starve them into submission.”

“That sounds like a good plan to me, mister. How are your people in Europe doing?”

“Very well indeed, Admiral. Now that we have taken care of a small domestic problem of our own in 3386, we have been concentrating in completing the elimination of the Nazi Party machine and of its instruments of repression. We will soon enter talks with the various high level German military commanders, to convince them to withdraw on their own out of all the territories they have occupied since the start of the war. In exchange for that and a partial German disarmament, we will guarantee that the original

German borders will be respected and that the Soviets will not be allowed to grab Eastern Europe.”

“That is quite a risky political program, mister. Can your Nancy Laplante really play that kind of hardball game?”

Michael Stone smiled at Nimitz’ question.

“Admiral, Nancy can play hardball with the best of them.”

20:54 (Honolulu time)

Scoutship TEEN TEAM

Hickam Field, Pearl Harbor

Hawaii

Ingrid’s bum felt like lead as she was finally able to leave her pilot seat: 22 hours sitting in it except for two toilet breaks and a quick snack was quite enough for anybody. Bill Conway, who was already up, saw that and smiled.

“Need a rub, Ingrid?”

“Oh yes! I’m not going to refuse that now.”

Stepping down from her pilot’s station, she turned around and presented her back to the delighted American while leaning against the observer’s seat. Bill’s vigorous rubbing and massaging got moans of satisfaction from Ingrid and a sarcastic look from Lori Kano.

“You know, you could find an easier way to justify getting a massage, Ingrid.”

“Hey, any way to get a massage is justifiable in my mind.”

Tom, a faked look of jealousy on his face, rubbed his own bum.

“Gee, I also sat in that seat for long hours. What do I have to do to get a rub?”

“You just need to ask, my pretty boy.” Replied Lori before taking position behind him, gluing herself to his back and caressing his bum with both hands. Lori saw Jenny’s cheeks turn red and grinned to the Japanese-American.

“Don’t tell me that you never had a boy rub your bum, Jenny.”

“Uh, actually, no. My parents were quite traditional in their values. Besides, nobody would even approach me during my navy classes.”

The way her tone saddened while saying her last sentence made Ingrid and Tom look at her with genuine concern. Ingrid made Bill stop his rubbing and went to the small ensign, taking hold of her by the shoulders.

“Jenny, you are a sweet girl who deserves better than to be shunned. If you want to, there will always be a place for you with us in the Time Patrol.”

“You are serious, Ingrid? You really would accept me after this war?”

“Hey, Nancy is my adoptive mother and I think that I know her well enough to say that she would take you any time.”

“That...that would be fantastic. Thanks for the words of encouragement, Ingrid.”

“My pleasure, Jenny. Now, let’s go see Chief Engineer Alan Turok to get a verdict on my poor scoutship.”

The moment they walked down the rear access ramp of the TEEN TEAM, Ingrid and her crew were greeted by cheers from the other scoutship crews and from crewmembers of the BABYLON. Michael Stone came to Ingrid and hugged her warmly.

“Ingrid, you really scared me this time, but you did great. So did your crew.”

“Thanks, Michael. What about my scoutship?”

“I’m afraid that it will take at least a couple of days of intensive repairs to return it to service. In the meantime, you can serve as a second crew for one of our four other scoutships.”

“You better return my WALKÜREN in once piece if I loan it to you, Ingrid.” Shouted Hanna Reitsch jokingly, making Ingrid pull out her tongue at her. After a round of congratulations, the crew of TEEN TEAM then took a ride in a cargo platform loaned from the ground support crew and headed towards the Pacific Fleet Headquarters for their mission debriefing. The welcome they got there was even warmer than at Hickam Field.

CHAPTER 18 – RAVENSBRÜCK

16:21 (GMT)

Tuesday, May 26, 1942 'B'

Tower ALPHA, RAF Air Station Northolt

England

Nancy was reading through the latest situation report from Warsaw when Thomas Fairbanks showed up at the door of her office with a sheet of paper in his hands. Her welcoming smile faded when she saw the concerned expression on the African-American's face.

"What is it, Tom?"

"Something bad, Nancy. This is a message on the radio net of the SS Corps that we just intercepted and decoded. We think that it was made by Reinhardt Heidrich."

Nancy frowned as Tom gave her the sheet of paper. Heidrich, now the top ranking SS officer not dead or captured yet, had been evading her efforts to find him for over a day now. Reading quickly the message, Nancy suddenly got up from her chair, revolted by what was in it.

"Is that the whole list of addressees?"

"Yes, Nancy. This was sent basically to all the concentration camps that are still operating."

"That Heidrich bastard! This will totally screw up our present operational plans. Come with me, Tom: we are going to see Farah with this."

Leaving her office with Tom on her heels, Nancy started chasing for Farah around the Tower ALPHA, finally finding her in the infirmary. Nancy handed her the message Tom had brought her.

"This is a message intercepted on the SS Corps radio net which was probably sent by Heidrich. In it, he orders all the SS units in and near German concentration camps to start erasing as rapidly as possible all the traces of the camps and to eliminate all witnesses. Basically, this means the massacre on the spot of all camp inmates, followed by the destruction of the camps. Hundreds of thousands of tortured souls are in immediate danger of death, Farah."

After a moment of stupor, Farah read the message, then threw it away in a rare fit of rage.

“How could anyone be this cruel?”

Rage was then replaced by grief and tears. Nancy hurried to her friend and hugged her, caressing her back.

“We will do everything humanely possible to prevent this monstrosity, Farah, I promise. If you agree to it, I will suspend temporarily all our other activities until this crisis is over.”

“Go ahead, Nancy.” Said Farah between sobs. “You have my authority to do as you please on this. Just save those poor people.”

“You can count on me, Farah. Tom, come with me!”

As the two of them left the infirmary, Nancy gave rapidly a few directives to the computer genius.

“I want you to extract from our data banks all the information we have on German concentration camps and organize it in target files. We will need the maps of the camps and their exact locations, the size of the German garrisons and the number of inmates to be expected, along with any personal info on key German personnel in those camps. If we don't have good maps, then send out reconnaissance probes to take air photos of the camps. Do this as fast as you can and enlist the help of all the sensor operators you deem necessary.”

“I'm on it, Nancy.” Replied Tom before walking away. Running back to her office, Nancy called up on her computer screen the listing of available Time Patrol personnel and of their present tasks. She grimaced at seeing how few people she had to do the present job. At least, with their scoutship down for repairs, she could use Ingrid and Tom. She could also strip some personnel and robots from the Warsaw sector, which was relatively quiet at this time. The other big problem they would face was how they were going to feed and care for all these inmates once they were out of danger. Those people could not just be abandoned in the middle of Germany or Poland to fend for themselves. Thankfully, the field hospital deployed from Aldershot by the British Army was now about ready in Northolt, while good progress had been made by the British on setting up an adjoining refugee camp. Checking on the stockpiles of food acquired and stored away by Boran Kern, Nancy was pleased by what she saw: they had presently a bit over 1,800 tons of non-perishable food in storage. While this was a good start, it however represented only a few days of food at the most for the hundreds

of thousands of inmates presently held in German camps. They would need more, a lot more. This promised to be a logistical nightmare of the first magnitude. Her head nearly spinning from so many problems at once, Nancy started writing up a series of short operational orders. Once she was done with those, she grabbed the old style telephone on her desk that connected her to the British telephone system and started calling a number of military officials representing the forces of various governments in exile in Great Britain. She was going to call in a few favors today, starting with some help from General De Gaulle, of the Free French Forces.

07:11 (Honolulu Time)

Tuesday, May 26, 1942 'B'

Navy Officers' cafeteria, Pearl Harbor

Hawaii

Ingrid Weiss and Tom Allen were having breakfast with Jenny Kawena, Bill Conway and Lori Kano in the officers' cafeteria when Amelia Earhart came in and shouted at the top of her lungs.

"ALL TIME PATROL PERSONNEL ARE TO REPORT BACK RIGHT NOW TO THE BABYLON FOR AN URGENT OPERATIONAL BRIEFING."

Jenny and Bill looked with indecision at Ingrid, Tom and Lori as they stopped eating and got up.

"Uh, should we come too?" Asked Bill, getting a shake from Ingrid.

"I don't think so, Bill. We will keep you informed, though."

"But, we were supposed to take off in one hour with the BRITANNIA for a sweep of China." Objected Jenny, who had been looking forward to that mission. Ingrid smiled at her eagerness.

"Jenny, I am sure that it will only be delayed and not cancelled. We will see you later in Hickam Field."

The two teenagers and the giant reporter then left the cafeteria, along with a good fifty other members of the Time Patrol, causing the start of a wild cycle of rumors and suppositions amongst the American officers present.

Michael Stone gathered the personnel of Task Force BABYLON inside the cargo bay of the research ship, a file in his hands. Once everybody was present, he spoke up, nearly shouting to be heard from everyone.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have urgent new orders. We have just learned that the SS troops guarding the various German concentration camps have been ordered to eliminate as quickly as possible all the inmates and to destroy the camps in order to erase all proofs of their existence. We are talking about maybe 300,000 persons or more who are in immediate danger of being murdered.”

Exclamations and comments flew at that announcement. Ingrid, who was close to Hanna Reitsch and Otto Skorzeni, saw that they were shaken hard by the news. Everybody had been careful up to now not to raise the subject of Nazi atrocities with Hanna and Otto, not because the two ex-Nazis would excuse those actions but rather to avoid making them feel guilty about them. Ingrid knew that Hanna had once confronted Himmler about the existence of concentration camps while she was still serving the Third Reich, to which the head of the SS Corps had sworn that no such things existed in Germany. As for Otto, he may have been a ruthless soldier but he had a sense of military honor that would make the commitment of such atrocities unthinkable to him. Ingrid then concentrated her attention back to Stone, who had resumed his speech.

“The detailed plans for our rescue operation are still being put together, but what I can tell you is that we will leave behind one operational scoutship, the BRITANNIA, plus the TEEN TEAM, which is still under repair. The technical support team will also stay in Hawaii. The rest of us, including Ingrid and Tom, will leave this morning at nine O’clock for Northolt. We should stay in Europe for about two days, or until the camps are all secured.”

“Could I come and cover that operation?” Shouted Lori Kano. Stone gave her a warning look.

“Lori, you don’t know what you will get yourself into. Those camps we will free are simply hell on Earth and those sights may well traumatize you for life.”

Lori hesitated but finally put on a brave face.

“I still want to go.”

“As you wish, Lori. I will now ask you all to pack and be ready to leave at nine. Dismissed!”

09:07 (Honolulu Time)**Parking apron, Hickam Field**

Doug Wilson, seeing the downcast expression of Jenny Kawena as they waved goodbye at the departing fleet, got close to the small ensign and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t worry about them, Jenny: they will come back safe and sound.”
Instead of cheering up, the Japanese-American became even more depressed.

“I hope so, Doug, but I will still miss Ingrid and Tom terribly: they made me feel fully accepted and appreciated for the first time in years. Now, I’m nearly afraid to use the cafeteria or mess because I am not sure that the abuse and taunting will not start again during the absence of your people. You should have heard some of the stupid, outrageous comments and slurs I overheard yesterday about the way you mix freely between nationalities and races. On the surface everybody is happy that you are destroying the Japanese war machine, but many are resentful of the way you push your social ethics around. Once you are gone, this place will simply revert back to its bad old ways. I am not sure that I will then want to stay.”

“Jenny, believe me when I say that many of us are concerned about this as well. I know that Ingrid has already spoken to Nancy about you and that something will be done once this campaign is over. In the meantime, you and Bill will accompany Elizabeth and me on missions. We will take off tonight at midnight, so you might as well catch some rest now.”

“I just woke up two hours ago, Doug.”
Elizabeth suddenly smiled as an idea came to her.

“I know what you could do. We could use a time scooter to drop you at your parents’ house now. We would then go get you back at the end of the afternoon, after Doug and me could take some rest. Your parents do live in Hawaii, no?”

To Elizabeth and Doug’s alarm, that last question brought tears to Jenny, who turned away to hide her crying. Embarrassed, Elizabeth gently took hold of the ensign, trying to repair whatever mistake she had committed.

“I’m sorry, Jenny. Maybe I shouldn’t have asked that question.”
Jenny shook her head, wiping her tears away while trying to control her sobs.

“That’s alright, Elizabeth: you could not possibly know. While my father, who is of Polynesian blood, does live on a plantation in Oahu, my mother is presently detained in an internment camp in Manzanar, California.”

“But...why?” Asked Doug, confused.

“Mostly because she is Japanese.” Answered Jenny in a bitter voice. “She would have normally been allowed to stay in Hawaii under the rules of martial law, except that she was deemed a security risk because she has a sister that works for the government in Japan. They corresponded regularly and that must have made the army censors suspicious of my mother. My father was hit hard by her deportation.”

Doug Wilson then looked at Bill Conway, who stood nearby with a shamed expression on his face.

“Uh, Bill, would you mind leaving us alone with Jenny for a while?”

“Sure, Doug.” Hastily replied Bill, who understood that Doug’s request was more like an order, actually. Wilson waited until Conway was well beyond earshot before speaking in a low voice to the distraught Jenny.

“How long has your mother been in that camp in Manzanar, Jenny?”

“She was deported just after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. I have not been allowed to go visit her since.”

“But, that’s both stupid and cruel.” Objected Elizabeth. “You are a member of the Navy Intelligence, helping to decrypt Japanese messages, and they refuse you the right to visit your mother?”

Jenny made a sour face as she looked into Elizabeth’s eyes.

“I may be part of the Navy but, when I was inducted into service, I was classified ‘4C’, meaning that I am considered an enemy alien. Before your Time Patrol asked for Japanese linguists, I had to work at the Joint Intelligence Center’s annex in Honolulu and was not allowed inside the base proper.”

“And yet you are ready to risk death on missions in order to serve your country, even though your country refuses to treat you like a full citizen.”

“That’s it in a nutshell, Elizabeth.” Said Jenny, sounding thoroughly discouraged. Both Doug and Elizabeth exchanged looks, then Doug gently took hold of Jenny’s hands.

“Do you know where your mother is in Manzanar and do you have a picture of her?”

"I do." Said Jenny, who then searched inside her service purse and took a small picture out of her wallet, giving it to Doug. "She is detained in Block 7 and her name is Minami Kawena, born Fushida. Do you think that you can really do something for her?"

"I don't know yet but I will speak to Nancy about your mother. Having been herself a Japanese in two of her previous lives, I believe that she will not be indifferent to this situation. Besides, this whole question of internment of Japanese-Americans reeks of racism, which we all abhor in the Time Patrol. Have faith, Jenny."

"You are so kind, both of you." Said tearfully Jenny before kissing Doug and Elizabeth on the cheek. Bill Conway watched them from a distance, then walked away.

21:45 (GMT)

Tower ALPHA

RAF Air Station Northolt

England

"Sir, just have all your aircraft avoid flying over occupied Europe for the next 24 hours unless you want them to be shot down.... No, I can't explain the detailed reasons on the telephone. I will just say that anything that does not belong to the Time Patrol and is flying over occupied Europe tonight and tomorrow will be shot down, period!... No! There can't be any exception, sir. I am talking about machines that will have total free rein to shoot on sight at any non-Time Patrol ship or craft.... Please do that, sir."

Nancy, a bit frustrated at General Ismay for taking so long to agree to her request, put down the old style receiver of the British secure telephone and got up from behind her desk. Her videophone then buzzed as she was about to walk out of her office. Switching it on, she saw the face of one of her sensors operators.

"Nancy, the base main gate just advised us that a convoy of vehicles from the Free French Forces has shown up and will be here in a few minutes."

"Excellent! Thanks, Rana."

Leaving the office after switching off the videophone, Nancy went down to the reception level of the tower and walked down the access ramp, passing by the two combat robots posted on guard duty at the foot of the ramp. She had to wait only a couple of minutes before a convoy of trucks and jeeps bearing the Cross of Lorraine of the Free French Forces entered the disused parking lot in the center of which stood Tower ALPHA. A tall

French senior officer stepped out of the leading jeep and came to Nancy, who saluted him after a slight hesitation.

“General De Gaulle? I didn’t expect you here tonight.”

Charles De Gaulle smiled and shook her hand.

“This was the best way I found to make sure that our contingent arrived here quickly, Brigadier. I have with me two companies of naval infantry and a medical group with six ambulances. It was all that I could muster on such a short notice.”

“General, you did great. I am due to brief all the mission participants at half past ten tonight. I will ask your company commanders and your doctors to be present at that briefing, which will be held in the main conference room of this tower.”

“And what about me, Brigadier?”

Nancy, surprised, then noticed that De Gaulle was wearing a steel helmet and a web belt supporting a holstered pistol.

“General, you are not seriously thinking about going on this mission, are you?”

“Are you going on it, Brigadier?”

“Uh, yes, but...”

“Then I am coming, Brigadier, especially if this mission is in France.”

“Well, parts of this operation will effectively happen on French soil. We are planning on taking and liberating all the transit and concentration camps run by the Germans in Europe tonight, three of which are inside France or just over the border. We have indications that the Germans want to eliminate all the inmates of these camps and destroy all the evidence of their existence as quickly as possible. There are thousands of French men and women held in those camps.”

De Gaulle was somber as he remembered the reports brought back by the Free French troops that had helped liberate the Neuengamme concentration camp a year ago, an operation that had also been led by Nancy Laplante when she was still working for the British.

“This will then be a true mission of mercy to help our compatriots. Thank you again for letting us participate in it, Brigadier, or should I say Jeanne d’Arc?”

Nancy was surprised at first, then understood how De Gaulle could have learned about that.

“A French officer from Colditz must have spoken to you about what happened to me there, right?”

“More than one, actually.” Replied softly the tall general, looking at her with something approaching reverence. “How much of her life do you actually remember, Brigadier?”

Nancy switched to Old French to answer him, nostalgia overtaking her for a moment.

“I remember everything, including the English soldiers who raped me in my cell and the agony of burning alive at the stake. To help free more French people tonight will be a great satisfaction for me. How many people around you know about this, General?” De Gaulle had to concentrate to understand all that she said: while not as different from its modern version than, say, Old English, Old French still needed a good ear and undivided attention to be comprehensible.

“Quite a few, actually. Many troopers have also heard about the rumors out of Colditz Castle concerning you. Would you like to review my troops before the briefing, Jeanne?”

Nancy, a lump forming in her throat, nodded her head.

“It would be a true honor, General.”

De Gaulle smiled, then turned towards his officers, standing near his jeep.

“LINE UP THE TROOPS FOR INSPECTION! JEANNE D’ARC WILL REVIEW YOUR UNITS.”

The officers immediately scrambled around, shouting orders and lining their soldiers in three ranks in front of the trucks, with the doctors and nurses forming up at the left end of the parade. Followed one pace behind by De Gaulle, Nancy then walked slowly along the ranks of soldiers, speaking briefly with a number of them. More than a few of the French soldiers actually had tears on their faces when she stopped in front of them to say a few words. The more tearful lot was however by far the group of sixteen French Army nurses, with whom Nancy spent more time speaking with. Finally, herself in tears, Nancy walked to the front of the parade, stopping and facing the French.

“Soldiers of France, it will be a truly great honor to fight with you tonight. You will soon receive a detailed briefing concerning your mission but know this: you will help free tens of thousands of poor souls held in horrible conditions in German concentration camps. Part of you will first help liberate the camp of Ravensbrück, a concentration camp reserved for women and where many brave French women from the Resistance are being starved and tortured slowly to death. The other half of your unit will in the meantime liberate the camp of Natzweiler/Struthof, in the Alsace region, before freeing in succession two transit camps situated inside France proper. Combat machines and

ships of the Time Patrol will do most of the initial fighting, as there is no sense in risking casualties needlessly, but you will still be needed to sweep the camps for hidden guards and to weed out collaborators. Mostly, however, you will be there to help in the evacuation of the inmates and to provide first aid to them. Think of this operation as mostly a humanitarian mission. You will see many horrible things tonight, but I know that you will not falter and that you will represent France proudly. VIVE LA FRANCE!”

“VIVE LA FRANCE!” Shouted in unison the French soldiers and medical personnel. Nancy then saluted General De Gaulle.

“General, may I have you and your officers follow me inside?”

“Certainly, Brigadier.”

As the group of French officers was about to walk up the access ramp of Tower ALPHA, De Gaulle stopped for a moment to examine one of the combat robots standing guard.

“An impressive thing, Brigadier. What are they actually capable of?”

“These combat robots are actually as powerful as a contemporary tank, apart from being invulnerable to small arms fire and small caliber shells. They are armed with a machine gun, an automatic 50mm grenade launcher, a twin missile launcher and a laser. They can also fly and jump spacetime. They may be only machines but they are quite intelligent actually.”

“How many of them do you have, Colonel?”

“The Time Patrol has a total of 10,800 of those combat robots, plus 600 much bigger machines used for air defense against aircraft and ships. However, part of those robots are in the future, defending our base there. We however still have here in this time period 10, 000 combat robots and 540 PDRs.”

“My God! You probably could sweep the Germans out of France with such a force.” Exclaimed De Gaulle. Nancy nodded her head at that.

“It may be in the books soon, General. Part of my forces are in Hawaii, helping destroy the Japanese military machine in the Pacific, but some recent developments are making me think about relocating those forces elsewhere.”

“What is happening there? Are the Americans unhappy about having your people there, Brigadier?”

“It is actually the other way around, General. Let’s say that the racial policies of the American government are starting to sour my stomach. I was hoping to influence them into changing the worst of their laws and policies and have been speaking on a number of occasions with American officials, including President Roosevelt, but it is like

talking to a wall. They see our attempts as mere interference in their internal affairs. Did you know that the American government deported all their citizens of Japanese origin to so-called relocation camps that are little better than some of the German camps we will liberate tonight?"

"Uh, no. I have to say that I never understood fully the Americans' obsession about racial segregation, especially that concerning their black people. I remember still some disgraceful examples of such segregation I saw during the First World War, when American troops came to France. Where would you relocate your forces from Hawaii, though, Brigadier? All the other important locations in the Pacific are in Japanese hands, apart from Australia, which is quite far to the South."

"Distance is actually not a factor for us, General, as we can jump spacetime and go anywhere in the world in a fraction of a second. I am actually seriously thinking about establishing part of my forces in Paris, after throwing the Germans out of there, of course."

The French officers looked at each other, stunned for a moment.

"You could really take back Paris without too many casualties?" Asked De Gaulle, hopeful. Nancy was dead serious as she answered him.

"I actually plan to take Paris without a fight, General. The more I think about it, the more I am tempted to initiate that move. It will however have to wait until after this operation is completed. Let's go inside now."

22:32 (GMT)

Main conference room, Tower ALPHA

RAF Air Station Northolt

"May I have your attention, please!" Shouted Nancy in French, in order to facilitate things for the French officers present. The main conference room was now crowded with over fifty people involved with Operation MERCY. Nancy then made a map of Europe appear on the big viewing screen behind her.

"Operation MERCY will start at midnight and will involve simultaneous attacks against eight targets in the first phase of the operation, as shown by the red dots now visible on the map behind me. Once these eight targets are secured and the process of helping out the inmates is initiated, then part of our robot forces and a few personnel will be left behind to complete the evacuation while the rest will go to their second phase

objectives. Once the second phase targets are secured, the third phase targets will then be taken. The key to this operation will be to not let ourselves bogged down in any particular location, as the Germans may use any delay on our part to murder the inmates still in their power. Once all the guards and collaborators are eliminated at a location, a force of at least fifty robots will be left to protect the inmates and the personnel caring for them, which will be more than enough to ensure that no German force can return there. In case of a particularly fierce German reaction, our ships will be on call to provide immediate air support and additional combat robots will be sent as reinforcements. A reserve of 200 combat robots will be kept on standby here in Northolt for such an eventuality, so you will not have to worry about being overrun by the Germans. The Germans are anyway in a state of anarchy right now, with their leadership either dead, captured or on the run and with their state instruments of repression nearly exterminated during the course of the last two days. I will now distribute the target files to each of the groups involved with those targets. Study them, then brief your people and be ready to depart at midnight sharp. First objective: Auschwitz-Birkenau! The KRONOS will provide air support, with William Anderson, Tom Allen, Heinrik Braun and Martha Pfalz forming the ground team. You will control 400 combat robots and eight PDRs for that objective, which is by far the biggest on our list. I expect close to 100,000 inmates to be found in that camp complex alone. Another 200 robots and four PDRs will then help you secure your second phase objective, Theresienstadt, a camp-cum-ghetto near Prague holding approximately 55,000 Jews. Due to the size of those two objectives, you will not have a third phase target assigned to your group.”

Nancy then gave copies of the target files on Auschwitz-Birkenau and Theresienstadt to Peter Stilwell and the members of his ground team. She then pointed at a red dot on the map.

“Second objective: Ravensbrück! The scoutship WALKÜREN will provide air support to me, Otto Skorzeni, Ingrid Weiss, Sylvie Comeau and the First Compagnie d’Infanterie de Marine. We will be supported by 240 combat robots and six PDRs on that objective. Otto, on hitting the ground, you will go with forty combat robots take and hold the secondary camp just off the main camp. That camp, the ‘Jugendschutzlager Uckermark’, is reserved for the detention of young teenage girls. I count on you to not let time to the guards to start killing those girls.”

“You can count on me, Nancy.” Replied firmly the big Austrian. For a consecrated macho man like him, anyone showing violence or cruelty towards a young

girl was beneath contempt. Nancy had actually chosen that particular task for Otto with the hope that it would make it easier for the ex-SS man to fight members of his old service corps. He took his copy of the target files on Ravensbrück, Buchenwald and Flossenburg and joined the other members of his group while Nancy kept briefing the other groups. The commander of the French unit assigned to work with him, Ingrid and Sylvie, a Commandant Kiefer, looked suspiciously at the nametags on their gray Time Patrol uniforms.

“Are you three Germans, by any chance?”

“As a matter of fact, four of us are, or were I should say.” Answered Hanna Reitsch, the pilot of the scoutship WALKÜREN. “Don’t worry, though: we are as bent as you on getting rid of the Nazis. As for Sylvie Comeau besides you, she was French-Canadian. Let’s read our target files while Nancy finishes briefing the others.”

Only half convinced, Kiefer started going through the material inside his file. He found inside a color map of the area around Ravensbrück, a series of very high definition air photos of the camp itself with annotations on them, a fact sheet about the camp and an extract from an operational order concerning the operation they would be executing. He read the last one carefully and found out that one of his platoons, along with Sylvie Comeau and four French nurses, was going to stay behind under the protection of forty robots while he and the rest of the force moved on to their next objective, Buchenwald. Kiefer sifted through the part of the file concerning Buchenwald, then through the part on Flossenburg, where 100 more robots would reinforce their group. Overall, he was surprised at how flimsy the German guard force was for such large camps, but he wasn’t going to complain about that. Looking up from his file, Kiefer saw that Nancy Laplante had joined them and was giving extra directives to Sylvie Comeau and to the pilot and copilot of the scoutship due to support them. Seeing that he was looking at her, Nancy quickly wrapped up her conversation and went to Kiefer, smiling to him.

“Do you have any questions about the plan, Mister Kiefer?”

Seeing him hesitate, she looked intensely at him while her smile faded. She then led him to a deserted corner of the room and spoke in a near whisper.

“Mister, if you want to know, I have full confidence in the loyalty of all the members of the Time Patrol. Those people you will be working with may have been German, but they are now dedicated to the betterment of the whole of Humanity. If you are going to ask how I could know about your doubts, then know that I am a telepath and that I can read minds. Now, do you have any more questions?”

“Uh, no, Brigadier.” Said the somewhat shaken Kiefer. Nancy then smiled again and patted his shoulder.

“Then welcome to the team, mister.”

00:03 (GMT)

Wednesday, May 27, 1942 ‘B’

Scoutship WALKÜREN

800 meters above Ravensbrück concentration camp

The amplified voice of Hanna Reitsch came up on the speakers of the scoutship’s cargo bay as the rear access ramp came down, revealing a patch of dark night sky.

“Heads up, ground team! Be advised that we can hear the sound of intermittent gunfire coming from the camp on our directional microphones. Our robots have not jumped to the camp yet, so this could mean only bad news.”

Nancy, standing near the ramp with Otto Skorzeni and Ingrid Weiss and ready to jump, swore to herself, then spoke in her helmet microphone.

“Hanna, have the robots jump to the camp now. I will jump now as well. Take care of the guard towers then and land to let out the French troops.”

“Got that!”

Heavily loaded with assault rifles and lots of ammunition, Nancy, Otto and Ingrid then ran down the access ramp and jumped into the night, watched by the anxious French soldiers cramming the cargo bay along with Sylvie Comeau’s cargo platform.

Splitting up immediately from Nancy and Ingrid, Otto flew down towards the Uckermark Youth Camp, which was situated apart from but close to the main camp. His helmet thermal camera let him see small flashes of light coming from a corner of the Youth Camp. He swore when he saw them: they were the muzzle flashes from rifles. Then, a series of bright flashes announced the arrival of the combat robots all over the camp area, followed by the noise of a short but very intense salvo of automatic fire from the robots. There was still some shooting going on when Otto landed inside the perimeter of the Youth Camp, his assault rifle ready to fire. He saw dozens of corpses lying besides a long ditch in the area where the initial gunfire had come and ran towards

the ditch. A small form on the ground moved, making him point his weapon instinctively at it. The voice of a young child then cried out in pain.

“Hilfe¹⁹!”

Checking first around him that no live guards were visible around, Otto then crouched besides the moaning girl and quickly examined her. She had been shot in the back but the bullet had seemingly missed her vital organs. Otto took a field dressing out of a uniform pocket and applied it to the girl’s wound, then caressed her hair.

“I have to go now but I will be back, little one. Hang on!”

“Please, don’t...” Said the girl weakly in German.

“I have to, to help the others as well as you. I will be back, I promise.”

As he got to his feet, Otto then realized that the ditch close to him was half filled with the bodies of young girls. Looking at the bodies around the ditch, he understood with horror that the line of corpses nearest to the ditch were more girls who had been executed firing squad-style by the German guards now lying a few paces away. Going to the nearest dead guard, he saw that he wore the uniform of the SS-Totenkopf. Full of rage and disgust, Otto kicked the dead guard hard.

“You worthless piece of shit! Wait until I find one of your comrades alive.”

He then charged towards the nearest inmate block and kicked the door open, weapon at the ready. The long barrack turned out to be empty. Going to the next one, he kicked the door open as well, drawing a concert of frightened screams. Otto felt joy and relief at the sight of the dozens of young girls huddled on the floor, behind their triple bunk beds. He was near tears as he eyed the children cowering around him.

“Don’t be afraid anymore, children: Uncle Otto is here to save you.”

Nancy landed besides the camp headquarters and immediately sent thirty of her robots to lay waste to the SS guards barracks nearby. A SS officer came out of the building at a run as she was about to enter it. Cutting him down with a short burst of rifle fire, Nancy then walked in and methodically went through every room, killing any German she found and wrecking the radio and telephone equipment inside. Her next stop was the camp’s prison, a L-shaped building close to the headquarters building. Six robots were already surrounding it and blocking its exits. Firing one grenade inside through the main door first, Nancy then ran inside, passing through the now wrecked

¹⁹ Hilfe: ‘Help’ in German.

guardroom before crouching at the entrance of the hallway along which the cells opened. She saw a SS guard running away from her near the end of the hallway. Taking a quick aim, she shot him once in the head, then got up and inspected each of the cells one by one, unlocking and throwing open every door. She found a total of seventeen women in the cells, one of them dead and the others in a very poor state. All were naked and had been forced to sleep on the bare dirt floor of their tiny cells. They also bore the marks of severe beatings and floggings over their emaciated bodies. Clenching her teeth, Nancy then spoke in her helmet microphone.

“Sylvie, this is Nancy, over.”

“Go ahead, Nancy.”

“I need you with some help at the prison block now. I have here sixteen women in very bad shape. They should get priority for evacuation, over.”

“I am on my way.”

One of the inmates then walked out shakily from her cell two doors down from Nancy, who ran to her and helped her keep her balance.

“You should save your strength, miss: you are too weak to walk.” Nancy said in French. The woman, while obviously spent physically, looked at her with fiery resolution, answering in heavily accented French.

“Those German bastards couldn’t break me and I will be damned if I don’t get out of here on my own two feet.”

Nancy looked at the tall blonde: despite having been nearly starved to death, the young woman, who was maybe 24 or 25 years old, must have been an athlete in better times. She had wide shoulders and stood about as tall as Nancy but, like her, was also very feminine. Her accent made her a Russian, probably.

“Now that’s what I call spirits.” Nancy said in Russian. “I am Nancy Laplante. What is your name, miss?”

The blonde smiled while she kept walking laboriously towards the prison’s exit.

“So, you are the famous Canadian time traveler. I am Senior Lieutenant Tatiana Korbut, of the Red Army Corps of Transmissions. Who did you bring with you to free us? The British?”

“No! I now work for myself. I lead an organization from the far future called the Time Patrol. We are taking and liberating all the German concentration camps tonight. You may be happy to learn that most of the Nazi leadership, including Hitler, is already in jail or dead and that we have been systematically eradicating the German secret

police and security forces for over three days now. The Luftwaffe is also as good as finished.”

“So many good news at once. Do you want my death from a heart attack? Us Russians are not accustomed to good news piling on in a single day.”

That made Nancy laugh: Tatiana was one spirited young woman with quite a dry sense of humor. Searching in a uniform pocket, she took out an energy bar and presented it to Tatiana, who grabbed it eagerly.

“Eat this: it will give you back some strength. We will stop in the guard room to find something for you to wear: you would not want to give a show to some of the French soldiers I brought with me tonight.”

The Russian, munching slowly on the energy bar and savoring every bit of it, looked down sadly at her ribs sticking out from under her skin and at her once firm breasts, now nearly flat.

“I was once the most sought-after woman in my regiment. Now, I couldn’t attract the eyes of anything but vultures.”

“Tatiana, you will be again beautiful, I promise you that. We will take good care of you and of the others.”

“Thanks!” Replied the Russian, more moved than she wanted to show. “I will be in your debt forever for this. I don’t know how I will ever repay you.”

“Simple, Tatiana: get well. It will be our best reward.”

“You talk about your people but I don’t know what kind of people you lead. Are they Canadian?”

“A handful of them are, Tatiana. My people actually are from many nationalities and backgrounds. Most of my technicians and scientists are from the 34th century, while my field agents are from the 20th and 21st centuries. I even have a few Russians in my organization.”

“You will have to present me to them one day, Nancy.”

That gave an idea to Nancy, who looked intently in the blue eyes of the tall Russian.

“I will, Tatiana. In fact, you could stay with us if you wish so: you are the kind of person I would gladly enroll in my Time Patrol any time. The war will be soon over and it would be a shame to return you to a boring life in some state manufacture or, worse, to see you sent to a Gulag in Siberia by the NKVD as a ‘suspected traitor’ because you let yourself be captured.”

"I didn't let myself be captured!" Protested angrily Tatiana. "I stayed behind in order to finish destroying our unit's codes. Those German bastards tortured me for two days to make me tell them what I knew about the codes."

Nancy stopped then, with Tatiana still using her as a crutch, and gave her a sad look.

"I don't doubt your courage for one second, Tatiana, but let's not kid each other: you know very well how quick those NKVD bastards are at accusing others of cowardice while they themselves stay in the rear ranks, ready to shoot in the back any Soviet soldier who does not charge forward with enough gusto. You deserve so much better than to put your life back at the mercy of the NKVD, Tatiana. I offer you a full, exciting life in the company of some exceptional people. Think well about this."

"I will." Said Tatiana, now deep in thoughts. They soon arrived at what was left of the guardroom, which had been all but blown to bits by Nancy's grenade. Searching through the debris, Nancy found a number of folded prisoners' gowns in the remains of a closet and gave one to Tatiana.

"Take this but wait before putting it on."

"Why? You want me to give a show to your French friends?"

"Not at all, Tatiana: I will heal you first. In 1941, I was gifted with a few powers, including that of healing. Please don't laugh: I am very serious about this."

Tatiana was nearly contemptuous as she looked with total incredulity at Nancy.

"Gifted by whom? And what else should I know about you?"

"I will show you. Please don't move."

Tatiana nearly recoiled with surprise when Nancy's hands started glowing as they touched her bruised breasts, which bore whip marks. A marvelous, soothing sensation overtook Tatiana, who stopped resisting and looked in awe at Nancy as the Canadian moved her hands in succession to various parts of the Russian's body, healing the nasty bruises and burns covering it in less than two minutes. Tatiana, now feeling none of the constant pain that had dodged her for weeks, was about to warmly thank her when she heard a strangled exclamation in French coming from the main entrance.

"Mon Dieu!"

Looking like Nancy in that direction, Tatiana saw another young woman wearing the same gray uniform as her savior, plus two French Army nurses and over six French soldiers, all looking at her. Only the Time Patrol woman didn't seem stunned like the French were. Nancy ignored the lot and smiled to Tatiana.

"Time to get dressed, friend."

She then went to Sylvie Comeau, who was already heading towards the cells.

“Tatiana here will stay with us after this. Do you have your ambulances now?”

“They were just dropped off by the HERMES. We will establish our first aid station besides the camp kitchen, which is next door.”

“Excellent! I will go check how things are going in the rest of the camp. Tatiana, I will ask you to stay besides the kitchen until this operation here is completed.”

“Understood.”

Nancy then walked out into the night, her weapon again at the ready. Firing was now very sporadic and she could see long columns of liberated inmates being led out of the nearest barracks by French soldiers. She immediately activated her helmet radio.

“Ingrid, this is Nancy. Why are the inmates being marched out of their blocks? It is still not totally safe outside.”

“I know, Nancy, but we have to: the Germans had been boarding shut the windows of the blocks and had started to douse some of them with gasoline, obviously planning to burn the inmates alive inside their blocks. We have to evacuate those blocks already splashed with gasoline, in case a spark starts a flash fire.”

“I see! Good call on that one, Ingrid. How is it going apart of that?”

Nancy detected some contained anger in Ingrid’s voice as she answered her.

“We were unfortunately too late for many of the inmates, Nancy. All the male inmates of the men’s sub-camp were already dead when I arrived there. Over a thousand men have been summarily shot over there. Also, I found that all the sick inmates in the camp’s so-called infirmary were killed by lethal injection.”

“The bastards!” Raged Nancy. “Have you found the German medical staff?”

“Yes! They are now dead, including the camp doctor, Herta Oberheuser. I caught them as they were burning compromising medical files.”

“Well done, Ingrid. Out to you. Otto, how is the situation at the Youth Camp?”

The Austrian’s voice had a haunted quality to it when he answered back on the radio.

“I was too late for about sixty of the girls, Nancy. The guards were executing them as I landed. I have about 450 survivors with me, including a young girl who needs immediate treatment for a bullet wound. Could you come, over?”

“I’m on my way. Switch on your helmet light to guide me to her.”

“It is done. Please hurry, Nancy.”

Without taking the time to answer, Nancy activated her armor’s integrated gravity drive system and flew off the ground, heading at top speed towards the Youth Camp. She

arrived there just over a minute later, landing besides a ditch and near Otto, who was crouching over one of the small bodies lying on the ground. Nancy herself crouched and quickly inspected the wounded girl with the combined light from their two helmet lamps. Not wasting time, she then applied her hands on the girl and concentrated, healing her in minutes. Otto then cautiously, tenderly took the child in his arms and hugged her. Nancy could have sworn that the Austrian was crying, but Otto would never acknowledge that and commenting on it now would have been inappropriate. Nancy patted his arm instead.

"I will send a few captured trucks with French soldiers to pick up and bring the girls to the main camp in preparation for their evacuation. Are there any German guards left around?"

"None! I found the last of the bastards hiding in the toilets of the camp. I drowned him in shit."

Nancy was silent for a moment, measuring the dept of Otto's emotions, then nodded her head.

"Nice job, Otto. I am proud to have you with me tonight."

"Thanks, Nancy...for opening my eyes."

"And thank you for being a decent man, Otto." She replied softly before flying off towards the main camp.

02:11 (Warsaw Time)

Local Time Patrol command center

Gesia Street, Warsaw Jewish Ghetto

Poland

"What is it, Mister Brunet?" Asked sleepily Shimon Huberband as he entered the second floor command center. One of the two Jewish fighters who stayed in the Time Patrol command post to act as couriers inside the Ghetto had just awakened him in his apartment, located in the building just across the rear courtyard. Fernand Brunet, himself looking tired, managed a weak smile.

"You remember about what I told you yesterday evening, about needing your community's help in helping other Jews? Well, the time for that has arrived. I am sorry that we could not tell you anything more precise before, in order to keep the Germans from learning about our plans of action, but the Time Patrol has initiated one hour ago a

plan to take control of all the German concentration and extermination camps in Europe. We have already taken eight camps and liberated their inmates. We are now about to jump to eight more camps to take them, but we have over 150,000 ex-inmates to evacuate to safety and to care for. Many of them will be brought to England but we plan to send here the Polish Jews found in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, Sobibor, Belzec and Dachau and, later on, those found in Lublin, Treblinka and Chelmno. Adequate supplies of food and medicine will be sent with them but what we need are volunteers, by the hundreds, to help care for those poor souls. I was thinking that Mister Ringelblum could have his network of self-help organizations take care of findings such volunteers, along with temporary shelters for the camp survivors.”

For a moment, Fernand thought that Huberband was going to have a heart attack. The rabbi finally overcame the emotions that had nearly struck him down and shook Fernand’s hand vigorously.

“My friend, you don’t know how much of a gift to God you have just made. You can count on the full support of our community.”

“Then, you can tell Mister Ringelblum that a first shipload of about 600 survivors, along with supplies to care for them, will arrive in one hour in Muranowski Square. There will be many more after those.”

“Then I must hurry and go inform Emanuel.” Said Huberband before looking at the Jewish fighter who had fetched him. “Will you escort me, Chaim?”

“Of course, sir!” Replied the young man before shouldering his captured German Mauser rifle and following the rabbi outside. The single Jewish fighter left in the command post, a pretty young woman with a fiery character named Liliana Edelman, looked at the camera pictures visible on the screens of Mona Zirel’s portable workstation.

“Mister Brunet, do you know if George is alright?”

Fernand hid a smile as he looked at the Jewish teenager. Liliana and George Townsend had been developing with remarkable speed a mutual interest into each other in the last two days.

“I spoke with him on the radio less than fifteen minutes ago, Liliana. He was fine then and was completing the capture of the extermination camp in Sobibor, but I can have Mona here show you live the view from his helmet camera, if you would like that.”

“You could do that?”

"It's easy enough: we have continuous contacts with all our agents presently involved in Operation MERCY. Mona, please put on George's view on your top left secondary screen."

"Coming up!" Replied the giant engineer, playing a few seconds with her controls before the moving picture from a helmet camera appeared on one of her three secondary screens. She then pulled up a chair so that Liliana could sit and watch comfortably. Fernand used that period of relative calm to call Farah Tolkonen 'A' in Northolt and to pass on the willingness of the Warsaw Jews to help in caring for camp survivors. Once that was done, he called by old-style telephone the head of the Polish underground secret army, General Grot-Rowecki. After going through one transfer and one junior officer, the Polish general answered in a polite but guarded tone: while the Polish resistance was most thankful for the Time Patrol having all but booted the Germans out of Warsaw, tensions had been starting to appear about the alleged preferential treatment the Jews of Warsaw were getting from the Time Patrol, compared to the help given to non-Jewish Polish citizens. Brunet had been trying hard to dispel these allegations, but there was apparently a lot of bad blood between Jews and Catholics in Warsaw as well as in the rest of Poland, much of it dating back from quite a long time. Still, Brunet had not given up on reconciling the two groups.

"General Grot-Rowecki, I have some good news to pass on..."

Brunet then took a few minutes to tell the Pole about Operation MERCY and about the impending arrival of Polish survivors from German camps. Grot-Rowecki was quiet for a few seconds, apparently stunned by the news.

"And you have been pulling all this off without a single casualty to your forces?"

"Up to now, yes, General. I am crossing my fingers, though: war can never be without risks. The reason I called is that many of the survivors that will be brought to Warsaw tonight will be catholic Poles who will need help and assistance in order to be brought back to health. While the Jews of the Ghetto have already accepted to assist the Jewish survivors, I will need someone from your side with enough resources in terms of transportation, shelter and medical care to assist the Catholic survivors. A ship with the first shipment of survivors should arrive in about an hour in Muranowski Square, at the northeast edge of the Ghetto. We will have some reserves of food that we will distribute to the survivors on arrival. One of my concerns is that some people without scruples or conscience could attempt to rob those sick and weak people of their donated food."

“Do not worry about that anymore, Mister Brunet: I will make sure that the people who will greet these survivors are incorruptible ones. From which camps will these survivors come?”

“The catholic Poles will come mainly from Auschwitz-Birkenau, Lublin and Ravensbrück, while the Jews will come mostly from Majdanek, Chelmno, Sobibor, Treblinka, Belzec, Auschwitz-Birkenau and Dachau. Thank you for your cooperation, General. May I hope to see you tonight at Muranowski Square?”

“You think that I’m going to miss seeing the landing of one of your spaceships? Of course I will be there.”

The Pole’s tone then changed, as if he was afraid to be overheard.

“Uh, if we are going to meet tonight, could we then take some time to discuss the situation concerning the Soviets?”

“General, I believe that I already know what you are going to ask. I can tell you two things right now: first, the Soviets will not be permitted to set foot again in Poland, especially when considering what they did at Katyn; and, second, Stalin will not keep his head on his shoulders for very long. That comes from Nancy Laplante, who has a score to settle with Stalin.”

Brunet could nearly hear Grot-Rowecki gloat at the end of the telephone now.

“My friend, you have just truly made my day. See you in one hour!”

Brunet put the receiver down and, leaving the small lounge where the telephone stood on a corner table, returned into the room housing his command post proper. His satisfied smile faded at the sight of Mona Zirel’s concerned look.

“What’s wrong, Mona?”

“We just had our first combat casualty: Tom Allen was seriously wounded in Birkenau and is now onboard the KRONOS for medical treatment.”

“How did it happen?” Asked Fernand gravely. Mona paused for a moment, apparently affected seriously by Tom’s misfortune.

“Tom was doing house-clearing in the prison block of Birkenau, where the restricted space precluded the use of his electro-magnetic shield, when a hidden German threw a grenade at him. He rolled partly out of the way but still got multiple shrapnel wounds to his legs. I was told that he should recover fully within a week with advanced care. Of course, Nancy will go heal him as soon as she is finished with her own target list.”

“Did someone get that German?”

“Oh yes! Twenty robots reduced the prison block to rubble once Tom was safely pulled out of there. On a different subject now, Fernand, the BABYLON is due to arrive in fifteen minutes to unload some extra food supplies for the Ghetto and the camp survivors. Farah also scrapped the bottom of the drawers and is sending us a small group that will help administratively process the survivors. They will also be on the BABYLON.”

“Hell, we have been scrapping the bottom of the drawers from the start, Mona. I still can't believe all that we accomplished with so few people. Anyway, I suppose that I better go to Muranowski Square now. I will take Natia with me.”

Going down the stairs to the next floor, where their small medical team was installed, Fernand found Natia Mindicor combating the boredom of her night shift by watching the recording of some 34th century musical show on a holographic viewer. The young giant woman looked questioningly at him.

“What's up, Fernand?”

“The BABYLON is due in soon to bring extra food supplies and an administrative support team from Northolt. The HERMES will follow in about fifty minutes with a first load of Polish survivors from the German concentration camps. You and I will have a busy night.”

Natia immediately stopped the recording and got up to put on her helmet and body armor. She then followed Fernand downstairs to the covered courtyard passage, where they took place in one of their three time scooters. With the combat robots on guard there opening the gate doors for them, they soon flew off towards Muranowski Square, arriving there a minute later. Fernand landed his small machine besides a large modular shelter set up near a row of cargo containers lined up along the perimeter wall of the Ghetto. Those containers were used to store the food supplies sent from Northolt and Fernand expected that the BABYLON would drop off quite a few more of them. He had to recognize that Boran Kern was doing an exemplary job of acquiring foodstuff by the hundreds of tons every day. That steady supply of extra food was doing a huge difference these days for the people of the Ghetto, who were now able to slowly recover from months of starvation. Kern had even been able to go back to 3386 'A' at least once, to buy there much needed advanced medical supplies and to top up their reserves of isotopic fuel for their ships. As he had said himself candidly to Fernand yesterday, who in the Global Council would refuse to sell humanitarian supplies to someone who was both armed and ready to pay cash with pure gold? Besides, public opinion in the

Global Council had started to shift radically in favor of the Time Patrol, with the existing High Council looking increasingly about to be voted out of office via a soon-to-be-held popular referendum.

Going to the shelter, which was guarded like the containers by a squad of combat robots, Fernand and Natia switched on the portable workstation inside and the series of powerful light beacons that ringed the square to facilitate landings. It didn't take long before people started appearing at the windows and balconies of the buildings surrounding the square: even at night, a ship's landing always attracted a number of fascinated onlookers, especially children. Fernand didn't mind that, as long as a crowd didn't start a stampede in the middle of the landing area. This coming landing was probably going to cause some sensation: apart of being bigger and much slicker-looking than the HERMES or the light shuttlecraft that had landed here up to now, the BABYLON bore a name that had a powerful resonance in the history of the Jewish people, Babylon being where the population of ancient Jerusalem had been deported to in the sixth century B.C.E. after the destruction of their city and of their sacred temple.

Being probably aware of that historical fact, Amelia Earhart piloted the BABYLON to a smooth landing five minutes later with all the ship's navigational lights on. Fernand, watching from the periphery of the landing zone, thought about the irony that Amelia had actually been a Babylonian woman in one of her past incarnations. The big rear access ramp lowered open soon after landing, letting out first a group of nine people, all carrying a kit bag and with six of them each carrying as well a portable workstation. Fernand and Natia met the group at the foot of the access ramp and were not a little surprised by its composition. Jan Bella actually led the group, followed by Dina Mishtar, Lynda Crawford, Indira Saduranidrasekar, Misha Godunov, Gunther Braunig and Miriam of Magdala. At the end of the line were Baran Mishtar and Carolyn Anderson, both thirteen years old and wearing proudly their uniforms of cadets of the Time Patrol. Fernand was grinning as he shook hands with Jan Bella.

"I have to say that I wasn't expecting top-flight scientists, a mother and a couple of cadets for this job, Doctor Bella. I have to warn you that the living conditions here are quite Spartan."

"That's alright with me." Replied jovially the Chief Historian of the Time Patrol. "It will give me a chance to see firsthand another historical event. By the way, Miss Lori

Kano is also with us. She will come down from the bridge in a few minutes, when she will be finished recording the ongoing operations in Auschwitz-Birkenau. But let's get out of the way now, before the robotic forklifts trample us with their loads."

As they moved off to one side of the access ramp, Fernand approached Miriam of Magdala and discreetly spoke to her.

"Why did you come here, Miriam? You should have stayed at our secret base to care for your infant son."

The young Galilean woman, dressed in a traditional first century Jewish robe, looked gravely at him.

"How could I stay in our base and not help when my people is suffering so much here? Besides, Margaret MacDonald is taking good care of David and of little Steve Crawford."

"As you wish, Miriam. I will show you and the others your accommodations once we have received the camp survivors. In the meantime, you can assist Natia with the distribution of the food supplies."

"That will be most satisfactory, Fernand."

They then moved further away, as the first heavy robotic forklift went down the ramp with a fifty-foot container in its grip. Going to the landing area's reception shelter, Fernand then held a quick meeting with Jan Bella and Natia Mindicor. Jan first handed a data chip to Natia, who was the official supply officer for the Warsaw outpost.

"Here is the electronic manifest of the content of the eighteen containers of supplies you will receive now."

"Eighteen containers? Wow! Mister Kern really worked his butt off on this one."

"Actually, those containers were loaded directly in New Lake City, Natia: those supplies are a humanitarian donation from the Global Council. It seems that Tomi Kern, Boran's wife, is playing all the right political tunes there. We were promised more supplies in the near future. The people in New Lake City were careful in their choice of foodstuff, so you won't end up with the embarrassment of giving away pork products to starving Jewish camp survivors. One of the containers is full of wool blankets, while another one contains medical supplies and baby food. Also, you have two refrigerated containers for dairy and meat products. Doctor Keiko Miramoto has already gone through the manifest and has made a suggested list of items for individual food parcels. A pallet that will be unloaded last has boxes full of heavy-duty plastic bags of various sizes that you will be able to use to make the individual parcels."

“Then, I better get busy. Can I use some people of your group to help me prepare the parcels?”

“Sure! We are here to help, after all. Take Miriam, Baran and Carolyn.”

As Natia walked away, Jan turned to face Fernand.

“Since you head the operation in Warsaw, I might as well give you some extra information. If you follow the suggested parcel list made by Doctor Miramoto, you should have enough supplies to feed well over 550,000 persons for a day. When I mean well, I mean as per Global Council standards.”

“Which are positively luxurious by local standards. We will make a lot of happy people today.”

“That is the plan, Fernand. On another matter, Farah Tolkonen is getting worried about the psychological impact of Operation MERCY on our members, especially on the field agents doing the actual camp cleanup work. They have been seeing unspeakable horrors for hours now and some are starting to show signs of mental distress. Frankly, I can't blame them one bit: I personally could not have stomached even a bit of what they had to go through up to now, and they still have a lot of work ahead of them. That was one of the reasons why Farah allowed Lynda Crawford to come here, so that Jack can have the support of his wife when he returns here from his mission.”

“That will be very appreciated, Jan.” Said somberly Fernand. “In all honesty, I don't think that I will be the same man after this. I never thought that some people would be capable of the level of cruelty I have witnessed here against the Jews of the Ghetto. How are our German field agents reacting to these horrors?”

Jan gave him a nearly despondent look at that question.

“Fernand, you know as well as me how good and decent our German agents are. Seeing the pain and shame they feel towards the Nazi atrocities is nearly painful to me. Some, like Otto Skorzeni and Hanna Reitsch, are now going through a deep identity crisis and will need some time to psychologically recover from this ordeal. Otto in particular is concerning Farah: he is now a man full of rage and hatred. There is also another serious case for concern: Nancy.”

“How so?” Asked Fernand, frankly surprised. “Nancy is mentally about the strongest person I have ever known.”

“But she is also a telepath. What the others only see, she can also feel in her head. Can you imagine what it is like to hear the mental screams for help of tens of thousands of men, women and children. Farah is afraid that Nancy could be dodged by

nightmares for a long time after this operation. Our field agents will definitely need a good period of rest and rehabilitation once this is over.”

As both stood silent, reflecting on this, Lori Kano showed up in the tent. Dressed in a gray Time Patrol uniform and wearing body armor, she had her GNN head-mounted camera and microphone unit fixed to her Time Patrol helmet. Fernand couldn't help notice how the normally jovial reporter now looked tired and nearly depressed. She was obviously as much affected by the latest events as the members of the Time Patrol were. She did manage a polite smile to Fernand.

“Hello, Mister Brunet. How are things going in Warsaw?”

“Much better now than a few days ago, Miss Kano. Did you cover our operations at one of the German camps?”

Any pretense at smiling then faded from her smooth face.

“Yes, I did. I spent one hour in Ravensbrück, which was probably the longest hour of my life. I don't know if I will release my footage from that camp to GNN: some of the scenes would be simply intolerable to Global Council viewers.”

“Then, reserve that footage for the members of the High Council, so they can see the kind of criminals we in the Time Patrol are. I bet that some of these assholes will object to us taking justice into our hands.”

“You would probably win your bet, mister. Are we expecting some of the local community leaders here tonight?”

“We are expecting both Jewish and Polish representatives soon. Ah, talking of the devil, here is Mister Emanuel Ringelblum, one of the leaders of the Ghetto community, along with Rabbi Shimon Huberband.”

The two Polish Jews hesitated at the sight of Jan Bella and Lori Kano, with Huberband looking questioningly at Fernand.

“I hope that we are not interrupting some sort of meeting, Mister Brunet?” He asked in Yiddish. Fernand shook his head.

“Not at all, Rabbi. Does your friend speak English, French or German? I am afraid that my two friends here do not speak either Yiddish or Polish.”

“I do speak a fair French, Mister Brunet.” Answered Emanuel Ringelblum, a man in his early forties with a clean-shaven face. “May I say that your spaceship is quite impressive? It also has an interesting choice of name, especially for a historian like me.”

"You are a historian?" Said Jan Bella, his face lighting up while he presented one hand. "Then we will have to have some serious conversation after this. I am Jan Bella, Chief Historian of the Time Patrol."

A spark of interest appeared in Ringelblum's eyes.

"A fellow historian, from the future? I will gladly spend a few evenings talking with you. First, though, we have to discuss how to welcome our unfortunate compatriots."

"You are right, Mister Ringelblum. May I present you Miss Lori Kano, reporter at Global News Network, who came from the year 3386 to cover the events of this war?" Both Jews looked up with admiration at the beautiful giant, with Ringelblum shaking hands with her.

"A reporter from the future? We will..."

An angry exchange of words in Polish just outside the tent then cut him off, making Fernand Brunet run outside. What he found was Zivia Lubetkin and Mordecai Anielewicz, armed with rifles pointed at three men, one of which was General Grot-Rowecki, of the Polish Home Army.

"Everyone will calm down, now! Zivia, Mordecai, lower your rifles immediately before I stun you both."

The two Jewish fighters, still looking angrily at the Poles, lowered their weapons after a short hesitation. To play it safe, Fernand interposed himself, staring down severely at Zivia.

"I invited General Grot-Rowecki to come here. Why did you threaten him?"

"Because he has no business here." Replied Zivia, clearly unrepentant. "The Home Army never did a thing for us. Yet, they show up the minute we have something they can steal."

"As I said, they are here on my invitation. Many of the survivors that will be returned here from Nazi camps are catholic Poles and I asked General Grot-Rowecki for assistance into taking charge and caring for those survivors. Besides, all of Warsaw is open to all of the Poles now, Catholics and Jews alike. If the General wishes to visit the Ghetto, then he is entirely in his right to do so."

"That's fine in theory, Mister Brunet," replied Zivia, "but they don't put it in practice themselves. Nearly all of our people who tried to return to the apartments or houses they owned before being forced by the Germans to move to the Ghetto were turned back by the Poles who now occupy them."

Fernand, not liking this piece of news one bit, looked at Grot-Rowecki questioningly.

“Would you know something about this, General?”

The Polish general sighed in exasperation before answering him.

“It is true that many Poles refused to give back apartments and houses to Jews who previously lived there, but those Poles paid to live there. There is still a severe shortage of accommodations in Warsaw and there was no sense in leaving thousands of flats empty. So our people applied to the municipal authorities to occupy them and paid a substantial rent or even bought them outright in order to live in them. Now, they are asked to vacate them without any compensation and without alternate accommodations being available. Can you blame them for refusing to move out? Besides, many of the houses of the Ghetto belonged to catholic Poles before the Germans started cramming the Jews in here. When will those Poles get their houses back?”

“You think that this was our choice?” Cut in Mordecai Anielewicz. “We...”

“Mordecai, wait your turn!” Said firmly Fernand, who then looked again at Grot-Rowecki. “General, to whom did those catholic Poles pay their rents or gave their money to buy houses?”

“To the municipal authorities of course, since the Germans seized those flats and houses when they evicted the Jews from them. But the Germans fled with the money and the municipal authorities are now left with their hands empty.”

“I see! What if the catholic Poles living in ex-Jewish houses were to be compensated financially? Couldn't they then return to their previous residences?”

Grot-Rowecki hesitated for a moment, as he thought about what he knew of the accommodations situation in Warsaw.

“I suppose that some would, but many houses in Warsaw were destroyed by the Germans and there is still an overall deficit of accommodations. Besides, where would the Jews find the money to buy back their houses? They have barely anything left in their possession right now, save for the clothes on their backs.”

“The Time Patrol might help in this matter.” Said calmly Fernand. “We do have access to important gold reserves. If I am not mistaken, General, many of the Poles who moved to Warsaw since the start of the German occupation did so because the Germans forced them to come work in their armament industries, correct?”

“That is true, Mister Brunet. In those cases, I could push for them to return to their original villages and towns, once they are financially compensated and once their original homes are found to be still in living conditions.”

“Then, let’s start with that. It will be a slow process but it will be better than the present chaos.”

Emanuel Ringelblum, who had been listening to the exchange like the others in the tent, then approached Fernand and touched his shoulder.

“Mister Brunet, could I have a private word with you for a second?”

“Uh, sure!” Replied Fernand before looking at Zivia and Mordecai. “Try to stay polite while I speak with Mister Ringelblum, okay?”

“Okay!” Said reluctantly Zivia. Fernand then followed Ringelblum to the corner of the nearest container, well out of earshot of the others.

“What is it, Mister Ringelblum?”

“First, I wanted to thank you for your generous offer to help financially my people to gain back their houses. The war has however caused a lot of frictions between Jews and Catholics in Poland, frictions that already existed to a significant degree before the war. Many of our people would actually prefer to emigrate to Palestine if given a chance to do so. Do you think that your Time Patrol could help them in this after the war?”

Fernand was silent for a while, his face somber. He then answered slowly in a grave voice.

“Mister Ringelblum, the subject of Palestine is fraught with long term political consequences of a gravity you could not know about. Since we come from the future, we have seen what an uncontrolled Jewish immigration to Palestine will cause: basically, over seventy years of wars and suffering in the Middle East. Nancy Laplante happens to be an expert on the subject and I would not dare make any promises about this before I could speak with her and get her opinion. Then, she would still need to reach an agreement with both the British and the Jordanian King, who share control of Palestine, before anything could be done. I however promise you that your request will be passed on to her as soon as the present crisis is over with.”

“Then please impress on her that this is no trivial matter for us. Right now, what my people need desperately as much as food is hope, hope for a better life in a land of their own.”

Fernand swallowed hard and stared into Ringelblum’s eyes.

“Mister, you won’t find a person more concerned about the fate of the Jewish people than Nancy Laplante. I suppose that you heard about us in the Time Patrol being able to remember our past incarnations?”

"I heard about it. A truly intriguing concept but one I fail to see the relevance here."

"Oh, it is very relevant to this problem, I assure you. In one of her past lives, Nancy Laplante's spirit was that of Sarai of Ur, wife of the Patriarch Abraham. She also lived through three more lives as a woman in Palestine, including one as a Jew."

Ringelblum was speechless for a moment, deeply shaken by Brunet's revelations.

"Laplante, the wife of Abraham? Then, she is the matriarch of all the Jews."

"Put simply, yes! As for giving hope to your community, I will suggest something to Nancy. Now, shall we take care of more immediate concerns?"

"By all means, Mister Brunet. Sarai of Ur... The others won't believe this."

By the time all the containers and pallets had been taken out of the BABYLON twenty minutes later, over a thousand Jewish residents of the Ghetto had arrived and stood along the periphery of the square. Over twenty trucks had also arrived from other parts of Warsaw, all commandeered by the Polish Home Army. Fernand Brunet nodded in approval when he saw who General Grot-Rowecki had selected to help the incoming catholic Polish survivors: over sixty priests and nuns escorted by armed Polish fighters had arrived with the trucks. As soon as the BABYLON cautiously lifted off and left, the heavy cargo shuttle HERMES landed in its place, its rear cargo ramp lowering nearly immediately upon landing: the crew was on a tight schedule, with many more survivors to be transported to safety. Fernand Brunet, followed by Rabbi Huberband and a Polish Home Army officer, immediately met the occupants of the cargo hold at the foot of the access ramp and shouted in Polish.

"PLEASE LISTEN TO ME! THE JEWISH EX-INMATES WILL COME OUT IN A LINE AND WILL FOLLOW RABBI HUBERBAND TO MY LEFT. THE CATHOLIC POLES WILL FOLLOW CAPTAIN TZERNICKI TO MY RIGHT."

With a number of Jews and Poles to help guide the weak survivors towards the registration and food distribution points, the process of handling the 632 ex-camp inmates started in earnest. The HERMES lifted off as soon as its cargo hold was emptied of its occupants and left to pick up more survivors. It came back with 648 more survivors from Auschwitz-Birkenau half a hour later, as some of the people from the first load were still being processed. By then, dozens of Polish nuns and of Jewish women had volunteered to help the overwhelmed Time Patrol team preparing the individual food parcels given to each of the camp survivors. Those food parcels made a huge

difference in term of morale boosters for the emaciated ex-inmates, who held tightly to their precious bags, which held more food than what they got in a month in the German camps. Lori Kano, who was filming and commenting the whole process, broke in hysterical tears at one point, when a group of over a hundred very young, nearly skeletal orphaned children got off the HERMES. Miriam of Magdala, herself in tears, had to escort Lori inside the landing point control shelter to help console her. After fifteen minutes, Fernand had to escort the deeply disturbed reporter to the Gesia Street Time Patrol command post, so that Farah Tolkonen 'B' could treat and sedate her.

The hours went by quickly, with the volunteers and community representatives working non-stop through the night and the early morning with the members of the Time Patrol to handle the apparently endless flow of camp survivors. By noon, after processing over 12,000 men, women and children and with more still coming, Fernand Brunet decided in common accord with General Grot-Rowecki and the Jewish community representatives to call in more help to replace the exhausted volunteers. They then grimly went on with the task at hand. One hour later, the news came that young Martha Pfalz had been killed while helping to liberate the camp in Theresienstadt.

23:35 (Honolulu time)

Tuesday, May 26, 1942 'B'

Parking apron, Hickam Field

Hawaii

Bill Conway, escorting an excited young Navy Intelligence officer, was about to climb up the rear access ramp of the scoutship BRITANNIA when Doug Wilson and Elizabeth Windsor blocked his path, looking severely at him.

"Where is Ensign Kawena?" Asked abruptly Doug Wilson to Conway. The American, even though he didn't like the role assigned to him by his superiors, shrugged and gave his prepared lie.

"She fell sick and had to be replaced. This is Lieutenant Smithers, from the J.I.C.. He was designated to take Jenny's place and speaks a fair Japanese."

"Mister Smithers is not coming on board this scoutship and neither are you, Mister Conway. The mission for tonight has been scrubbed off."

"But, why?"

That was when Doug Wilson let out his anger, snapping at Conway.

“Why? Because of your treachery and of your superiors’ stupidity, that’s why! When Jenny left us this morning, we attached a spy probe to her, suspecting some possible foul play concerning her. That probe reported in half a hour ago. We saw her arrest by your MPs and the way she was treated in jail since. DID YOU KNOW THAT YOUR FUCKING MPs SLAPPED HER AROUND AND USED MEN TO STRIP-SEARCH HER? AND ALL THIS SIMPLY BECAUSE SHE TOLD US ABOUT HER MOTHER. WHAT GENIUS ON YOUR SIDE DECIDED THAT THIS CONSTITUTED GROUND FOR ATTEMPTED DESERTION?”

“But...I...I had nothing to do with all that.”

“YOU REPORTED HER CONVERSATION WITH US, WHICH WAS ENOUGH TO START THIS WHOLE DISGRACE. YOU AND YOUR FRIEND WILL RETURN TO THE J.I.C. AND TELL YOUR COMMANDER THAT WE WANT JENNY KAWENA HERE WITHIN ONE HOUR.”

“Now, who the hell do you think you are?” Protested Lieutenant Smithers. “Ensign Kawena belongs to the United States Navy, not to your Time Patrol.”

Conway thought for a moment that Wilson was going to strike Smithers.

“If you really considered her part of your navy, then you would not have treated her like a pariah from the start. Right now, our agents have just spent half a day freeing inmates from German concentration camps all over Europe and are one pissed off bunch, believe me. Nancy Laplante nearly flew off her hinge when she was told by us ten minutes ago about your commander’s decision to send Jenny Kawena to the Manzanar detention camp for so-called disloyalty, all that without any hearing or legal assistance provided to Jenny. If Jenny is not here in one hour, we will get her ourselves by any means necessary. And don’t try to take her away from Pearl Harbor: we know exactly where she is at any time.”

Smithers was about to protest further but was stopped by Conway, who held his arm.

“Come with me, Lieutenant: there is no point in arguing further here. Let’s go back to the J.I.C..”

Doug and Elizabeth watched the two Americans get back in the jeep they had come in and speed away. Doug then activated his helmet radio.

“Chief Engineer Turok, this is Doug Wilson, over.”

“Turok here, over.”

“Chief, be advised that the Americans may become hostile to us. Did you get Nancy’s directive to pack up your equipment and supplies for pickup by the GILGAMESH?”

“I spoke with her a few minutes ago, Doug. Since all our supplies are either on pallets or in containers, we will be able to clear out of here in less than half a hour once the GILGAMESH shows up, which should be soon. The scoutship TEEN TEAM will be put inside the GILGAMESH for the trip to Northolt.”

“Excellent! Proceed on your own once the GILGAMESH shows up. Over and out to you. Lakshmi, this is Doug, over!”

“Lakshmi here! Go ahead!”

“Lakshmi, I am going to pay a short visit to Admiral Nimitz to notify him of our incoming departure. Pack up your workstation and return to Hickam Field now.”

“Understood! Be advised that the Americans around me are starting to act suspiciously.”

“Be ready to defend yourself: I’m sending you four robots now.” Replied Doug urgently. “Units 245 to 248, report immediately to Cadet Saduranidrasekar to provide her close protection. You are authorized to use only your stun rifles. Acknowledge!”

The four robots answered him immediately, by order of unit number. Doug then ordered all the other combat robots present in Hickam Field to establish a protective cordon around the hangar and parking apron used by the Time Patrol. Next, he turned to face his copilot.

“Elizabeth, I want you to monitor directly what is happening to Jenny. If she is about to be either brutalized or threatened, then you can bring her here via a transit probe. If she is moved out of her cell, advise me immediately.”

“Got it!”

Doug shook his head in disbelief as Elizabeth returned inside the cargo hold. He would never have thought until today that racism could create so much stupidity and meanness. Now he knew. His next move was to go to the time scooter parked inside the cargo hold. Sitting at the controls, he flew out of the scoutship and headed at low altitude towards the Pacific Fleet headquarters, arriving there in a mere four minutes. Young Lakshmi Saduranidrasekar was loading her equipment in her own time scooter, closely surrounded by four combat robots, when Doug landed his scooter near hers. The young Indian gave him a warning look.

“Be careful, Doug: the Americans are quite nervous right now.”

"I will be careful, Lakshmi. I don't think that they are stupid to the point of attacking us overtly, though. Admiral Nimitz is still a decent man, after all."

Doug then closed the canopy of his scooter and locked it before climbing the steps of the headquarters' main entrance. Two armed Marines guarding the doors blocked his path, with the corporal in charge addressing him politely.

"Excuse me, sir, but we have orders to escort at all times the members of the Time Patrol visiting the headquarters. What is the goal of your visit, sir?"

"I am here to bring a verbal message to Admiral Nimitz, Corporal. May I?"

"One moment, sir. I will call up an escort for you."

The corporal then went inside briefly, probably to make a telephone call. He was back less than two minutes later with an armed navy junior officer who saluted Doug.

"If you may follow me, sir."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

The young officer didn't say another word during the walk to the admiral's office. The navy and army personnel they met all looked at Doug with newfound suspicion. Even the admiral's secretary looked crossly at him before letting him in Nimitz' office. Admiral Nimitz was waiting in front of the bay windows of his office, looking outside. Doug saluted him when he turned around. Nimitz returned the salute, then looked critically at him.

"Mister Wilson, I was just informed about the regrettable incident concerning Ensign Kawena. Isn't the Time Patrol overreacting to this?"

"No, sir! I would say that we actually think the exact contrary, Admiral. Ensign Kawena, despite having been treated shabbily in the past, was still a loyal officer of your country's navy. Yet, for telling us about her mother's internment in a camp, she was summarily arrested, brutalized and strip-searched by male MPs, then thrown in jail. Now, we learn that she is to be deported to Manzanar Camp, where her mother is being held."

"Wait! Who said anything about her being brutalized and strip-searched?" Said Nimitz, apparently surprised.

"Princess Elizabeth says so, Admiral. She watched everything via a spy probe we attached to Ensign Kawena. We could provide you with copies of the recordings in question, Admiral."

Nimitz repressed a flash of anger, then stared hard at Doug.

"I will enquire about this later. Why are you so interested in that girl, Mister Wilson?"

"It is simply a question of principles, Admiral. Our whole organization went into exile in time in order to rescue one of its members. Ensign Kawena stated an interest to join us after the war, apart from proving to be a very brave and capable young officer. We will not let her suffer a grave injustice just because she wanted to join our organization. There is also the matter of racism in the United States and especially the existence of internment camps for American citizens of Japanese ancestry, which is a very big sore point with us, Admiral. Our agents have been spending the last twelve hours liberating hundreds of thousands of inmates held in horrible conditions in German concentration camps across Europe. Our agents are now tired, traumatized and very angry. Nancy Laplante herself is considering your own internment camps as little better than the German ones, especially when it concerns a country supposedly as democratic as the United States."

That visibly angered Nimitz, who slammed his fist on his desk.

"We are a democratic country, Mister Wilson! How dare you doubt that?"
Doug Wilson shook his head slowly, his expression hard.

"No, it isn't, Admiral, at least not for African-Americans, Japanese-Americans, native Indian-Americans and many other racial groups who don't have the right to vote or, in the case of the Japanese-Americans not born in the United States, who don't even have the right to become legally American citizens. It is presently a democracy for white-skinned Caucasian people only. It will not be always so however, as Mister Stone mentioned to you a few days ago. I am thus here to inform you that we will soon leave Hawaii with all our equipment and personnel, to seek outside of the United States a more acceptable base of operation for our forces. Further to that, I inform you that we intend to bring Ensign Kawena with us, with or without your consent. We only wish to give her a chance at a better life."

"Mister Wilson, I find your moralizing insulting."

"And we find your country's racism and bigotry abhorrent, Admiral. This is coming straight from Nancy Laplante and from Doctor Tolkonen and we will not back down from our position. After all, you need us a lot more than we need you."

"That may not be true anymore, mister. You already cleaned the Pacific of the Japanese Navy and Air Force: we can now continue on our own and retake the Pacific with little trouble."

“That, Admiral, would prove to be a costly assumption. You may find that the Japanese island garrisons, while isolated and cut off, are tough nuts to crack. Also, in line with the Time Patrol strategy of terminating this war with the utmost care in avoiding civilian casualties, be advised that we will not allow you to conduct any air or sea bombardment against Japanese population centers. Any force attempting such bombardments will be neutralized by us.”

“You would shoot on us to defend the Japanese?” Said Nimitz, now livid.

“Correction, Admiral: we will shoot on you if you attack unarmed civilians. You now have 41 minutes to have Ensign Kawena sent back to us at Hickam Field. After that, Nancy Laplante in person will get her out of jail, manu military. Have a good day, Admiral.”

Doug saluted and turned around, walking calmly out of Nimitz’ office. The old admiral watched him for a moment, then grabbed his telephone and called the Joint Intelligence Center.

“Brigadier Twitty, this is Admiral Nimitz. I just had a visit from the Time Patrol. Do you have any idea of the kind of shit your decision concerning Ensign Kawena has put us in?”

12:42 (GMT)

Wednesday, May 27, 1942 ‘B’

Infirmary, Tower ALPHA

RAF Air Station Northolt

England

Tom Allen, lying in a medical bed and with his legs covered with bandages, smiled when Jenny Kawena entered timidly the infirmary and came to him. His smile then became a grin when he noticed that she wore the gray uniform of an apprentice of the Time Patrol. She in turn smiled and stood besides Tom’s bed, taking hold of his left hand.

“Hello, Tom. How are your legs?”

“They could be worse, Jenny. It’s really nice to see you here, especially in this uniform.”

"I owe a big one to Nancy Laplante on that. Doug Wilson was also very...persuasive in convincing the Navy to let me go. I heard about what you and the other agents did in Europe. You can be proud of your work, Tom."

Tom's smile then faded as he looked absent-mindedly through a window.

"It still cost us a good girl, Jenny. I can't help think about Ingrid and whether she is going to come out of this in one piece, both physically and mentally. This business of concentration camps is the hardest thing I ever had to face."

"Tom, you helped save tens of thousands of lives. Think about them and about the new hope you brought to them. You should see the refugee camp that was set up in a corner of this airfield: it is full of people who can now laugh, cherish their families and enjoy life. Whatever happens now, your name and that of your comrades will be honored for the good deeds you accomplished yesterday and today."

"Maybe, but those good deeds are in turn part of a plan that has by now probably erased out of existence a good four billion people due to live in the far future. Are we really do-gooders or are we the biggest mass murderers of all times?"

Jenny then saw tears appear in Tom's eyes as he spoke. Unable to dispel his doubts for the moment, she simply bent down and kissed him on the forehead.

"For me you are a hero, Tom. Get well. I will visit you again later today."

Once out of the infirmary, Jenny wandered around the tower, not having anything specific to do at the time. She soon found herself in a visitors lounge brightly lit by huge bay windows that gave a nice view of the grassy expanse of Northolt Airfield. Visible half a kilometer away was the sprawling refugee camp that was filling up rapidly with survivors of German concentration camps. Four young women wearing pajamas and slippers sat in the lounge, taking some sunrays while sipping on fruit juices. One, a tall blonde, was nearly down to bone and flesh, while two others sported some bruises and swells on their faces, apart of having their hands and feet bandaged. The fourth one, a bald giant who looked outside as if in a daze, was well known to Jenny, who ran to her to hug her happily.

"Lori! It is so nice to see you again. What are you doing here?"

The reporter looked at her, managing only a weak smile.

"I was told that I needed a rest, so I am resting, along with my new friends here. May I present you Tatiana Korbut, Claudette Besson and Mary Coleman? Girls, this is Jenny Kawena, from the United States Navy."

“Ex-United States Navy.” Corrected Jenny while shaking hands gently with the three other women. She then returned her attention to Lori, examining her haggard expression.

“What happened to you, Lori? You look like hell.”

For a moment, Lori did not reply, trying to hold in the nightmares in her head. She finally broke and started crying.

“Because I...I saw hell!” She managed to say between sobs. Feeling guilty now, Jenny held her gently, speaking softly to the giant to console her. It took long minutes for Lori to quiet down, a sign of how deeply she was psychologically hurt. Nancy Laplante, her uniform dirty and her face showing exhaustion, came in the lounge as Jenny still hugged Lori. She looked silently at that scene for a moment, then approached them and caressed Lori’s back, kissing her on her bald head.

“Hello, Lori. Hello, girls.”

“Hello, Nancy.” Replied Lori, her eyes lighting up at Nancy’s sight. “Is it all over?”

“The worst of it is. I am declaring a pause in our operations, to give our people a chance to rest a bit and to complete the evacuation of the camp inmates.”

“How many inmates was the Time Patrol able to save around Europe, Nancy?” Asked Claudette Besson, the French resistance fighter. Nancy rubbed her tired eyes before answering.

“At last count, we saved a bit over 215,000 inmates. Unfortunately, the camp guards had time to kill about 43,000 inmates before we could free the camps. In turn, we killed a total of over 3,900 camp guards and staff members. None of the bastards escaped.”

“Good!” Replied coldly Tatiana Korbut. “What will happen next?”

“Once our people had a chance to rest and once all the camp survivors are cared for, we will convince the German leaders left around to give up fighting and to withdraw all the German forces back inside Germany. Tonight, after taking a few hours of sleep, I will start delivering ultimatums to the top German military commanders. With any luck, and if common sense prevails, war in Europe should be over without further fighting in a few days at the most.”

“Peace at last!” Said Mary Coleman, sighing audibly. “Won’t that be wonderful?”

“Yes, for everybody. Jenny, I had Doug and Elizabeth do one last thing before they stood down like the rest of the Time Patrol.”

Nancy then went out of the lounge for a few seconds, returning with a couple in their forties. Jenny nearly screamed with joy at the sight of the small Japanese woman and of the beefy Polynesian man, then ran to them to hug them. Nancy stood aside and grinned while watching the trio.

“Your parents accepted to come live with the Time Patrol, so that they could be close to you. Take a day of rest with them, Jenny.”

13:07 (Paris Time)

Thursday, May 28, 1942 ‘B’

Headquarters, German Military Governor

Hotel Majestic, Paris

France

Field-Marshal Gerd Von Rundstedt, Commander In Chief of the Wehrmacht in Western Europe, greeted General Hugo Sperrle, Commander of the Luftwaffe in France and Belgium, and led him towards the big conference table where fourteen other senior officers and one man in civilian suit sat. Once Sperrle had taken a seat, Rundstedt went to stand at one end of the table and looked around at his subalterns.

“Gentlemen, I officially asked you to come to the headquarters of General Von Stulpnagel to discuss our strategy to oppose the Time Patrol. Actually, we are here mainly because there are no Gestapo or SS forces left inside Paris, thanks to the same Time Patrol, while there are still some Waffen-SS liaison officers at my headquarters. Yesterday evening, I received a clandestine visit from none other than Nancy Laplante, who served me with an ultimatum: we start withdrawing back to Germany by no later than noon this Saturday or our forces will be destroyed in an all-out assault by the Time Patrol. She also added the special condition that Paris and its surrounding area out to 25 kilometers be completely evacuated and devoid of German personnel by that same deadline. We thus have less than two days to take a decision and either withdraw or be ready to fight the Time Patrol. Frankly, the second option strikes me as most unrealistic. I need your opinion, gentlemen.”

“How could anyone hope to fight against the Time Patrol?” Asked General Blaskowitz, Commander of Army Group ‘G’, stationed along the southern coast of France. “Their technological advantage is simply too great. They can appear and

disappear at will and are invulnerable to our weapons. I say that we withdraw right now, in order to save our men from needless death.”

“I agree with General Blaskowitz.” Said General Sperrle. “I have at most a dozen light aircraft or transports left to me now, even though the Time Patrol tactics of attacking at night has resulted in most of my aircrews being still alive. I may have a lot of people left on my roll calls but my air power has simply ceased to exist in the last week.”

The next one to speak was General Erwin Rommel, Commander of Army Group ‘B’, which defended Northern France and Paris.

“Who is left in charge in Germany now? How would Berlin react to a withdrawal on our part, Herr FeldMarshal?”

“Chaos is nearly total in Germany now. Nobody of consequence is left in command and the few Nazi Party officials who are not either dead or in the hands of the Time Patrol have gone into hiding. The SS and the Gestapo have been hit especially hard, with all the internment camps run by the SS taken and emptied by the Time Patrol yesterday.”

“Herr FeldMarshal,” interrupted the man in civilian suit, “I will have to correct you on your choice of words. The internment camps you spoke about were in reality death camps where unspeakable atrocities were being committed by the SS. Abwehr agents were able to visit some of them once the Time Patrol left them empty. What they found, apart of the bodies of the SS guards, were trenches filled with thousands of dead men, women and children reduced to mere skeletons by starvation and ill treatments. I am actually surprised that Miss Laplante, after seeing such monstrosities, is still willing to let us go unmolested. However, if we do not withdraw, then I expect that we will get no more mercy from her. If any French hostages or prisoners are executed by German troops from now on, then again our skins won’t be worth much. Those Time Patrol killing machines on tracks, once let loose, leave no Germans alive in their path. We should do the utmost not to give an excuse to Miss Laplante to release these machines into our midst.”

“Hmm, you may be right, Colonel Rudolph. What is the assessment of the Abwehr concerning the remaining strength of the SS security forces?”

“It is hard to give a solid assessment at this point, Herr FeldMarshal, but most of the SS leadership has been eliminated by the Time Patrol and their offices across Europe have been decimated. In particular, the SS forces and Gestapo officials

controlling Warsaw were massacred three days ago and the Poles and Jews there now control the city. We however have a problem right here in France: the First SS Panzer Corps, which is resting and recuperating after our defeat in Norway at the hands of the British, could decide to stay and fight, and thus attract a Time Patrol attack on all of us.”

“Actually, Colonel, Miss Laplante told me that she would take care personally of the First SS Panzer Corps. They may be all dead by now as far as we know.”

A shiver went through the meeting participants at those words. General Rommel then raised another hot subject.

“Herr FeldMarshal, what if our forces on the Eastern Front have received a similar ultimatum and decide to pull back? The Soviets will pursue them and may well use that chance to enter Germany.”

“Then the more reason for us to retreat back into Germany, where we will be able to defend our borders. We will however have to do that without our tanks and field artillery, as Laplante stated that we would have to leave them behind. She intends us to become a purely defensive force. We will be permitted to keep our anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns and our mortars but no other heavy weapons. We are also strictly forbidden to destroy any equipment or supplies left behind by us or to requisition supplies for our move. We break these rules and we will be attacked. That is the price to save the lives of our men.”

Rundstedt’s subalterns then broke into an animated exchange, unhappy at the idea of losing their most effective weapons. However, a consensus quickly grew that they really had no choice but to withdraw back to Germany. Rundstedt looked slowly around the table, then slapped his hand on top of it.

“Then it is decided! Return to your units at once and start withdrawing eastward as soon as possible. Do not wait for trains to become available: you know how unreliable the railway system has become lately. General Von Stulpnagel, as the military governor of Northern France, you will have to ensure that the area of Paris is vacated by our troops promptly and that the withdrawal is complete by noon Saturday. I frankly don’t care where your units will end up, as long as it is somewhere inside Germany. Probably the easiest solution will be to go back to our respective original garrisons in Germany. Just make sure that you stay in radio contact with me. You are dismissed, gentlemen.”

13:36 (Paris time)
Headquarters 1st SS Panzer Corps
Evreux (45 miles west of Paris)
France

General Paul Hausser was awakened by the strong, acrid smell of something waived under his nose. His head pounding, he opened his eyes and took a few seconds to adjust his vision so that he could see clearly the young woman crouching besides him.

“You? What do you want? What happened?”

“What happened is that the area around your headquarters was blasted by salvoes from the stun canons of my cruiser, Obergruppenführer Hausser. All your men have been unconscious for the last half hour and will stay so for another half hour.”

“Then, why didn’t you just kill me and my men, Miss Laplante?”

“Because you are actually soldiers and not a bunch of sadists and monsters like the SS-Totenkopf bastards who ran the concentration camps or spread terror through the ghettos of Europe. Your men fought hard and well in Norway and I respect them for that.”

“Then, what do you want, Miss Laplante?” Asked Hausser, frankly puzzled, while trying to get up from the floor. His head still swam, so he had to be content with sitting on the carpet. Nancy looked at him with her intense green eyes, apparently impassive.

“What I want is for the units under your command to start withdrawing from France no later than noon this Saturday and to return to Germany. You will have to leave your tanks, your field artillery pieces and other heavy weapons behind but you will be allowed to form a defensive line inside German borders. The other German units in France, Belgium and the Netherlands have received the same ultimatum already. If you refuse to withdraw, then you will force me to unleash my combat robots, which will then massacre your men.”

Hausser then remembered whom he had been with when he had been knocked unconscious and looked for him around but didn’t see him. Nancy’s face hardened.

“If you are looking for that Heydrich bastard, we already took him away. That man is a sadistic butcher, pure and simple, and will be judged for his crimes. His plans to reduce Paris to burning rubble as an act of revenge will also weigh against him. I thank you for having questioned his orders: that helped save your head.”

The full bitterness of defeat then struck Hausser: His Führer was gone; German forces had bogged down everywhere; the Luftwaffe was as good as destroyed and Germany now had to deal with a nearly invulnerable enemy. The tank battalion he had sent yesterday to Drancy in reaction to the Time Patrol raid on the transit camp there had been literally cut to pieces in no time and its survivors sent fleeing in panic by the merciless combat machines used by the Time Patrol. His men had not even been able to come within sight of the transit camp before being massacred.

“What will happen to Germany after we withdraw?” Asked Hausser in a dejected tone.

“Nothing, mostly. Germany will be allowed to defend its borders but will not be permitted to produce offensive military weapons again. Some reparations will have to be paid but I intend to avoid a repeat of the mistakes of the Versailles Treaty of 1918, whose harsh terms led eventually to this war. The ones responsible for this war are anyway either dead or in jail now. So, what do you decide to do, General?”

Hausser stared into her eyes but saw only resolve.

“Do I really have any choice?”

“Yes!” Replied Nancy, her voice now harsh as she remembered the horrible scenes of death and suffering in the German concentration camps. “You have a choice between living and dying. Hundreds of thousands of innocent people didn’t even have that choice. So, again, what is your choice, General?”

“My units will start withdrawing by tomorrow, miss.”

“Good! Remember this: if your troops kill any French hostage or prisoner, or any French property gets willfully destroyed, then our deal is off and I unleash my robots. Some of my robots will anyway escort your columns to make sure that there are no incidents between your soldiers and the locals. Also, you can’t destroy or sabotage any of your equipment or supplies left behind, as they will be used as partial payment for war reparations. This said, have a good day!”

She then disappeared in a flash of white light, leaving Hausser alone in his office. Getting up with difficulty, Hausser went to the nearest window and looked outside for signs of the Time Patrol. There were none, except for the fact that the seven Tiger tanks that were parked in the courtyard of the requisitioned manor an hour ago were gone.

16:44 (Moscow Time)
Headquarters of the city's military garrison
Leningrad, Soviet Union

Colonel Ivan Zorokin, head of the NKVD²⁰ in Leningrad, couldn't help look again outside through a window as he walked towards the office of Colonel-General Dimitri Chernikov, the commander of Leningrad's garrison. The huge spaceship from the Time Patrol was now flying away after dropping off pallets loaded with hundreds of tons of foodstuff, mostly flour, as it had for the last four days. The morale inside the besieged city was now rising steadily, along with the popularity of the Time Patrol, even though none of the citizens or soldiers of Leningrad had seen yet a single living Time Patrol member. Zorokin read again the decrypted message from the NKVD headquarters in Moscow that he was bringing to show to Chernikov and shook his head in disgust. The order in it, which came from Beria, the chairman of the NKVD, was nothing short of monstrous. In turn, that order must have been dictated to Beria by Yosef Stalin himself, which was made even more probable by the paranoid character of the order. In essence, Beria was ordering Zorokin to seize and destroy the foodstuff delivered by the Time Patrol, and to justify that by claiming that the foodstuff had been poisoned. The reason given for such an apparently mindless order was that the Time Patrol was not to be allowed to 'subvert' the people of Leningrad through deliveries of food. It also stated that the 'bourgeois spirit' of Leningrad had to be broken in order to ensure party domination over the citizens of the city. Zorokin understood too well the true motivations behind Beria's directive: he and Stalin were probably afraid that the Time Patrol, through its altruism and generosity, would make Moscow's rule look petty and unjust in comparison. Zorokin personally believed in a pure, hard communism in which harsh measures were often needed to weed out capitalists and other profiteers who lived on the back of the proletariat. The problem was that Stalin, Beria and their clique of apparatchiks were increasingly living on the back of the Soviet people and showed little interest in the welfare of the common citizens. Zorokin, who was no fool, had refrained before from publicly criticizing the Moscow leadership, lest he ended up with a bullet in the back of the neck, but this last order was just too much for him.

²⁰ NKVD: Soviet secret police. Predecessor of the KGB.

The two soldiers standing guard at the door of General Chernikov came to attention when Zorokin approached them. They let him in without question: they knew too well that the NKVD and not the Red Army was the real power in the Soviet Union. Chernikov's Aide-De-Camp stood up from behind his desk and saluted as Zorokin walked past him while proffering a quick good day.

"Comrade General Chernikov is in his office, Comrade Colonel."

"Thank you, Comrade Major. Make sure that nobody disturbs us until further notice."

"Yes, Comrade Colonel!"

Entering Chernikov's office, Zorokin saw the general studying his wall situation map while holding a document. Chernikov was young for his rank, being still in his forties, but was acknowledged to be a competent and tough officer. He turned around at the sound of the door opening and nodded his head in a polite but cautious welcome: he knew the extent of Zorokin's power, which included the prerogative to arrest or execute him any time he wished if he had a good enough pretext to justify it. Zorokin was however a rarity in the Soviet Union: a pure communist who also happened to be honest and who genuinely believed in the primacy of the needs of the Soviet people as a whole. He was thus unlike the majority of NKVD officers or of Communist Party officials, who quoted Lenin on one hand and got fat through corruption and misappropriations on the other hand. Chernikov could live with Zorokin around his command, something he could not with the previous NKVD representative, who had thankfully been killed by a German shell two months ago. One example of Zorokin's style of leadership was the fact that the NKVD troops in Leningrad now fought side by side with Red Army soldiers, instead of standing in their back, ready to shoot them if they faltered. As a result, the fighting spirit of the starving soldiers had improved markedly, something Chernikov was grateful for.

"Good afternoon, Comrade Zorokin. What can I do for you today?"

"Good afternoon, Comrade General. I actually need your counsel about something."

"My counsel?" Said Chernikov, a bit surprised. Zorokin then handed him the message from Beria.

"Read this and you will understand."

Chernikov quickly read the message, then turned deep red with anger and looked back at Zorokin.

“Destroy the food supplies delivered by the Time Patrol? Are they mad in Moscow? This food is the only thing stopping our citizens and soldiers from dying of starvation.”

“I realize that very well, Comrade General. That is why I came to see you. I simply can’t obey such a mindless, cruel order.”

“But, you could be executed by Beria for failing to obey this order.” Said Chernikov in a low, cautious tone.

“I know that too, Comrade General. I however believe that Comrades Beria and Stalin have just shown themselves to care nothing for the fate of the Soviet people and to be unworthy of leading it.”

Chernikov looked nervously around his office, as if to watch for hidden microphones. If Moscow heard about this conversation, they were both dead men.

“Then, what do you intend to do, Comrade Colonel?”

“I actually have a plan, Comrade General...”

15:01 (Moscow Time)

Friday, May 29, 1942 ‘B’

Leningrad docks, Soviet Union

The Time Patrol ship showed up again in mid-afternoon, as it had done for the past four days. As soon as the first flying machine transporting a large metallic container loaded with foodstuff touched the concrete surface of the docks, where the previous deliveries had taken place, Ivan Zorokin ran to it. The machine, which looked like a giant spider, had a ladder running up along each of its giant legs, which were also used as grappling points for the container it had brought in. Zorokin grabbed the handles of one of the ladders and started climbing quickly towards the machine’s main body, where a sort of control cabin was visible at the front. As he was halfway up, an amplified voice speaking Russian boomed in his ears.

“CLIMB DOWN IMMEDIATELY OR YOU WILL BE FORCIBLY REMOVED! I SAY AGAIN, CLIMB DOWN IMMEDIATELY!”

Zorokin clenched his teeth but continued climbing: he knew the risks of his actions but the lives of hundreds of thousands of his people depended on the success of his plan. Thankfully, nobody shot him while he climbed up and he finally stepped on a narrow steel platform connected to the control cabin. He knew better than to pull out his pistol

now, figuring that this would bring him only trouble. Instead, he walked to the large windows of the cabin and looked inside. What he saw was a giant of a bald man sitting at a complicated-looking control station. There was also a normal-sized woman with blond hair facing him with suspicion and pointing a pistol at him. Both were dressed in gray uniforms. Zorokin hurriedly waved to the woman while shouting.

“DON’T SHOOT! I WANT TO SPEAK TO NANCY LAPLANTE ABOUT A MOST URGENT MATTER.”

In response, the woman spoke in the microphone of her helmet, with her words coming out of an external speaker.

“Who are you and what do you want exactly?”

“I am Colonel Ivan Zorokin, of the NKVD. I have some vital news to pass on to your leader, Nancy Laplante.”

The woman’s face hardened at the mention of the NKVD.

“And why should I believe you? The NKVD is as bad as the Gestapo.”

It was Zorokin’s turn to look offended. He however had to recognize that the woman was mostly correct.

“Look, I received yesterday an order from Moscow telling me to destroy the food supplies you are bringing to Leningrad and to pretext that they are poisoned by you. I refused to obey that order and want to discuss a plan with Nancy Laplante on how to react to this.”

The woman hesitated only slightly before going to a door near Zorokin and opening it, inviting him inside. She however kept her pistol pointed at him.

“Alright, lean against this wall and spread your hands and legs.”

Zorokin obeyed and let the woman search him, which she did expertly after taking his STECHKIN pistol out of his belt holster. She then made him turn around to face her. Only then did Zorokin see the nametag on the woman’s right breast.

“Helena Groth? You’re a German?” Nearly shouted the Soviet, shocked. The woman, a pretty blonde with blue eyes and a round face, smiled at his reaction.

“Yes I am, like some other members of the Time Patrol, but I am no Nazi. We have members of many nationalities and from different centuries in the Time Patrol. Do you have that message from Moscow on you?”

“Of course I do.”

Zorokin took the folded sheet of paper out of his breast pocket and cautiously handed it to the woman. She read it quickly and frowned, then spoke briefly in an unknown

language to the bald giant, who grabbed his flight controls and made his machine lift off. Groth stared at Zorokin as the machine flew towards the giant spaceship that had brought it to Leningrad.

“Colonel, you just won yourself a paid return trip to England. We should be there in a few minutes.”

“A few minutes? How is that possible?”

“We jump spacetime directly from point to point, which is instantaneous. In the meantime, you can take place in that seat. Are you hungry or thirsty?”

“Hungry, mostly, but less than most people in Leningrad.”

The German went to a sort of storage locker and searched through a drawer, pulling out of it a bar of chocolate and throwing it at Zorokin, who eagerly grabbed it and started munching on it with delight. The machine was now entering a cavernous cargo hold inside the giant spaceship that was big enough to put a cruiser in. Huge doors closed behind them as the flying crane landed in the cargo hold. Groth spoke again in her helmet microphone in the same language she had used with the giant pilot. She however spoke with an unseen person for a good two minutes. Zorokin was about to ask what was happening when a flash of white light briefly bathed the control cabin, surprising him.

“What was that?”

“We just jumped spacetime. We are now over our temporary base in England and will land in a short while. Follow me, Colonel.”

With the bald giant following them, Zorokin was led by Groth through a door and a short passageway, ending up in a small elevator cabin that went down one of the machine's legs and brought them to the level of the hold's deck. A sort of small vehicle without wheels was waiting for them there. Looking in vain for a driver, Zorokin nonetheless got in the open-top vehicle with the two others. The vehicle then started moving, crossing the expanse of the cargo hold and entering a large cargo lift that went down for a few seconds before stopping and letting the vehicle out in a wide hallway. Half a minute later they emerged outside, going down a huge ramp before the vehicle stopped at the foot of the ramp. Groth and the giant got out, making Zorokin do the same. Looking around him, he saw what appeared to be a standard military airfield, with its wide grassy surface and hangars. The row of spaceships parked nearby and the big, futuristic tower standing a few hundred meters away were however far from standard. Examining the parked spaceships with intense curiosity, Zorokin was not a little surprised to see one

that had the name 'WHITE ROSE OF STALINGRAD' painted on its nose. He looked at Groth questioningly.

"You have Russian members in your Time Patrol?"

"A few and they come from two different centuries, Colonel. Ah, here is Nancy." That made Zorokin snap his head towards an approaching vehicle that looked like a flying platform. A tall woman with black hair and wearing the same gray uniform as Groth and the giant was piloting the platform. She landed besides them and looked with cold interest at the NKVD officer while the two others got in.

"Colonel Zorokin, I am Nancy Laplante. I believe that we have to have a serious talk together."

"We certainly do, miss."

"Then hop in! We will speak in my office."

The trip to the tower took only a minute or so, with Laplante piloting her platform directly inside a hangar situated in the lower level of the building. Zorokin couldn't help look around him constantly as he followed Laplante inside the tower, fascinated by so many novel sights. He quickly noticed that there were at least as many women as men working in the building, most of them bald giants. He and Laplante finally entered a comfortably furnished office, where he was invited to sit in a plush sofa.

"I hope that the decadent comfort of my office will not appear too 'bourgeois' to you, Colonel." Said Laplante, deadpan. Zorokin smiled at her attempt at humor.

"Some Party apparatchiks, including Chairman Beria, enjoy at least the same level of luxury, Miss Laplante. It is one thing that grates me to no small degree when I see the starvation and misery around Leningrad these days. That is why the latest order from Beria disgusted me and prompted me into wanting to see you."

"Could I see that message, Colonel?"

"Of course!" Replied Zorokin, taking out again the sheet of paper. He was about to get up to hand it to Laplante when it flew out of his hand and floated in the air all the way to her. Laplante calmly grabbed it in midair and unfolded it, reading it while Zorokin unconsciously made the sign of the cross, sweat appearing on his forehead. The Russian didn't say a word, though, not wanting to appear too intimidated. Laplante soon looked back at Zorokin, clearly upset by the message from Beria.

"I knew that Stalin was a monster, but this tops everything. What did you plan to do about this, Colonel? Is anyone else aware of this message?"

“Colonel General Chernikov, the military commander of Leningrad, knows about it. What I had in mind was to rid the Soviet Union of Stalin, Beria and their henchmen, and to put the interests of the Soviet people back at the top of Moscow’s priorities. I would however need your help in order to be able to do that.”

Laplante stared at him with her penetrating gaze, making him feel uncomfortable.

“Colonel, do you believe in either socialism or pure communism?”

“I am a communist, miss, and always will be. What is practiced in Moscow now has little to do with true communism.”

“Colonel, this may surprise you, but I believe that I am what you would call a socialist. I come from a country and time where, while capitalism heavily influenced the economy, the domestic policies would certainly be deemed to be socialist, or even communist, by Americans or British of this time. The giants you saw around today come from a future society that would probably appear to you to be a model of communist paradise: all the basic necessities of life are provided free to all by the government, while one has to pay only for what are considered luxuries. Also, if some economic downturn threatens basic services and necessities, then production of luxury products will be curtailed until the economy improves. Their society is however so prosperous that they have not had to cut production in centuries. They also have not known war for five centuries and are not burdened with any military expenditures, except for the few needed to support the Time Patrol. They have no secret police and enjoy total freedom of expression, apart of being able to elect democratically their leaders or even oust them via referendums. What do you think of that kind of society, Colonel?”

“That I would love to see the Soviet Union becoming such a society, Miss Laplante. But that will be impossible as long as men such as Stalin and Beria hold the reins of power in Moscow. Will you help me and General Chernikov in getting rid of them?”

Nancy was silent for a while, scrutinizing the NKVD colonel sitting in front of her. The old saying ‘better the devil you know than the devil you don’t’ kept coming to her mind. Zorokin, from what she could read in his mind, was what one would easily call a fanatic, with a rock-hard belief in communism and its superiority over all other political systems. He however appeared genuinely concerned about the interests of the common Soviet citizen and had been absolutely honest up to now with her. Stalin and his dirty executioner, Beria, had gone way too far this time and had just proved that there would be no peace in Eastern Europe as long as they were alive. Nancy was loath to make

them martyrs of communism, though, which was what probably would happen if the Time Patrol publicly killed them. In a way, Zorokin was presenting her with a convenient solution to a tough dilemma. It was a nasty, sneaky solution but it was probably the only practical solution.

“Colonel Zorokin, I believe that our interests and those of the Soviet people meet in this case: you want to rid the Soviet people of the tyranny of Stalin’s rule while I want to ensure a lasting peace in Europe after the end of this war. When you return to Leningrad, you may give this piece of news to General Chernikov: two days ago, I served an ultimatum to the High German Command to either start withdrawing on all fronts back into Germany by noon of this Saturday or face total destruction. Both Field Marshal Von Rundstedt in the West and Field Marshals Kluge and Manstein in the East have accepted my terms and are in the process of preparing to withdraw. In exchange, I have promised the Germans that they will be allowed to defend the borders of Germany as they stood in 1938, before the start of this war. On the part of the Soviet Union, I expect it to stay within its borders of 1938 and refrain from entering Poland and the other countries of Eastern Europe.”

Zorokin first felt joy at these news. Then, the thought of letting those murderous Germans withdraw peacefully started getting to him.

“And what about all the deaths and destruction the Germans caused to my country? How could they be allowed to go free, as if nothing had happened in the last three years?”

“The persons responsible for causing this war are already either dead or in jail, including Adolph Hitler, Heinrich Himmler and Herman Goering. We nabbed them four days ago. They will be publicly tried for their crimes once this war is over. As for reparations for war damages, Germany will be made to pay a certain amount, but I do not want to repeat the mistakes made in 1918, when overly harsh terms caused long-term resentment in Germany and contributed to the rise to power of Hitler and his gang. It may be an imperfect peace in your mind, Colonel, but it is still a whole lot better than to let this war go on. We need peace and we need it now.”

“And what do you and your Time Patrol get out of this?” Asked Zorokin, suspicious. Nancy kept a firm eye contact as she answered him.

“What we get is the satisfaction of saving lives and of stopping human suffering, Colonel. Also, peace now means peace in the future, which is in our interest. We have no wish for personal power or enrichment.”

Zorokin nodded to that: while Laplante was not a communist, she was widely acknowledged in the Soviet Union as a brave and honorable soldier. She did not strike him at all as a person seeking personal power. There was also a powerful, indescribable feeling emanating from her. It was hard indeed not to succumb to her charisma.

“Then, I can live with your conditions. What do you propose that we do?”

“What I had in mind will need the support of the Red Army. You, Colonel, can take care of Beria...”

21:15 (Moscow time)

28 Kachalova Street, Moscow

Soviet Union

Lavrentii Beria slapped hard the teenage girl tied naked and spread-eagled in his bed.

“Will you stop crying like this, you young slut, or do you want to experience real pain?”

The fifteen year-old blonde, who had been picked up an hour ago in a nearby street by a roaming team of NKVD secret policemen, strangled her sobs as best she could, terrified by her rapist. She was only the latest in a long list of girls picked at random to satisfy Beria’s lust for teenagers. Beria himself was naked and had already abused her once. He didn’t have a chance to rape her a second time, though. A male voice, disgust and anger audible in it, then snapped in Beria’s back.

“Leave her alone, you filthy bastard!”

Surprised and alarmed, Beria turned around to see a man in his late thirties and wearing civilian clothes. The stranger was also pointing at his head a pistol equipped with a silencer.

“Who...who are you? How did you get past my bodyguards downstairs?”

“Your bodyguards are a bunch of incompetents. As for who I am, just know that you raped one girl too many. You will now pay for the dishonor you brought to my daughter. Now, untie the girl!”

Beria, not known for his personal courage, promptly undid the ropes holding the teenager, who immediately jumped out of bed and ran to her clothes, thrown into a pile in a corner of the room. The gunman looked at the girl as she dressed.

“Once you are dressed, leave this house and go home. If this bastard’s bodyguards ask you, tell them that he is finished with you for the night. Don’t say anything to anybody, if you don’t want to put your family in danger.”

“I...I understand. Thank you, mister.”

As the girl left once fully clothed, the gunman went to the bedroom’s window while keeping his pistol pointed at Beria. Opening the window wide, he then got closer to the NKVD chairman, staring at him with intense hatred.

“This is for the people of Leningrad, whom you were ready to let starve to death.” The pistol then coughed once, the noise barely audible for anybody not inside the room. The bullet struck Beria right between the eyes, killing him instantly. As Beria’s inert body flopped down on the bed, the gunman quickly unscrewed the silencer off his pistol and threw a sheet of paper on the floor, then went back to the open window after locking the door. He waited a few minutes, in order to let enough time for the girl raped by Beria to escape, then passed his right arm outside and fired one bullet skyward, careful to catch the ejected brass casing, which he pocketed. He then fired two more bullets, this time in Beria’s body. The noise of running feet could be heard as he took out a spherical object from one pocket of his trench coat and pressed the red button on top of it. He disappeared in a flash of white light seconds before the first violent knocks shook the bedroom’s door. The door soon gave up, two burly men with revolvers at the ready crashing through it. They found only Beria’s body, the open window and the sheet of paper on the floor, along with three spent bullet casings. One of the bodyguards picked up the sheet of paper and read aloud the short statement written on it in rough lettering.

“For the rape of my beloved daughter...”

21:32 (Moscow Time)

Soviet Army Chief of Staff’s office

The Kremlin, Moscow

Marshal Georgii Zhukov was a busy man tonight, what with all the reports coming in of unspecified German troop movements at night along the whole front. When told that Colonel-General Chernikov had unexpectedly arrived from Leningrad, however, he made the time to receive him, as Chernikov was an old classmate from the military academy. Zhukov didn’t recognize the NKVD officer who came in with Chernikov,

though. The latter saluted Zhukov and shook hands with him before presenting the NKVD man.

“Comrade Marshal, this is Colonel Ivan Zorokin, NKVD commissar for Leningrad. He is part of the reason I came to Moscow to see you. Yesterday, Colonel Zorokin received an order from Chairman Beria. That order was so shocking, so cruel that he came to see me to ask for my counsel, as he could not in all decency obey it. This is the message he received.”

Now frankly curious, Zhukov took the message from Chernikov and read it. His reaction was the same as that of Chernikov a day ago. Both angry and disgusted, he went to one of the large windows of his office to take in some fresh air and calm down. He finally faced his visitors, his face hard.

“You know what this means, comrades? If Beria wrote this, then it was probably at the request of Comrade Stalin himself.”

“We realize that, Comrade Marshal. However, that is not all. Yesterday again, when the Time Patrol cargo ship made its now customary delivery of foodstuff, it also delivered a letter from the Time Patrol. Its content was so sensitive that I decided to bring it by hand to you.”

Zhukov took the envelope Chernikov handed him and opened it, finding inside a single sheet of paper bearing a holographic logo with the emblem of the Time Patrol. Zhukov knew from the hologram that this could not be a fake, as nobody but the Time Patrol could produce such pictures. The content of the letter was a real bombshell.

“The Germans are withdrawing back to Germany on all fronts? So, that is what those German troop movements are all about. We can’t just let them go like that, unmolested.”

“We will have to, Comrade Marshal: the Time Patrol envoy was very clear about that. It doesn’t want our forces to go further than our national borders as they stood in 1938. If we do not respect that clause, then the Time Patrol will use force to stop us. You know that we would not stand a chance in that case, Comrade Marshal. Their envoy also emphasized the importance of the last paragraph.”

Zhukov reread that part aloud, intrigued.

“We want durable peace for all of Europe and also to see the Soviet people enjoy such a peace free from terror from whatever origin. I am not sure I understand, Comrade Chernikov.”

It was Zorokin who spoke then.

"We believe that Miss Laplante, who signed that letter, meant the terror from within the Soviet Union, Comrade Marshal. The Time Patrol somehow knew about Beria's order to destroy the food and to blame this on them. They were understandably unhappy about it and threatened to clean our house if we didn't do it ourselves."

Zhukov looked again at the envelope: it had been addressed to him and not to Stalin, something that was most probably not a simple mistake.

"Comrade Zorokin, did you destroy the foodstuff, as ordered by Chairman Beria?"

"I didn't and I won't, Comrade Marshal!" Replied forcefully the NKVD officer. "That order was nothing less than an act of treason against the brave people of Leningrad, who have been enduring hell for a year while resisting the German invaders."

"So, how are you supposed to explain that to Beria or to Stalin, Comrade Colonel?" Asked pointedly Zhukov. Zorokin hesitated for a moment then: Nancy Laplante had not told him how she would get rid of Stalin.

"The Time Patrol envoy said to us not to worry about Beria or Stalin, Comrade Marshal, and to worry only about the freedom and security of the Soviet people."

Zhukov looked at him suspiciously: this sounded like a carefully elaborated plot. He however still had to plan for Stalin's reaction to all this. He put the letter back in its envelope, then went to his large work desk and held the envelope over the big ashtray on it. Taking out his lighter, he put fire to the envelope and watched it burn, letting it go only at the last second. He then faced his visitors, his expression grave.

"Comrades, you never got that envelope. You only received a verbal message from the Time Patrol, who never mentioned the part about comrades Stalin and Beria. We will now go inform Comrade Stalin about the German withdrawal and the Time Patrol restrictions to our movements, but nothing else."

"What if he insists that we pursue the Germans all the way to Berlin?" Asked Chernikov anxiously. "That could be the death of the Red Army."

"The Red Army will not die, not as long as I live." Replied resolutely Zhukov while taking out his pistol and chambering a round in it before holstering it again. "Follow me and be ready for everything but don't draw your pistols unless I do so."

Their hearts pounding with both excitement and fear, Chernikov and Zorokin followed Zhukov out of his office and along the corridors of the Kremlin. Zhukov's authority made all the doors open for them and they arrived in the anteroom of Stalin's

office six minutes later. Stalin's political aide, Georgi Malenkov, was still working there at that late hour and greeted them.

"Comrade Marshal, what can I do for you and your two officers at this hour?"

"Is Comrade Stalin still in, Comrade Malenkov? We have news of the utmost importance for him."

"He still is." Replied the fat man, smiling amiably to Zhukov. "You know how hard our leader works for his people. Give me a minute to announce you."

The trio repressed its nervousness as Malenkov knocked lightly on the door of Stalin's office. After a few seconds and no answer, Malenkov knocked again, harder, but still without results. Getting worried, the aide then cautiously opened the door and stuck his head inside. He immediately jumped back, panic on his face.

"Comrade Stalin...he is lying on the carpet and not moving."

Zhukov immediately rushed past Malenkov, followed by Chernikov and Zorokin. They found Stalin lying still besides his desk, his mouth open and his right hand grasping his chest at heart level. An expression of intense pain was frozen on his now white face. Malenkov finally approached the body of his mentor and looked with horror at it.

"Is he..."

"Dead? Yes!" Replied Zhukov, having checked for a pulse and finding none. "Get a doctor here, quickly!"

As Malenkov ran out of the office, Zorokin examined the attitude of the body carefully.

"It looks like he suffered a heart attack."

"It appears so to me as well." Replied Zhukov. "The doctor should be able to confirm the diagnostic."

The doctor presently on duty in the Kremlin showed up, out of breath, six minutes later, along with Malenkov and a few guards. The doctor knelt besides the body of Stalin and took a minute to examine it before pronouncing his diagnostic.

"A heart attack. All the telltale signs are visible. I am afraid that the Comrade Premier worked too hard for his own good."

"So, it is not an assassination?" Asked the guards officer standing behind him. The doctor gave him a dubious look.

"No, Comrade Major, it isn't. There are no wounds visible and a victim of poison would grab its throat or belly, not its chest. I will have an autopsy made right away but I don't expect to find anything suspicious."

“What do we do now?” Nearly shouted Malenkov, near panic again. Zhukov got up and stared hard into his eyes.

“We make sure that the Soviet Union survives its great leader. I will order our forces to stand fast on all fronts. In the meantime, Comrade Malenkov, advise the members of the Politburo and of the Council of People’s Commissars of this tragic loss for our country. General Chernikov, Colonel Zorokin, come with me!”

The trio waited until they were back inside Zhukov’s office to blow air out in relief.

“God, that was a close call!” Said Chernikov, his hands shaking from the release of stress. “How could the Time Patrol arrange Stalin’s death to look like a heart attack?”

“The how is not important, comrades.” Said Zorokin firmly. “How we act from now is the important thing. This may be an opportunity that will probably be unique. Let’s use it wisely.”

Zhukov suddenly swore to himself.

“Beria! If he uses Stalin’s death to succeed him, things will be even worst, with the NKVD in total control of the country.”

“Do not worry about Chairman Beria, Comrade Zhukov.” Said calmly Zorokin, attracting a surprised look from Zhukov. “He is dead already. The Time Patrol envoy told me so. We should worry more about his deputy and assistants at NKVD headquarters.”

“Is it really prudent to try to strike the NKVD headquarters now?” Asked Chernikov nervously. “It may point to us as being responsible for Stalin’s death.”

Zhukov nodded his head at those words.

“You may be right, Comrade Chernikov. If we play our political cards right, we may still marginalize the NKVD without exposing ourselves. Colonel Zorokin, how did Beria die, if I may ask?”

“Simple! The bastard raped one girl too many and got what he deserved from a vengeful father. His name will go down in mud, as it should rightly be.”

Zhukov couldn’t help smile at that: Beria’s sinister reputation as a depraved man was well known around Moscow.

“Neat! We thus have only to worry about who will succeed Comrade Stalin as our leader. If you will excuse me, I have a few urgent phone calls to do. There is a bottle of Vodka in that cabinet. Feel free to serve yourselves.”

Zorokin and Chernikov didn’t have to be told twice. Tonight was truly a night worthy of celebration.

CHAPTER 19 – LIBERATION

22:19 (GMT)

Friday, May 29, 1942 'B'

RAF Air Station Northolt

England

The close to 500 men of the First Naval Infantry Battalion of the Free French Forces were not too surprised to see their trucks stop at the foot of one of the huge access ramps of the gigantic GILGAMESH: this whole thing was probably another secret, short-notice combined operation with the Time Patrol, like the one that liberated the inmates of the German concentration camps less than two days ago. That brought a concert of approving comments and cheers from the French soldiers, who had appreciated that chance to finally get at the Germans, apart of being able to free thousands of civilian compatriots. The men of the Second Company of the battalion in particular had been proud to play a role in that operation, since that had permitted them to walk and fight for a day on French soil. The morale of the soldiers was thus high as they jumped out of their trucks and formed up in three ranks, then walked up the access ramp while singing a march song, led by their officers. While they were not surprised to see three men and one woman of the Time Patrol waiting for them inside the huge cargo hold, the French were however intrigued by the 25 men and nine women waiting besides the Time Patrol members and wearing camouflage-pattern uniforms of a type never seen before. After being ordered to a halt and made to turn towards the waiting men and women, the soldiers couldn't help whisper to each other as they examined the strange uniforms: miniature French flags were sewn on the left shoulder of those uniforms. One of the men of the Time Patrol then walked to a position facing the soldiers and shouted loudly in French to be heard by all of them.

“WELCOME ABOARD THE GILGAMESH, GENTLEMEN! I AM FIELD AGENT JACK CRAWFORD AND I WILL BE IN CHARGE OF YOUR BATTALION DURING YOUR STAY ON THIS SHIP. THE GROUP OF MEN AND WOMEN IN FUNNY UNIFORMS YOU SEE IN FRONT OF YOU ARE ACTUALLY SOLDIERS OF THE FREE FRENCH FORCES LIKE YOU. WHEN YOU WILL GET OFF THIS SHIP, YOU WILL LOOK LIKE THEM, SINCE YOU ARE HERE TO BE FULLY REEQUIPPED WITH

MODERN EQUIPMENT BEFORE YOUR NEXT MISSION: THE LIBERATION OF PARIS.”

Wild cheers came out of the French soldiers at those words. Jack Crawford waited until silence had mostly come back before speaking again.

“IN CASE YOU ARE IMAGINING THAT YOU WILL DO THAT MISSION ALL BY YOURSELVES, THINK AGAIN. YOU ARE GOOD BUT NOT THAT GOOD. WE OF THE TIME PATROL ACTUALLY PLAN TO REEQUIP AND RETRAIN MOST OF THE FREE FRENCH FORCES BEFORE THAT OPERATION. YOU WILL PROBABLY THINK THAT THIS COULD TAKE WEEKS, MAYBE MONTHS. IT WILL, BUT I PROMISE YOU THAT NOT TEN MINUTES WILL HAVE PASSED IN LONDON BY THE TIME WE LAND YOU BACK IN NORTHOLT. WE WILL ACHIEVE THAT BY GOING INTO THE DISTANT PAST, WHERE WE WILL DO YOUR TRAINING AND REEQUIPPING BEFORE RETURNING TO THIS DATE. THE FIRST PHASE OF OUR PROGRAM WILL BE TO KIT YOU OUT WITH NEW UNIFORMS AND PERSONAL FIELD GEAR. IN CASE YOU ARE WONDERING WHERE WE GOT THOSE UNIFORMS, THE ONLY THING I CAN TELL YOU IS THAT WE FOUND A NUMBER OF ABANDONED MILITARY DEPOTS AROUND THE WORLD IN THE FAR FUTURE. DON'T ASK IN WHAT YEAR OR WHY THEY WERE ABANDONED BECAUSE WE WON'T ANSWER YOU. SOME THINGS ARE BETTER LEFT UNSAID, GENTLEMEN. THE 25 FRENCH SENIOR NCOs HERE WILL NOW EACH TAKE CARE OF A SUB-UNIT AND WILL GUIDE YOU TO YOUR QUARTERS BEFORE SHOWING YOU TO THE TEMPORARY CLOTHING STORE. I WILL SEE YOU AGAIN ONCE YOU ARE CLOTHED.”

Jack Crawford then loudly called up forward the French instructors, who quickly dispersed throughout the ranks of the battalion and presented themselves to its French officers and warrant officers. The battalion then split up and its elements were guided to a bank of cargo elevators that brought them to higher decks. By that time, the access ramp of the ship had closed and the GILGAMESH was lifting off from Northolt. It soon disappeared in a flash of white light from the British sky.

The troops soon found themselves on one of the passenger decks of the GILGAMESH, decks which had been designed to handle a large volume of refugees or survivors fleeing a natural disaster or other types of emergency situations. The passenger deck was divided into dozens of passenger lounges cum dormitories, apart

from including large mess halls and other communal facilities. The rows of comfortable sofas in each of the passenger lounges/dormitories could actually be reconfigured into wide double-decked bunk beds at the touch of a button, allowing each lounge to accommodate comfortably up to 120 sleeping persons or 180 sitting ones. The French instructors gave enough time to the soldiers and their officers to drop their gear on the places selected by each of them, then led them up to another deck used to store small-sized cargo. The nine French women and the single Time Patrol woman seen earlier were waiting for them in a wide, deep compartment nearly filled with large cardboard boxes staked on modular shelves. The Time Patrol woman, a tiny person in her thirties, shouted in French as loud as she could in order to be heard by all.

“GOOD EVENING, GENTLEMEN! MY NAME IS MARGARET MACDONALD AND I RUN THIS TEMPORARY CLOTHING STORE. I WILL ASK YOU NOW TO DIVIDE INTO NINE FILES, ONE IN FRONT OF EACH OF THE LADIES BEHIND ME. LET’S MOVE, MEN!”

The French soldiers, hurried on by the instructors, quickly formed up nine long files, after which the women standing in front of the rows of shelving started serving them. Each soldier received first a large kaki kit bag where he could stuff the articles of clothing he was about to receive. He then accompanied the woman serving him down the rows of shelves and cardboard boxes, trying on the various items to find the size that fit him. Each soldier got four complete combat uniforms, two pairs of boots, underwear, a cold weather overcoat, gloves, a beret, rank slip-ons, rain gear and a winter hat. The last items distributed were a Kevlar helmet, an armored tactical vest, a web gear system and a large capacity backpack with sleeping bag. No signatures were requested from the soldiers for the kit. Once fully equipped, the loaded soldiers were directed through the back exits of the storage compartment and guided back to their respective lounges. Kitting out the whole battalion took hours of frantic work from the French female clerks but the morale of the soldiers was high as they went through their new clothes. The last act of the night was a group visit to the showers, followed by bedding down and lights out.

Reveille was marked by the switching on of the main lights and the shouts of the instructors, as there were no windows in the lounges to see outside if dawn had come. The soldiers were told to dress in their new uniforms after shaving, which gave a chance to the instructors to inspect them quickly and correct the most glaring mistakes. The

battalion then went to have breakfast at one of the cafeterias on the deck they used. To their surprise, they found there dozens of bald giants in futuristic civilian clothes busy laying out a breakfast buffet. One of the officers, Lieutenant Marc Pinel, went to Jack Crawford to ask him about the giants. The American smiled and answered Pinel with good humor.

“They are from the 34th century, where the Time Patrol originates from. With all the humanitarian work to be done these days to take care of concentration camps survivors and refugees, we were in serious need of extra manpower. So we appealed for help in 3386 and got an overwhelming response. The civilians you see were actually on the most part unemployed and idle, either because they don’t have professional qualifications that are in demand at the time or because they simply were not interested in the work that was available. Helping others in need is however a strong trait of the people of the 34th century, who are convinced pacifists.”

“They were out of work? But they don’t look poor to me.”

“Lieutenant, the society of the 34th century, which is called the Global Council, is what you would describe in France a socialist paradise. All the basic necessities of life are provided free to all the citizens, including the unemployed. That means free rent for a government-provided basic apartment, a ration card that allows you free meals in public cafeterias, a free clothes allocation, free medical care and education and a small, very small actually, cash stipend. The money one earns through a job is essentially used to buy luxury items, to go to first class restaurants or to enjoy vacations in fancy places.”

“And what attracted those people to come work for you in a time of war, especially if they are pacifists?”

“Partly the pay and partly the chance to help others in need. The reports from this war struck the citizens of the Global Council hard: they couldn’t even imagine that so much misery and inhumanity could exist. Some of our volunteers are actually people who had good jobs but took unpaid leave to come help us alleviate some of the human suffering caused by this war.”

“I see! Thank you, Mister Crawford.”

Lieutenant Pinel then returned in the chow line, thinking furiously about what Jack had said. Pinel was actually a discreet member of the French Communist Party. He didn’t know if establishing a social system such as the one described by Jack Crawford would be possible in France but it was certainly worth considering if it proved to be at all

feasible. His turn at the buffet then came. Pinel looked in disbelief at the choice of eggs, sausages, ham, cheese, oatmeal, cereals, bread and fresh fruits, then at one of the giants helping to serve the food, a middle-aged woman with a mix of oriental and Caucasian blood.

“Is this typical of the variety and quality of food you get in your society, miss?”
The bald woman looked back, apparently surprised by his question.

“Yes, mister. Actually, this is a quite basic spread. Is something unsatisfactory, mister?”

“Uh, no, not at all. Thank you, miss.”
Like the other French soldiers, Pinel filled his plate, going heavy on the meats, which were rationed and expensive commodities in this war. He then sat with his men, which were hungrily wolfing down their breakfast and making more than a few positive comments about the food. As they were nearly finished, a man’s voice came out of some invisible loudspeaker.

“YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE! BE ADVISED THAT WEAPONS DISTRIBUTION WILL START IN HALF A HOUR. IN THE MEANTIME, ENJOY THE COFFEE: WE HAVE FRESH COLOMBIAN GRIND.”

“Colombian grind?” Said Pinel’s platoon sergeant while getting up. “After all this ersatz coffee, I’m certainly going to have a cup...or two.”

One of Pinel’s soldiers then looked at him while munching on a sausage.

“Lieutenant, do you know what kind of weapons we will get? Will they be as modern as our new uniforms?”

“I frankly don’t know, Corporal. I guess that we will see in half a hour.”

What they saw half an hour later in one of the seemingly countless storage rooms of the ship was even better than what they had dreamed. Taking a rifle out of a crate, the French instructor assigned to Pinel’s platoon presented it with pride to the 34 men facing him in a semi-circle.

“Gentlemen, this is a FAPAM, or Fusil d’Assaut à Puissance Accrue Manurin ²¹, your new individual rifle. As you can see, it is short enough to be used like a submachine gun and is thus suitable to arm tank crews as well as infantrymen. It fires a totally new kind of 7mm cartridge called Telescoped Cased Round, like this one.”

²¹ Manurin Increased Power Assault Rifle

The instructor then handed Pinel a strange cartridge, where the bullet was actually seated inside the casing, with the propellant surrounding it. It made for a fat but short round of ammunition. Pinel examined it for a few seconds, then passed it around his men. The instructor waited until the round was back in his hands before continuing.

“The FAPAM was adopted by the French Army as its standard rifle in the year 2029, after the 7mm TCR was selected as the new standard rifle caliber. It can fire in semi-automatic, automatic or 3-round burst modes and is fed by a 70-round capacity magazine that fits on top of it.”

The instructor pointed at a cylinder-like magazine on the table in front of him. A number of other accessories and parts were also on the table. He took the magazine and snapped it in place on top of the rifle. Next, he pointed at a large, round housing under the rifle barrel.

“This is the grenade-launcher assembly. It is a single-shot unit that fires 60mm grenades to a maximum range of 800 meters. The grenades themselves are contained in this sealed tube, which is used as both a transport container and as the launch tube. To load the launcher, you simply insert the sealed tube in and press while twisting it clockwise one-quarter turn. Once fired, you simply twist back the empty tube and throw it away. The standard grenade is a dual-purpose anti-armor, anti-personnel one that can pierce up to 300mm of steel. Its fragments are deadly to a radius of ten meters. The heavy recoil when firing a grenade is absorbed by a pneumatic recoil buffer situated behind the launcher.”

The instructor went on for a good five minutes, then demonstrated how to disassemble and reassemble the weapon. Next, he distributed a rifle to each of his students and made them practice with their new weapons for a good hour until he was satisfied that they were proficient in caring for them.

“Alright, we will now see your new light machinegun, the MLAM, or *Mitrailleuse Légère d’Assaut Manurin*. Who are the machine gunners in your platoon?”

Seven men raised their hands. The instructor looked at the most senior one.

“What kind of machinegun have you been using up to now, Master Corporal?”

“We have two British Vickers .303 machineguns, Master Sergeant. They are good weapons but are a bit too heavy for our assault role. We lost our original *Chatellerault 1924/29* light machineguns in 1940.”

“Then, you should love this baby.” Said the instructor, going to a large crate and taking out one after the other three futuristic light machineguns, handing them to the machine gunners.

“The MLAM uses the same 7mm TCR ammunition as your new FAPAM rifles and are actually very similar inside. They however use a larger, 200-round capacity magazine, have a longer, heavier barrel with quick-change feature, a folding bipod and an optical X4 optical sight. Compared to your old Vickers, the MLAM has twice the rate of fire, weighs less than a third of the weight and can be transported and operated by a single man. A second man is however recommended as assistant gunner, to carry the spare barrel, tools and extra ammunition. I will ask three of you to exchange your FAPAMs for MLAMs now.”

Pinel then pointed at his three best gunners.

“Alright, Berthelet, Chauveau and Meunier, you take MLAMs.”

The three gunners obeyed readily enough, taking their new light machineguns eagerly. Another half hour of training on the MLAM followed. As they were about to take a well-deserved break, a doubt then entered Pinel’s mind.

“Master Sergeant, these new weapons are indeed fantastic but they use ammunition that is not produced in 1942. What happens when we run out of whatever stocks the Time Patrol brought from the future?”

The instructor smiled, having obviously expected such a question.

“Do not worry about that, sir. Only in terms of 7mm TCR ammunition, this ship is actually transporting over forty billion rounds that will be handed to our forces. There are lots more left where those came from as well.”

“Forty billion?”

“That’s right, sir. Now, could I ask you to stay for a few minutes while your men take a rest? I have a pistol for you that fires the same 7mm TCR ammunition than the MLAM and the FAPAM.”

That impressed Pinel: the idea of having a single type of ammunition for all the individual weapons in an infantry unit was a wise one indeed that would certainly save a lot of hassle in terms of logistics and tactical flexibility.

Pinel and his platoon felt wonderful as they went to the cafeteria at noon for lunch: they were now more than ready to take on the Germans and would do so with a marked superiority in equipment, something they had never enjoyed up to now in this

war. The meal itself helped keep the morale up, the menu being varied and of a very high quality, apart of being plentiful. As their assigned instructor guided them towards the lower cargo decks after lunch, he seemingly made a short detour and led them around a wide hallway lined on one side with large, thick viewing ports. The view out of these ports immediately drew exclamations from the soldiers: visible from orbit was the Earth, with its beautiful blue orb and oceans dotted with white clouds. The instructor let them admire the view for a good five minutes before speaking.

“We have been in orbit around the Earth since we left England yesterday. The people of the Time Patrol told me that, in the 34th century, Humanity occupies the whole of the Solar System and travels routinely through space.”

“The lucky bastards!” Couldn’t help say Pinel, drawing a nod from the instructor.

“Indeed! We are now going to one of the main cargo decks, where your battalion will draw its new vehicles. After that, this ship will land in a deserted area, so that you could go out and do some firing practice with your new weapons before returning to England, where another unit will be picked up to be reequipped.”

“Wait, Master Sergeant!” Said Pinel. “I can see how we could easily learn to operate and maintain new portable weapons, but vehicles are another matter entirely. Learning the mechanical details of a modern vehicle takes months and years, and spare parts availability could become a big problem.”

“That is why your new vehicles are not so new, sir.” Replied the instructor. “All of them are in production in 1942 and spare parts for them are readily available. Follow me and you will see.”

“Uh, if you say so, Master Sergeant. Lead on!”

Pinel was hopeful as he followed the instructor. Up to now, his unit had to do with a motley collection of old, mostly captured enemy trucks that had represented a maintenance nightmare for the inventive but overworked mechanics of the battalion. His eyes, as of those of his men, popped wide open when the cargo elevator they used stopped and its doors slid open, showing the inside of a cavernous hold: literally hundreds of military vehicles, both wheeled and tracked types, were lined up in successive rows, with enough space between rows to let them circulate around.

“Where the hell did they find all these vehicles?” Exclaimed Pinel, making the instructor grin.

“Would you believe in American war surplus auction sales in 1946, sir? There are also a few captured German heavy combat vehicles and artillery pieces. Your battalion transport officer will now assign you your new vehicles.”

Their platoon marched to a group of French officers and of one Time Patrol member discussing in the middle of one of the circulation lanes. Pinel came to attention in front of Captain Yves Roissy, the battalion transport officer, and saluted him.

“Lieutenant Pinel, Second Platoon, Second Company, ready to receive its new vehicles, sir!”

Captain Roissy saluted back, then looked at a list in his hands.

“Lieutenant Pinel, I have for your platoon three American DUKW amphibious trucks and one jeep.”

“Amphibious trucks, sir?” Said Pinel, surprised, not knowing that such things existed.

“Yes, Lieutenant! They are actually built around the chassis of the American GMC 2.5 ton truck, have a boat hull and one propeller in the rear. The DUKW will actually become the standard transport vehicle of our battalion. Come with me and you will see.”

Pinel, with his men a few paces behind, followed Roissy along the rows of vehicles. Pinel was able to recognize as part of the visible inventory the GMC 2.5 ton and Dodge $\frac{3}{4}$ ton trucks in many of their variants, hundreds of American jeeps and armored M-3 halftracks, plus dozens of German tanks and self-propelled guns, including huge Tiger tanks with their impressive 88mm guns. They finally stopped in front of a row of what looked like six-wheeled trucks with boat hulls. A .50 caliber heavy machinegun was mounted on each of the DUKWs and the white star of the American Army was still painted on the vehicles.

“You can take the first three DUKWs of that row, Lieutenant, along with one jeep out of the row to our left. Have your men familiarize themselves with them but do not start the engines: we will have to wait until this ship has landed and it could open its ramps before doing that. If not, the fumes would contaminate the air aboard the ship. Once on the ground, we will be able to drive around and get familiar with them. We will also take the time to paint them into a standard camouflage scheme, with our own insignias on.”

Pinel looked at his new vehicles with bright eyes.

“Hell, sir, I feel ready to eat Germans for breakfast anytime now with all this new kit.”

“That’s the idea, Lieutenant!” Replied Roissy, also pleased.

12:09 (Paris Time)

Saturday, May 30, 1942 ‘B’

Le Bourget Airfield, northeast of Paris

France

The first thing that the few remaining employees of the airfield at Le Bourget saw were four scoutships approaching at a dizzying speed, low over the horizon. Remembering what had happened six days ago in Paris when such ships were seen, the French cheered wildly and without fear, since the Germans had departed in great haste from the airfield yesterday. As the scoutships slowed down, they split up and each overflew specific installations of the airfield. About 200 silhouettes then jumped out from the tail end of the scoutships and, gliding smoothly down, dispersed around the airfield. An old janitor standing in front of the air terminal’s main entrance watched with awe one tall man fly down towards him, landing three paces in front of him. The man, wearing helmet and body armor and holding a sort of compact rifle, smiled to the janitor and spoke in perfect French.

“Good day, sir! Could you tell me if there are any Germans left around the airfield?”

“Not one, sir! They all fled like scared rabbits yesterday. They took what they could with them but they didn’t have enough trucks to bring all their supplies with them. I am actually surprised that they didn’t blow them up before leaving.”

“That’s because we forbade them to do so, good man.” Replied the helmeted soldier. “What kind of supplies did they leave behind?”

“Mostly aviation fuel, spare parts and ammunition, including hundreds of bombs. Some of the fuel is already gone, however: the black marketeers didn’t take long to learn about it.”

“I see!” Said laconically the soldier, apparently not pleased about the stolen fuel. He then spoke in his helmet’s microphone.

“Jan, this is Fernand. The Germans are supposedly all gone but be careful still about possible booby-traps. Also, beware of war profiteers who have apparently started stealing fuel from the leftover German stocks. Fernand, out!”

Looking back at the janitor, the soldier shook the old man’s hand.

“Rejoice, mister: Paris is being freed for good today.”

As the soldier said that, the biggest flying thing the janitor had ever seen appeared out of nowhere over the airfield and landed vertically on a dozen giant landing legs. Two huge ramps lowered from the ship’s belly and long columns of wheeled and tracked vehicles started rolling down on the airfield. The janitor felt his heart jump with joy when he saw that the jeep leading one of the columns flew a big French flag with the Lorraine Cross on it, the symbol of the Free French Forces.

12:15 (Paris Time)

Paris Town Hall Square

Right shore of River Seine, Paris

The scoutship BRITANNIA uncloaked just as it was about to touch ground on the large square next to the city town hall, an imposing and beautiful 19th century building. As soon as the rear access ramp was down and the twenty combat robots got out behind Jean Bigras, Captain Georges Bergé shouted to the 94 men from the First Company of Airborne Infantry of the Free French Forces standing in the scoutship’s cargo hold.

“REMEMBER: AVOID CIVILIAN CASUALTIES AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE. FIRE ONLY IF NECESSARY.”

The 95 French paratroopers, loaded down with backpacks full of ammunition and rations, ran out of the scoutship and rushed towards the town hall’s three main entrances. The six Paris policemen guarding the doors, stunned, did not offer any resistance and simply let the Free French soldiers run by them and enter the building. Already, the BRITANNIA had taken off and was being replaced in the square by the AMERICA, which promptly disgorged 94 men of the French First Battalion of Naval Infantry Commandos. The scoutships WALKUREN and ANGEL OF MERCY followed in quick succession, dropping off the rest of the battalion of naval infantry commandos, who quickly dispersed to take control of the area surrounding the town hall. The Parisian citizens watching all this with a mixture of disbelief and joy then looked in awe

as the heavy cargo shuttle HERMES maneuvered carefully to land in the square. Six jeeps, five of them mounting heavy machineguns, came out first, followed by a radio command van, a military ambulance and ten medium trucks. The armed jeeps dispersed at once, while the other vehicles parked in a single row in front of the town hall. The HERMES left as soon as its hold was empty: it had plenty more tasks to fill today. Stepping out of the lead jeep, General De Gaulle proudly marched side-by-side with Nancy Laplante towards the town hall. This was truly a dream come true for him, especially in view of the doubts and suspicions the British and, especially, the Americans had shown towards him and his Free French Forces since 1940. Thanks to Nancy Laplante and her incredible genius for operational planning, his ragtag forces had been brought from the various corners of Africa and of the Near East, where they had been fighting mostly French Vichy forces, to England, where they had been quickly reequipped with new equipment, including reclaimed French Army equipment that the enemy had been using since the defeat of 1940. What De Gaulle was most grateful for to Nancy Laplante, though, was the fact that she was ready to back him up by all means and to favor France at this critical time. De Gaulle was however not naïve and realized that Nancy expected in return his support for her post-war plans for Europe. He had already had a long discussion with her on that subject four days ago and understood why she was loath on depending much on the British and the Americans: both countries had their own agendas that partly conflicted with her long-term goals and both had serious disagreements with her, be it about racism for the Americans or about imperial attitude in the case of the British. De Gaulle, on his part, had already agreed with Nancy to a number of post-war measures that, while sensitive to many in France, he could live with.

Entering the town hall with Laplante and his Aide-De-Camp, De Gaulle was met at the foot of the monumental ceremonial staircase by a small man in civilian suit pushed forward by a Free French soldier. The soldier came to attention and saluted De Gaulle.

“General, this is the assistant prefect of Paris, Monsieur Gilles De LaMotte. It seems that the prefect himself fled along with the Germans yesterday.”

Both De Gaulle and Laplante looked down critically at the apprehensive civilian.

“We will eventually catch up with the prefect and deal with him.” Said De Gaulle. “Monsieur De LaMotte, I am General Charles De Gaulle, Commander of the Free French Forces. My soldiers are right now taking control of Paris in the name of the French

Government of National Liberation, which I lead, and I request you and your officials to provide any and all assistance required by my troops and me. First of all, you will call the police prefect and tell him that I expect law and order to be respected. Any act of vigilantism or summary execution against presumed collaborators is strictly forbidden and will be severely punished. This prohibition includes any public humiliation of women accused of relations with German soldiers. Military tribunals, with the assistance of the Time Patrol, will judge those accused of collaboration. We already have a list of proven collaborators that will be promptly arrested by my own soldiers today. I will establish my temporary command post here in the city's administrative offices and my men will start patrolling Paris this afternoon. Do you have any questions, Monsieur De LaMotte?"

The assistant prefect looked briefly at Nancy before looking back at De Gaulle.

"Uh, yes, General: what about the curfew established by the Germans? Do you plan to enforce a curfew as well?"

"Paris is now a free city, monsieur. While public violence and disorder will be repressed, the population will be free to come and go as they wish and to celebrate their liberation. I will soon make a radio address to this effect."

A genuine smile then appeared on the face of the official.

"That is wonderful news, General. If you don't mind, I will now go call the police prefect to inform him of all this."

"Please do, monsieur."

As the assistant prefect left them, escorted by the soldier, Nancy looked somberly at De Gaulle.

"I doubt that everything will go this smoothly today, General. I am especially worried about the pro-German militia of Jacques Doriot. Those militiamen know that they are as good as dead if they are captured now and will resist to the end."

"True enough, Miss Laplante, but they will not be able to offer much resistance: they are only lightly armed and are outnumbered."

"Still, it would be damning to lose many lives so close to the end of this war. If your men can flush them out with the help of my robots and without French casualties, it would be a good start for this new French government. If you don't mind, General, I now have to leave to take care of other things. Our liaison agent, Jeanne Leclerc, will arrive here in a few minutes and will provide you as much assistance as possible."

"I suppose that you are going to Warsaw, to support the return of the Polish government-in-exile there?"

“No, General. I already have a sizeable team there. Rather, I’m going to personally deliver a few of the invitations to heads of states to our peace conference scheduled here for next Friday.”

“Are the Americans part of the invited guests, miss?” Asked De Gaulle cautiously. “You know that they have recognized the collaborationist government of Vichy instead of mine as what they consider the legitimate government of France.”

“I am perfectly aware of that, General, and will remind them of what the reality is here. They may yet learn something about European politics. See you tomorrow, General.”

“I will await your next visit eagerly, Miss Laplante.”

Nancy then disappeared in a flash of light, leaving De Gaulle and his aide to look at the spot she had been in.

“What a woman she is!” Said fervently De Gaulle, who then turned to look at his aide. “Claude, once the city is secure, I want you to either find or have produced a Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor, along with the accompanying War Cross with Palm. Have also a few dozens more War Crosses ready as quickly as possible.”

“It will be done, General.”

09:09 (Washington Time)

Saturday, May 30, 1942 ‘B’

State Department Building

Washington, United States

Cordell Hull’s secretary, hearing some kind of disturbance in the hallway of the normally quiet State Department Building, was about to go see outside her office what was going on when a tall woman dressed in a gray military uniform opened the door and entered. The woman was too much of a celebrity for the secretary not to know her.

“Miss Laplante? What can I do for you?”

“You may tell the Secretary of State that I would like to see him for a few minutes to discuss a few urgent matters, Miss Calloway.”

“Uh, one moment please.” Replied the secretary, eyeing discreetly the two pistols and the sword slung from the shiny black leather belt worn by Laplante. The Canadian’s uniform was a parade style one, made of a shiny gray tissue and with rows of medal ribbons on her left breast. Knocking first and waiting for an answer, the

secretary pushed the door of Hull's office open and stuck her head in after hearing her boss' muffled answer.

"Mister Secretary, Miss Nancy Laplante is here to see you. She says that she needs to discuss a few urgent matters with you, sir. Should I let her in now?"

The old politician and diplomat, sitting behind his desk and reviewing a report, thought furiously for a few seconds. The President was not very happy with Laplante these days after the stunt she had pulled in Hawaii. In fact, Roosevelt had told him only two days ago that he considered Laplante as a woman whose power had gone to her head and who needed a lesson in humility. Hull himself tended to agree with him on that.

"Tell her that I am busy right now and that, if she wishes so, she can wait in the anteroom for the time being."

The secretary nodded her head and closed the door before turning to face Laplante.

"I am sorry, Miss Laplante, but the Secretary of State is busy at the moment. If you wishes so, you can have a seat and wait here."

An air of mounting irritation appeared on Laplante's face, who however kept her voice even and polite.

"Miss, tell the Secretary of State that I am fighting a war and that I have no time for his petty bureaucratic games. If he refuses to see me now without some very good reasons, then the United States will be shut out of both the Western Pacific and of Europe after this war."

"Uh, I will pass your message, miss. One moment please."

The secretary knocked again on the door and went inside, closing the door behind her before walking quickly to Hull's desk.

"I am sorry, sir, but she insists and threatens to shut our country out of the Western Pacific and of Europe if you don't see her now."

"She threatens us?" Replied Hull, getting irritated himself. "Alright, let her in, so that I can give her a piece of my mind."

"Yes sir!"

The secretary went out once again to invite Laplante in, closing the door after the visitor had entered and going to sit behind her desk, ready to call a few guards if things turned sour in Hull's office. Inside, Nancy marched resolutely towards Hull's desk and stopped a few paces in front of it as the diplomat got up from his chair.

"Secretary Hull, you should know that I don't request urgent meetings simply to discuss peccadilloes."

“And you should know that the United States doesn’t take lightly threats made against it, wherever they come from. You have already interfered a couple of time in the internal affairs of the United States and even broke two prisoners out of a state-run internment camp.”

Nancy bent forward and put both fists on Hull’s desk, glaring at him.

“Count yourself lucky that I didn’t have your obscenity of a camp torn down then, Mister Secretary. My people had just liberated dozens of camps that were damn similar to the one in Manzanar and had liberated hundreds of thousands of starving, brutalized inmates from those camps. We have basically wiped out by ourselves both the German and the Japanese military machines, potentially saving you from losing tens of thousands of your soldiers and sailors, and the only thing you do in response is to snub me? Well, I do have power and I will use it, but only to make this world a better one and to prevent deaths and suffering. Now, you either listen to me or I will totally ignore the United States from now on and do things around this world strictly my own way.”

While despising the tone she was taking with him, Hull kept his cool façade and pointed at a nearby chair.

“Alright, miss. Please sit down and say your piece.”

“I will stand, if you don’t mind: this is going to be short. First of, both the cities of Paris and Warsaw have been liberated and both the French and Polish governments in exile have been put back in power. The German Army is now withdrawing on all fronts back to the German borders, where they will be allowed to stay in a purely defensive posture, stripped of all offensive weapons. Stalin died of a heart attack yesterday, while Beria was killed by a father avenging the rape of his teenage daughter. The Soviet Union is now being ruled collectively by the surviving voting members of the Politburo. As a result of all this, a peace conference on the subject of post-war Europe will be held in Paris on June fifth, next Friday. Both I and General De Gaulle are extending an invitation to the United States to attend that conference as an observer state.”

Hull was speechless for a moment, stunned by so many vital news at once. He then connected on to something Laplante had said in passing.

“Wait! Did you say General De Gaulle? You know very well that we recognize only the government of Marshal Petain as the legitimate government of France.”

That earned him a severe look from Nancy.

“Mister Secretary, first the United States stayed in its splendid isolation for nearly three years, until it was attacked itself. Then you snubbed the one French general who

called for his compatriot to keep fighting and recognized instead a collaborationist government that has helped the Germans round up its Jewish citizens for deportation to death camps, which we just emptied. Even more, you held talks with and supported French Admiral Darlan, a political opportunist ready to switch sides at will and who took orders from the Germans when it suited him. Well, whether you like it or not, General De Gaulle will be the center of power in France from now on. If you still insist on wanting to back the wrong horse, then your invitation will be revoked and Europe will be rebuilt without any input from the United States.”

“Don’t you see what you are doing there, miss?” Replied heatedly Hull. “De Gaulle is a megalomaniac manipulated by the communists. You are going to help hand over France and maybe the whole of Europe to them.”

“Mister Hull, I won’t even grace those amateurish assertions with the comment they would deserve. Now, will you or won’t you recognize De Gaulle’s government as the sole legitimate one for France?”

“Miss, you know very well that I can’t initiate such an important change in our external policies without at least conferring with the President first.”

“Then I suggest that you make it quick, Mister Hull.” Said Nancy frostily before turning around and walking towards the door. A shout from Hull made her stop and turn.

“Wait! What about the Pacific campaign? Are you still going to fight the Japanese?”

“We will do what is necessary to stop the suffering around the Pacific, Mister Hull, without expecting anything in return. Just remember that the Time Patrol works for the welfare of the whole of Humanity, not for the good of any particular state. Goodbye, Mister Secretary!”

Hull watched Laplante leave, then grabbed his telephone and called the White House. He was quickly switched on to the President and spoke to him urgently.

“Mister President, this is Cordell Hull speaking. I just received a surprise visit from Nancy Laplante, who came to drop an invitation to a conference in Paris next Friday.”

Roosevelt listened in silence for a minute as his secretary of state told him about the information and the conditions given by Laplante. He finally grumbled in frustration.

“Can’t anybody reign in that woman? It is becoming impossible to make any coherent long-term policy with her around. Listen, Cordell, I am due to head a planning

meeting of the chiefs of staffs at ten in the conference room of the White House, where we will decide on a plan of action in the Pacific. Come in as well, so that we can discuss our European strategy at the same time.”

“I will be there, Mister President.”

Hull next called his aide to have his chauffeured car pick him up at the main entrance of the building. He then put a couple of files inside his briefcase before leaving his office and advising his secretary that he would be at the White House.

The car ride was short and Hull arrived well in time for the meeting, finding in the conference room of the White House the commanders of the Navy, Army, Marines and Army Air Force, the Secretaries of War and of the Navy, the Chief of the Joint Staffs, the Commander of the Pacific fleet and the President’s Chief of Staff, Admiral Leahy. The President himself was wheeled inside the room a few minutes after Hull’s arrival and stopped his wheelchair at the end of the table reserved for him. He looked around at the participants before speaking up.

“Gentlemen, before we start this planning session, I would like you to listen to some fresh information from Secretary Hull. Cordell, the room is yours.”

“Thank you, Mister President.”

Hull then described Laplante’s visit to the others, who grew quickly subdued. The Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, looked questioningly at Hull at the end of his presentation.

“What will the death of Stalin mean for us in terms of strategy in Europe, Cordell?”

“I am not sure yet, as I don’t know who replaced him as the effective leader of the Soviet Union. Thank God that Beria died too. I wouldn’t want to think about a Soviet Union led by such a monster.”

“That is in fact one thing that intrigues me.” Said Roosevelt from his wheelchair. “Don’t you find curious, if not suspicious, that both Stalin and Beria died at the same time? Couldn’t it be Miss Laplante playing kingmaker?”

“Even if she did, Mister President,” said Stimson, “I personally won’t shed a tear for any of those two men. Both were tyrants of the worst kind.”

“Maybe, but did you think about where she will stop playing kingmaker? She is apparently already putting General De Gaulle on the French throne, so to speak.” From jovial, Stimson then turned dead serious and stared back at the President.

“Sir, if I may. I have met Miss Laplante many times, the first time being only a few weeks after her arrival in 1940. I believe her to be an exceptional and most decent person, even if some people have tried to demonize her lately, maybe out of jealousy. Let’s not forget that she has the tremendous advantage of historical hindsight over us, apart from enjoying the support of some incredibly advanced technology. We may not like what she tells us, but does that mean that what she says is wrong? I personally believe that we may be wise to listen to her with an open mind.”

“To the point of changing our laws to fit her views, Mister Stimson?” Replied Roosevelt. “That is what she is basically asking us to do on matters like segregation laws and the internment of Japanese in the United States. No! The people of the United States elected this government and not her. Let’s now talk about our future plans for the Pacific.”

Stimson felt disappointment at being rebuffed like this but did not insist. Admiral King, the austere, severe commander of the Navy, was next to speak, his voice forceful.

“I say that we should go for a straightforward invasion of Japan right away. The Japanese have next to nothing left in the air or on the sea to oppose us and we could attack while most of the Japanese Army is stuck in isolated garrisons around the Pacific and unable to move. Hell, we probably could take Tokyo in a week.”

“Sir, that may not be a wise move.” Objected politely Admiral Nimitz, who was the subaltern of King. “The Japanese are holding tens of thousands of American and Allied prisoners around the Pacific, both military and civilians, and could massacre them in retaliation to any invasion of the Japanese main islands by us.”

“They know what would happen to them if they did that. They would not dare touch our people.” Said King dismissively. “Besides, we have thousands of Japanese held here in the States that could be used as a bargaining chip.”

Henry Stimson, keeping his cool with difficulty, bent forward, glaring at King.

“Admiral, you should realize two things: first, I believe that the Japanese soldiers don’t really care about either what will happen to them or what will happen to the Japanese interned in the United States; second, many of those so-called Japanese held in our camps happen to be American citizens, whether you like it or not. I always believed that interning those people, who by the way never showed any disloyalty towards their country of adoption, was both a big mistake and an injustice. I still think likewise right now. So, before you sacrifice both our people held by the Japanese and

punish some others held by us, I would urge you to reconsider your idea about invading Japan.”

King, a stern man unaccustomed to having someone oppose him openly, was about to reply when General Marshall, the Army Chief of Staffs, cut him off.

“Admiral King, I believe that we should hold on a bit about invading Japan yet. Personally, I feel that we should concentrate first on the place where most of our former allies and of our servicemen are held in the Pacific: the Philippines. We could always blockade Japan in the meantime and let it starve into submission while we free our people.”

“I would agree with that, General.” Said General Arnold, commander of the Army Air Force. “We would have however to act quickly to ensure that the Japanese in the Philippines don’t have the time or chance to harm our people there. I propose that, once our fleet is in place and about to invade the Philippines, we launch a massive airborne operation to secure the Japanese prisoners camps.”

“How long would it take us before we are ready to launch such an operation, gentlemen?” Asked Roosevelt, looking around him and appearing obviously interested by Arnold’s idea. The generals and admirals discussed between themselves for a moment before Marshall looked back at the president.

“We should be ready in about three weeks, Mister President. Doing it any faster would make us take unacceptable risks.”

“Then three weeks it is, gentlemen! Now, about Europe. I say that, since Miss Laplante has decided to play kingmaker over there, we should let her run the show and wait for her to trip on her own plans when things there will blow out in her face. Then we will see who has the last laugh. Cordell, we will skip that conference in Paris: I will be damned if I support that De Gaulle and his so-called Free French.”

Stimson nearly said aloud then that Laplante was certainly going to have that last laugh but managed to keep it inside himself.

17:03 (Warsaw Time)

Saturday, May 30, 1942 ‘B’

Local Time Patrol command post

Gesia Street, Warsaw Jewish Ghetto

Poland

Jack Crawford briefly stuck his head out of the lounge used as the command post proper and shouted at George Townsend, who was relaxing with Liliana Edelman in the nearby room.

“The celebrations are on for tomorrow, guys. Nancy will arrive at ten in the morning.”

“Good! Thanks, Jack!” Replied George before returning his attention to the holographic screen of the entertainment unit furnishing the room. His right arm, put around Liliana, resumed its discreet caresses, making the small but pretty Jewish female fighter purr with satisfaction. She had been watching with George the documentary made on the life of Yeshua of Nazareth and was finding it positively fascinating. Watching it while snuggled close to George made it even better. The final credits were now being displayed on the screen.

“You know, George, I am anxious to finally meet Nancy Laplante tomorrow: she seems to be such a fascinating woman. With everything she did for us and others in this war, she should be called a saint, or an angel.”

George laughed softly at that.

“Nancy, a saint? She may have earned that title in a previous life but she is no saint in this life. She likes her fun too much. Let me show you.”

Grabbing the remote control of the entertainment unit, George selected one of the separate features attached to the main documentary and started playing it. Liliana read aloud the title that appeared over a picture of the Roman fortress of Antonia, in Jerusalem.

“Nauca rocks the Antonia. What does that mean, George?”

“I will let you see for yourself, Liliana.”

The meaning of the title effectively became quickly self-evident to the young Jewish woman, who reddened at one of the scenes of the feature short film: a half naked Nancy singing and dancing on the tables of the Roman refectory while hundreds of wild Roman soldiers cheered her on.

“Wow! A few of my male comrades would certainly love to watch this.”

“I bet they would! Don’t think however that Nancy is always like this. I worked for nearly a year for her while still in the British Army and she was a very responsible officer. She still is, in fact, more than ever.”

Liliana looked up at George, uncertainty in her eyes.

“George, how long will you stay in Warsaw?”

"I don't know yet, Liliana. Maybe a few more days. Why?"

"Because I don't want you to go away from me, ever." Said the girl softly, attracting a tender look from George.

"Then, why don't you come with me? You could enroll in the Time Patrol and have the time of your life...with me."

"I could?"

"Why not? Liliana, you are not only a bright girl, but also a brave girl. We need people like you. Even more importantly, I need you and want you."

"You really mean it, George?" Said Liliana, close to tears. The British nodded his head.

"I do, Liliana. Come with me to the future, as my wife."

Tears now coming out, Liliana answered George with a passionate kiss.

09:48 (Warsaw Time)

Sunday, May 31, 1942 'B'

Muranowski Square, Warsaw

Shimon Huberband, leading seven other rabbis and wearing like them a ceremonial shawl and robe, arrived a few minutes in advance of the requested time in Muranowski Square, by now well established as the landing area for ships of the Time Patrol. A group of ten armed Jewish fighters were already waiting along one side of the Square, near Jack Crawford, George Townsend, Miriam of Magdala and two other persons. Shimon smiled when he recognized the giant woman in that group and went to her, followed by his fellow rabbis.

"Miss Kano, it is a pleasure to see you again. How are you today?"

There was still a bit of a haunted look in the reporter when she turned to face him and made a weak smile. She was wearing her head-mounted camera and microphone system this morning.

"Rabbi Huberband! I feel...better. And you?"

"I am fine, miss. You are here to cover the celebrations, I suppose?"

"I am. I brought with me Mister Peter O'Neil, reporter with the London Daily Telegraph and a good friend of Nancy Laplante. He will also cover today's events and will report on the liberation of both Warsaw and Paris."

“Paris has been liberated too?” Asked Huberband excitedly, getting a nod from Lori Kano.

“It was reoccupied by French troops yesterday. The German army units that had been occupying France are now nearly all back inside Germany.”

“That is great news indeed. I had a cousin in Paris. With any luck he and his family will be safe and free.”

“Excuse me, miss.” Cut in a balding, heavily bearded man behind Huberband. “Could you tell us why we were asked to come here? We were only told that Miss Laplante would be bringing with her an old Jewish artifact that we will then escort to the Tlomackie Great Synagogue.”

Jack Crawford, listening to all this, answered for Lori.

“You will actually carry that artifact between the eight of you, Rabbi Shapiro. It is quite heavy but it is too sacred to be carried by others than Jews. Nancy Laplante will come in her best Jewish dress for the occasion.”

“Is she actually Jewish, Mister Crawford?”

“She may not be a practicing Jew but she was converted by Rabbi Yeshua in Cana in the year 30 C.E..”

“Rabbi Yeshua?” Said blankly Kalunimus Kalmish Shapiro. “That name does not ring a bell to me. Should I know about him?”

“Probably!” Replied Jack, smiling. “He is also known as Jesus Christ.” Shapiro and the other rabbis were left speechless for a moment. Shapiro then lowered his voice.

“You better not tell this to the Christian Poles: they would hound your Nancy Laplante endlessly if they knew that.”

“Not as much as Miriam of Magdala if they realized that she is officially one of their saints, Rabbi Shapiro.”

Shapiro nodded his head while looking at the young Galilean woman, who was by now well known and appreciated by the people of the Ghetto. In fact, Miriam had come a few times to his house, which was also used as a synagogue, to pray. Miriam was resplendent in a beautifully embroidered robe of ancient manufacture. She was also holding a small boy of about one year of age that he had not seen before.

“Is this one of the orphans from the Ghetto’s Jewish orphanage, Miriam?”

“David is effectively an orphan, Rabbi Shapiro, but he is actually my son. He was in the care of another woman for the last few days while I was helping here.”

"I am sorry to hear that, Miriam. Did his father die during this war?"

"Hardly, Rabbi! Yeshua died on the cross when David was still inside me."

Shapiro became pale and stared at the little boy.

"The son of Jesus Christ? This could start real chaos throughout Christianity if this became known."

"We are perfectly aware of that, Rabbi." Said Jack Crawford before pointing an index at Peter O'Neil, who was about to take a picture of the child. "Mister O'Neil, as much as you are a favored friend of the Time Patrol, I will ask you to forget what you just heard. You know the consequences in England if you would publish something on David."

"Hell, I realize that, but to blow such a story: the son of Jesus Christ. My editor would kill me if he ever learns that I didn't tell him about this."

"Well, it won't be as painful as what Nancy would do to you if you blew that secret, mister. Talking of the devil, here is her shuttlecraft."

Looking all skyward, they were in time to see a light shuttlecraft on its final approach to the marked landing area. It landed smoothly less than fifteen meters from their group, with its rear access ramp opening soon afterwards. Nancy Laplante, dressed in an ancient Jewish robe and headscarf, got out and signaled the rabbis to approach before going back inside. The eight rabbis, dying with curiosity, walked quickly to the foot of the ramp, where they were able to look inside the shuttlecraft. All of them immediately went to their knees, a few of them suddenly dizzy from the rush of blood to their head.

"IT...IT CAN'T BE!" Shouted Huberband, attracting at a run the ten Jewish fighters nearby, who thought that something had gone wrong. They braked to a halt and also knelt after seeing what was inside the shuttle. Zivia Lubetkin bent her head, unable to believe her eyes.

"Dear God! The Ark of the Covenant."

Nancy, who was sliding in place the two gold-plated carrying poles in the hooks on the side of the priceless artifact, raised her voice to take the Jews out of their trance.

"It is the Ark of the Covenant, gentlemen, but it won't get to the Great Synagogue if you stay on your knees like this."

Shimon Huberband wiped sweat from his forehead as he got up on his feet and climbed the ramp of the shuttlecraft.

"Miss Laplante, I will always owe you for giving me such an honor as carrying the Ark. How did you get it?"

“The Time Patrol replaced it with a replica in the Temple of Solomon just before it was occupied and looted by Egyptian raiders after Solomon’s death. One day, it will be brought back to Jerusalem, that I promise solemnly.”

“May God bless you for that, Miss Laplante.” Said Shapiro fervently. Nancy gave him a mysterious look.

“He already did, Rabbi. You will have to be careful when lifting the Ark: it is quite heavy, apart of being irreplaceable. You wouldn’t want to drop it and damage it.”

“May God save me from such a curse, miss.” Replied Shapiro, meaning it. He and the seven other rabbis then took position, four to the left of the Ark and four to the right. Grabbing the carrying poles, they synchronized their moves and lifted the Ark to their shoulders. As the rabbis went slowly and cautiously down the ramp, Nancy shouted at the Jewish fighters.

“Zivia, have your fighters form an escort on each side of the Ark. We are going to the Tlomackie Great Synagogue.”

Beaming with pride, the seven men and three women formed up around the Ark and accompanied the rabbis at a slow pace, their rifles slung. The procession then left the square, followed closely by Nancy and Miriam, walking south towards the Great Synagogue. The Jewish people either present in the streets or on the balconies above the route followed by the procession fell to their knees one after the other as the Ark passed by them. Lori Kano and Peter O’Neil, following from a respectful distance, filmed and photographed all this, themselves feeling the great solemnity of the moment. As the procession progressed towards its goal, a growing crowd of praying Jews fell behind it. By the time the Ark was brought inside the Great Synagogue of Warsaw, over 20,000 people were close behind it, quickly packing the building to capacity.

Once inside, the eight rabbis carried the Ark to near the niche containing the sacred scrolls of the Torah and set the artifact down slowly. As they stood there, unsure what to do next, Nancy went to the chief rabbi, who was kneeling nearby and praying.

“Rabbi, I would need two large cushions, to put them in front of the Ark of the Covenant. Could you get them quickly?”

“Certainly, miss!” Replied humbly the man before getting up and walking quickly towards his office. He was back a few minutes later with two large red cushions, which Nancy took and then carefully positioned in front of the Ark. Next, she approached the Ark and stood a mere pace from it before speaking to the rabbis watching her.

“I will now use my mental powers to open the lid of the Ark. I want you to then take very cautiously the tablets of the Law inside and to lay them on the cushions. Be very careful: the tablets are extremely fragile.”

“God, oh God, guide my hands!” Prayed fervently Huberband as Nancy concentrated and the lid of the Ark started rising slowly in the air apparently by itself. The congregation of Jews watching this all knelt at the sight, whispered exclamations coming from all corners of the crowd. Once the golden lid with its two cherubim was floating a good meter above the Ark, Huberband and three other rabbis bent over and slowly grabbed the two engraved stone tablets inside, taking them out and laying them gently on the cushions. Only after sighing in deep relief did Huberband kneel to examine the tablets. They truly looked very old, with the Hebrew writing on them showing extensive erosion from both time and the elements. The ten commandments of the Law were indeed written down on the stone tablets. Huberband felt unprecedented humility and devotion as he read silently the ancient Hebrew letters. Once the Ark’s lid floated down back in place and the eight rabbis stood to one side with Nancy Laplante and Miriam of Magdala, the chief rabbi initiated a series of prayers to thank God and to honor the dead. After the last prayer, he looked at Nancy while stepping back from his lectern.

“Miss Laplante, as the person who saved the sacred Ark of the Covenant and saved so many of us from death, would you like to address the congregation?”

Nancy bowed while answering in Hebrew.

“I would be honored, Rabbi Zemba.”

Walking to the lectern and taking place behind it, Nancy then spoke up in Hebrew again, since she didn’t know Yiddish nor Polish and didn’t want to use German on such an occasion.

“Fellow men and women, the reason I brought the Ark of the Covenant here was to give you hope for the future, hope for a better life for your children. I may not be a practicing Jew, or even a practicing Christian as a matter of fact, but I had the chance to have a close encounter with a superior being I call ‘The One’ and to have communicated with him a few times since then. The One is neither Jewish, Christian nor Muslim: He is there for all of us on this Earth and his message is one of peace, love and tolerance. He loves us all, especially those most innocent ones among us: our children. After I am finished speaking, I will ask you to form two single files along the central aisle, so that you can briefly approach the Ark and touch it. Before that, though, I will ask the sick and the wounded to form a line in the middle of the central aisle, children first, where I will

use the healing powers The One gave me in the past. I will ask the rabbis and Jewish fighters who brought and escorted the Ark here to organize the processions and keep order during this most solemn occasion, when you will be able to touch part of your faith. After this ceremony, you are all invited to the Muranowski Square, where a feast is being prepared to celebrate this joyous day. I will now finish this speech with a solemn promise: one day soon, the Ark will be brought back to Jerusalem, where it will regain a place of prominence as a sacred artifact. The sick and the wounded may now form up in the central aisle.”

Nancy then walked away from the lectern, heading to a position ten paces in front of the Ark, facing the central aisle. The first patient who came to her was a small boy of about six who walked with a pair of crutches. Nancy smiled gently to him, caressing his head.

“What is your name, little one? What is the nature of your wound?”

“My name is Jacob, miss. A German soldier smashed my left knee a few weeks ago. Can you help me?”

“Of course I can, Jacob. Please sit down, so I can examine your knee.”

As the boy sat, Nancy noticed that many more children were already lined up behind Jacob. She felt discouragement for a moment, knowing how draining healing was on her. She however resolved to give everything she had to her task and, pulling up the boy’s left trouser leg, applied her hands to his knee and concentrated. Exclamations of surprise and awe came from the two files of worshippers passing by her to go touch the Ark as her hands glowed lightly for a minute. More exclamations came out when little Jacob, transported with joy, got up without the help of his crutches and hugged Nancy happily.

“My knee doesn’t hurt anymore. You are an angel.”

“No, Jacob: I am only a woman. Go see the Ark with your parents now.”

An old man that had watched the healing bowed and spoke with a tone of respect.

“The Hand of God! She is The Hand of God!”

Soon, most of the worshippers were repeating this, making Nancy blush with modesty. Trying to ignore the comments around her, she concentrated totally on healing one by one the long line of waiting children. After the seventh patient, she had to stop for a moment, mentally exhausted by her efforts. Looking down the line of children, she saw that over a hundred of them were still waiting for her care. Tears of discouragement came to her eyes.

“Great One, there is so much to do and only so much I can do.”

A powerful voice then echoed inside her head.

“Do not lose faith, Natai, as I am with you. Stand up and be one with me.”

Watched by the curious worshippers, who had not heard the message she had just received, she stood up and closed her eyes while extending her arms out. A column of intense white light then came through the roof of the synagogue without damaging it, landing squarely on Nancy and bathing her in its light. Nancy herself soon started emitting an increasingly bright light while she levitated off the ground, until no one could look directly at her. A silent explosion of light then burst out of her, radiating outward at hypersonic speed. The expanding wall of light simply went through the persons present, without knocking them down but bathing them in light as well for a few seconds before the light faded away. The frightened Jews inside the synagogue then saw that Nancy was still floating a few meters in the air and radiating light, her eyes closed as if sleeping. Exclamations and shouts then started coming from the ones who had been waiting to be healed by her. Rabbi Menahem Zemba, getting over his surprise, ran to them and saw that all of them now appeared perfectly healthy. An old man who had been sitting away from the aisle took out his glasses and looked around with bewilderment.

“My eyes! They are as good as when I was young.”

Rabbi Zemba soon understood from the reactions of the people inside the synagogue that everyone present was now in perfect health, even the survivors from the death camps, who had been barely more than skin and bones. Those now looked much stronger, with their cheeks full and their back straight. Overwhelmed by all this, Zemba looked up at Nancy Laplante, who was still floating in the air and radiating light.

“She really is The Hand of God. May God be praised for sending her.”

In Muranowski Square, Jack Crawford was talking with General Grot-Rowecki, head of the Polish Home Army, while a small army of Polish volunteers, both Jews and Catholics, were busy preparing the public feast announced for the early afternoon by the Time Patrol. A shout of alarm from Natia Mindicor made him turn around while grabbing his rifle. He barely had time to see an approaching wall of energy before it went right through him and the others in the square. Shaking his head quickly to regain control of himself, he turned around again and watched the giant wall of energy as it swept outward, apparently in the process of covering the whole of Warsaw.

“What the hell was that?” He asked himself. “It came from inside the Ghetto.”

Shouts of surprise from a number of people around the square then made him realize that something very big had just happened.

On the scoutship LATIN STING, flying east of Warsaw and over the Polish-Soviet border, a sudden alarm made Samuel Goldman look at his sensors. What he saw made him shout with urgency to Carmen Sanchez, sitting behind him in her pilot's seat.

"An energy shockwave is approaching the border, originating from Warsaw."

"What? What kind of energy? Is it a nuclear blast?"

"I don't know, but I don't think that this is a nuclear strike. I see no destruction in its path."

Both watched, fascinated, as the wall of energy finally died down and disappeared after sweeping across the border. Samuel shook his head with disbelief.

"Whatever it was, it covered a radius of just over 400 kilometers out from Warsaw. Nearly the whole of Poland was covered by it."

"Well, it looks like it's time to contact our team in Warsaw." Said Carmen, activating her radio.

The horse-drawn carts and wagons of the field hospital from one of the divisions of the German Fourth Army had just crossed the border, heading slowly towards Germany through Poland with its load of wounded soldiers, when the wall of energy swept through them. Their convoy was only one of many German convoys retreating back from the Eastern front, pursued by vengeful Soviet troops. Only the sacrifice of the German panzer divisions, including those from the Waffen-SS, who were fighting to provide a covering screen to the rest of the German units, had made possible the escape of most of the Wehrmacht troops from the Soviet Union. The Germans in the medical convoy, doctors, nurses and patients alike, counted themselves lucky to be still alive. Seeing the wall of energy approaching fast, the drivers of the wagon tried to turn around their horses in a reflexive but futile attempt to escape it. When it passed through them and proved to be harmless, the Germans looked at each other with total incomprehension. One of the drivers looked at the nurse sitting besides him in the front bench seat of his wagon.

"What the hell was that, Fraulein Hirsh?"

"I don't know, Corporal. Let me just check quickly on the wounded in the back."

Before the nurse could get inside the wagon, screams of joy came out, soon followed by one of the wounded, who stuck his head out and looked at Anna Hirsh while grinning. His face, which had sported ugly burns the last time she had checked him last night, was now intact, its skin smooth.

“It’s a miracle! Something just healed all of us inside!”

“Mein Gott!” Could only whisper the nurse, close to passing out.

In the Great Synagogue of Warsaw, Rabbi Zemba watched in respectful silence for a good two minutes while Nancy Laplante hovered above him. She finally floated down to the ground and stopped glowing as her feet touched the floor. Her eyes fluttered open and she looked around her slowly at the Jews staring at him. She appeared like one who had just awakened from a nice dream and there was an air of revelation on her face. Zemba kneeled in front of her and, taking her right hand, kissed it.

“You are The Hand of God and we will obey you, all of us. What do you wish of us?”

She stared down at him, unsure at first how to react to what had just happened to her. She finally swallowed hard and spoke in Hebrew.

“I wish to be considered as a simple woman, Rabbi Zemba. The One did the work here. What I would like from you all, though, is to go celebrate in Muranowski Square after you have paid your respects to the Ark of the Covenant. Today should be a day of happiness for all.”

“Will you do us the honor of accompanying us to the feast, miss?”

“I will, soon, but I have to go help others before. I will be back, I promise.”

Nancy then flew off again, without glowing this time, then disappeared in a flash of white light. Peter O’Neil and Lori Kano, who had watched and filmed all this from a corner of the synagogue, looked at each other with awe.

“My editor will never believe me until he sees my photographs.” Said weakly the British journalist. Lori nodded her head at that.

“Mine as well. I think that Nancy just got up another notch in her personal evolution. She will be more powerful than ever now, but it will probably be for the good of all. I hate to think about what an evil person could do with her powers.”

O’Neil then stared at Lori, examining her face.

“Lori, am I wrong or do you look like you finally feel at peace with yourself?”

Surprised at first by his remark, Lori then made a mental introspection. Her nightmarish visions from the German concentration camps were effectively gone now.

“By the stars, you’re right! Nancy, I owe you one.”

08:56 (GMT)

Tower ALPHA

R.A.F. Air Station Northolt

England

Farah Tolkonen ‘A’ switched off her videophone, having just received a number of frantic reports from both her team in Warsaw and from the scoutship LATIN STING, then sat back in her chair while trying to make sense out of all this. One thing became quickly clear to her, though: The One was involved in this. This latest intervention was however of a scope and power hard to imagine, let alone believe. She was definitely going to have to talk again with Nancy concerning The One. The problem was that no one knew where Nancy was right now. As Farah pivoted her chair to look outside through the large windows of her office, a burst of light exploded inside the refugee camp set up for the survivors brought from German concentration camps. A bright wall of energy then swept the whole of the airfield in a few seconds, passing through the Tower ALPHA and Farah’s office before continuing to expand outward. Tears of joy then came to Farah’s face: she now knew where Nancy was and what she had just done. The Hand of The One had struck again.

12:37 (Warsaw Time)

Muranowski Square, Warsaw Ghetto

Poland

Mike Crawford hesitated for a second before approaching Nancy, who was speaking with a delegation from the Polish government that nearly surrounded her: he just wasn’t sure if she was the same person than before her latest supernatural experience. Some would have even questioned if she were a person at all now. What convinced him was when she turned her head and saw him, then flashed a big smile. She excused herself with the Polish officials and came to him, hugging and kissing him

passionately. His doubts melting away, Mike returned her kisses in kind, then looked in her sparkling green eyes.

“Nancy, I must be the luckiest man in the world, for having you. How do you feel?”

“Better than ever, Mike. My latest contact with The One was like touching paradise.”

“How...different are you now?”

Nancy took the time to caress his face before answering, her expression now sober.

“The One boosted my powers of healing to an incredible level and I can now communicate more readily with him, but I am otherwise the same person, Mike. My other powers have not changed and I am still a woman made of flesh and bones. I will now be able to truly help people in need in this war. I see that Farah came with you. Do you mind if I go speak with her for a moment?”

“Go right ahead, baby.”

They kissed again before Nancy unglued herself from Mike and went to Farah ‘A’, who had been patiently waiting a few paces away. Both women exchanged a hug before Nancy spoke.

“Don’t worry about me, Farah: apart of my powers of healing, I am still the same perverted Nancy you know.”

“That is nice to know, Nancy. I was actually a bit worried about finding some kind of immaterial angel in your place. Did you know that your healing burst in Northolt reached all the way past Paris? That, along with what you did here, is going to impact heavily on how the people will look at you.”

“Farah, that must be the understatement of the year. Jews and Catholics alike already call me ‘The Hand of God’ here in Warsaw. In fact, that title describes pretty well what I am now: someone through which The One can help people in need. True, that will probably cause crowds to form everywhere I go, asking to be healed or expecting some other miracle, but it will be a small price to pay in view of the good I can do now.”

“The Hand of God...” said slowly Farah while staring at her friend. “And what do you intend to do next?”

“Farah, you are still the chief administrator of the Time Patrol: I don’t intend to take any decisions without consulting you, powers or no powers.”

Farah relaxed at those words: at least, Nancy’s new powers had not gone to her head.

“Alright, tell me as my chief of operations what we should do next, now that the war is all but over.”

“It is mostly over in Europe, Farah, but not in the Pacific. There are still hundreds of thousands of people suffering and dying in Japanese prisoners camps. We should concentrate now on helping those poor souls.”

“I concur! When do you intend to resume operations in the Pacific, Nancy?”

“Tonight! My plan is already thought over. It is a very simple one but it will involve a sizeable portion of our force of combat robots. You may want to alert our robotics technicians to be ready for some new programming to be loaded into our robots this evening.”

“I will pass the word. What will you do in the meantime?”

“Eat and drink, of course!” Replied Nancy jovially, her arms sweeping around to show to Farah the huge crowd of Jews and Poles filling the square and enjoying the food served at the many grills and tables set around the square. Polish and Jewish volunteers mingled with caterers from the Global Council, busy roasting the huge quantities of meat and potatoes being consumed and serving wine from a dozen big kegs brought in by shuttlecraft. The happy faces and laughter around the square were like a balm to Nancy’s heart, who had seen too much sadness and suffering in the last few days.

“Would you like to join us for the feast, Farah?”

The scientist smiled as she looked around her.

“Why not? Seeing some happiness will do me good.”

Collecting Mike Crawford first, Nancy then led Farah towards one of the big charcoal-fuelled barbecue grills, from which an appetizing smell of roasted meat came. Farah and Mike were quick to notice how the people in their path respectfully stepped out of Nancy’s way, many bowing to her. Nancy smiled to all of them, returning the bows. What truly surprised Farah was that the two men from the Global Council manning the grill bowed as well to Nancy, showing the same kind of religious reverence than the Jews and Poles. Farah was thinking about what this new trend could mean to the Global Council when Nancy asked her a question.

“Chicken leg or breast, Farah?”

“Uh, leg, please.”

Nancy soon handed her a plastic plate with chicken and potatoes in it, along with a set of plastic utensils. Thanking Nancy, Farah went to sit at a nearby folding table and started

eating while looking around her. Everybody seemed to have a mighty good time, with the children in particular eating as much as they could of the things they had seen so little of for so many months. She then saw George Townsend, holding the hand of a young woman armed with a rifle, approach her. There was some nervousness visible on his face as he stopped in front of Farah.

“Farah, this is Liliana Edelman, a member of the Ghetto defense militia. We have become very close to each other in the last few days and I would like your permission to be able to bring her with me to the future, whenever that becomes possible. Liliana is also interested in joining the Time Patrol. She is a very brave girl and I am sure that she would make a good field agent.”

Farah examined with interest the pretty girl, who had relatively short black hair, brown eyes and appeared to be around twenty years of age. Her face reflected both intelligence and character.

“Liliana, you should know that being a field agent is a lifelong commitment. You may not be coming back to this century for a long while once we leave for the future.”

“I know, Doctor Tolkonen. George explained to me what it meant to be a field agent of the Time Patrol. I however have no family left alive, so I won't be missing this time much.”

“Are you ready to work with members of the Time Patrol who are German, Liliana?”

There was only a slight hesitation in the girl's answer.

“Yes, I am. George showed me pictures of your German agents helping to liberate the inmates from the concentration camps. I am ready to work with persons of any nationality, as long as they are decent people.”

“Excellent! Liliana, consider yourself now an apprentice of the Time Patrol. Make your goodbyes to your friends this afternoon: you will be leaving with me for our base in England at four O'clock.”

Liliana shouted her joy before hugging and kissing George, who smiled to Farah.

“Thank you, Farah! This means a lot to me.”

“I know! May you have a happy life together.”

As the couple walked away, Farah went to Nancy to tell her about them. Nancy was however already following them with her eyes, a smile on her face.

“No need to tell me, Farah: I heard it all telepathically. Liliana will make an excellent agent. She will also make George a happy man, something he richly deserves. Now, let’s have some fun. Do you want some red wine?”

03:17 (Manila Time)

Tuesday, June 2, 1942 ‘B’

Japanese prisoner of war camp Cabanatuan Number 3

104 kilometers north of Manila, Island of Luzon

Philippines, Southwest Pacific

The loud noise of automatic gunfire and explosions made Lieutenant James Parker wake up with a startle in the dark of his bamboo long hut. Struggling to clear his mind and focus his eyes, he saw that the other prisoners crowding the stinking hut were all awake, which was not surprising in view of the heavy firing going on outside the hut. The Army Air Corps fighter pilot, wearing like the army soldiers of his hut the dirty rags that had once been his uniform, stepped out of the sleeping platform he shared with over sixty men, intent on having a peep outside. He was standing in the central alley of the hut and about to walk to the nearest door when it crashed open. Freezing where he was and ready to lie back on the sleeping platform, Parker then saw a fantastic silhouette enter the hut. He swallowed hard when he realized that it was flying silently just above the floor, instead of walking. He also soon saw that the thing, as it was obviously not a man, didn’t have legs either, having instead a pair of rubber tracks at the base of its boxy body. Now frozen with stupor, he watched helplessly as the thing floated towards him and came to a stop three paces in front of him. A male voice then came out of the machine.

“Are there Japanese soldiers in this hut?”

“Uh, no, just Americans. What are you?”

“A combat robot of the Time Patrol sent to deliver you. Please stay inside your hut until all firing has stopped. The Japanese garrison is being eliminated right now. You will be evacuated back to the United States once all the guards are dead.”

“Wait! What is this...Time Patrol? Is there someone inside you?”

“The Time Patrol comes from the 34th century and is led by Nancy Laplante. I am a machine with artificial intelligence. There is nobody inside me. Now, let me complete my sweep.”

Stunned, Parker stood aside and let the machine fly past him. It soon crashed through the rear door of the hut and left, leaving the Americans inside to look at each other with consternation.

“What is this wizardry?” Exclaimed an army corporal who, like the others, was barely skin and bones. “Did it mean Laplante, the Canadian time traveler who died in 1941?”

“Who else could it be?” Replied James Parker, who happened to be the highest-ranking prisoner in the hut. “Do you know many time travelers apart of her, Corporal? Alright, everybody down on the floor. There seems to be a lot of bullets flying around right now.”

The prisoners didn't have to be told twice, as the battle outside sounded quite fierce. As quickly as their weak, starving bodies allowed them, the Americans lay down on the floor, hoping that no stray fire would hit their hut.

The firing slowed down quickly after only a couple of minutes, dying down completely after less than ten minutes. Raising his head, James Parker listened carefully for a moment, then smiled.

“Whoever attacked the camp worked fast: I can't hear anyone now. Stay down while I go see outside.”

Going to the front door of the hut, James looked cautiously outside. With the moonlight, he was able to see fairly well down the alley separating the rows of huts. While he didn't see a single Japanese soldier, he saw dozens of machines on tracks similar to the one that had entered his hut earlier on. The machines seemed to be doing a detailed sweep of the camp, as if to make sure that no Japanese soldier was hiding somewhere. James suddenly tensed up: a silhouette had just walked from behind a hut and was now advancing calmly down the alley, what looked like a machinegun in its hands. The stranger, who wore a weird helmet and a bulky vest, then gave a few orders to a number of robots in a language that vaguely sounded like English, sending the robots away on some task. What caught his attention then was the fact that the stranger had a female voice. Deciding to take his chances, James got out of the hut and, his hands raised high, walked slowly towards the woman, who had stopped at his sight and pointed her weapon at him.

“Don't shoot! I'm an American!”

To James' relief, the woman lowered her weapon and let him approach her. He soon stopped two paces in front of her and lowered his hands. The woman was a tall one, being over 180 centimeters high.

"I am Lieutenant James Parker. I spoke earlier on to one of your machines. Are you really going to repatriate us to the United States?"

"We are, Mister Parker." Answered the woman before offering her right hand, which James shook. "Nancy Laplante, from the Time Patrol. Could you direct me to the Zero Ward?"

James nodded his head grimly: the Zero Ward was what passed as a medical ward in the camp. In reality, it was a hellhole where the sick and wounded that were too weak to work were sent to die slowly of starvation and neglect. Nobody ever came back from the Zero Ward. Obviously, the place's notoriety had made it to the history books if a woman from the future knew about it.

"I know too well where it is, miss. Follow me!"

Prisoners were now starting to come cautiously out of the huts as he guided Laplante towards a separate compound of the camp. They walked through a barbed wire gate that had just been blown away and entered the long bamboo hut in the center of the compound. The woman immediately stopped and covered her nose and mouth when hit by the stench from the dying men's vomit and excrements. James thought for a moment that she would throw up but she steeled herself and slowly walked between the twin rows of skeleton-like prisoners, most of them naked and smeared with their own wastes. James himself had a hard time not to become sick at both the smell and the sight. Laplante suddenly stopped in front of a tall man too weak to get up and spoke to him in a voice broken by sobs.

"Ken?... Major Ken Dows?... Is that you?"

"Nancy?" Replied the man in a weak, barely audible voice, prompting Laplante to quickly kneel besides him. She gently took his head in her hands and kissed his forehead while crying openly.

"Ken... My god! What have they done to you?"

What Laplante did next baffled Parker: gently putting down the sick man's head, she got up and looked skyward while spreading her arms outward.

"Please help me save these unfortunate souls, Great One."

Before James could ask her what she was doing, a silent burst of intense light erupted from Laplante and spread out, going through the walls of the hut without damaging them.

James felt a marvelous sensation of strength flow through his body when the wave of light went through and past him. His constant hunger pains also disappeared at that precise moment. Blinking in surprise, James then felt his hair rise on his head: the previously skeletal prisoners of the Zero Ward now had healthy-looking bodies and were getting up by themselves hesitantly, unable to believe what had just happened. They were still naked, dirty and stinking, though. That didn't stop Laplante from exchanging a tearful hug with Major Dows.

"Ken, I am so happy to have been able to save you. Wait until Mike hears that you are alive."

"Nancy, how did you do what you just did? That was nothing short of a miracle." She looked at him gravely and caressed his face.

"It was actually a miracle, Ken, a miracle made possible by The One. He both saved me in 1941 and gave me some powers, including that of healing."

"Who is The One?" Said Dows, sounding incredulous. "Are you talking about God?"

"No! The One is not God as you would define him, but he is very powerful, while being kind and compassionate."

She then pointed a hand at Dows, who suddenly started floating off the floor, making him wave his arms and legs frantically.

"Hey! What is happening to me?"

"I am lifting you through telekinesis, one of the mental powers I got from The One. Do you believe me now, Ken?"

Yes, yes! Now, put me down, please."

She lowered her hand, making Dows float back down to the floor. All the Americans present, including James Parker, stared in awed disbelief at Laplante, who pointed at the door of the hut.

"Let's get out of here, will you? The stench inside is unbearable."

Seeing one of the Americans timidly hide his genitals from her, she gave him a dubious look.

"Mister, me and my people have recently emptied all the German concentration camps in Europe and have seen our share of naked and dead people. Don't worry about me raping you."

That made Ken Dows laugh for a second.

"You are still worthy of your nickname of 'Dirty Nancy', as I can see."

“Damn right you are, Ken. I may have some powers given by The One but he didn’t turn me into an angel for that.”

As they emerged from the stinking hut, Dows put a hand on Nancy’s shoulder, stopping her.

“Nancy, irrespective of how you did this, I owe you my life. Consider me in your debt.”

Nancy looked into Dows’ eyes with something approaching love: she had known him for nearly a year while in London between 1940 and 1941 and they had been good friends there. Dows, as a neutral officer, had also helped care for the young German women held as prisoners of war in the Tower of London, in which role he had proved to have a heart of gold.

“Ken, there is an easy way you can repay your debt: come with me and join my organization. This war is about over anyway, with the Japanese Navy and Air Force already decimated by my Time Patrol. I could use such a man as you. Some of the girls from the Tower of London would also love to see you work for me. Were you planning to stay in the Marine Corps after the war?”

“Uh, I don’t know. A few minutes ago, I was busy dying, remember?”

“Please, Ken, consider my offer seriously: I can offer you a fantastic life through time alongside some good people. Mike and Ingrid would be so happy to have you with us.”

“They are with you?”

“Of course, Ken! They are my family after all. So, what do you say?”

“Hell, Nancy, your offer is tempting indeed. Could you let me think on this for a few minutes?”

“Make it quick, Ken: the evacuation ship will soon land to pick you all up.”

“Uh, would you be interested in a poor army fighter pilot, miss?” Cut in cautiously James Parker. “I’m afraid that returning to my old job of crop-dusting after the war won’t be too exciting.”

Nancy examined him carefully, helped in this by the night vision system integrated to the visor of her helmet. Parker was a handsome man standing about 180 centimeters, with dark brown hair and brown eyes. He was probably no older than 26. Nancy finally presented her right hand.

“Consider yourself in, with the provision that you pass the aptitude tests, of course.”

“But, I am fit, miss.”

“I am thinking about the psychological profile test mostly, Lieutenant. I need people with an open mind and without racial prejudices.”

“Miss, I may come from Southern Virginia but I am no redneck.”

“We will see, Lieutenant.”

That was when a group of about five men approached Nancy, soon stopping in front of her. They wore uniforms that were in slightly better shape than most of the other prisoners, who were half naked or, in the case of Ken Dows, totally naked. The man in the lead looked with reprobation at Dows, standing next to Nancy.

“Major, you could at least try to find something to wear instead of standing like this in front of a lady.”

“If I may, General Wainwright.” Cut in Nancy politely. “Major Dows was about to die when I found him a few minutes ago inside the Zero Ward. He also happens to be a good friend of mine. As for offending my morality, I could show you a few tricks about strip dancing, General. By the way, I am Nancy Laplante, Chief of Operations of the Time Patrol. My organization comes from the 34th century.”

Wainwright stared at her with disbelief.

“The 34th century? You must be joking, miss?”

“Never when freeing dying men, General. A ship will land soon to pick you up and repatriate all of you to the United States.”

“What about the Japanese? They could launch a counter-attack soon. Could your...machines hold them at bay?”

“They easily could, but it won’t be necessary: there are no Japanese soldiers left alive around this camp. Within a few hours, the same will be true about the whole of the Philippines. I have 8,000 such combat robots and six ships actually engaged in a systematic sweep around the Philippines, with orders to kill any Japanese soldier they find. As we speak, the various Japanese prisoners camps in the Philippines are being liberated by my agents and robots, including Camp O’Donnell, where your surviving soldiers from Bataan were held.”

Wainwright grinned at these news.

“Excellent! Uh, could you tell me what the hell happened a few minutes ago? Is the wall of light I saw some kind of medical invention from the future?”

“No, General: I was the source of that wall of light. My healing pulse was targeted at the whole of the Philippines. Right now, every person on this island must be

in perfect health, save for the Japanese, of course: my healing energy is useless to dead people.”

“What are you talking about, miss? You don’t make much sense to me.”

“You will see for yourself soon, General. If you will excuse me for a moment, I must get things going here.”

Nancy then activated her helmet microphone, watched by the Americans around her.

“TEEN TEAM, this is the bitch! You can land in the camp with your load of food and water. There will also be people who will seriously need the use of a shower.”

“TEEN TEAM understood, out!”

Nancy next had thirty of her robots cordon off the parade ground of the camp, so that the TEEN TEAM could have space free of people to land. The scoutship soon landed silently with its navigation lights on, watched by the incredulous Americans.

“Hell, if somebody would have told me that he saw something like this, I would have charged him for drunkenness.” Exclaimed Wainwright. “This thing is however way too small to carry us all, miss. There are over 10,000 men in this camp.”

“It is not intended to transport your men, General: a much larger ship will follow it. This scoutship is simply bringing some supplies of food in. By the way, the Filipino troops in this camp will not be shipped out: they will stay in the Philippines after being given food and water. They will also be able to use the Japanese weapons captured in this camp. Our plan is to kill all the Japanese in the Philippines, evacuate all the American and Allied prisoners and leave the islands in the hands of the Filipinos.”

“And then, what are you planning to do, you and your Time Patrol?”

Nancy gave the general a resolute look as she answered him.

“Then, we will kill all the other Japanese soldiers stationed outside of Japan and free the rest of the Allied prisoners, both military and civilian. The Japanese Army’s conduct through this war, especially in China, has been simply too barbaric to be forgiven. Japan itself will not be invaded but it will lose its army and it will have to publicly apologize to the rest of the world for what it did. If it doesn’t, then it will pay an even heavier price.”

Wainwright was struck by the rage contained in Nancy’s voice.

“You did not personally suffer at the hands of the Japanese, miss, yet you seem to take a very personal view of this.”

“General, I am simply sickened by all the atrocities that were committed in this war. Also, I know about things that the Japanese did, both during and after the war, that

you can't possibly know about. I do not hate the Japanese people, far from it. What I want to erase is the militaristic and xenophobic mentality of their leaders that made all the atrocities around the Pacific possible. Once I am finished with them, the Japanese will not be able to think of themselves anymore as a superior race entitled to treat all others like inferior beings. Then, and only then, there will be peace."

Wainwright saw in her eyes that she meant every word of what she had said. Considering the kind of technology at her disposal, the Japanese were most probably in for a lot of hurt. That was however something he could live with easily. Looking at the landed ship, which was presenting its rear to him, he saw a big cargo ramp lower to the ground, showing the inside of a spacious cargo bay. Five female silhouettes, one a true giant, stood at the top of the ramp. The four smaller women then walked down the ramp and went to Nancy, Wainwright and the officers around them while the giant woman went to sit at the controls of what looked like a heavy forklift parked inside the cargo bay. One of the women, a beautiful teenager, stopped and stared at Ken Dows for a second before running to him, joy on her face.

"Major Dows? It's me, Ingrid!"

"Ingrid? Ingrid Weiss?"

Both exchanged a hug for a second before Ingrid pulled away, pinching her nose.

"Phew! Ken, you do need a very serious shower."

"I know, believe me. Nancy saved me and those six other men here from the hell of Zero Ward. You are more beautiful than ever, Ingrid. How are the other girls from the Tower of London doing?"

Ingrid gave him a sober look.

"Mostly well, Ken. Some are in Germany, while many, like me, are part of the Time Patrol. Lisa Hartmann, Barbara Holzberg and Martha Pfalz are dead, though."

"Damn, I am truly sorry to hear that, Ingrid."

Nancy then cut in on the conversation, as there was a lot to do and little time to do it.

"I hate to cut your reunion like this, guys, but we have things to do. Ingrid, could you escort Ken and these six other men to the showers inside your scoutship and provide them with clothes from our emergency reserves?"

Nancy then added a silent mental message meant only for Ingrid. The teenager nodded discreetly, then led Ken and the six others inside the scoutship. On his part, General Wainwright was eyeing with surprise one of the three other women, which was wearing a dirty American Army nurse's uniform.

“Nurse, what are you doing in that ship?”

“I volunteered to help the Time Patrol help our men, sir. Second Lieutenant Frankie Lewey, sir. I was held with other nurses in Santo Tomas University campus, in Manila. The Time Patrol freed us a few hours ago. The other nurses who were in Corregidor are now in the heavy cargo ship of the Time Patrol, helping with the evacuation of camp O'Donnell.”

Wainwright, close to tears, looked at Nancy.

“Thank you truly, miss, for all that you are doing for us. The United States will be in your debt for this.”

To his surprise, Nancy made a wry smile at his words.

“Maybe, General. I will have to explain something to you later on.”

She then addressed the three women besides her.

“Colette, Tatiana, Frankie, we will start distributing the food and water to the Filipino troops as soon as Xinia has taken out all the pallets. Tatiana, you will be in charge of the distribution.”

“Consider it done, Nancy. Come on, girls!”

As the three women went to the first pallet unloaded by the technician driving the forklift, Nancy called in the command combat robot leading the other machines present in the camp. The robot rolled to a stop two paces from Nancy, its weapons turret pointed upward and away.

“Unit 3540, at your command!”

“Unit 3540, take twenty of your units and provide a crowd control barrier to Tatiana Korbut's team. Only stun rifles and riot prods are to be used and only if absolutely necessary. Go!”

Nancy then turned towards Wainwright, who was looking with fascination as the intimidating machine pivoted and rolled away.

“Excuse me for this, General, but I must take some precautions here: I am not sure that all of your men will wait their turn when they see that we are distributing food.”

“You don't need to excuse yourself, miss. I am a realist and I know for a fact that there were instances in the past of some of my rear area troops stealing rations meant for frontline troops before our surrender to the Japanese. By the way, those machines truly amaze me. Hell, they sound as intelligent as some of my soldiers.”

Nancy couldn't help laugh at that.

“True enough, General. They also never get drunk or become scared. In many ways, they are the perfect soldiers. Could I now ask you to have your Filipino troops line up near the pallets unloaded from my scoutship?”

“Sure! Major Tracy, have the Filipino troops line up as requested by Miss Laplante. Make sure that our other troops don’t try to get at the food before their turn.”

“Yes sir!” Replied the officer before collecting a number of junior officers and senior NCOs and leaving Wainwright alone with Nancy, who then spoke in a low volume.

“General, about the relations between the Time Patrol and your country, you should know about this...”

She then spent a few minutes telling him about the events that unfolded in Pearl Harbor and the tense state of relations between herself and Washington. Wainwright listened in silence, giving her a puzzled look at the end of her explanation.

“You really have different priorities and outlooks than ours, miss. However, you are in the process of saving the men of my command from a long agony, and for that I will be eternally grateful to you and your people. I do not pretend to understand much about politics but your goals seem laudable enough to me. I sincerely hope that our mutual relations will improve soon, miss.”

“I do too, General, but I’m not holding my breath for this. Ending this war quickly will be a good enough accomplishment by itself for me.”

“I will second you on that, miss.”

They watched for the next half hour as the over 3,000 Filipino soldiers that had been held in Cabanatuan were given each a bag with carrying sling, a few tins of meat or fish, a few granola bars and two plastic bottles full of water. Nancy then had Wainwright tell their officers to have them collect the weapons and ammunition from the dead Japanese around the camp. Those were enough to arm about 240 of the Filipinos. While those soldiers were organized into two infantry companies, the rest of the food and water was distributed to the American ex-prisoners. To Wainwright’s embarrassment and anger, that part of the distribution was much less controlled than with the Filipinos, with a large group of American troopers breaking rank and trying to push their way to the pallets of supplies to serve themselves. The three women doing the distribution of the supplies were nearly trampled then by the rushing prisoners. Only the vigorous but non-lethal reaction of the combat robots surrounding the pallets restored a semblance of order in the line of waiting men. Fuming, General Wainwright

went up and down the line, berating the troublemakers and directing the others to behave like soldiers. That did the trick, permitting the distribution to resume. By the time all the supplies were distributed, the huge mass of the GILGAMESH landed besides the camp, attracting exclamations from the ex-prisoners. Nancy, who had in the meantime discreetly put both Ken Dows and James Parker aboard the TEEN TEAM, went back to General Wainwright and pointed at the big cargo ramp now coming down on the heavy transport ship.

“General, your men can now board their ride home. There will be a short stopover in Manila to pick up the army and navy nurses and the civilians that had been interned there. Then, my ship will fly to the San Francisco area, where you will disembark at the Alameda Naval Air Station. The authorities there have been warned by radio to expect you and your people.”

“What about my Filipino troops?”

“They will also board this ship but they will get off in Manila, where they will help restore Filipino authority over the capital. There are more than enough captured Japanese equipment and supplies in Manila to reequip them for that job. Will that be satisfactory, General?”

Wainwright nodded, obviously pleased.

“You have planned this whole thing very well, miss. I see that your reputation while working with the British higher staff in London was well deserved. As tempting as going back to the States for rest and recuperation is, however, I would prefer to stay in Manila with my Filipino troops until I can properly hand over my command to General MacArthur when he will return.”

Nancy smiled at those words.

“General, I was expecting that from you, so I had a few things prepared as a consequence. They will be handed to you once on the ship. I will not be going with you, though: I have other trouble spots to take care of. Have a good trip, General.”

“Thank you, miss.” Replied Wainwright, shaking her hand. They then exchanged a salute before Nancy returned to the TEEN TEAM, where the empty pallets had been put back in and the team of women was now waiting inside the cargo hold. Wainwright watched her get in the scoutship, which then closed its rear ramp and took off, disappearing in the night sky. The general then turned to face his troops.

“ALRIGHT, MEN! FORM UP IN THREE RANKS, WITH THE OFFICERS AND NCOs ALONGSIDE, THEN WE WILL MARCH INTO THAT SHIP IN MILITARY

FASHION! AFTER A SHORT STOP IN MANILA, YOU WILL THEN FLY TO ALAMEDA NAVAL AIR STATION, NEAR SAN FRANCISCO, FOR A WELL-DESERVED PERIOD OF REST AND RECUPERATION.”

Wild cheers greeted his words. Their spirits now high, the soldiers quickly organized themselves into marching columns, their NCOs barking orders and directives when some were too slow in finding a place in the ranks. After five minutes, satisfied that his troops were grouped properly, Wainwright and his top staff officers took place at the head of the long procession.

“TROOPS, FORWARD...MARCH!”

The 11,632 men then started walking in cadence towards the GILGAMESH.

Major General Edward King, wearing a dirty and tattered tropical uniform, was waiting with a young woman of the Time Patrol inside the cavernous cargo hold of the ship. Wainwright, passing first the command of his column to his chief of staff, then broke away from the ranks and went to his subordinate, who had commanded his army forces in Bataan until its surrender to the Japanese. King saluted Wainwright when he stopped in front of him, then shook hands with him.

“Sir, it is a real pleasure to see you alive and well.”

“I’m alive but I was not really well until less than an hour ago, Ed. How did your men fare after the surrender?”

King’s face clouded with sorrow as he remembered the horrors he and his men had gone through.

“Not well at all, sir. Those Japanese bastards made us march over 85 miles without any food or water, then put us in a camp with only two water faucets for over 60,000 men, no sanitary facilities and little food. We lost an average of at least 500 men a day, the majority of them Filipinos, from diseases and starvation. The Japanese also kept beating us and killed our men under any kind of excuse they could find. According to our saviors, they counted a bit over 42,600 survivors as we marched inside this ship. In total, I lost over 2,000 American and 28,000 Filipino troops between the day of our surrender and today, sir.”

Wainwright lowered his head, devastated by these news.

“My God! So many good men, gone. Ed, I have decided to stay in Manila with our Filipino troops until General MacArthur can come and do a proper takeover of my command. You will escort our survivors to the States and make damn sure that they get

the best treatment possible. As their commander, I am authorizing all our men and women a month-long leave of rest and recuperation. Don't let any paper-pushing asshole in the States delay or shorten the leave for our people, Ed."

"You can count on me, sir."

The young woman in the gray Time Patrol uniform then politely cut in on their conversation.

"Excuse me, General, but I am to bring you to a cabin where you will be able to wash up and change. Since our trip to Manila will be very short, we have to hurry."

"Alright then, lead on, miss."

The trip to a small but luxurious private cabin on an upper deck took a good ten minutes, so big was the ship. The woman explained first to him the functioning of the shower and of the toilet in the bathroom attached to the cabin, then went outside in the hallway to wait for Wainwright. The general eagerly jumped in the shower and enjoyed the hot water spray for a few minutes, rinsing away the accumulated crust of dirt and perspiration on his body before soaping up and rinsing again. Feeling like a new man, he stepped out of the shower and toweled himself dry. He found a razor and a can of shaving cream by the side of the sink. He hesitated only for a second before deciding to take the time to shave. Once that was done, Wainwright went to the bedroom, where he had seen clothes laid on the bed. To his pleased surprise, he found there a standard American Army combat uniform to his size, complete with boots, underwear and cap. There were even three stars on the collar of the shirt. A web belt supporting a holstered Colt .45 pistol was also laid on the bed. A small canvas backpack besides the bed contained two spare uniforms, some underwear and articles of personal hygiene. His morale quite high now, the general soon walked out of the cabin to join up with the Time Patrol woman, who smiled in approval while looking up and down at him.

"Much better, sir. Commanders should always look at their best."

"Well said, miss. Thank Miss Laplante on my part when you see her next time."

"It will be done, sir. This way, please."

As they were in an elevator headed down to the main cargo holds level, a noise accompanied by a slight shock attracted a question from Wainwright.

"Hey! What was that, miss?"

"We just landed in Manila, sir. We are now straddling the old sports field of the Santo Tomas University, which had been turned by the Japanese into an internment

camp for civilians. We will pick up over 3,600 American civilians and a few navy and army nurses there, unload your Filipino troops and you, then head towards California.”

“Could I ask you to delay the disembarking for a few minutes, to give me a chance to speak to my Filipino officers first?”

“Why not?” Replied the woman, who then used her helmet-mounted radio to speak in an unknown language with someone. Wainwright couldn’t help examine in detail her uniform in the meantime, noting in particular her nametag: Eva Dittmar. That and her accent probably made her a German, but he was not going to be alarmed by that, not after what she and her comrades had done tonight. The doors of the elevator soon opened, revealing the inside of a huge cargo hold full of soldiers sitting or standing around. Looking around him as he walked out of the elevator, he soon spotted Major General King, who was conferring with some of his senior officers. He quickly walked to his group, prompting them into coming to attention and saluting.

“At ease, gentlemen! General King, I want to speak to our Filipino army officers, now!”

“Yes, sir!”

King in turn ordered his officers to assemble the Filipino officers, making them run away in all directions while shouting orders. King used the time he was alone with Wainwright to speak to him in a low voice.

“Sir, the Time Patrol trooper who freed us said that Nancy Laplante was the point of origin of that wave of light that miraculously healed all of us. Is that really true, sir?”

“It seems so, Ed. I didn’t see it myself but others in Cabanatuan did. Laplante herself said that she produced that wall of light. Frankly, I can think of only one who could do what she did: God! It does seem that Laplante is in high favor with Him right now, whether Washington likes it or not.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“What I mean is that Laplante herself confided to me that there are serious differences between herself and President Roosevelt concerning international policies in the post-war world. She also said that, while directing operations against Japan from Hawaii, racially motivated incidents made her abandon Pearl Harbor as a base of operation. Basically, she objects violently to the United States laws concerning racial segregation and the treatment of Asian immigrants.”

“She may think what she wants about our segregation laws, sir, but it is none of her business, since she is not an American.” Replied King. That drew a dubious look from his superior.

“Maybe, Ed, but can we afford to ignore her? She and her organization are turning this war upside down in a matter of days, while she personally holds powers that I would qualify as quasi-divine.”

King didn't reply to that, obviously shaken by his arguments. The Filipino officers were starting to assemble around them anyway and they were out of time. Wainwright took two minutes to brief the native officers about what he wanted done in Manila, then sent them back to their men. The nearly 38,000 Filipino soldiers in the holds then formed up in massive columns, Wainwright at their head, as the giant access ramp of the hold lowered to the ground. The lights from the ship revealed a crowd of civilians waiting some distance from the ramp, guarded by dozens of the combat machines of the Time Patrol. Led by Wainwright, the Filipino soldiers walked down the ramp, bringing wild cheers from the civilians. A lone man in the gray uniform and body armor of the Time Patrol was waiting for Wainwright at the foot of the ramp and came to him as soon as the Filipino troops had a chance to disperse around the large campus of Santo Tomas University, searching for Japanese weapons and equipment to commandeer. The man was a tall, lean British named William Anderson who sported a small blond moustache and spoke with an unmistakable British accent.

“Good morning, General! If I may bring you up to date on the situation in Manila, I can tell you that all the Japanese within three kilometers from this campus are already dead. I have 1,200 combat robots doing an expanding, all-azimuth sweep of the city and the rest of the Japanese still alive should be dead in a couple of hours. All the strategic points and known Japanese installations have already been either taken or destroyed, including the Japanese High Headquarters for the Philippines. By the way, we found this in the files taken from the Japanese.”

Wainwright took the official-looking document written in Japanese as Anderson went on.

“This is a directive from the Japanese Army Grand Headquarters in Tokyo to all of its units, both inside and outside Japan. It directs all local Japanese commanders to exterminate all the Allied prisoners in their custody, both military and civilian, if enemy forces are either about to invade their zones of responsibility or about to invade Japan itself. The footnote at the bottom of the page was signed by General Homma, commander of the Japanese forces in the Philippines, and says that the order is to

receive the widest distribution possible. You may keep this copy for your own use, General.”

“The bastards!” Raged Wainwright, the Japanese order still in his hands. “And where is General Homma now, Mister Anderson?”

“Dead, sir, along with the rest of his staff. They never had a chance to warn Tokyo that we were attacking them. Before the end of this day, our robots should have completed a full sweep of the Philippines and killed all the Japanese soldiers still alive on the islands. We will then advise you when the job is finished. Where do you intend to set up your command post, General?”

“Right here, in this campus. My Filipino soldiers will help you sweep the city and ensure that no Japanese can hide. After learning about this Japanese order, I doubt that we ourselves will take any prisoners.”

“An understandable reaction, sir. By the way, you may want those to keep contact with us and with Pearl Harbor.”

Anderson then presented him with two radio transceivers, one small enough to fit in a large pocket, the other a heavier one meant to be worn like a backpack.

“The small one is already tuned to our operational frequency. The bigger one is a powerful HF/SF transceiver that can reach all around the world. The main frequencies presently in use by the U.S. Pacific Fleet are written on that tag attached to the handset. Both radios use isotopic batteries that will last over twenty years. We will recuperate both radios after you can effect a linkup with American forces, not because we are cheap but rather because these radios represent very advanced technology. By the way, saying that you lost them won’t work: they have internal radio beacons.”

Wainwright looked at Anderson with amusement.

“You Time Patrol types always think of everything, it seems.”

“We do try, General.” Replied proudly the field agent.

13:17 (San Francisco Time)

Monday, June 1, 1942 ‘B’/Tuesday, June 2 in Philippines

Alameda Naval Air Station, Oakland

California

Voran Tess, commander of the GILGAMESH, felt relieved when the last of his American passengers was safely off his ship and the access ramps closed back: the

welcome from the local base authorities had been polite but cold, probably reflecting the attitude of Washington towards the Time Patrol. The European and Australian passengers left aboard would probably bring him warmer welcomes at his next stops. Still, posting anti-aircraft guns and pointing them at his ship had not been a gesture he had appreciated much. Even General King had found that quite stupid and had blasted verbally the base commander, forcing the latter into withdrawing the guns. For Voran and his crew, who had been warmly thanked by the camp survivors as they left the ship, the attitude of the local authorities had been a bitter disappointment. With that still in mind, Voran turned his command chair to look at his pilot, Alan Mishtar.

“Let’s take off now, Alan. Our next stop will be Northolt, where we will drop off our British passengers. Helena, warn Northolt that we are about to arrive, so that the British can be ready to process those poor souls in the cargo hold.”

“Yes, Voran!” Replied the young German blonde, who was the assistant sensors and weapons officer of the ship. As she was contacting Northolt, Voran rubbed his tired eyes and shifted his body in his command chair: he had been up and at his station for over sixteen hours now. The rest of his crew was also getting tired by the high operational tempo of the latest days.

“Helena, on second thought, tell Northolt that, after dropping all of our passengers off, we will go to 60,000 B.C.E. to take a good rest period.”

“Got that!” Said Helena, pleased by his decision. She was dog-tired and really could use some sleep. One way to catch up on one’s sleep without delaying the present operations was to go back in the distant past, park the ship in Earth orbit and put the autopilot on before going to bed. Once you had slept all that you needed, you simply jumped back to five minutes past the time of your first jump and resumed operations.

For their two last trips, to Amsterdam in Holland and Melbourne in Australia, they didn’t even bother retracting and deploying again the landing legs, instead rising high enough from their latest landing spot to perform a spacetime jump to the next destination and landing again. This way, they had their last passengers disembark less than an hour after leaving Alameda Naval Air Station and were soon on their way to a parking orbit in 60,000 B.C.E.. Once in the planned orbit, Voran made a last ship-wide systems check, then spoke in the ship’s intercom.

“Attention all hands! Secure from duty stations and go for a twelve hour rest period. We will resume operations then. Have a good sleep!”

Getting up slowly from his command chair, he rubbed his tired back and went to his cabin, situated on the same level than the bridge. The other bridge crewmembers soon followed suit.

Voran woke up with a startle seven hours later, still feeling tired. The insistent voice of the main computer then made him wake up fully very fast.

“Alert! Intruder on the bridge! Alert! Intruder on the bridge!”

Getting out of bed in a hurry, he switched on his videophone, which could also connect with the main computer.

“This is Voran Tess. Show me the intruder!”

The main computer then switched his videophone screen to the view given by one of the security cameras on the bridge. Voran now could see a young woman in a dirty T-shirt and tropical shorts bending over the pilot’s station, studying the controls. Her black hair, cut at the neck, was disheveled and dirty. Voran sighed in both relief and annoyance: at least the intruder was not an armed Imperium soldier, in which case their situation would have been very bad indeed. On the other hand, having a clandestine passenger was not something to please him. Eva Dittmar, the ship’s security officer, was going to blow a fuse on this. Voran called Eva next, finding that the German was already up and armed with a stun pistol, even though she was only wearing her underwear.

“Eva, take the time to dress properly. I don’t think that our visitor means any harm. The controls will refuse any command from her anyway. I will meet you outside the bridge in five minutes.”

Dressing quickly, Voran took a stun pistol as well before leaving his cabin. Eva Dittmar was already at the main entrance to the bridge when he arrived there and looked at him.

“She has done nothing but look at the various stations. She seems to be quite a curious woman, but she also is showing no apparent fear. I would rate her as a cool customer. She must have come aboard during our stop in Manila, then probably hid in some storage room.”

“We will know soon enough, Eva. Let’s go in!”

Pistols at the ready, they ran inside as soon as the door slid open. Crossing the footbridge leading to the bridge control platforms, set in the center of a large holographic sphere, they then ran up the stairs to the command platform, where the intruder was. The stranger heard them coming and raised her hands as soon as she saw their pistols, shouting in English.

“Don’t shoot! I have no hostile intentions.”

Eva approached her cautiously, her pistol still pointed, and performed a quick search on her, finding no weapon in the process.

“Alright, miss, who are you?”

“My name is Sally Nolan. I was a prisoner in the Santo Tomas internment camp. Before the Japanese invasion, I was working for a Texan mining company doing prospective work in the Philippines.”

“Why did you stay on board this ship instead of disembarking at Alameda?”

“Because I want to stay with you guys.” Said forcefully Nolan. “Can you imagine how exciting it could be for a girl like me to be part of your Time Patrol? I have been constantly treated before like a tomboy who wouldn’t stay in her proper place, even though I could drive and operate heavy machinery better than most of these beer-guzzling loudmouths. Then, I saw you guys, commanded by Nancy Laplante and apparently treating your women on an equal footing with men. How could I not stay on this ship?”

Eva and Voran exchanged a quick glance, then lowered their pistols. Voran spoke this time.

“You said that you can operate heavy equipment, miss. Are you good at mechanical repair as well?”

“Hell, will a degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Houston be enough for you? Even with that, the most those macho morons would let me do is drive a bulldozer or a heavy truck. Now, can I put my hands down?”

“You can, Miss Nolan. By the way, I am Voran Tess, captain of this ship. This is Eva Dittmar, my weapons and security officer.”

“Cool!” Said Nolan happily while shaking Eva’s hand after that of Voran. “Does that mean that I am in?”

Voran smiled at Sally’s audacity. Nancy Laplante was definitely going to like that Texan woman.

“Only Nancy Laplante can approve your candidacy, miss, but I would say that the odds are in your favor. Do you need anything for the moment? Are you hungry?”

“I could use a good shower and a meal, if that is possible.” Said Nolan, her voice now reflecting her fatigue. Voran nodded his head and looked at Eva.

“Eva, could I ask you to escort Miss Nolan to a private cabin and see to her needs? Have her fitted with an apprentice uniform and make her pass a session of mnemotronic chair to teach her Neo-English, French, German, Russian and Spanish.”

“I already speak Spanish, guys.” Said Nolan quickly. “What is a mnemotronic chair?”

“A device that let’s you learn very quickly through direct transfer of knowledge to the brain. You will be able to learn those four new languages in less than an hour.”

“Wow! I can’t wait to see that. What do we do after that?”

“We will resume our operations. Our next priority task is to go pick up Australian prisoners in Rabaul, on the island of New Britain just north of Australia.”

“Rabaul? Isn’t that a main Japanese naval base?”

“It is.” Answered Eva. “Right now there is a hell of a battle going on there.”

05:46 (Melbourne Time)

Kokopo catholic mission, near Rabaul

Island of New Britain, Solomon Islands

Southwest Pacific

“My God! I don’t know who is attacking the Japanese, but this sounds like one hell of a fight.” Said Australian nursing sister Mavis Cullen as she listened to the noise of the intense firefight coming from the Japanese naval base in Rabaul. Her comrade, nursing sister Eileen Callahan, standing like her outside the convent of the Kokopo catholic mission, nodded in agreement.

“It certainly is. It has been going on for over half a hour now. Do you think that the strange flying ships we saw a few days ago are involved again?”

“They must be, since the last time we saw one was when it sank all the ships in the harbor.”

Kathleen Parker, the matron in charge of their group of six nursing sisters, then stuck her head out of the door of the convent.

“Girls, you better come inside. The last time the Japanese got clobbered, it took all of the bishop’s influence to stop them from taking us away and throwing us in the prisoners camp with our unfortunate soldiers.”

“She is right, Mavis. Let’s go inside.”

They were about to walk inside the convent when a huge ship flew overhead at low altitude, spitting condensed streams of canon shells from a number of gun turrets at the Japanese base. The two nursing sisters watched with awe the behemoth pass over them, then ran inside.

“Did you see that thing, Kay?” Exclaimed Mavis. “The Japanese are going to be shredded to pieces this time.”

“I sure did. Now, let’s lock the doors and windows, quickly!”

Leading her five nursing sisters towards the back rooms of the convent, Parker gathered as well the seven civilian sisters from the government hospital at Namanula, the two Methodist missionary sisters of the mission and the wife of a plantation owner who had refused to be evacuated last December.

“Get dressed and be ready to run from the mission on short notice. The Japanese may well seek revenge on us.” Shouted the matron. The missionary sisters looked at her with shock and disbelief.

“Abandon the mission? We can’t do that!” Objected the senior Methodist sister, bringing frustration to Kay Parker.

“Do you prefer to die if the Japanese come here? We would only leave the mission for a short time anyway, until the Japanese are gone.”

“Where could we hide, Kay?” Asked nursing sister Lorna Whyte, anxious.

“In the jungle, of course!”

Taking their clues from Kay, the fifteen women hurried up and got fully dressed, then filled a few knapsacks with food and water canteens. A shout of alarm from Mavis Cullen suddenly froze them.

“Kay, a Japanese Army truck is coming up the road.”

“Quick, let’s leave by the back door!”

They were moving towards the rear of the convent again when they heard a shouted order in German from the courtyard of the mission. The two Methodist sisters immediately froze in horror.

“My God! The bishop!”

They would have turned back towards the front if Kay had not physically stopped them.

“Are you crazy? What do you expect to accomplish except for getting yourselves killed?”

“But, the bishop...”

“He is trying to save you. Don’t make his efforts pointless.”

As if to underline her point, they then heard a last shouted order from the bishop to the approaching Japanese, which was followed by a single rifle shot. Kay then forcefully pushed the Methodist sisters back.

“I said get out, all of you, and run inside the jungle.”

The sixteen women started running out from the back of the convent as the noise of rifle butts breaking down the front door could be heard. There was a good hundred meters of open ground from the convent to the start of the jungle, a long distance when running in female shoes while pursued by Japanese soldiers. Arriving first to the cover of the trees, Mavis Cullen turned around to see how the others were doing. To her horror, nine of the women were still in the middle of the open ground when the first Japanese soldier showed up at the back door of the convent. The Japanese raised his rifle and pointed it at the back of one of the Methodist sisters. Mavis couldn't help flinch and look away as a rifle shot rang out. She then realized that the shot had come from the jungle and not from the convent. Looking again, she saw the Japanese soldier sprawled across the back porch. A second Japanese soldier appeared, only to be shot as well in the next second. Someone then shouted from inside the jungle.

“QUICK, SISTERS, RUN INSIDE THE JUNGLE!”

Spurred by the voice of their unknown savior, the women soon were all under tree cover, while two more shots downed as many Japanese soldiers, who were now growing much more cautious and were shooting back from behind the windows of the convent. The Australian women had no choice but to lie down to avoid the bullets, but the dense jungle foliage gave them good cover. Probably spurred by their officer, the Japanese soldiers suddenly burst out of the convent at a run, charging with bayonets fixed and screaming loudly. In a show of marksmanship that left Kay Parker awed, the unseen sniper shot the Japanese one after the other, downing six soldiers in less than ten seconds. That left only two Japanese alive to reach the first trees. If the unseen sniper was using a Lee-Enfield bolt-action rifle, as Kay suspected, he was now probably busy reloading his rifle, which could contain a maximum of ten rounds. Terrified, Kay forced herself to stay still as the two remaining Japanese soldiers advanced in her general direction, keeping a low profile. Another shot rang out from close by, downing one of the Japanese. The surviving one cursed loudly in Japanese and shot back twice in the general direction of the shot, unable to spot the sniper. He tumbled to the ground two seconds later, a bullet through the head. There was then an incredible silence around for a few seconds, as the women didn't dare move yet. Someone then moved to the

right of Kay. She sighed with relief when a tall silhouette covered with dirt and wearing the tattered remains of an Australian Army uniform approached her, a scoped rifle in its hands. The sniper smiled to Kay and offered her a hand.

“Let me help you up, Sister.”

The voice of the sniper struck Kay as she got up with his help: while he had spoken with a strong Australian accent, the voice had been that of a teenager. The sniper’s face was hard to detail with the shadows from the trees and the dirt covering it.

“I must thank God for your help, sir. We owe you our lives.”

“It was a pleasure, Sister. I’m Jeffrey Norton, from the Australian Army Corps of Cadets.”

“A cadet?” Exclaimed Kay in disbelief. “And what are you doing, running around the jungle with a sniper rifle?”

Jeffrey’s smile turned to a tired expression then.

“It is a long story, maam. First, though, do you have food still in your convent? I haven’t eaten for over two days now.”

“Of course, my poor boy. Come with us.”

Kay was leading him while assembling the other women when Jeffrey stopped and pointed his rifle towards the convent.

“Maybe you should stay here under cover for a while, Sisters: there may be more Japanese in and around the mission. I will go check the place out first.”

Seeing the good sense in his suggestion, Kay didn’t object and watched the boy run across the open ground towards the convent. To her relief, nobody shot at him and he soon disappeared inside the convent. He reappeared two minutes later and waved at them to join him inside. Cautiously at first, the sixteen women left the cover of the jungle and walked back to the convent, arriving there without incident. They found Jeffrey Norton in the kitchen, his mouth full of raw onions. Embarrassed, he tried to swallow the onions while attempting to explain himself.

“Sorry, Sisters! I was so hungry and I saw those onions...”

“There is nothing to be sorry about, Mister Norton.” Replied Kay in a gentle tone while detailing him. The teenager was over 180 centimeter-tall and had blond hair and blue eyes. While thin from hunger, his body was athletic, with wide shoulders and long legs.

“Mister Norton, how old are you exactly?”

“I turned fifteen last month, Sister.”

“And you were fighting in the jungle? Since when?”

“Since the occupation of Rabaul over four months ago, Sister. My parents, who owned a plantation near Rabaul, were shot by the Japanese. I fled in the jungle then and returned to my house a day later. I shot the Japanese still there, then packed what I would need to fight on before disappearing in the jungle again. I have been sniping at the Japanese since then, stealing food and water from where I could. I was starting to despair of ever seeing Allied troops come and deliver us when those silent flying ships started appearing a few days ago.”

Kay was about to say how impressed she was when one of the Methodist sisters suddenly ran towards the front door.

“Bishop Becker! We must see if he is alive still.”

As one, the other women followed in, with the confused Jeffrey Norton behind them. Emerging in the courtyard of the mission, they saw the body of the bishop sprawled in the dust near a parked Japanese light truck. They ran to him, with Mavis Cullen arriving first and kneeling besides him. After checking his pulse, she looked up with joy at the others.

“He’s still alive. Quick, let’s get him inside.”

Jeffrey Norton shouted in alarm before they could lift the bishop from the ground.

“SISTERS, WATCH OUT!”

The teenager was in the process of pointing his rifle at something behind the truck when he froze, total surprise on his face.

“What the hell is that?”

The women looked in the same direction as him and froze as well. A machine the size of a big man and mounted on two tracks had advanced from behind the truck, a turret with weapons in the place of a head. Altogether, the thing looked formidable and Jeffrey decided that lowering slowly his rifle was the smart thing to do right now. The machine rolled to a few paces of their group and stopped, its weapons pointed downward at the ground. A male voice coming out of the machine then spoke in English,.

“Are you Australians?”

“Yes, we are!” Answered quickly Jeffrey. “Who are you?”

“The correct question would be ‘what are you?’, sir. I am a robot, a machine animated by an artificial intelligence. My task is to destroy the enemies of the Time Patrol.”

“The Time Patrol?” Said Kay Parker. “What’s that?”

“The Time Patrol is an organization from the 34th century mandated to protect history. Our present mission is to destroy the Japanese Army and save the prisoners it holds.”

Everyone swallowed hard while trying to digest that information. Jeffrey was the first to recover from the shock.

“Could you help us? We have a gravely wounded man here who urgently needs to be brought to a hospital.”

If the machine looked at Bishop Becker, nothing showed it. It stayed still and didn't speak for a few seconds, prompting Jeffrey into shouting at it with impatience.

“Hey, machine, are you listening? We have a man in need of urgent treatment.”

“The message has just been passed along, sir.” Replied the machine in a patient voice. “Someone will soon arrive to help you.”

“He better arrive quickly.” Muttered Mavis Cullen, who was pressing her hand on the chest wound of the bishop to stop the bleeding. “The bishop is bleeding heavily.”

Only a few seconds after she said those words, a tall woman appeared from nowhere in a flash of white light, making them all jump back in surprise. The woman wore a gray uniform, a complicated helmet and some type of molded armor around her torso. Jeffrey's eyes opened wide when he recognized the heroine he had been worshipping since 1940.

“Wow! Brigadier Laplante!”

Nancy Laplante smiled to him while walking towards the bishop.

“Just miss or Nancy will do, boy: I resigned my commission. Let's see your friend he...”

Just then, a bullet ricocheted on her body armor and went through her left arm, making her stagger back and grimace in pain. The robot reacted even faster than Jeffrey, who pivoted around immediately towards the corner of the convent while raising his rifle: the weapon turret of the robot went up and spat a short machine gun salvo in less than a second. The wounded Japanese who had crawled to the corner of the convent to shoot at them dropped dead, riddled with bullets. After a moment of stupor, the nursing sisters ran to Nancy Laplante to examine her wound, but Nancy gestured for them to stop.

“No need for this: I can heal myself.”

Before anyone could question her on that, she touched her left arm with her right hand, which then glowed intensively for twenty seconds. Withdrawing her right hand, she cautiously flexed her left arm to test it and smiled.

“As good as new.”

While everybody was still stunned into silence, she extended her right hand towards Bishop Becker, palm opened. A white ray shot out of her hand and covered the bishop's chest for a few seconds before fading away. The bishop soon opened his eyes and sat up, confusion on his face.

“What happened? My shirt is covered with blood but I don't feel any pain. Did the Japanese shoot me?”

The Australian women and Jeffrey immediately kneeled in unison, staring at Nancy with awe.

“A miracle! You just performed a miracle.” Said fervently one of the Methodist sisters. Nancy looked down gravely at them.

“Please get up, all of you. I am no saint: I am just an intermediary.”

“But...the way you healed yourself and the bishop was nothing short of a miracle.” Objected the sister. Nancy shook her head.

“Call it the power of mind over matter, Sister.”

She then looked at Jeffrey, scrutinizing him with curiosity.

“Aren't you a bit young to fight, boy?”

“Boy? Miss, I may only be fifteen but I know how to fight.”

“How long have you been fighting the Japanese?”

“I have been sniping at them for over four months now, miss.” Answered proudly Jeffrey. Kay Parker took on her then to support the cadet.

“Yes, and one fine sniper he is, miss. Jeffrey shot twelve Japanese in succession and saved our lives.”

Nancy looked at Jeffrey with renewed interest.

“Where are your parents, Jeffrey?”

“Dead, miss.” Replied the cadet, lowering his head. “They were killed by the Japanese when they took Rabaul.”

Nancy nodded her head slowly and spoke after a few seconds.

“Jeffrey, would you like to come with me? I could use a brave lad like you.”

Jeffrey immediately took one step forward, coming to attention with his rifle.

“I would be honored, miss.”

“Excellent! Bishop, sisters, I will have a small flying craft pick you up shortly to transport you to Australia. Please pack your things quickly.”

“But we can’t abandon the mission like this.” Objected the bishop, who was now up on his feet. Nancy looked at him with concern.

“Bishop, this is only a raid. We will kill all the Japanese we can find, free their prisoners and then leave, as we have much to do around the Pacific and few people to do it. I can’t guarantee that no Japanese soldier will be able to escape into the jungle to later attack your mission. There will anyway be no one left for your mission to serve until the original citizens of Rabaul return.”

“I still want to stay with my nuns, miss.”

Nancy sighed in annoyance, then looked at Kay Parker.

“Alright, but I am evacuating all the nursing sisters present here: you will be a lot more useful in a hospital in Melbourne than here. Be ready in less than ten minutes.”

“Yes, miss!”

As the nurses ran back to the convent, Nancy approached Jeffrey and glued herself to him while smiling.

“Don’t think bad of me because of this, Jeffrey: I am simply about to transport you out of here.”

Both then disappeared in a flash of white light, leaving the stunned bishop to stare at the spot where they had been.

18:46 (Beijing Time)

Tuesday, June 2, 1942 ‘B’

Main vivisection laboratory

Pingfan Germ Warfare Complex

Manchuria

Farah Tolkonen ‘A’ stared silently for long seconds at the partially dissected bodies of four unfortunate Chinese: two men; a woman and a small girl. She had seen pictures and films of countless atrocities committed in this war, but this was the first time that she truly saw by herself the bestiality of some humans. That so-called doctors of medicine would have done such things, injecting living human beings with horrible diseases and then dissecting them to see the results, made it even harder for Farah to accept that such atrocities could have happened. She, like the other Time Patrol personnel present in Pingfan, was wearing a light protective suit on top of her uniform

and her helmet faceplate was down and sealed, her air now being filtered by the built-in filters of her helmet. An equally silent Nancy Laplante stood besides her.

“Nancy, you did say that the Japanese doctors assigned to Unit 731 and Unit 100 were captured alive, correct?”

“They were, Farah. Since those bastards were wearing civilian clothes, our robots simply stunned them instead of killing them outright. We herded them into a nearby lounge.”

“Lead me to them!” Said Farah in an unusually cold voice. As a citizen of the Global Council, she had been a convinced pacifist before meeting Nancy but, like all the other field agents and aircrews of the Time Patrol, had been since then exploring the souvenirs of her past incarnations with the help of Nancy. One of her past lives had been as a soldier in Humanity’s last recorded war in the 29th century. Following Nancy out of the vivisection laboratory and along a long hallway, she soon entered a lounge whose two doors were guarded by combat robots. About twenty Japanese men wearing lab overcoats were sitting around the tables of the lounge, their face jittery, and looked up at the two women with fear and dread. Farah stared back at them for a minute, examining the face of each of them, then turned towards Nancy and extended her right hand.

“Your pistol, Nancy.”

Nancy gave Farah her Colt RAPTOR machine pistol without a word. Farah, like all the members of the Time Patrol, was fully qualified on all of their individual weapons and was familiar with the Colt RAPTOR. Nancy did speak out loudly in Japanese, though.

“Doctor Ishi, stand up and come forward.”

The head scientist of Unit 731 got up hesitantly and walked slowly to Farah and Nancy, stopping three paces in front of them and bowing deeply.

“What may I do for the honorable ladies?”

The hypocrisy and shameless opportunism of the man finished convincing Farah about her next move. Raising the machine pistol, she shot Ishi once between the eyes. The Japanese toppled backward to the floor, letting Farah realize how easy it had been for her to kill him: no last second hesitation; no shaking of the hand and no remorse. In fact, she now felt relief, as if killing that monster had brought peace to his unfortunate victims. She then slowly, deliberately shot the remaining Japanese scientists one by one even as they scattered around the lounge to find whatever cover there was. All her pent-up

revolt at the sadistic atrocities she had witnessed in this war burst out in that round of killings. Her face was hard when she gave back the weapon to Nancy.

“Let’s repatriate the prisoners that survived this hell, then we will get rid of the stocks of chemical and biological weapons stored in the camp by transporting them into space and dumping them into the Sun. Then, let’s burn this whole place to the ground.”

10:10 (Washington Time)

Wednesday, June 3, 1942 ‘B’

Oval Office, White House

Washington

“Come in!” Said tersely Franklin D. Roosevelt while still reading the morning edition of the Chicago Tribune newspaper. Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Secretary of War Henry Stimson entered the Oval Office and took the seats offered by the President. Since both had also read today’s edition of the Chicago Tribune they had a good idea already about why they had been called in. Stimson even had his own copy of the Chicago Tribune in his briefcase. Roosevelt, sitting in his wheelchair behind his work desk, finally showed the front page of the newspaper to his two cabinet members and pointed at a large picture with an equally large title in bold letters. The picture showed Nancy Laplante in the process of healing General Claire Chennault in freshly liberated Nanking, with the title above saying ‘HOLY WARRIOR IN CHINA’.

“Did you guys see this?”

“We did, Mister President.” Answered glumly Cordell Hull. The events of the last few days had been particularly damaging to his professional ego. Having dismissed Laplante as an egomaniac with simplistic views of world politics, he was now starting to look like the actual amateur, with Laplante piling success after success. “That woman could give lessons in public relations to even General MacArthur.”

“Which she did.” Replied Stimson. “Remember yesterday’s edition of the Chicago Tribune, with that picture of General MacArthur arriving in the Philippines by plane in order to play ‘Savior of the Philippines’, only to be upstaged by Nancy Laplante, who was waiting for him on the tarmac besides General Wainwright. Personally, I have to admit that I was happy to see MacArthur eat crow for once.”

“I have to say that I felt the same.” Admitted Roosevelt. “MacArthur had it coming for a long time. However, our real problem now is about what we do next.

Because of her advanced technology, Miss Laplante and her Time Patrol will always be one step ahead of us, literally, and can accomplish military feats we can only dream about. Hell, that picture of all these robots lined up in Nanking made me green with envy. There is also another aspect of her that could play havoc with the way the American public is viewing her.”

“You mean her so-called holiness, Mister President?” Said Hull, attracting an annoyed look from Roosevelt.

“Cordell, I know that you don’t like her, but give her at least her dues. After all that she did in the last days in front of thousands of witnesses, how could anyone deny that she is able to perform literally miracles? That is having right now a major impact on the American public, an impact I can easily understand. Imagine: after years of seeing Germany and Japan kick the teeth of about everyone else in the World with apparent impunity, here comes a charismatic woman who basically defeated Germany in a single week and destroyed the Japanese Navy and Air Force. To add to that, she frees hundreds of thousands of people dying in German and Japanese camps and, to top it all, heals them in a series of mass miracles with what can only be the help of God himself. Well, guess what! Those healed Jews and American servicemen and citizens have friends and relatives here in the States who are now ready to kiss Laplante’s four cheeks for what she did. You should see the deluge of mail the White House is receiving, all supporting Laplante and praising her to heaven.”

“She already went to heaven and came back, if one can believe the stories about her, Mister President.” Said Stimson, deadpan. That made Roosevelt pause for a moment.

“Damn, you are actually right, Henry. You want another good one on the same line? Our people in London have been very carefully monitoring what is happening around the Time Patrol people there and they picked up something that is extremely disturbing, to say the least. Yesterday evening, the head of the OSS, General Donovan, briefed me about it. From the testimony of numerous witnesses, both in London and in Warsaw, a young Jewish woman who came with the Time Patrol and who is presently staying in Warsaw is actually Saint Mary-Magdalene in person. She was apparently extracted from Palestine by Laplante after the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. That is not however the real whopper. What is significant is that she has a toddler boy with her that may be the actual son of Jesus Christ. That toddler, named David, is said to have demonstrated already some paranormal powers.”

“Dear God!” Said softly Stimson, now pale. “If this is true and it becomes public knowledge, it could start a real religious storm, especially with Laplante running around and performing miracles.”

“That secret may be already out, at least partially.” Replied Roosevelt. “The Vatican, whose information network should never be underestimated, has apparently learned about that Mary-Magdalene and her son and is said to be preparing a delegation to visit her in Warsaw.”

Cordell Hull shook his head in bewilderment at those words.

“Damn! That’s the last thing we need. How will the Muslims and other religious groups react to this? What about our own people? This could create worldwide chaos and religious turmoil.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” Said Stimson, somber. “I am sure that the Vatican wishes no more than us to see such religious turmoil being created. Whatever its delegation will find in Warsaw will probably be kept a closely guarded secret. Mister President, this aspect of the situation may be a fascinating one, but it leaves us still with the question of what we do next. Personally, I would urge that we reconsider our decision not to attend that peace conference in Paris on Friday. We should also seriously consider dumping the Vichy government of Marshall Petain. From what I hear about it, it is already becoming quite irrelevant and could be soon dissolved under French popular pressure. If we keep backing dead horses in Europe, we may end up with pie all over our faces.”

Cordell Hull, stung by such open criticism of his handling of foreign affairs, had however little arguments to oppose Stimson’s views: whether he liked it or not, Nancy Laplante seemed to have all the aces in her deck of cards at the moment. He thus swallowed his pride and spoke up reluctantly.

“I am afraid that Secretary Stimson is correct, Mister President. Things are quickly slipping out of our grasps in Europe as well as in the Pacific. We must salvage what we can while we still can.”

Roosevelt took only a moment to take his decision: it was not as if he had many options left open to him anyway.

“Alright! Have our embassy in London contact the Time Patrol outpost in Northolt to inform them that we wish to participate to that conference in Paris. As for the situation in the Pacific, let’s put on hold any military operation, except for the reinforcement of our forces in the Philippines, until things become clearer, especially in China.”

CHAPTER 20 – THE IMPERIUM STRIKES BACK

09:27 (Universal time)

Monday, October 28, 1940 ‘B’

Imperium super-battleship ROYAL SOVEREIGN

Earth orbit

“So, you are positive that all your equipment will work, especially those portable time distorter units and time-jumping spy probes?”

“Absolutely, Your Majesty.” Replied the head of the scientific study group as he faced King Stan the Sixth, sitting behind the work desk in the office of his royal suite. “We conducted a number of tests, which all succeeded without a problem. The time drive of this ship has also been modified so that it could be tuned quickly to the frequency of the timeline where the Time Patrol originated from, once we find that frequency of course.”

“And how close are you to finding that frequency, Doctor?”

The three scientists facing King Stan hesitated and looked at each other before their leader answered in an embarrassed tone.

“That is still a problem, Your Majesty. Without a lead of some sort, finding that frequency could be a long search indeed.”

Stan felt irritation but kept an outer appearance of calm: he was a realistic enough man to see how difficult that particular task was. Those scientists had however done well enough to let his plan go ahead.

“Thank you, gentlemen! Be advised that we will jump ahead by a few months shortly. We will then need both your portable time distorters and your special spy probes. You may go.”

Once the three scientists were out of his office, Stan contacted by intercom Major Kossov, the commander of the guards from the Ministry of Security that were aboard the flagship. Despite being a Security Ministry officer, Kossov seemed to be both a decent man and a capable officer. His guards were also the only ones to have fought directly with the Time Patrol forces and their experience could become handy just now. Kossov bowed his head on Stan’s viewing screen when he saw who was calling him.

“Your Majesty, what may I do for you?”

“I need you to report to my suite with that young female guard who was wounded in ancient London and healed by Laplante. What is her name again?”

“Private Rina Tonen, Your Majesty. She is one of my best guards. We will be at your suite in a few minutes, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you, Major!”

Switching off his intercom, Stan then thought over his plan for the last time, trying to find a possible flaw in it. He however could not think of anything wrong with it. Logically, his plan should prevent the creation of the Time Patrol and thus preserve the future existence of the Imperium. Opening a drawer of his desk, he took out the ancient book that had led to so many mistakes and to the possible demise of his empire, looking at the picture of a smiling young woman in old British uniform on the cover of the book.

“I’m sorry it has to come to this, Brigadier Laplante. You were a worthy opponent indeed.”

The sound of his door buzzer then made him put down the book.

“Come in!”

Major Kossov and a young female guard, both in the green uniform of the Ministry of Security, entered and came to rigid attention a few paces in front of his desk, saluting him.

“Major Kossov and Private Tonen reporting as ordered, Your Majesty.”

“At ease!”

Stan examined carefully Rina Tonen before speaking: she seemed very athletic and strong and was also pretty.

“Major, I have a critical mission to give to Private Tonen, a mission on which could depend the very existence of the Imperium. Do you have full confidence in her?”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Replied without hesitation Kossov. Stan then looked at Rina Tonen, who stood impassive, as a good trooper would.

“Private Tonen, we are about to jump forward by a few months, to June 24 of 1941, over Berlin, Germany. At that time, Nancy Laplante had been captured by the Germans and handed over to their secret police, the Gestapo. Your mission will be to transport yourself inside the prison where she is being tortured by the Gestapo, find Laplante and kill her. If you are successful, Laplante will die before she has a chance to go back to the future and create her Time Patrol. At that date, she has already contributed enough to the British war effort to ensure future British domination of the world and thus prepare the future emergence of the Imperium. Once you have killed

her, you will transport back to this ship, using a portable time device just developed by our scientists. We will then wait a bit and then jump to 3386 to ensure that our mission had the desired result. Do you have any questions, Private Tonen?"

"No, Your Majesty!" Answered Rina, apparently undisturbed by her new mission. In reality, the order to kill Nancy Laplante was leaving a bitter taste inside her mouth. To kill her in fair combat was one thing. To do it while Laplante was strapped to a torture rack and helpless was another thing. However, the king was correct: her death was the price to save the Imperium.

"Good!" Said Stan before calling the bridge on his videophone. "Commodore Nousma, have the ship jump high over Berlin, Germany, at 22:00 hours local time on June 24 of the year 1941."

"Right away, Your Majesty!"

Fifteen seconds later, a flash of white light briefly permeated the whole ship. Stan then got up from behind his desk and started walking out of his suite.

"Please follow me, both of you."

It took them ten minutes of walking and elevator-hopping through the 800 meter-long behemoth to arrive at a scientific laboratory where a dozen men and women were busy doing last minute adjustments to a number of pieces of equipment. The scientists all stood up at the king's entrance.

"At ease, please! Doctor Leitrim, is everything ready?"

"It is, Your Majesty." Answered an old, distinguished man sitting in front of a large viewing screen. "We can launch the spy probe when you wish."

"Then proceed."

Leitrim punched a few commands on his control console. A tiny ball the size of a large pearl that was floating inside a glass cage then disappeared in a flash of white light. Leitrim explained out loud what was happening as the overhead picture of a city appeared on his viewing screen.

"We were able to find on an old map of Berlin the address mentioned in that old book of yours, Your Majesty. The probe is now flying down towards it. We could not risk a direct jump inside as we are lacking the very precise coordinates needed for a safe jump. Our probe will however help us map accurately the objective as it goes around and inside it."

The picture from the probe soon showed a close-up of a gray, sinister building guarded by soldiers in black uniforms.

“The main interrogation center of the Gestapo in Berlin, Your Majesty. From your book’s description, it was a truly nasty place where I wouldn’t care spending time.”

“We will soon see for ourselves. Find a basement window and have the probe jump inside.”

The probe’s camera soon showed a low window shut by steel bars and situated at sidewalk level. The probe passed through the bars but bounced on a glass surface with an audible noise. Leitrim, looking annoyed, played with his controls.

“Just a temporary annoyance, Your Majesty. I will have our probe jump through that glass pane and...AAAH!”

Everyone who was looking at the screen jumped back from fright and surprise as the battered and bloody face of a man suddenly appeared on the screen, filling it due to the short distance. King Stan understood first who the man was.

“Don’t worry, Doctor: this is only one of the unfortunate prisoners of that center, who was probably attracted to the window by the noise of the probe colliding on it. Proceed!”

“The poor man.” Said one of the female scientists. “Look at his hands. They seem to have been crushed.”

“The Gestapo had a fearsome reputation, miss.” Said Stan, who had read all he could find on that time period. “I have to warn you that even worst sights will probably come soon.”

Leitrim and many of the scientists swallowed hard at those words: as top-flight scientists considered loyal to the Imperium, they had been mostly cocooned from the less savory aspects of Imperium security operations. The probe then jumped inside what turned out to be a tiny cell, bare except for a sanitary bucket. Leitrim made it jump again, this time inside a concrete basement corridor. He then made it follow the corridor towards the left, from where horrible screams of pain could be heard. The scientists in the lab were now on edge, disturbed by the screams. Rina Tonen herself, even though she was an experienced, combat-hardened soldier, felt nearly ill by now, while Major Kossov tried to keep a straight face. The probe then made one more jump through a thick, steel-reinforced door and the screams became much more loud. The probe was now floating near the masonry ceiling of a large room with stone pillars. A number of sinister instruments furnished the room and two men were visible in front of a naked woman

strapped to a heavy steel chair. The biggest of the two men was kneeling in front of the woman and moving two electrical wires to various points of her body, making her scream every time the electrodes touched her skin. The smaller man simply looked on calmly, a notepad in his hands.

“Nancy Laplante.” Said coldly King Stan, while Rina Tonen clenched her teeth but forced herself to keep looking at the sadistic show. She however couldn’t look anymore when the big man applied a red-hot iron to Laplante’s left breast, rolling it slowly across her nipple. Stan’s right hand firmly but gently grabbed her arm, forcing her to look back at the screen.

“Private Tonen, I don’t like this anymore than you do, but you will have soon to go down there and kill that woman. The existence of the Imperium depends on it. You have to watch this and be ready to jump to that room at the first opportune moment. Doctor Leitrim, have Private Tonen equipped with a portable time distorter and program the necessary coordinates in it.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Replied Leitrim, too happy to have an excuse to stop looking at the awful scene filmed by the probe’s camera. Rina Tonen soon had a black, flat steel box strapped against her belly. A series of small display panels and control buttons covered the upper side of the box. Leitrim took a minute to carefully program two sets of spacetime coordinates in the box, then showed two large buttons to Rina, one red and one green.

“Your time distorter is now programmed and you will only need to press either of these two buttons. Pressing the red one will send you to a spot in a corner of that interrogation room in Berlin. Pressing the green one will bring you back here in this lab.” Leitrim next pointed at an empty spot in the lab, where eight small cylinders were attached to a large tubular frame forming an empty cage.

“Those cylinders fixed to the frame are spacetime beacons. They will actually guide your time distorter back to that precise spot, where you will materialize a few centimeters from the floor. Thus, be ready for a short fall on your return trip.”

“Red button to go, green one to come back. Got that! Where exactly will I appear inside the interrogation room, Doctor?”

Both looked back at the viewing screen, just in time to see the big German smash one of Laplante’s fingers, which were already missing their nails, with a heavy hammer. The scream from Laplante made both Leitrim and Tonen cringe. Leitrim hurried to his control

station and lowered the volume, then passed a shaking hand on his forehead while looking at King Stan.

“How could anybody do such barbaric things to other human beings? And she didn’t give away any information despite of all this?”

“She didn’t, according to all the sources I consulted.” Replied Stan in a soft voice. “Nobody ever denied that this woman had incredible courage. I will mourn her after her death. Private Tonen, are you ready?”

Rina took her eyes off the screen and unholstered her pistol, making sure that its magazine was full before cocking the slide and chambering a round.

“I am, Your Majesty. I have only one question: what do I do if my time distorter malfunctions and I am trapped down there in Berlin?”

Stan approached her and stopped close to her, his eyes staring into hers.

“Whatever happens, the primordial thing is to kill Laplante and to make sure that she is truly dead. If you are trapped there afterwards, you can imagine how the Germans will feel about you: you will have just killed a very important prisoner for them and you will also be plainly from the future. I would suggest that you don’t let yourself be taken alive, Private, unless you want to go through the same kind of tortures that poor woman is enduring now.”

“I...I understand, Your Majesty. I will do my duty.”

“Excellent! We now have only to wait until those Germans leave Laplante alone for a moment. Then, you will jump to Berlin. Doctor Leitrim, do you have any spare portable time distorters, in case of emergencies?”

“We have two more units, Your Majesty.”

“Then program them with the same coordinates as for Private Tonen’s unit. That way, we will be able to send a rescue team at a moment’s notice.”

“Who do you want on that rescue team, Your Majesty?” Asked Major Kossov.

“You and me, Major. I am not going to ask things from my soldiers that I won’t do myself.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.” Said Kossov, feeling renewed loyalty towards his monarch. He was the kind of person to inspire others the same way as did...Nancy Laplante. Kossov could feel that the King had a soft spot for the woman he was about to have killed and spoke up about an idea that had been nagging him.

“Your Majesty, wouldn’t it be more humane to simply grab Laplante and bring her on this ship instead of killing her?”

Stan shook his head sadly.

“I thought of that myself, Major. However, as long as she lives, Nancy Laplante could still escape one day and start this whole circus again. What tells us that this ‘Creator’ of hers will not appear later on and give her all these psyonic powers we fear so much?”

“I see, Your Majesty. It was just a wild suggestion on my part.”

“And one I was glad to see coming from you, Major. Once this mission is over, I would very much like to transfer you and Private Tonen to my Royal Guards Corps, or what’s left of it.”

“I would accept with pleasure, Your Majesty.” Replied Kossov, meaning it.

“I would too, Your Majesty.” Added Tonen, making the king smile.

“Excellent! Grab a chair, both of you: we will now have to wait until the Germans give us an opportunity to act.”

That wait was a nerve-wracking one for all of them, as the Germans kept torturing Nancy Laplante for another two hours, using about every sadistic method one could think of to inflict pain short of amputating parts of her body. The two Germans, tired from their work, finally called it a night and left the interrogation room, with the now unconscious Laplante still strapped to the heavy steel chair. Stan then patted Tonen’s shoulder, who was by now a nervous wreck from watching the tortures inflicted on Laplante.

“Time to go, Private Tonen. Come back in one piece.”

“I will do my best, Your Majesty.”

Rina got up from her chair and walked to the cubic frame in the middle of the lab, stepping inside it and turning around to face the viewing screen. After making sure that Laplante was still alone in the interrogation room, Rina pulled out her pistol and pressed the red button of her time distorter unit. A flash of white light then enveloped her for a brief moment. She fell about twenty centimeters and landed on a concrete floor. The impact took her out of her sensation of amazement at finding oneself suddenly in a new place. Looking quickly around her, she saw no Germans in sight. The door of the interrogation room was closed but the big bolts on it were not pulled in place. Rina thought for a moment of going to the door and locking it but dismissed that idea as a waste of time. Instead, she approached cautiously Nancy Laplante, inert and immobile in her torture chair. Her body was now nothing but a mass of bruised, swollen and

burned flesh, with blood dripping from numerous superficial wounds. Feeling pity for the woman, Rina gently pulled back the hair covering her face. It was swollen and bleeding, with her left eye shut by multiple blows and her lips split open. Rina's touch was somehow enough to wake up Nancy, who slowly looked up at the Imperium trooper.

"Pl...please, help me." She said in a barely audible voice. Tears now coming to her eyes, Rina shook her head slowly, answering back in English.

"I'm sorry, I can't!"

Straightening up, Rina pointed her pistol at the right side of Nancy's head and started pulling the trigger. That tiny effort suddenly appeared a Herculean task to Rina, whose hand started shaking badly as she sobbed.

"Please forgive me for this, Nancy." She said weakly before pulling the trigger all the way. The blast from the shot was accompanied by a strange visual effect: as the muzzle flash appeared in what looked like slow motion to Rina, Nancy Laplante and everything in the room seemed to split into double images of themselves for a second or so. Then, Rina was left looking down at Nancy's body, now slumping forward with a large exit hole on the left side of her head. Blood and pieces of her brain were scattered on the floor. As in a daze, Rina took hold of Nancy's right wrist and felt for a pulse. There was none: her mission was accomplished. As she was turning around towards the door and raising her left hand to press the green button, she saw a German standing in the doorway, pointing a pistol at her. Swearing at herself for having wasted precious time, she went for the green button as the German fired twice. Sharp and intense pain in her belly made her stagger and drop her pistol. The German then fired a third time, causing more pain in her belly, at rib level, and making her fall to her knees. In a desperate effort, she pressed repeatedly the green button as the German rushed towards her. Nothing happened. With panic mixed with disbelief she pressed the button again and again, still without result. Only then did she see the three bullet holes in the casing of her time distorter.

"NOOO!" She screamed in despair before looking for her pistol. She had only the time to see a blurred movement as the German swung his pistol butt hard at her chin, knocking her unconscious.

01:46 (Berlin Time)

Wednesday, June 25, 1941 'B'

Applied physics laboratory

H.M.I.S. ROYAL SOVEREIGN

High altitude station over Berlin

“Where is Private Tonen?” Raged King Stan, staring at the viewing screen where the trooper had just disappeared after firing her pistol at Laplante’s head. Incredibly, Laplante was still alive, even though the muzzle of Tonen’s pistol had been nearly touching her head. Tonen could not possibly have missed such a shot, as much as Laplante should not have survived it. Yet, Laplante was still moving, while Tonen had disappeared in the middle of a weird visual effect. Stan turned his head towards Leitrim, who was apparently transfixed at his controls.

“Doctor Leitrim, where is Private Tonen?”

“The...the timeline: it has just split!” Replied weakly the scientist, stunned.

“WHAT?”

“For a moment, all my instruments went crazy, overcome by a surging wave of spacetime distortion. It can only mean one thing, Your Majesty: your trooper’s action of firing at Laplante somehow caused a split in the timeline, in essence creating another timeline parallel to this one. Your trooper is probably now in that new timeline.”

“How could that be, Doctor? How could the act of killing one woman split the timeline?”

“Your Majesty, if your son Len was right, that woman was not just any woman. She created this timeline unconsciously by her actions, thus making herself a critical node in spacetime for this timeline. It would be the same case if one would change history by killing prematurely a historically important person in the primordial timeline, like Hitler, Napoleon or Julius Caesar. Also, Private Tonen, who did the act that caused the split, does not belong to this time period, which must have been the catalyst in this event. If my theory is right, then Laplante is probably dead in another timeline, with your Private Tonen besides her.”

“But we have to retrieve our trooper.” Objected Major Kossov. “We can’t abandon her in this barbaric time period.”

“I agree.” Said firmly Stan. “Doctor, can you isolate the frequency of that new timeline, which we will call timeline ‘C’ for convenience sake?”

"It will take some time, Your Majesty: I have to go through a jumble of signals and distortions. It will take a few hours, at the least."

"Make it quick, Doctor: a young woman may be in big trouble right now."

02:11 (Berlin time)

Wednesday, June 25, 1941 'C'

Interrogation room, Gestapo center

Berlin

Rina Tonen woke up with a sharp, continuous pain to her chin and jaw. She tried to feel her jaw but realized then that she was tied down to a sort of X-frame and lying on her back. She was also naked. Panic nearly overcame her when she remembered where she was. What was Major Kossov waiting to show up and take her out of this hellhole? The voice of the man who had been questioning Nancy Laplante then made her look towards her feet, where she saw the small man standing between her spread legs.

"Do you realize how much damage you caused by killing Brigadier Laplante, miss? Now, I will have to get the answers from you, whoever you are. First, who are you and where do you come from?"

Having seen that man and his assistant torture Laplante for hours, Rina had nothing but pure hatred for him and nearly spat her answer.

"Go to hell, you cowardly sadist!"

The man did not reply to that, instead extending his arms and applying two electrodes to her genitals. The pain was horrible, making Rina's body arch convulsively. She however barely managed not to scream, attracting a nod from the interrogator.

"Another tough woman, albeit much bigger than even Brigadier Laplante. You are obviously from the future, if I look at your size and equipment. Those six fingers per hands are also an interesting evolutionary step. By the way, whatever you had strapped to your belly saved your life. The bullets barely had enough strength left after passing through that box to break your skin. As a qualified doctor, I was able to extract them in minutes without difficulty. Now, those slight wounds won't impede my work one bit. Karl, raise the voltage."

Rina steeled herself as the man approached again the electrodes towards her genitals. This time she screamed.

07:49 (Berlin Time)

Wednesday, June 25, 1941 'B'

Applied physics laboratory

H.M.I.S. ROYAL SOVEREIGN

Leitrim rubbed his tired eyes, taking a short pause from fixing the signals analysis screen. He and his team had been working non-stop for over six hours now and he was feeling the fatigue in his old bones. They however had a crucial task to complete as quickly as possible.

"Alright, Lita, enhance the Kd spectrum of the spacetime signal and replay the sequence...that's it... FREEZE!"

Leitrim and his primary assistant looked at the wave shapes displayed on the screen with growing enthusiasm.

"We have it!" Said softly Leitrim before shouting. "WE HAVE IT! WE HAVE THE FREQUENCY FOR TIMELINE 'C'!"

That attracted his other assistants at a run to the screen, where they stared at the waveform pointed by Leitrim. As most of them congratulated the old scientist, a young assistant pointed at another waveform near the edge of the screen.

"What's that, Doctor? It looks like a ghost reflection of timeline 'C'."

Leitrim and the others looked at it as well: it was effectively at the opposite of timeline 'C' compared to the frequency of timeline 'B', where they were actually. The truth then dawned on Leitrim like a ton of bricks.

"The primordial timeline! We found it as well! Quick, someone notifies the King!"

King Stan, having been awoken from a deep sleep, was in the laboratory fifteen minutes later and listened carefully to Leitrim's explanations, Major Kossov listening besides him as well. Stan finally patted the shoulder of the old scientist.

"Well done, Doctor! Record both frequencies in the ship's computer and adapt the ship's time distorter drive to make it able to jump to either timeline, then do the same with your portable units: we have one of our troopers to save."

It took another hour to prepare everything, at the end of which King Stan ordered a jump to the same date-time in timeline 'C'. Next, a new spy probe was launched,

jumping directly to the Gestapo interrogation room while Stan and Kossov stood ready to jump themselves. The King was now holding a big machine gun fed by a linked belt of cartridges connected to an ammunition backpack. The first pictures sent by the probe made both Stan and Kossov swear.

"The bastards!" Growled Kossov as he watched a German who was methodically roasting Rina Tonen's breasts with a welding lamp. The young trooper, solidly tied to the same steel torture chair than Laplante had been, could do nothing but scream continuously. The German stopped for a few seconds, only to ask a brief question to Rina. When she shook her head while crying, the German resumed the torture, making her scream again. Stan looked resolutely at Kossov.

"You grab Tonen and her equipment. I will cover you. We jump at my count. One, two, three, GO!"

The two Imperium men materialized in the back of the Germans present in the interrogation room and were not noticed immediately. Using that to full effect, they shot dead the two Germans closest to Tonen, then King Stan swept his fire to kill the two other Germans present as Kossov ran to his trooper. Going to the door, Stan stood in it and opened fire as soon as three SS guards turned a corner at a run, chewing them down mercilessly. Having plenty of ammunition with him, he fired short bursts every time a SS guard dared show up, forcing them to stay behind the cover of the hallway corner. A shout from Kossov then told him that the officer had Tonen. Looking back for a second, he saw Kossov standing, with Tonen thrown across his shoulders in a classic fireman's carry. Tonen's vital equipment, including the shot up portable time distorter, was also in his hands.

"Jump now, Major! I will follow you in a few seconds."

Stan then closed the door and locked it. Seeing a shape covered by a blanket in one corner of the interrogation room, he went to it and lifted a corner of the blanket. What he saw was the mutilated and battered head and upper torso of a dead Nancy Laplante. The sight made a hard lump appear in his throat.

"Goodbye, Brigadier Laplante. I hope that they will honor you the way you deserve in London."

He caressed her hair one last time, then got up on his feet and pressed the green button of his time distorter unit. To his immense relief, he did materialize as planned in Leitrim's lab on the ROYAL SOVEREIGN. Taking off his ammunition backpack and time

distorter unit, he then rushed to Rina Tonen, who had been laid hurriedly on top of a lab coat spread on the floor.

“How is she?” He asked to Kossov, who was holding her head.

“In a horrible state and suffering a lot, Your Majesty. I have already ordered a medical team to the lab.”

Tonen, still conscious but shaking continuously, managed to whisper a few words.

“Didn’t...talk...sir.”

“I know, Private Tonen. You did a splendid job.”

“Is...Imperium...alright?”

Stan hesitated for a second, then lied to her, not wanting to make her suffering look pointless.

“The Imperium will live on, Private. Now, shut up and rest.”

A medical team showed up at a run with an anti-gravity gurney two minutes later and quickly loaded Tonen on it, then departed for the ship’s infirmary as quickly as they had come with Major Kossov in tow. Stan then turned towards Doctor Leitrim, who had been watching on from his control station.

“Doctor, what are the chances that an Imperium as we know it will eventually appear in the future of timeline ‘C’?”

“I would say quite good, Your Majesty. I have been thinking over that for a few minutes and all the conditions for the future appearance of the Imperium are in place in timeline ‘C’. Nancy Laplante is now officially dead; she had time to transfer most of her knowledge to the British and Great Britain is in a good position to dominate the world in the years to come, at the detriment of the United States and of the Soviet Union. However, the same cannot be said of timeline ‘B’: we cannot try to kill Nancy Laplante in 1941 without splitting further the timelines and she will thus be able to eventually found her Time Patrol, with the consequences we know for our Imperium. In fact, as long as the Time Patrol remains a threat to us, it can still find timeline ‘C’ and manipulate it in order to kill in the egg any Imperium due to see the day in the future.”

That depressed Stan to no small degree.

“Then, I have no choice but to destroy the Time Patrol in its nest, in the 34th century of timeline ‘A’.”

13:30 (North America Central Time)

Monday, July 10, 3386 'A'

Time Patrol headquarters

New Lake City University campus

American Great Lakes area

Dana Mulano, Chief Supervisor of the Time Patrol surveillance center, was positively fuming by now. It had been over seven hours now since they had detected the formation of a new timeline that had split from timeline 'B'. Her crew had even been able to isolate and measure the frequency of that new timeline 'C' but had been unable to transmit that vital information downtime to the rest of the Time Patrol due to a faulty circuit module in the time wave transceiver unit. Even worse, because of that same equipment failure, they had been unable to monitor the signals from their surveillance satellite network for more that fourteen hours now, and that at a time when an Imperium battleship was on the loose in the past. As bad luck went, they didn't have a spare circuit module and had to repair the faulty module instead, a job that was proving to be extensive and complicated. Dana was about to have one of her technicians jump in a time scooter to bring the information on the new timeline to 1942 'B' when a sensors operator monitoring the civilian air traffic network gestured to get her attention. Walking to the man's control station, she looked at the big radar picture screen showing the air traffic over North America.

"What's up, Lenny?"

"The continental air traffic control center is in an uproar because of a contact that is refusing to identify itself and is now crossing the Atlantic coast near the mouth of the Saint Lawrence River. It previously was first detected over the middle of the Atlantic, where it loitered for about an hour before moving West."

Dana suddenly felt dread at those words, as an awful possibility formed up in her mind.

"Quick, Lenny, override the controls of the G-3 orbital space telescope and point it at that unidentified contact."

"But, the Astronomical Council will skin us alive for diverting one of its best telescopes like this."

"I don't give a damn about them! Consider this a Code Red Situation."

"Uh, as you wish, Dana."

It took a minute for the operator to override the usual control authority of the space telescope and have it pointed down towards the correct spot. A high definition color picture then filled the view screen of Lenny's control station. The huge ship visible in the cross hairs made Dana and Lenny freeze with instant fear.

"The ROYAL SOVEREIGN!" Shouted Dana, her face pale. "It is heading our way."

Trying to combat the panic about to overtake her, Dana reviewed quickly what could be done. One thing however appeared obvious: get help!

"Karla, forget your control station and come here on the double."

Dana grabbed an electronic notepad and wrote down a short message on it before giving it to the waiting technician with an urgent order.

"Karla, run to the scooter hall, take a scooter and jump to Northolt on June 4 of 1942 'B'. Give this message to our people there and tell them that the Imperium battleship ROYAL SOVEREIGN is here and heading our way and that we need help, fast! Now go!"

As Karla left the center at a run, Dana shouted orders around at various operators and technicians.

"Jay, activate now the defensive shield generator at maximum power! We are about to be attacked. Then sound the air raid siren and alert the University Administration to have its students and staff take shelter. Tell them that this is not a drill. Rana, warn all the personnel not on active shift to evacuate the area right now: I am not sure that our shields will withstand the fire from such a behemoth."

"What about our various robots stored in hangar number one?" Asked Rana. "They represent a lot of valuable and very costly equipment."

"Have them disperse as well away from the headquarters but pass the warning first to our personnel. Golen, put our Point Defense Robots on full alert, with authority to fire the moment that this Imperium battleship is within range. Have also our PDRs disperse to the maximum extent possible. Make it quick!"

Her heart now beating furiously, Dana looked around her, trying to think of what she should do more. A thought then crossed her mind.

"Lenny, advise the continental air traffic control center that the unidentified contact is an enemy battleship and that all air traffic should avoid this area at all cost."

"I'm on it."

Going to the station controlling the internal security cameras, Dana switched a viewer to the camera showing the inside of the scooter hall. To her relief, she soon saw Karla jump on a time scooter and disappear in a flash of white light. At least they could now hope for help soon. Dana next went to a locked steel locker in one corner of the center and, taking a key she always kept with her, unlocked it. Inside were a row of machine-pistols and assault rifles, along with spare magazines and ammunition. Taking a machine-pistol for herself, she then distributed weapons to her seven technicians remaining on duty in the center. She had just finished doing that when Lenny shouted to her.

“Dana, I’m having trouble convincing the continental air traffic control center that this is a real emergency.”

“What? Give me that videophone line!”

Dana spoke in an angry tone as soon as she heard the voice of the air traffic control supervisor in her own headset.

“Listen up, mister! This is the Time Patrol surveillance center and we are declaring a Code Red Alert Worldwide: there is an armed and hostile Imperium battleship approaching the Great Lakes area.”

“Is this worth disturbing the air traffic over the whole continent, miss? Are you sure that this contact is what you say?”

“Our identification is positive: that ship is the battleship ROYAL SOVEREIGN, flagship of the Imperium Navy, and it is armed with nuclear weapons. Now, stop wasting time and warn all the ships to stay clear!”

“Uh, alright, we will pass the word.”

Just twenty seconds later, Lenny banged his fist in anger on the edge of his control station.

“What the hell? A heavy starliner has just taken off from New Lake City astroport.”

“Are these people all terminally dumb?” Raged Dana. “Contact it and order them to land immediately.”

13:37 (North America Central Time)

Bridge of H.M.I.S. ROYAL SOVEREIGN

King Stan, sitting with members of his family and three of his royal guardsmen in the V.I.P. seats situated directly behind and above the command stations on the large bridge of the ROYAL SOVEREIGN, was monitoring closely the events around him when the Sensors Officer spoke up briefly on the command channel.

“Warning! A large ship is taking off now from what must be New Lake City astroport, near our main target area.”

Commodore Nousma didn't hesitate one second. They already knew from intercepted civilian news channels programming where the Time Patrol headquarters was situated and the battleship must have been detected by now, or else the staff of the Time Patrol were a bunch of incompetents, an unlikely assumption after seeing how it operated. That ship taking off could only be part of a Time Patrol reaction force.

“Weapons Officer, target that ship with our main plasma battery and fire!”

A quick set of commands pointed the focusing nozzle of the huge weapon installed in the nose of the battleship and charged it with over twenty gigawatts of energy. A bright violet beam of plasma energy then shot out of the nozzle, reaching across 900 kilometers to its intended target.

Over the New Lake City astroport, the luxury astroliner ORION had just taken off, loaded with 1,460 passengers headed towards the Jupiter system, when it got the first warning from the Time Patrol headquarters. Unsure what to think at first, the captain of the ORION decided to contact the air traffic control center to confirm that warning first before taking any action. That delay was fatal. The 400 meter-long astroliner was hit dead center by the fifty meter-diameter beam of plasma from the ROYAL SOVEREIGN. With its relatively thin hull and lack of protective shields, the astroliner was cut in half like butter under a hot knife within a second, its parts raining down on the astroport and causing additional heavy damage and loss of life.

On the ROYAL SOVEREIGN, the bridge staff did not have much time to enjoy that apparently easy victory. The Sensors Officer's shout of alarm about multiple missiles being fired from many locations on the ground was cut short by dozens of bone-jarring impacts and explosions on the armored hull of the battleship. As the series of impacts continued in quick succession, an irritated Commodore Nousma shouted at his Weapons Officer.

“Mister Konik, what are our defensive batteries doing and how come these missiles can penetrate our shields as if they didn’t exist?”

“Sir,” replied the overwhelmed officer, “those missiles disappear from our screens as soon as they are launched, then reappear only just before impacting our hull. Our laser batteries have no chance to even target those missiles.”

“Then target the launchers, dammit! Damage Control, what is our situation with those missile impacts?”

“We are sustaining serious damage to our outer compartments and our hull is starting to look like Swiss cheese, but no vital systems have been affected yet, sir. Those missiles have heavy explosive warheads but not the nuclear warheads that would be needed to really hurt us.”

“Then evacuate the personnel from the outer compartments towards the armored core of the ship. Weapons Officer, target the headquarters of the Time Patrol with our main plasma battery and fire when ready.”

“Aye, sir!”

The huge weapon soon fired again, with the Weapons Officer then reporting in a monotone voice.

“Target area destroyed, sir.”

Those simple words could barely describe what had just happened on the ground. Hit by a massive, sustained beam of plasma, the headquarters building of the Time Patrol was vaporized, along with the surveillance center located underneath it, while the other buildings of the Time Patrol complex were either melted down or caught fire. The nearest buildings of the university complex also caught fire, with dozens of students and staff that had been too slow to evacuate them becoming instant human torches from the intense wave of heat radiated by the plasma burst. The surviving university students and staff running away could only watch with panicked dismay the exchange of fire between ground missile launchers dispersed around New Lake City and the still unseen attacking battleship, from which came a rain of laser beams trying to take out the launchers. The two first scoutships to react to the crisis then arrived in the middle of total pandemonium.

13:41 (North America Central Time)

Scoutship TEEN TEAM

“Ingrid, I just lost all contact with our headquarters.”

“I know! I’m afraid that they are goners. Do you have that damn battleship in your sights, Tom?”

“I’m ready to rock and roll.”

“Then try to target the laser batteries in the tail of that monster. With the little effect the missiles from our PDRs seems to be doing, we will have to make each of our missiles count.”

“Ingrid, I have a better idea.” Said Tom, then speaking for a few seconds and making Ingrid nod. It was a crazy, most unconventional idea but it could well work.

“Alright, I buy it. Let me advise Sandra Billings first, then we will go for it.” Replied Ingrid before switching to the air ops channel and contacting the scoutship AMERICA, flying in loose formation with the TEEN TEAM and also under cloak. “TEEN TEAM to AMERICA, I’m going for a really close flyby of the ass of that monster. Be careful where you shoot for a while.”

“Understood, TEEN TEAM! I will also be flying close to it, but on its back. Stay cloaked as long as you can if you want to stay alive.”

“Will do, AMERICA!”

While speaking on the radio, which was on crypto mode, Ingrid never kept a straight flying path, wiggling her scoutship around all the time. That paid off, as three powerful laser beams burned through the airspace she should have been in a second ago. The young German did another zigzag and blew air in relief.

“Hell, they have some good radio direction-finding equipment on that ship. That’s another lesson: speak as little as needed on the radio from now on.”

Pushing her scoutship to its maximum acceleration rate, Ingrid closed in quickly on the enemy battleship, passing it before performing a loop to line herself behind the ROYAL SOVEREIGN.

“Alright, Tom: it’s your game now. Where exactly do you want me to land?”

“On the top of the middle upper tail portion. Watch my visual marker on the holosphere.”

“Got it!” Said Ingrid as soon as she saw the red crosshair on the surface of the projection sphere surrounding their seats. Calculating carefully her spacetime jump, she then pressed the jump button. She was ready for what was coming and landed with her landing gear extended the moment her scoutship materialized only fifty meters over the

tail of the battleship, then engaged the magnetic clamps incorporated to her landing gear. With their scoutship now firmly glued to its target while still cloaked, Tom fired their heavy ship laser repeatedly, taking out the laser beam directors visible at the surface of the battleship's hull. Now safe from enemy fire, Tom switched on a very low frequency radar normally used only to map underground soil layers during planetary exploration missions. The radar waves were able to propagate through the hull of the battleship and soon gave Tom an approximate map of the inside of the aft portion of the enemy ship. In the meantime, Ingrid was busy programming new, special orders for the twenty combat robots stored in her cargo bay. Once Tom gave the proper coordinates for her robots, Ingrid ordered them to jump inside the battleship and to create maximum havoc once in. As soon as the robots disappeared, Tom made the 24 heavy missiles transported by the scoutship jump spacetime and appear as one deadly cluster inside a large craft hangar he had detected in the belly of the battleship.

On the bridge, Commodore Nousma was still trying to make sense of the report of a seismic radar wave detected inside the ship's tail section when a tremendous series of internal explosions rocked the battleship. Alarms started all over the bridge, with operators reporting a number of distressing news.

"Sir, the attack craft squadrons main hangar has been destroyed by a massive internal explosion. The munitions and fuel in our craft are cooking off and exploding as well. Most of the crews of the attack squadrons are missing and feared dead, sir!"

"The whole lower aft portion of the ship is vented to the outside and on fire, sir! The fires are out of control."

"Sir, intruder alert in the aft main generators section! Armed robots are causing mayhem there!"

As Commodore Nousma was trying desperately to deal with these problems and as ground-fired missiles kept exploding against the hull of the battleship, King Stan felt gloom descend on him. The 75 armed craft of his attack squadrons had represented the main nuclear punch of his flagship. With them gone, his hopes of destroying the industrial capacity of this society and thus paralyze the Time Patrol were down to nearly nil. He was also realizing now how much the Time Patrol outfought and outmaneuvered him and his forces in terms of fighting through time. Until only recently, he had not been able to even find this timeline, while every equipment, weapon and tactic of the Time Patrol was geared towards using the secrets of spacetime to the fullest. He was

probably going to lose this last battle as well and would be lucky to save his family from this disaster. As he decided that he would personally not survive this defeat, he remembered one young woman who deserved a second chance at life. Activating his videophone, he contacted the infirmary of the ship, getting the chief surgeon on the line.

“Your Majesty? I am afraid that I’m very busy right now and...”

“It won’t take long, Doctor. Are there any healthy guards in the infirmary right now?”

“Uh, there is one young Ministry of Security guard standing vigil over Private Rina Tonen, Your Majesty.”

“Perfect! Give him an anti-gravity gurney and have him bring Private Tonen to the bridge and report to me directly.”

“To the bridge, Your Majesty?” Asked the surprised chief surgeon. Stan nodded his head.

“Yes! Tell that guard to hurry!”

Stan then closed the line and returned his attention to the tactical situation, which was going from bad to worse. There were now reports of a high power laser drilling through the upper sections all the way to the core sections. That report suddenly made his mind click on something. Grabbing his command microphone, he spoke directly to Commodore Nousma, sitting a few seats down from him.

“Commodore, have your defensive laser batteries sweep close to the hull plating of the upper section: there may be an unwanted fly stuck there. Do the same in the aft section.”

“Aye, Your Majesty!”

Stan then switched his personal viewer to a camera giving a view of the top of the ship. As he suspected, the laser beams crisscrossing the hull soon encountered an invisible object, creating explosions of sparks.

“THERE’S YOUR FLY, COMMODORE! SWAT IT!” Shouted Stan triumphantly. The gunners of the battleship reacted swiftly, concentrating twelve laser beams on the invisible attacker. A small ship soon became visible, spewing thick smoke from multiple holes in its hull. It soon exploded, its burning remains cutting loose from the battleship and dispersing in the relative wind.

“What about the aft section, Commodore? Did you find anything there?”

“Not yet, Your Majesty. However, a number of our laser directors on the upper aft hull are not responding and we can’t effectively cover that area with laser fire. If there is... What now?”

All the lights had dimmed for a fraction of a second, prompting the annoyed question from Nousma. An engineering technician answered him from a control station one platform down.

“Sir, those roving robots have just succeeded in cutting the main power cables from the generators section. We are now on secondary power across the ship.”

“Sir, our shields are now down.” Shouted the Defensive Systems Officer. “Without main power, we can’t put them back on.”

“Have the royal guardsmen take out those robots and then send in repair teams.” Replied Nousma. The officer’s answer to that was subdued.

“Sir, the guardsmen are dead. The robots wiped them out in mere seconds while losing only four machines themselves.”

“Then seal the generators section and trap those damn robots there.”

“Sir, that won’t work: these robots can jump spacetime.”

As Nousma was left out of arguments, a young Ministry of Security guard came to the V.I.P. seats while pulling a medical gurney and presented himself to the King, saluting him.

“Your Majesty, Private Den Selan reporting with Private Rina Tonen as ordered.” Stan looked briefly at the young guard, then at the dazed Rina Tonen lying on the gurney.

“Good! Install her down across those four empty seats and strap her in, then take a seat besides her.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

The young guard, helped by Prince Len and Dame Miri Goshenk, quickly moved Rina to the designated seats after raising their armrests out of the way and buckled a safety harness around her, then took an empty seat besides her, ending up immediately to the right of the First Mistress of the Imperium. Miri, an experienced psychologist, didn’t miss the way the young man was caressing gently the head of Rina Tonen. She touched his arm and whispered in his ear.

“You know her well, do you?”

The young guard hesitated, then answered, also in a whisper.

“We are intimate, Your Highness.”

A loud noise and shouts of joy then attracted the attention of both to the giant viewing screens, in time to see a small Time Patrol ship fall out of the sky, in flames.

“What happened, Stan? I missed that.” Asked Miri to her husband, seated to her left.

“That Time Patrol ship just did something incredibly brave: it took position right in front of the nozzle of our main plasma battery and fired inside it, revealing its position at the same time. It was then hit repeatedly and collided violently with us. I’m however afraid that the last act of that ship took out our heaviest armament.”

Miri, like Stan, followed with her eyes the falling, burning ship. After a few seconds, a sphere was ejected from the ship and parachutes soon deployed, braking its descent. That prompted a comment in a low voice from the king.

“Thank the stars! Brave men like these deserve to live.”

As they looked back up at the bridge, the whole ship suddenly became totally unstable and started rolling and pitching around wildly for a few seconds until a modicum of control was restored. The pilot, sweat on his forehead, then shouted at Nousma.

“Sir, we just lost all the computerized flight controls due to cumulative damage. I am now in purely manual mode and I don’t know how long even that will hold.”

This time, it was King Stan who reacted to that by giving an order to Commodore Nousma in a resigned voice.

“Commodore Nousma, the ship is as good as finished. Give the order to abandon ship.”

Nousma looked at him silently for a moment, unable to accept the awful reality. He then shook himself back and activated his ship’s intercom.

“ALL HANDS, THIS IS THE CAPTAIN. ABANDON SHIP! I SAY AGAIN, ABANDON SHIP!”

King Stan was next on the intercom.

“All hands, this is your king. You all served bravely but more fighting is now senseless. Once on the ground, surrender without further resistance to the local authorities or to the forces of the Time Patrol. I am certain that you will be well treated. Goodbye and good luck to you all.”

Stan then looked at Colonel Xitak, the commander of his royal guardsmen, seated to his left.

“Make sure that my family escapes safely, Colonel. Use any means to ensure that.”

Stan then got up from his seat and ran down to the pilot's station, where he politely but forcibly ejected the pilot from his seat and took his place. The dejected pilot then had no choice but to go sit in the king's previous seat. Miri, looking at this with disbelief, then started unbuckling her safety harness while shouting.

"STAN! COME BACK HERE! STAN!"

Heavy Plexiglas panels then slid quickly into place, turning the V.I.P. section into an enclosed escape module on the command of Colonel Xitak. Miri, now trapped inside the module, could only bang repeatedly on the Plexiglas walls while crying until Xitak forced her down in her seat.

"Put your harness on, Your Highness. There is nothing else you can do now."

Xitak, sitting back himself and buckling up, then activated the last part of the ejection sequence. The V.I.P. module was pushed upward into a roof recess of the bridge by hydraulic pistons, then ejected via an evacuation tunnel leading to the top of the ship. It emerged into the clear afternoon sky and followed a preprogrammed flight path until Xitak could assume manual control of the module, which had its own propulsion drive. The passengers of the module could now see the ROYAL SOVEREIGN, its battered hull showing the frightful extent of the damage it had taken, veer to the North, away from the now close New Lake City, and take some altitude as evacuation pods shot out of it in droves. The wounded battleship nearly flew out of sight before starting a steep dive towards the far side of Lake Michigan, where it finally crashed in a titanic explosion. Miri and the rest of the royal family wept quietly while Xitak flew down towards where he had seen the evacuation sphere of the Time Patrol ship land with its big, bright orange parachutes. If they were going to surrender to the Time Patrol, he reasoned, they might as well do it to one of the crews who had helped shoot down the ROYAL SOVEREIGN. As he was about to land a hundred meters from the sphere, which was spewing thick black smoke, three ships of the Time Patrol sped by. One of them, of cruiser size, slowed down and turned around, overflying both the sphere and the Imperium module for a moment before leaving the scene. Xitak, who had been scared of being shot down for approaching the sphere, put down the module on its landing legs and powered down the propulsion drive, then turned around to look at his passengers.

"The orders from the King were clear: we are to surrender without resistance. We will thus leave all our weapons inside the module. You may go outside after me but stay near the module until I declare the area safe."

Unbuckling his own pistol belt, Xitak left it on his seat before going to the access airlock of the module and stepping outside. The air was warm and dry and a fair breeze blew from the West. Xitak started walking towards the sphere but had to stop halfway, as a woman of the Time Patrol landed between him and the sphere. She was armed but her pistol was still holstered. Xitak then recognized her: it was Nancy Laplante, looking none too pleased. Xitak quickly raised both hands high.

“I am unarmed, Miss Laplante. King Stan gave us the order to surrender without resistance. The royal family, minus the King, was with me in the evacuation module.”

“Where is the King now, Colonel?”

“Dead! He took the controls of our ship for its last dive, so that as many of us as possible could escape before the crash.”

Laplante’s expression softened at those words.

“King Stan was a brave man. I will regret him in a way. If you will now excuse me, I have to go check on my scoutship crew.”

“May I come with you, miss?”

“You might as well, now that you are here, Colonel.”

Xitak then followed Laplante to the smoking sphere, as the latter shouted in English.

“INGRID! TOM! WHERE ARE YOU?”

“OVER HERE, ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SPHERE! QUICK: INGRID IS BADLY HURT!”

Both Laplante and Xitak then broke into a run, going around the sphere and finding Tom Allen kneeling besides Ingrid Weiss, who was lying in the long grass, inert. Tom’s face and hands were blackened by soot and his uniform was singed in a few places but he otherwise appeared all right, although panicky. Ingrid was another matter: her uniform was half burned away and hideous second and third degree burns covered one side of her head, her right arm and half of her back. She also appeared to be in shock. Nancy, horror on her face, ran to the duo and knelt besides her adopted daughter, examining her extensive burns.

“My God, Ingrid! Hang on for a second, while I heal you.”

Extending both of her hands over Ingrid, Nancy then closed her eyes and concentrated. Xitak watched with disbelief white light radiate down from Nancy’s hands and envelop the teenage girl for a few seconds. The burns disappeared gradually but quickly, leaving her body intact when the light faded away. Nancy was not finished, though. As Ingrid was waking up, more light enveloped her burnt hair, making it grow back at a fantastic

rate. Nancy then helped Ingrid up on her feet. Tom Allen was frantically hugging and kissing his wife as Xitak approached, hesitant and still stunned.

“Miss Laplante, I truly don’t know how you did that, but we also have a seriously wounded woman with us. Could you help her, please?”

“The One’s compassion is to be extended to all, Colonel. Show me to her.” Too shaken still to figure out what her cryptic message meant, Xitak nonetheless led her to the module. Most of the royal family was already outside, breathing with delight the pure country air. Nancy smiled and bowed when she saw Miri Goshenk, who was wearing her full regalia as First Mistress of the Imperium.

“I am truly happy to see that you and the rest of the royal family are safe and sound, Your Highness.”

Miri gave back a weak smile.

“Thank you, Miss Laplante. However, you may simply call me Miri, as my titles mean nothing now.”

“Miri it is, then. I was told that you had a wounded that needed help.”

“Private Tonen is inside the module, miss.”

Nancy stopped and looked with mild surprise at Miri.

“Private Rina Tonen is with you?”

“Yes, miss: the King ordered that she be evacuated with us. She is in an awful state.”

“Not for long, Miri.” Replied Nancy before entering the airlock of the module, negotiating the two successive doors, then climbing the steep ladder to the passenger compartment. She found young Den Selan sitting besides Rina’s head and comforting her with soothing words. Nancy quickly gave the guard a friendly smile.

“I am here to help Rina, young man. Do not be alarmed.”

Nancy then delicately pulled away the bed sheet covering Rina’s nude and battered body, recoiling in revulsion at the sight of the savage marks of torture on the guard’s body. Her eyes then fell on a large letter ‘K’, branded with successive applications of an iron on Rina’s belly. Her face now both grave and sad, Nancy looked into the eyes of Rina, who was looking back at her with a silent plea for help.

“I see that Karl tortured you as well, Rina. Did you go to Berlin in 1941 ‘B’ to kill me?”

Rina slowly nodded her head, tears appearing in her eyes.

"I was ordered to, in order to ensure the survival of the Imperium. It was the most difficult act I ever had to do. Please forgive me, miss."

"You are forgiven, Rina."

With those words, Nancy healed Rina within a minute, then bent over and kissed her tenderly on her lips.

"I can feel your memories of those moments in Berlin. Forget what happened there. I wish us to be good friends now. Would you like that?"

"Could you really forgive me for killing you, miss?"

"I have already forgiven you, Rina. You can get up now."

"I...I will find her something to wear, miss." Said Den Selan, still shaken by the sight of Nancy's healing process. He was back after a few minutes with a pair of boxer shorts and a T-shirt. Both were a bit too small for Rina but the fabric could stretch. Nancy smiled while looking at Rina's body, which now filled tightly the shorts and T-shirt.

"That's quite a sexy fit, actually, Rina. Let's go outside in the fresh air."

A troop of a dozen horses arrived at a gallop as Nancy, Rina and Den emerged from the module, making members of the royal family marvel.

"These horses must be trained, to come to us like this." Said a young teenage princess. Prince Len, who had seen twice the documentary on the life of Yeshua, spotted a brown horse leading the pack and smiled.

"Could that be? PEGASUS!"

The leading horse, on hearing this, turned towards the teenage boy and stopped abruptly in front of him.

"You know me, boy?"

Nancy laughed hard at the faces the Imperium members did on hearing the horse speak in Neo-English. The other horses then surrounded the group, with Nancy approaching Pegasus.

"Report, Pegasus! What is the status of our headquarters?"

"It was completely destroyed, along with most of the rest of the complex. A number of university buildings caught fire as well. Some of our personnel not on shift were able to evacuate the danger area in time, along with us and other robots, but the losses are heavy, including many students and staff members of the university. I heard on the civilian emergency radio net that an astroliner was shot down while taking off from

the New Lake City astroport and that the casualties there are at least 2,000 dead, with many more wounded.”

Nancy bowed her head in sadness, mourning the death of so many innocents. If she felt any anger or hatred towards the Imperium members, she did not let it show. Turning around, she designated the horses to the members of the royal family and the Imperium guards.

“Please take place on these horses, ladies and gentlemen. They are actually sophisticated robots and can easily take on two riders each. Prince Len, would you like to ride Pegasus with me?”

“I certainly would, miss.” Replied enthusiastically the big boy of sixteen. As they were mounting up, two big combat vehicles mounted on multiple wheels came in at high speed, following the terrain contours and using its cover to the maximum. Nancy reassured quickly Colonel Xitak, who nearly jumped off his horse to take cover in the nearby trees.

“Do not worry, please! These are two of our Point Defense Robots, or PDRs in short, who were tasked to defend the area around New Lake City. We had 160 such PDRs firing at your battleship. They will now stand guard on your evacuation module and our rescue sphere until they can be retrieved.”

Xitak and his guards looked with respect at the long, quadruple rail guns and the missile silos, now empty, arming the vehicles.

“No wonder the ROYAL SOVEREIGN was taking such a beating from the ground. Any lesser ship would have been shot down within seconds.”

“Well, that is now in the past. Let’s ride!”

The horses, with their riders mounting without saddles or even bridles, adopted a smooth trot to avoid accidental dismounts. They headed towards a large column of black smoke rising from behind a line of nearby trees. Once past the trees, they were able to see New Lake City in the distance, about four kilometers away. The smoke came from the fires still burning around the university campus, which was nearer than the city. After a little bit over twenty minutes of riding, the group arrived near the edge of a huge crater in the ground, where the headquarters building of the Time Patrol had stood. The other buildings of the complex, including the residential tower and the sports center, were now reduced to burned out hulks. Only the more distant ship and storage hangars were more or less intact. Dozens of vehicles from the firefighting department of New Lake City were still busy putting out fires through the nearby university campus,

while ambulances were everywhere, with long lines of burned people on stretchers laid on the ground waiting for medical evacuation. Nancy looked at all this with growing sadness and dismounted, walking towards the nearest line of stretchers, where dozens of paramedics and volunteers were frantically providing first aid to the wounded. Miri Goshenk dismounted as well, intent on lending some help. She was about to ask a paramedic if she could be of help when she saw Nancy Laplante stop and look skyward while raising her arms. Laplante then became intensively bright and a silent explosion of light surged out of her, with a wave front of energy expanding quickly outward. Miri felt only deep well-being when the energy wave passed through her. Blinking from the surprise after the wave had passed, Miri soon realized that the wounded around her were now getting up by themselves, their burns apparently healed as if by a miracle. Nancy Laplante still shone for nearly a minute while the energy wave expanded past the city and reached the nearby astroport. It then died down a few kilometers past the astroport, while Laplante returned to her normal aspect. With everyone around her except for Ingrid Weiss and Tom Allen looking on in stunned disbelief, Nancy emitted a strong mental message around her.

“I am nothing but The Hand of The One. Thank and praise him, not me.”

Before Miri could go to her and ask any question, the reporters present and covering the disaster rushed to Nancy and assaulted her with questions. Ingrid Weiss went to Miri and gently took her arm.

“Come, Dame Goshenk. These reporters are not about to leave her alone for a while. I have asked for someone to come down from our cruiser so that proper care can be taken of your people.”

Miri suddenly felt alarm at those words.

“Are we going to be put in cells? If you do, please spare the children that humiliation.”

Ingrid gave her a weird look then, with her voice hardening a bit.

“Dame Goshenk, your Imperium was ready to torture a twelve year-old British princess. Don’t worry, though: we are not barbarians, even if we are ancestors. What we had in mind was to rent rooms for your people at the Lakeside Hotel, in New Lake City. There are no true prisons in the society of the Global Council anyway.”

That answer from the half naked ancestor girl was so unexpected that Miri had trouble believing her.

“Excuse me? We came and did all that damage, killed your people and for that you are simply going to put us in hotel rooms?”

“What else could we do? Kill you? This war between the Imperium and us is over and the Imperium is no more. The best future, the only future actually for you and your people, is to integrate peacefully into the society of the Global Council and to build new lives for yourselves. Is that such a bad prospect to contemplate?”

Miri felt a chill then: that teenage girl was right. Her Imperium, the life she was used to and into which she had been raising her children, even her king and husband, all that was gone now.

“You speak with much wisdom for your age, miss. How old are you?”

“Biologically, I am nineteen, Dame Goshenk. Spiritually, I am over 7,000 years old. I probably would have died today if not for the help from Nancy, who is my adoptive mother. However, many innocent people did die because of your Imperium. So, be grateful and quiet, take your hotel rooms and behave: it will be simpler and much nicer for everybody that way.”

The teenager was about to walk away when Miri grabbed her arm.

“Wait! What is your name?”

“My present name is Ingrid Weiss, Dame Goshenk. My first ever name, seventy centuries ago, was Amdira. Either name will do fine.”

20:13 (North America Central Time)

Suite 1001, Lakeside Hotel

New Lake City

Miri Goshenk was sitting in front of the holovision set of her suite with her children, Princes Len and Sten and Princess Danya, watching with intense interest the GNN hourly news program. Unsurprisingly, today’s battle between the ROYAL SOVEREIGN and the Time Patrol was the big news. For Miri, the way the news medias of this society were covering the affair showed too well that the Global Council had not known war for a very long time. In fact, the newscaster himself said so during the program, mentioning the 29th century as the last time a war had happened on this Earth. There were thus numerous hyperboles, exaggerations and a general ignorance of military affairs or even of the business of war that quickly irritated Miri. From what she had seen up to now of this society, however, she could not deny that these people were

highly advanced both technologically and socially and had a refined artistic sense. They were a world apart from the average Imperium citizen, who was also technologically advanced but rougher and tougher in manners, or from the ancestors of the Time Patrol, who seemed to have been literally immersed constantly in a culture of war while in their original time periods. As they were watching pictures of the carnage caused by the crash of the astroliner ORION, Len looked at his mother with concern.

“Mom, are they going to punish us for all these civilians killed by us?”

“I don’t know, Len. However, as the girl from the Time Patrol told me, they don’t even have jails in this society, so I doubt that they have anything like the death penalty or something we would consider a severe punishment. For the other members of the Imperium captured earlier during a raid on the London of 1942 ‘B’, where Princess Margaret came from, I am afraid that their situation is much more precarious.”

The mention of Princess Margaret made Prince Sten, who was thirteen, smile as he pictured her in his mind.

“I have to say that Princess Margaret was really cute. She was so tiny, so fragile-looking. She was also quite funny. Don’t you think so, Len?”

His older brother, who was actually a bit smaller than Sten and also much smaller than the average Imperium boy of his age, answered after a moment of hesitation.

“She was effectively cute, Sten. The other ancestor girls I have seen were also very cute on average. The one who piloted the ship that shot up the ROYAL SOVEREIGN was positively beautiful. I think that their hair contributes a lot to the beauty of the ancestor girls.”

Princess Danya, eleven years old, made a face at those comments from her brothers.

“You boys are so superficial. Cut their hair off and what will these ancestor girls have over us then?”

The buzz of the door chime interrupted that argument. Telling her children to stay in place, Miri went to the door and looked at the video monitor besides the doorframe that showed her visitors: a woman and a very old man, both wearing civilian clothes of high quality. There were still no armed guards or combat robots guarding the door of her suite or that of the other hotel rooms occupied by Imperium members. Miri opened the door and bowed slightly her head as a welcome.

“Good evening! What may I do for you?”

The woman, a distinguished person with a sympathetic face, answered her.

“First Mistress Goshenk, I am Tomi Kern, newly elected Global Chief Administrator of the Global Council, and this is Global Justice Administrator Sten Vargas. Could we speak with you for a while?”

Miri was agreeably surprised by this. To have the head of the planetary system’s government visit her instead of simply summoning her to her office was a sure sign that they were going to treat her and her family with dignity. Miri thus warmly welcomed them inside the suite, presenting her children to the two visitors. After shaking hands and exchanging kisses with them, Kern and Vargas took place in a sofa close to Miri’s easy chair. Miri switched off the holovision set and looked at Tomi Kern.

“Chief Administrator Kern, I am honored by your visit, especially in view of today’s circumstances. I wish that we could have met in a more peaceful setting.”

“What is done is done, First Mistress Goshenk. This conflict is now over and we are here to discuss about the future of your people. As First Mistress, you now represent the top surviving official of the Imperium, am I right?”

“You are right, Chief Administrator.” Answered softly Miri, the face of Stan flashing for a second inside her head. “As such, I also bear responsibility for the acts of my people. If you want to prosecute someone for our attack on your society, then let it be me.”

“Please, Dame Goshenk,” said Sten Vargas, “we are not here to put blame on anyone. In fact, we are not planning to present any charges against you or your people. While we have not seen war here for centuries, Miss Laplante and her Time Patrol have recently taught us back the meaning of the word and have opened our eyes to reality. This conflict was the unfortunate consequence of the acts of a man thirsty for power, namely your General Veck, and of a number of political mistakes on both sides. The Time Patrol was created to protect us from the dangers of time travel, but we failed to listen to its advice and tried to preserve our precious peace by cocooning ourselves, instead of doing our part in trying to reassure your Imperium that we were no threat at all. Exchanging embassies would probably have gone a long way towards defusing the mistrust between us.”

“It would have indeed, Chief Justice Vargas. On the other hand, my husband, King Stan the Sixth, was deadly afraid that, despite the reassurances given by Miss Laplante that we would be left alone if we didn’t interfere with history, your government would one day come back on its word and decide to erase us from history. Seeing your society now, I realize that your government would never have been capable of such a

treacherous act. Without wanting to push blame away from me, I can say that I was horrified when King Stan decided to launch a massive nuclear strike against your society as soon as feasible, in order to eliminate the support base of the Time Patrol. If the Time Patrol had not stopped our ship today, your world would be by this evening a nuclear wasteland. There were over 2,450 nuclear warheads aboard our ship and on the attack craft we transported.”

Both visitors paled visibly at those words. Tomi Kern hid her hands, which were now shaking.

“So, we have even more reasons to be grateful to the Time Patrol. This will go a long way in helping to clear their name.”

“Clear their name?” Said Miri, surprised and confused. “I am afraid that I don’t understand you on this point.”

“You may call this either rank cowardice or utter stupidity on our part, Dame Goshenk, but the truth is that the Time Patrol had been ordered to abandon Miss Laplante to her fate when she was captured by you while on her diplomatic mission. The Time Patrol mutinied rather than let her down and went into exile in time with their ships and equipment. The previous government then declared them a criminal organization and even tried to close down the operations of their headquarters, the one you destroyed today. I was elected yesterday to form a new government after I circulated a worldwide petition protesting the treatment meted to the Time Patrol and demanding for new elections.”

Miri looked at her with total disbelief mixed with more than a little contempt.

“You mean that your previous government first sent her on a diplomatic mission to talk to us, then refused to do anything to help her?”

“Basically, yes! Their argument was that we should have hidden away from you and not reacted when your General Veck launched his raid on 1942 ‘B’ London. My reaction, and that of my husband, who lost his post as Chief Administrator when vetoed on this by his own cabinet, was why create the Time Patrol in the first place, only to tell them to do nothing when faced with the first threat to the integrity of history?”

“Chief Administrator, do you know what would have happened if your Time Patrol would not have reacted to Veck’s raid? Veck would have become even more reckless with his use of time travel, until he would have discovered your timeline. Then he would have either destroyed or enslaved your society to satisfy his thirst for power. Instead of having to face only one ship, like today, you would have had the whole Imperium fleet to

deal with, something even your Time Patrol could not defeat. That is what hiding from us would have brought you.”

Kern and Vargas then exchanged looks.

“How soon can you have the charges against the Time Patrol dropped, Sten?”

“Tomorrow, Tomi. It will be my first official act after our swearing in.”

“Uh, wait!” Exclaimed Miri. “If your Time Patrol is still officially a criminal entity, how can they operate here without apparent restraints? Who is paying for the hotel rooms we are using?”

Tomi Kern, realizing how foolish her answer was going to sound like, turned away her eyes in embarrassment.

“The Time Patrol is the only group in the Global Council to have access to lethal weapons. Nobody would dare try arresting its members. As for your rooms, I believe that the Time Patrol used its own gold reserves to pay for them.”

Miri hid her face in her hands, exasperated, while Prince Len rolled his eyes upward and made a face.

“Alright,” said Miri, “let’s deal with something you can handle. What do you plan to do with us?”

“Integrate your members into our society as smoothly as possible, Dame Goshenk. There will be no criminal prosecution against any of your people. The ones responsible for this tragedy are already dead.”

“And, as a new citizen of your society, I can choose what I will do in my life here?”

“Absolutely! That goes for all of your people as well. I will have a number of government clerks show up tomorrow after breakfast to process your people as new citizens and provide you with startup funds.”

“That is very generous of your people, Chief Administrator. What about the crews of the two interceptors shot down over London two weeks ago? They are still being held by the British.”

“Not anymore, Dame Goshenk: Miss Laplante told me just one hour ago that they have been released by the British and that most of them will arrive here tonight.”

“Most of them? I don’t understand.”

“Uh, it seems that some of them have already requested to join the Time Patrol.”

Instead of making Miri angry, those words actually made her laugh hard.

“Please excuse my choice of words, but I can understand their decision: I too would prefer to work for somebody who has balls.”

“Uh, Mom, could I join the Time Patrol too?” Asked timidly Prince Len, stopping cold Miri’s laughter. She stared at her son for a moment, then smiled.

“Why not? You always loved history. What better place than the Time Patrol to keep learning about it?”

15:06 (Warsaw Time)

Thursday, June 4, 1942 ‘B’

Time Patrol command post, Gesia Street

Warsaw Ghetto, Poland

Jack Crawford was planning the shipping out of the excess materiel and robots no longer needed in Warsaw when Natia Mindicor showed up in the command post room, three church dignitaries close behind her.

“Excuse me, Jack, but a delegation from Rome has just arrived to meet with Miriam.”

Jack hid as best he could his displeasure: they were busy enough as it was without having to contend with some commission of inquiry from the Vatican. Those dignitaries probably wanted to discuss Miriam’s links with Yeshua, a delicate subject that could raise a religious storm easily enough. He wished that Nancy was here to deal with this instead of him, who never paid much attention to religious things. He however politely invited the three churchmen inside the command post and offered them seats, which they took. The senior churchman, a short man in his early sixties and with a prominent nose, radiated human warmth and put Jack more at ease quickly, speaking in French at first.

“Would French be appropriate, or another language would be more acceptable?”

“French will do fine, Your Excellency. I am Field Agent Jack Crawford, in charge of this outpost.”

“And I am Apostolic Delegate Angelo Roncalli, until very recently Delegate to Turkey and Greece and soon to be Papal Nuncio to Paris. This is my assistant for this mission, Monsignor Fra Arnoldi, and this is my private secretary, Father Umberto Galliano. We were tasked by His Holiness the Pope to meet with a Miriam of Magdala, who is said to be part of your group in Warsaw.”

“Miriam of Magdala is effectively here in this building, Your Excellency. Matters concerning her and her son David are however...delicate in terms of religious orthodoxy. If this is some kind of heresy tribunal, then I am not going to give you access to her: she is a young and gentle woman who deserves to be left in peace.”

Roncalli nodded his head and smiled gently.

“Do not be afraid for her, Mister Crawford. We mean her no harm, on the contrary. In fact, if she is who we think she is, she is already an ordained saint of the Catholic Church. We are aware of the implications of this case and I can promise you that our mission will be extremely discreet and that the results of our inquiry will only be seen by His Holiness the Pope.”

“In that case, you are welcome to speak to her. Do you mind if I observe your conversation with Miriam?”

“If you must, then I don’t mind.”

“Then follow me!” Said Jack, getting up from behind the portable workstation he had been using. Before leaving the room, though, he switched the radio functions of the workstation to remote control mode, so that he could monitor communications using his helmet radio, then put his helmet on. Climbing the stairs to the next floor with the churchmen behind him, Jack went to the room occupied by Miriam and knocked on the door. The Galilean woman opened the door after a few seconds, her son David in her arms.

“Sorry to disturb you, Miriam, but there are three visitors from the Vatican for you.” Said Jack in Hebrew.

“The Vatican? What’s that?”

“The seat of the Catholic Church, which worships Yeshua as the Son of God. They would like to ask you a few questions, probably about your life with Yeshua.”

Miriam glanced at the three churchmen, then whispered at Jack.

“Should I answer all their questions?”

“Tell the truth, Miriam. However, if they start bothering you, just say so and I will terminate the interview.”

Miriam nodded her head, then let Jack and the churchmen in. While Jack stayed up besides the door, Miriam offered her camp cot for the churchmen to sit in, taking herself the rocking chair in the corner of her small room. Roncalli used French again to speak to her.

“We can use French, Italian, Greek or Latin as you prefer, miss.”

“French will do, sir. What may I do for you?”

“If you could answer a few questions, it would help us a lot in our task, miss. I am Apostolic Delegate Angelo Roncalli, sent by His Holiness the Pope to investigate about a few rumors that reached the Vatican a few days ago. May I ask first your full name, place and date of birth?”

“Of course, sir. My name is Miriam, daughter of Ephraim and Judith. I was born in the village of Magdala, in Galilee, in what would be your month of June, in the eight year of your calendar. I am now 25 years old.”

“How did you come to this time, Miriam?” Asked politely Roncalli, who was letting his secretary note down the conversation.

“Nancy Laplante brought me to the year 3385, after Yeshua asked her to take me under her protection.”

“And who was Yeshua?” Asked Roncalli, who actually knew the answer already.

“Yeshua of Nazareth is known to the Poles here as Jesus Christ. Yeshua was dying on the cross when he made his request to Nancy.”

“Why did he ask that of Miss Laplante? Did he know that she was from the future?”

“Yeshua knew that she was very special but Nancy was then known to all as Nava, a Sarmatian warrior woman who had come to Palestine to convert to Judaism. I believe that Yeshua didn't know then about the true nature of Nancy. He however knew after his death, as he visited me in the year 3385, on the day of the birth of David.”

Roncalli, along with the two other churchmen, reacted with strong interest to her answer.

“Jesus visited you in 3385? How?”

“He appeared to us in the hospital where I gave birth to David and held our son for a short moment, touching his head while praying, then disappeared from where he stood.”

Roncalli swallowed hard while looking down at the cute little boy in Miriam's arms.

“Jesus is the father of your son, miss?”

“He is. We were married in Cana, a year and a half before his death.”

Miriam then looked at Jack, but kept speaking in French, so Roncalli could understand.

“Jack, why not show them the documentary on Yeshua? It would answer most of their questions in much better detail.”

“I don't know, Miriam. That documentary could create a storm of controversy. I will have to ask the permission of Nancy before showing it to them.”

“Could you do that while I answer their questions, Jack?”

“Uh, sure. It shouldn’t take very long to get an answer.”

“Thanks, Jack!”

As soon as Jack was gone, Miriam smiled to Roncalli.

“The documentary we were speaking about was produced by the Time Patrol to document the birth, life and death of Yeshua of Nazareth. Nancy Laplante spent years in the Palestine of my time, filming scenes from the life of Yeshua and following him around as one of his disciples. It is an extremely well produced documentary that deals strictly with the facts of the life of Yeshua. Nancy followed him closely but did as little as possible herself in order not to interfere with the events themselves. She helped Miriam of Nazareth give birth to him and was there at his crucifixion. I however understand that the facts exposed in that documentary do not support many preconceptions about Yeshua’s life that are found in your Bible. I myself read your Bible and found many inaccuracies in it, mostly due to distortion of facts by the chroniclers who wrote about Yeshua after his death.”

Roncalli, while hurt by Miriam’s words, stayed polite and friendly. While many would never accept that the Holy Bible could contain mistakes, Roncalli was too well educated not to understand that the Scriptures had been translated and sometimes reworded many times through the centuries. The Time Patrol had the enormous advantage in this case of having been able to gather facts on the spot and at the time of the events in question. If those facts could show that Jesus was what the Church said he was, then he could live with a few changes to the Scriptures. That was however something only the Pope could decide on.

“Tell me about Yeshua, miss. What kind of man was he?”

Miriam smiled and became dreamy as she remembered her lover and spiritual master.

“He was an extraordinary man, truly. He was incredibly gentle and kind, compassionate and tolerant. He was ready to accept anyone who would listen to his preaching, including sinners, women and people of low repute. He had the power to heal with his hands and did heal people all over Galilee and Judea. He also loved children and spent much time in their company.”

Miriam went on for many minutes, answering specific questions from Roncalli without any qualms or hesitations. The churchmen had priceless details about the life of Jesus by the time Jack Crawford came back, knocking briefly at the door before entering. He smiled at both Miriam and the churchmen.

“Good news: Nancy authorized His Excellency to see the documentary on Yeshua. I have set up our holovision set next door to show it. It is ready when you want.”

“Excellent!” Said Roncalli, pleased. “It should prove a captivating film. Will you watch it with us, Miriam?”

“I will, sir. I also want David to watch it, so that he could see pictures of his father and keep a memory of him.”

“A most understandable need in a child. May I say that he is a beautiful boy?”

“You are too kind, sir.” Said Miriam, beaming with pride. As Roncalli got close to her to caress the head of the toddler, David saw the cross suspended from a chain around the churchman’s neck. His eyes sparkling, he extended a hand to hold it. He was still too far away to reach it but the cross flew towards his hand until its chain was pulled taut. After a moment of stunned surprise, Roncalli got closer, letting the child touch the cross. Little David looked up at him and grinned with happiness. At that exact moment, Roncalli felt a strong mental wave of human warmth that intensified when he smiled back at the child. The sensation of pure joy he felt from the boy made tears appear in his eyes, so marvelous the feeling was.

“He is such a lovely child! He is like a small angel.”

“Uh, you would not say that when trying to make him eat something he doesn’t like.” Replied Miriam playfully. “Let’s go see the documentary now.”

18:47 (Warsaw Time)

Time Patrol command post, Warsaw Ghetto

There was a long silence from the three churchmen when the documentary ended. While the authenticity of the recordings could not be denied without a lot of bad faith, what they had seen was enough to cause a revolution, or worse, in the Catholic Church. Reserving his judgment for a later time, when his thoughts would have quieted down, Roncalli looked at Jack Crawford, who had watched the documentary besides them, explaining a few technical details or backtracking the recording to review a few critical moments at the churchmen’s request.

“Mister Crawford, another aspect of our mission here was to do an inquiry about the miracle of mass healing said to have been performed by Miss Laplante here in the Ghetto.”

“That miracle is much more than hearsay, Your Excellency. Thousands of people were direct witnesses to it and even more people will vouch that they were miraculously healed at that moment, all around Warsaw and the rest of Poland. Nancy performed a similar mass healing near London only a few minutes after the one in Warsaw and she did a third mass healing in the future, in 3386. She is now widely addressed to as ‘The Hand of God’ by everybody here in Warsaw, a title even an ex-atheist like me will not deny to her. She truly has amazing powers now, especially when it comes to healing. If the Catholic Church is thinking about calling her a saint, something which Nancy herself will deny, then you should know that the Church has already made one of her past personas, Joan of Arc, a saint.”

Now deeply shaken, Roncalli got up from his chair and shook hands with Jack.

“We will now go investigate around the Ghetto and the rest of Warsaw. Thank you for your cooperation in everything.”

Roncalli then knelt in front of Miriam and kissed her hand, then the one of David.

“It was a great joy for me to meet you and your son David, Saint Mary-Magdalene. May God smile on both of you.”

“And on you, Your Excellency. Shelamah!”

“Shelahmah!” Repeated little David in his tiny voice. Roncalli grinned and waved at the boy before leaving.

CHAPTER 21 – PEACE CONFERENCE

09:52 (Paris Time)

Friday, June 5, 1942 'B'

Council Room, Town hall

Paris, France

“Where is Laplante? She should be here by now.” Asked to nobody in particular a British reporter, who was occupying the visitors’ gallery of the Town hall’s Council Room with the other representatives of the Press Corps. Edward Murrow, the head of the CBS radio news European department, also kept asking himself the same question. Nancy Laplante was officially listed as the chairperson of this peace conference, which was supposed to be inaugurated at ten O’clock. Such a conference would have been unthinkable two weeks ago, yet here they were in Paris, ready to discuss the future of post-war Europe, something they owed entirely to Laplante and her Time Patrol. Murrow was very conscious of how crucial this conference would be and had been relieved to learn that Washington had seen the light and accepted to participate in it, even if it was only here in an observer status. Looking down from the visitors’ gallery at the rows of desks and seats facing the elevated bench to be occupied by the chairperson, Murrow could see representatives from all the countries of Europe, plus observers from other countries that had been concerned with the war in Europe, including the American Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, and his aides. At one end section of the rows of seats and desks sat representatives of Germany, Italy and of their former allies in the war, relegated to the role of observers at talks that would decide their future. General De Gaulle, co-host of the conference and also one of the participants, was looking nervously at his watch while pacing behind the bench.

Nancy Laplante finally showed up four minutes before ten, walking in the Council Room at a hurried pace. She was wearing her gray combat uniform and her body armor and was still fully armed. There was also blood splattered all over her, something that attracted a buzz of whispered comments and questions. Murrow was however only a little surprised by her appearance: Nancy Laplante was first and foremost a soldier and she still was fighting the Japanese in China. Taking place behind the elevated bench,

Laplante conversed briefly with De Gaulle, then put down her rifle and her sword out of sight. While she did that, De Gaulle used one of the microphones lined along the bench and addressed the participants and spectators in French. Murrow already had a headset earphone on that was connected to the English translator for the conference, so he had no trouble following the short speech.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Paris for this conference on peace in Europe. I am General Charles De Gaulle, head of the Provisional French Government and co-host of this conference. While war is still going on in the Pacific theatre, fighting in Europe has all but died down and it is high time that we start planning the huge task of rebuilding our countries and of taking care of the millions of people who suffered and are still suffering from the war. In this, I am in full agreement with Miss Laplante, the chairperson and co-host of this conference, that this is the time for reconciliation and atonement, not one for recriminations or for revenge. The true responsible ones for this war are already either dead or in jail, facing imminent judgment. This conference is planned to go on for six days, of which Sunday will be used for private meetings and discussions between the participants. You have all received a copy of the conference’s detailed schedule, so I won’t talk further on this. As you may have noticed already, there is some very high technology in use at this conference, thanks to the generous support of the Global Council, the society from the 34th century where the Time Patrol originates. That technology includes the wide screen television sets distributed around this room and on which various presentations and maps will be shown. There is a lot more to say about this but I will let my co-host, Miss Nancy Laplante, speak and elaborate on this and other points. Miss Laplante...”

Respectful silence fell as Nancy Laplante switched on her microphone and adjusted it, then spoke in English.

“Good morning and welcome to this peace conference, ladies and gentlemen. Please excuse my shabby appearance and late arrival, but the Japanese Army is still far from finished in China. I can however announce to you that Shanghai, like Nanking, is now firmly in the hands of the Time Patrol, and that all the Japanese counter-attacks to date have been defeated with very heavy losses to the Japanese. The battle for Beijing has now started and is quite ferocious, as you could judge from the state of my uniform. More details on the China Campaign will be available to all at the press question period, at 17:00 hours. To elaborate on the equipment in use at this conference, here is some information for the benefit of the Press Corps. First, cameras are filming the

proceedings of this conference and the pictures and sound from them are being retransmitted live to the various capitals of the states involved in the conference, so that the respective governments can follow our progress and react quickly to developments here. Second, the Time Patrol will provide a taxi service for the diplomats present so that they could bring quickly documents and information to their respective governments for approval or discussion. Thirdly, in the Salon des Arcades, you will find a large number of individual communications booths to be used by both the Press Corps and by the delegates. These booths are linked via satellite retransmission to a network of communications booths dispersed around press and government agencies in various countries. This arrangement in particular is a late development, so we are still adding up to this network as the needs arise. Please do not expect that we will provide such booths to every press agency you represent. You will have to come to an arrangement to use them as a pool resource. The list of stations connected to the network is provided in each booth. This is for the technical arrangements. Now, concerning the logistical arrangements. You are of course welcome to have your meals in the various restaurants of Paris and enjoy the hospitality of the city, while boosting at the same time the local economy, for which General De Gaulle will certainly be grateful for.”

A round of laughter broke around the delegates and reporters at her last remark, while De Gaulle grinned.

“For those of you on either a low budget or a tight schedule, a permanent buffet will be operating from 06:00 hours to 22:00 hours in the Salon Bertrand and will be totally free. Being myself a war correspondent in my own time period, I am sure that some of you who work for a miserly editor will appreciate this service. While the catering company is from Paris, the foodstuff and supplies are compliment of the Global Council and the Time Patrol. You may thus find a few items on the menu that are not from this time period. The maids and waitresses are however definitely from this time period and are of the best vintage Paris can offer. Please do not indulge too much.”

The laughter then was general and genuine. Nancy then became serious again.

“You certainly all noticed the strict security measures and the searches on entering the town hall. While we came here to discuss peace, there however always will be a few individuals or groups ready to use violence to further their own agenda or simply to create anarchy. Another thing about security: we are here to discuss our mutual problems, not to fight over them. While the diplomatic status of the delegates will be respected, no weapons or bodyguards will be allowed inside the town hall during this

conference. Anyone who starts a fight will be ejected from the conference, diplomatic status or not. Be assured that my combat robots are totally impartial about who they have to manhandle. If need be, I am more than ready to personally boot out any senior delegate who does not behave like a diplomat.”

Nancy paused for a moment, so that her words could sink in. She then pointed to her left, at the section of desks and chairs where the representatives from the Axis powers sat.

“As you all certainly noted by now, I have invited representatives of Germany, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, who will have the status of observers at this conference. While they may not participate directly in the debates unless invited to, I encourage the various delegates to hold talks with them on a bilateral or multilateral basis during this conference. I myself will now give the floor to the representative of Germany, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, who asked me to address you briefly. Admiral Canaris, as you may all know, was the head of the German Army Intelligence. What many of you may not know is that Admiral Canaris was also part of a group of German officers and civilians secretly plotting the assassination of Adolf Hitler, something I will vouch for. Admiral Canaris...”

A buzz went around the delegates and reporters as the old admiral, wearing a dark blue civilian suit, walked to the lectern and microphone set in front and below the elevated bench occupied by Nancy. He put a few sheets of papers on the lectern, then looked around at the delegates facing him before starting to speak in English.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I decided to give this speech in English instead of in German because many of you understandably heard way too much German in your own streets during the war. I will not try to downplay the atrocities committed by German forces in Europe, which are too horrible in scope and nature to be denied. I will not try to find excuses for us starting this war, which was the sole product of the thirst for power of the Nazis. While not all Germans either wanted the war or profited from it, too many did, to our national shame. The German Government of National Salvation, which I represent, pledges to do its utmost to return promptly all the prisoners of war, forced laborers and internees still in Germany to their countries of origin, along with the artistic treasures and other valuable assets looted by the Nazis during their occupation of Europe. Those persons that will be returned will be compensated for their work and suffering by the German state. We will also, through the good offices of the Time Patrol, provide access to suspected war criminals hiding in Germany and make them available

for future prosecution. The profits they made from the war will be seized and will be used to compensate the poor souls who were exploited by the German war industry. To help in this, I will ask the cooperation of the Swiss delegation, in which country's banks much of that money has been stashed."

Many eyes turned towards the two Swiss diplomats participating as observers to the conference. The senior Swiss diplomat was about to protest that no such money existed in Swiss banks but had to sit down under the hard stare of Nancy, who spoke up briefly while keeping her eyes on the Swiss.

"The Time Patrol is ready to provide the account numbers and the bank addresses where Nazi war profits were deposited, so that the Swiss government can cooperate with the German government in retrieving those funds. This concerns in particular the gold coming from such sources as the gold teeth pulled out from the bodies of the Jews exterminated in Nazi concentration camps. You may continue, Admiral Canaris."

The Swiss cringed as an indignant roar went through the council room. Edward Murrow enjoyed Nancy's barb at the Swiss: she certainly knew how to drop verbal bombs. Even the Soviet foreign affairs minister, Molotov, a normally stone-faced man, grinned at that arrow shot at those ultimate capitalists hiding behind the much-vaunted secrecy of their bank accounts. Canaris continued once the room fell mostly silent.

"The present German government knows that simple excuses will not be enough to repair the wrongs done in this war. It however pledges the following: Germany will never again use its armed forces offensively outside of its borders. Thus, and under the control of the Time Patrol, all offensive weapons will from now on be banned from German inventories. These include submarines, warships larger than destroyers, bomber aircraft, artillery weapons other than mortars and anti-tank guns, ground-to-ground missiles, tanks and self-propelled artillery guns. The few such weapons still in German hands will be destroyed or disposed of under Time Patrol supervision. As for war reparation payments, Germany will do its honest best to pay for the damages it caused, but our only request is that the future of our children not be mortgaged by excessive repayments, one factor that directly led to the rise of the Nazis after the war of 1914-18. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention."

There were a few scant, polite applause as Canaris walked back to his seat. Nancy then took back the microphone.

“Before other delegates who wish to speak do so, I would like to say a few things on behalf of the Time Patrol. First, I planned this conference so that the efforts of the Time Patrol in bringing this war to an end would result into a durable peace and not simply in some short-term break before more wars. Thus, while I truly hope that you will be able to resolve your differences by peaceful means from now on, the Time Patrol will not hesitate to act decisively in the future against anyone, and I say anyone, who will endanger peace again. Also, if a reasonable consensus cannot be reached by the end of this conference, we will be forced to propose our own solutions and then enforce them if there is still no consensus between yourselves. Many of you may consider this as a thinly veiled threat to enforce our will on you but believe me: we will not let peace be sabotaged by either thirst for power, hatred or a wish for revenge. Second, the reasons that caused this war should be well understood, so that the same mistakes will not be repeated in the future. Many will say that simple thirst for power by German leaders caused this war. That would be a most myopic and incomplete view of the problem. As Admiral Canaris mentioned earlier on, the Versailles Treaty that concluded the First World War was partly to blame for this war. While not wanting to diminish the responsibilities of Germany in that war, the very harsh and, in my mind, unrealistic terms of that treaty caused long-term public resentment in Germany. The refusal to embrace true democracy through much of Europe was also a big factor, with militaristic or dictatorial regimes refusing to share power or to hand it over when they were no longer wanted by their people.”

Edward Murrow couldn't help notice that Nancy's eyes went firmly on the Polish delegation, which was led by an army officer, as she said that last sentence. She was far from finished, though.

“One other big factor that should be firmly pointed at is racism and ethnic hatred. Too often, when times got tough, the people and governments of Europe turned against specific ethnic groups or minorities in their countries, as if murdering, persecuting or deporting someone seen as different could make the true problems disappear. In this, hardly any of the governments represented here are blameless. Before anyone is tempted to protest that their government is innocent of such conduct, be sure that I have enough tales to shame most present here. But enough about the causes of war! Since many now probably wish me to shut up, I will now let the floor to a representative of another delegation present here as observer, that of the Global Council. Ladies and

gentlemen, please welcome Global Chief Administrator Tomi Kern, leader of the Solar System in the year 3386.”

Edward Murrow, as surprised as the others present, then got up and applauded as Tomi Kern entered the council room, dressed in a futuristic women’s suit that was certain to make the headlines of every fashion magazine in the world. Flashbulbs exploded continuously for many seconds as Kern went to the lectern and took place behind it. Murrow was struck by how mixed her racial background appeared to be: it would be difficult to decide if she was either Oriental, Caucasian or African. She appeared comparatively young for the position she held, looking to be in her mid-forties. After looking around at the delegates, she chose to speak in English.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to say first that it is an honor to be able to speak at this conference. The Global Council has in fact a vested interest in the success of this conference. Many of you must be wondering why the Time Patrol, an agency of the Global Council, got involved in this war at all. Some will probably even think that it had no business in it. The truth is that, by stopping this war and creating a balanced peace in your time, the Time Patrol was trying to prevent two future wars. One of those wars would have resulted in the near extinction of the Human race, followed by the emergence in the far future of a militaristic empire called the Imperium. The other war was the intended destruction of the Global Council by the Imperium in 3386. On May 20 of this year, the first ever act of military aggression through time occurred in London, when a raiding force of three Imperium ships looking for one of their scientists attacked Buckingham Palace and kidnapped the King’s equerry and young Princess Margaret, who were then transported to the Imperium capital in 3386 ‘B’. I say 3386 ‘B’ because there are actually more than one historical timeline. This timeline where you and I are presently is timeline ‘B’ and was created from timeline ‘A’ in September of 1940, when a certain woman was kidnapped and brought back in time against her will as part of an illegal time travel experiment, then found herself marooned. The Imperium is, or rather was part of the future of timeline ‘B’. The Time Patrol, which is tasked by the Global Council to prevent illegal time travel and protect history from irresponsible tampering, reacted to the Imperium raid, shooting down two of the raiding ships. Miss Laplante then went with a British diplomatic delegation to visit the Imperium in order to win the negotiated release of Princess Margaret and of the King’s equerry. Unfortunately, the Imperium showed bad faith and, while freeing its two British hostages, then tried to take Miss Laplante prisoner, hoping to extract vital information about the Global Council and

the Time Patrol by torturing her. That is unfortunately when the then government of the Global Council showed inexcusable and despicable moral and political cowardice by refusing to go to the rescue of Miss Laplante, being scared of the military might of the Imperium. Please bear in mind that the Global Council is a pacifist society that has not known war for over 500 years. It had no armed agency until the Time Patrol was created in 3384 'A'. As a result of the abandonment of Miss Laplante by the Global Council, the Time Patrol mutinied and exiled itself here in 1942, from where they mounted a rescue operation that was able to extract Nancy Laplante from the clutches of the Imperium. The Time Patrol, knowing that the Imperium was planning to attack and destroy the Global Council as soon as it could find it, then proceeded in changing the history of timeline 'B' in order to prevent the Imperium from ever appearing in the future. They chose to do that by stopping this war and now by creating a durable, balanced peace through the world. The Imperium, led by their king, had however succeeded in sending one warship to the safety of the past. That warship, a huge battleship capable of destroying this whole planet, was eventually able to find a way to the Global Council. Five days ago, relative time, that Imperium battleship showed up on July 10 of 3386 'A'. The Global Council then learned about war first hand for the first time in 500 years. The Time Patrol was able to destroy that battleship, but not before losing two of its ships or before heavy damage was also done on the ground. The Global Council now realizes how heavy a debt it owes to the Time Patrol and has decided on a few steps to repay that debt. One of those steps is to support its efforts in bringing peace to this time period. That support will include help in rebuilding your world and in relocating the millions of refugees and displaced persons victims of this war."

Tomi Kern waited until the wave of exclamations and comments caused by her words had died down, then went on in her calm but firm voice.

"Another aspect of that support and also a byproduct of the public knowledge of time travel in this timeline, is the recent decision by the Global Council to authorize intertime tourism and trade between this time period and the Global Council, subject to the close supervision of the Time Patrol. High technology items will however not be allowed to flow down from the Global Council. As soon as the governments of Europe can rule out their differences and restore a stable peace, an official transit point for trade and travel will be opened here in Paris, connecting Europe with the Global Council. In time, more such transit points will be opened as trade develops. I will now let you

continue this conference but will be available for questions from the press this afternoon.”

As soon as Tomi Kern had left the council room, the majority of the reporters present rushed out as well, heading towards the communications booths in the Salon des Arcades.

19:04 (Paris time)

Salon Roll, Paris Town hall

British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden had a hard time taking his eyes off Nancy’s dress as she invited him and the Jordanian representative to sit down on one of the gold and royal blue sofas of the Salon Roll, a large lounge decorated with paintings by the artist Alfred Roll. Nancy had shed her bloodstained uniform for a Chinese style dress made of a fantastic fabric that changed colors depending on the angle one looked at it. The style of the dress was also decidedly futuristic, the opening along her left leg being much wider than in traditional Chinese dresses and the front opening in a wide, deep ‘V’ that gave a tantalizing glimpse of her fantastic breasts. Faisal Hussein, the Jordanian representative, was close to salivating as he took his seat. On her part, Nancy moved an armchair so that it would face the sofa where the two diplomats sat, then sat down, crossing her left leg over her right leg. A cart had already been rolled besides the sofa, with a computer sitting on top of it and with a map of Jordan and Palestine pictured on its screen. Anthony Eden had one look at the map and smiled.

“Let me guess, Nancy: you want to discuss our mandate on Palestine, isn’t it?”

“That is correct, Sire Anthony. Would you and Mister Hussein like something before we start our discussion, though? Tea, maybe some pastries?”

“I will go for tea, Nancy.”

“I will have tea as well, Miss Laplante.” Said Hussein. Nancy nodded, then made a signal to a maid waiting besides the door of the lounge.

“Please, tea for three.” She ordered politely in French. She then looked back at Eden and Hussein, switching to English again. “I hope that the facilities and arrangements for this conference are to your liking up to now, gentlemen.”

“They are most satisfactory, miss.” Replied Hussein, a handsome man in his forties wearing the traditional Bedouin headdress and a Western suit. “May I also say

that you are most beautiful in that dress? My wife would kill to have some of this...multicolored fabric.”

“It is called holographic silk, Mister Hussein, and is a product of the Global Council that will soon be exported to this time period as part of the announced program of intertime trade.”

“Then I shall impatiently wait for the first arrival of such holographic silk, miss. What kind of products could we offer to the Global Council that would be of interest to them, though? They will have a marked edge on us in terms of tradable products.”

“True, Mister Hussein. What may interest the people of the Global Council will be actually simple products, like certain types of fruits that cannot be found in the Global Council anymore, or like good old scotch. The main thing will be tourism from the 34th century, though. Please understand that, in timeline ‘A’, a horrible war happened in the mid 21st century that nearly snuffed out the Human race. Nearly everything was destroyed and land and water were contaminated for centuries. All the historical archives and artifacts were destroyed as well. As a result, there is a widespread public fascination in the 34th century towards visiting this time period, once it is safe to do so of course.”

The maid then returned with a cart supporting a full tea service. Nancy let her pour three cups, then thanked her and told her to leave the cart near her. She let Eden and Hussein sip some of their tea, then touched the subject of discussion she had in mind for this meeting.

“Well, let’s talk about Palestine if you don’t mind, gentlemen. You both know that the place is already like a powder keg, ready to explode because of ethnic tensions between the Arabs and the Jews living there. The British soldiers stationed there, apart from fighting until recently against the French Vichy forces in Lebanon, had to contend with terrorist acts from both sides and are having a hard time of it. If nothing is done to improve the situation, it will get worse, much worse. On the other hands, we now have in Europe millions of Jews barely out of the clutches of the Nazis, most of them reduced to mere skeletons by the time we could free them from German concentration camps. Many of those Jews have nowhere to go, being unwanted in their countries of origin and having lost everything. The only hope they have left is to immigrate to Palestine, where they could rebuild new lives. Before you protest about this, Mister Hussein, please understand that I am well aware of the potential problems of such a wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine. I am considered an expert on Middle East affairs in my own

time and have witnessed first hand the conflicts in Palestine. True, there is not enough good arable land to support millions of new citizens in Palestine and the existing water resources are already stretched thin. I however have a plan to propose that will not infringe in any way on the lands possessed by Arabs and will make it possible to house most of the Jewish immigrants in parts of Palestine that are presently mostly empty.”

Husseini put down his cup of tea, his face somber.

“Does The Hand of God propose to make water flow out of the desert sand and grapevines grow on rocks?”

“The Hand of God, no. The Global Council has the means to do it, though, and I already have the support of Global Chief Administrator Kern for this particular project. Most of the new settlements will be in the Negev Desert and will use potable water extracted from seawater pumped out of the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. That potable water will in turn be used to grow food inside enclosed gardens that will use what is called hydroponics, where sand or even rocks are used to support the growing plants. In exchange, I would like to be able to form a new country out of Palestine, a multiethnic country that would be a peaceful home to Muslims, Jews and Christians alike. That country would be called ‘The Holy Land of Palestine’. To do all this, though, I will need total free rein to act there. In essence, Sir Anthony, I am asking that Great Britain hand its mandate on Palestine to me and the Time Patrol, while I will ask Jordan to be ready to let go the lands West of the Jordan River. As ‘The Hand of God’, you have my solemn promise that the holy sites in Jerusalem and elsewhere in Palestine will remain accessible to all and that the rights of none of the present inhabitants of Palestine will be infringed on by this plan. As a bonus, Great Britain will gain durable political stability in the region and will be able to pull out its troops presently stationed in Palestine. What do you say to this, gentlemen?”

Both Eden and Husseini were silent for a long moment, measuring the implications of her plan. Husseini was the first to respond.

“Miss Laplante, why this particular interest in Palestine, a land that has been ignored by so many in the last decades?”

“Because the first home of my spirit was in Jericho, 9,000 years ago. Because I lived two more lives in Palestine since then. Because I was Sarai of Ur, the wife of the great patriarch Abraham, who traveled all the way from Sumer to Palestine. Because I am The Hand of God. Gentlemen, I can help you avoid over seventy years of bitter

conflicts in Palestine that will poison the political atmosphere of the whole Middle East. What do you have to lose?"

Eden looked at the map of Palestine on the computer while thinking furiously.

"Could you tell us more details on your project, Nancy?"

"Of course! Here is the map of the proposed new settlements..."

Nancy exposed the details of her plan for a good half hour, answering a number of questions from Eden and Hussein. Finally, both men reached a consensus and got up from their sofa.

"Your project is most interesting indeed, Nancy. However, such a decision will need the approval of the British cabinet. Be assured that I will support your requests, though."

"I will also have to request the approval of my king on this, Miss Laplante." Said Hussein. "Knowing that it comes from The Hand of God, I am sure that he will look favorably on this project."

"Thank you, gentlemen. Please tell your governments not to take too much time on this: many lives are at stake here, along with the political stability of the region."

"We will do our best to hasten things, Nancy." Replied Eden. "It was a pleasure to speak with you this evening."

"It was a pleasure for me too, miss." Said in turn Hussein.

Nancy stayed for a moment in the lounge after the departure of the two diplomats. Feeling tired and in need of fresh air after this long day indoors, she decided to go take a walk outside to change her mind a bit. Leaving the lounge, she walked down the grand staircase and then crossed in succession the Salon Willette, the Salon des Tapisseries and the Salle des Prévôts before emerging outside and climbing down the few stairs to the wide plaza facing the town hall. The French soldiers guarding the entrance came to attention and saluted her. Nancy thanked them and informed the lieutenant in charge of them that she was taking a walk before going towards the River Seine nearby. There was little vehicle traffic in the streets at this time, most of it being French military patrols, but there was quite a few pedestrians walking along the riverbanks. She attracted numerous stares with her holographic silk dress as she walked towards the bridge nearest to the Notre-Dame Cathedral, the 'Pont du Change', crossing it and cutting her pace as she got nearer to the cathedral. Nancy particularly

loved this part of Paris, which she found so romantic. There were dozens of people sitting around the wide plaza situated in front of the cathedral, most of them quiet couples of lovers kissing and caressing each other while admiring the scenery. Even better for Nancy was the quietness of the evening, with no detonations, shots or other noises of war, something she relished after nearly two weeks of constant fighting and countless deaths. The souvenirs of the people she had lost in that fighting then came back to her, bringing tears to her eyes: young Martha Pfalz, killed by a Nazi sniper; Dana Mulano and her team of 17 surveillance technicians, vaporized with the headquarters building in New Lake City; Sandra Billings and Keith Strong, shot down with their scoutship in the battle with the ROYAL SOVEREIGN. Then there were the ones who had suffered in battle and endured wounds: Tom Allen; Tatiana Korbut; Ingrid Weiss and, most recently, Klaus Manheim. Nancy herself had been wounded twice up to now, once in Rabaul and the other time this morning, in Beijing. The physical wounds were nothing though compared to the mental wounds caused by seeing so much cruelty and human suffering on a continuous basis, especially while liberating German and Japanese internment camps. All of the members of the Time Patrol were indeed in serious need of prolonged vacations, while some could actually use the help of psychologists to get rid of the nightmares they were experiencing. The positive side of this was all the lives they had saved in this war and in the Global Council, which had come very close to experiencing a second nuclear holocaust at the hands of the Imperium. Looking up at the gallery linking the two spires of the cathedral, with its stone gargoyles lined along the parapet, Nancy decided that watching Paris from up there would help change her mind. The cathedral was closed at this hour but that was no obstacle for her. Concentrating on her levitation power, she flew off the plaza and rose along the façade of the cathedral, attracting exclamations from the people present in the plaza. Getting to the level of the gallery, she stepped over the parapet and landed softly on the old stones of the walkway. Now facing her, a grimacing gargoyle seemed to mock her, attracting a smile on her face.

“I know what you think, gargoyle: you are saying that you will outlast me through the years, isn't it? Well, you may be right but don't grab the jackpot yet.”

Standing against the parapet and looking down at the city, Nancy took comfort at thinking that they were close to truly ending this war.

“Only a few more days, Nancy. Just a few more days.”

She then dreamed about the nice, quiet days she could spend together with Mike on Europa. She still had that offer from the manager of Station One for an all-expense paid week, a reward meant to thank her for that suicidal rescue mission she had conducted on Io.

12:41 (Tokyo Time)

Monday, June 8, 1942 'B'

Imperial palace, Tokyo

Japan

Emperor Hirohito, having finished his frugal lunch of rice and dried fish, signaled to the imperial lady-in-waiting that she could take away his empty plates and his sticks. Hirohito's face was expressionless, like most of the time, in the way that was fitting for a living god. Hirohito however knew very well that he was no god. In fact, he didn't want to be one. However, the militarists and the ultra-nationalists would not let him tell that to his people, even now when most of the militarists were dead or in the hands of the enemy. The enemy had struck hard at Tokyo last night, not with bombs but by setting foot directly on Japanese soil and killing thousands of army soldiers and officers. The few senior army officers that were left until yesterday and that had been the most strident supporters of continuing the war at all cost got what they asked for. They were now dead, having paid the ultimate price for their fanaticism. That left only a few junior officers alive in the whole of Tokyo, like the one guarding his pavilion, but even those young officers were too fanatical to be ready to accept that the war was lost and had to be stopped. The sound of paper being shred and the scream of horror from his lady-in-waiting made Hirohito snap his head up, in time to see the officer guarding him fall through the paper wall of his lounge, a knife stuck deep in his throat. The officer was still twitching when a shape in gray uniform crashed through the flimsy wall, a sword in one hand and a knife in the other. The newcomer was fairly short and wore a complicated full-face helmet and a sort of molded cuirass. It also happened to be a woman, as her voice showed when she told in perfect Japanese to the lady-in-waiting to leave at once, which she did at a run. Now expecting to be killed in the next seconds, Hirohito got to his feet and faced his attacker with as much courage as he could muster.

"If you came to kill me, then do it, but don't expect me to beg for my life."

His attacker's answer was to raise her faceplate, revealing the face of a mere teenager with brown hair and blue eyes. Looking with stunned surprise at her face and then at the nametag on her right breast, Hirohito couldn't help stare at her with disbelief.

"Princess Elizabeth of England? But...you are supposed to be dead. And what are you doing in that uniform, killing my officers with knives?"

"I only came close to dying, Your Majesty. The Time Patrol saved me and I then joined them. As for killing you, that is not what we came here for."

"We? Who else is with you?"

"Her!" Simply answered Elizabeth while pointing at a tall woman wearing the same sort of uniform and who was now stepping inside the pavilion, a pistol in her right hand. Hirohito did not have to ask who she was, since she was known all around the World and had been so for a year.

"Brigadier Laplante! Why did you come here?"

"I came to end this war, which has gone on for too long. We destroyed your navy, then your air force and now we have destroyed your army. Japan has nothing left to fight with now, unless you want to use civilians armed with bamboo spears."

"How could you say that you destroyed our army? We have over three million soldiers in China, Manchuria, Burma and the rest of Asia and the Pacific."

"You had three million soldiers!" Replied harshly Nancy, studiously refusing to use any honorary title to address Hirohito. The Japanese emperor may not have been part of the ones directly responsible for this war, but too much bloodshed and atrocities had been committed in his name. "We massacred your soldiers to the last man, giving them as much mercy as they had given to the unarmed civilians and prisoners of war they tortured, starved to death or killed while shouting your name. Now, all the ones in Japan who were screaming for having this war are either dead or facing a war crimes tribunal. Your army reaped what it had sowed and nobody outside Japan will cry for your soldiers, I assure you."

"Three million young men, all dead?" Said Hirohito, in shock. Nancy Laplante didn't give him time to recuperate from that, walking to him and dominating him by over a head.

"It is now time to end this war, by Japan declaring publicly that it is surrendering unconditionally to the Time Patrol. You will at the same time proclaim that you, the Emperor, are a simple mortal man and not a god. Too many people either died or killed others because they believed in that myth."

“But, that could cause social chaos in Japan, Brigadier.”

“It would be a normal reaction from a people who had been lied to and obliged to sacrifice so much for a mere myth. Maybe it is time for a shock treatment, to wake the Japanese people up and take it out of its false sense of superiority. If you are not ready to announce it yourself, then I will do it, in a manner that you may find most humiliating. The choice is yours.”

“Why be so harsh with me, Brigadier? I didn’t want this war personally.” Said Hirohito, his head bowed. As an answer, Nancy took a document out of a pocket and presented it to him, speaking with near rage in her voice.

“This is an official army general order, signed by you, authorizing the formation of Unit 731, a unit dealing with biological warfare and which conducted experiments on live prisoners, infecting them with all sorts of diseases. The goals of Unit 731 were clearly stated in this order, yet you signed it, the same way you signed many more orders that resulted in atrocities and war crimes. Doctor Ishi, the head of your biological warfare program, had it proudly displayed in his office in Manchuria.”

Nancy then pocketed back the order while looking down with contempt at Hirohito.

“You were the puppet of the militarists for all those years and refused to stand against their monstrous ambitions, instead letting them use your name to justify their crimes. Did you ever stop to think how many millions of people have died because of this? You could have broken that infernal circle by publicly denying your divine nature, or by stepping down as emperor, but you chose to save your life and your title. That is understandable enough in most people, but by safeguarding your position, millions died instead. I, personally, would rather die than be the puppet of anyone. The only one whom I will obey without question is The One.”

Next, Nancy took out another document, along with what looked like a simple hand microphone.

“This is the declaration I want you to read aloud. This microphone is linked by radio to my ships overflying Tokyo and the rest of Japan now. Your declaration will be heard all over the country.”

Thoroughly depressed now, Hirohito read silently the short declaration once and then looked up at Nancy, who gave him a warning look.

“You either read it or I will. If I have to do it, the conditions will become harsher. Push the ‘on’ button up before speaking.”

Now resigned to his fate, Hirohito played the puppet one last time. He switched on the microphone and read aloud the declaration.

“People of Japan, this is your Emperor speaking! I am now in the custody of the Time Patrol, which just took control of Tokyo. Our Navy, Air Force and Army are no more and none of our soldiers will come home, as they are all dead. Further resistance would be both futile and wasteful, thus I, as your Emperor, order you to accept defeat and to refrain from further fighting. Japan is to surrender immediately without conditions to the Time Patrol. The present government will step down at once and I will ask the Jushin²² to step in and to govern temporarily the country. All war production and manufacturing of weapons and ammunitions will cease immediately and emphasis will from now on be put on the production of food and consumer products. If there are any prisoners of war or forced laborers from other countries still in Japan, they are to be treated decently until they can be repatriated to their respective countries. Any act of revenge against them will be severely punished. The armed forces of Japan are to be disbanded as of today and its surviving personnel to be retired. The Time Patrol will enforce our surrender and will supervise our new government until true democratic elections can be organized. It will also protect Japan from any attempt to invade it by foreign powers while it lies defenseless. Lastly, I, your Emperor, declare solemnly the following: I, like all my predecessors, am a simple mortal man and am not of divine origin. Those who plunged Japan in this disastrous war used the myth of imperial divinity to make you follow their ambitions and to consolidate their personal power. That myth has cost too many lives and is to be put to rest now, permanently. I, your Emperor, have spoken. For the sake of Japan’s future, I exhort you to obey my commands.”

All the while he was speaking, Hirohito could hear his speech echo around Tokyo, amplified and retransmitted from above. When he was finished, he switched off the microphone and gave it back to Nancy, along with the text of the speech.

“Now, you can do whatever you want with me, Brigadier.”

Nancy stared down at him, her face softening a bit now. While he had a lot to answer for, Hirohito was basically a decent man who had only been too weak to stand up for himself. Harming him further would be both cruel and unnecessary. She was about to say something to him when the Empress and her six children burst in the pavilion, fear and anxiety on their faces. Nancy looked at them, then holstered her pistol, while

²² Jushin: National council of elders formed from previous government Prime Ministers

Elizabeth, following her lead, sheathed both her sword and her throwing knife. Seeing this, the Empress ran to Hirohito and knelt before him, imitated by her four daughters and two sons. The eldest son, who was nine years old, looked fiercely at Nancy.

“You have no right to do this! My father is the Emperor!”

“He still is, Prince Akihito, but from now on he will rule as a human being, not as a living god. There is only one true superior being and he is called ‘The One’. With him, there are no such things as a ‘Chosen People’ or a ‘Divine Race’, only Humanity as a whole.”

“How could you be sure of that?” Replied the boy despite signs from his mother to keep quiet. Nancy stared at him and answered telepathically.

“Because I saw and touched The One, twice. I also spoke with him on other occasions.”

The whole imperial family heard her thoughts and stared at her with awe and disbelief. Nancy went on, looking now at Hirohito.

“You may stay as emperor if you wish so and if your people still want you. You can also pursue a career in marine biology if you prefer to do so. As for your government, a Time Patrol team led by Elizabeth Windsor will supervise its work and provide guidance as needed. Contact both the members of the Jushin and of the now deposed government and tell them to meet you tomorrow at nine in the morning, in your imperial library. Elizabeth will be there to brief them on what is expected exactly of Japan.”

Hirohito couldn't help look doubtfully at Elizabeth.

“I mean no disrespect towards Princess Elizabeth, but isn't she a bit too young and inexperienced for that role?”

“Your Majesty,” replied calmly Elizabeth, “I may be still shy of my seventeenth birthday, but I benefit from the experiences of my past incarnations, which span over 11,000 years. I lived a total of five lives as a Japanese, including one as the 12th century Shogun Minamoto Yoritomo. I also received some training from my father on state affairs. I will actually enjoy my role as Overseer of Japan, Your Majesty.”

16:14 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, June 9, 1942 'B'

Council Room, Paris Town hall

France

The assembly fell silent as Nancy Laplante, resplendent in her Time Patrol parade uniform, took control of the microphone on the elevated bench of the Council Room. The peace conference was now in its final stage, with all the political discussions concluded and the formal treaties being prepared for ratification tomorrow. The going had been rough at times and more than a few tempers had exploded but a lot had been accomplished, thanks mostly to the firm, some would say dictatorial, manner Nancy had chaired the conference.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the final results of our hard work are now close at hand, with the signing tomorrow by the heads of states involved of the various treaties we agreed on. We now have peace in Europe, hopefully a durable one. I can now also announce that we have peace as well in the Pacific. This morning, the new provisional government of Japan officially signed a declaration of surrender to the Time Patrol and also signed a twelve-point plan to put a demilitarized Japan on the road to true democracy. All the territories occupied by Japan, including in China and Korea, are now free. Japan will now, for the time being, be supervised by the Time Patrol, which has named Field Agent Elizabeth Windsor as Overseer of Japan on a temporary basis.”

Most delegates and all the reporters present applauded and cheered at those news, with British Foreign Minister Eden being particularly happy, no doubt mostly because of the role played in this by Princess Elizabeth. The American delegation, while happy to see the end of the war in the Pacific, was obviously not thrilled by the fact that the United States had been sidelined on the subject of post-war Japan. Nancy went on as soon as silence had mostly returned.

“Despite all the progress we made here, however, I have a solemn warning to give to all of you. If there is anything that this costly, cruel conflict should have taught you, it is that the age of imperialism is well past and should go, forever! The ideas and attitudes that went with that imperialism, like the smug and racist belief that it was the white man’s burden to civilize the rest of the world, have been discredited by the way so-called subhuman specimens, as the commander-in-chief of the Singapore garrison described Japanese prisoners he saw in China, outfought European troops during this war. Europe has treated up to now the people of Africa, Asia and the Middle East with a mixture of racism, snobbery and overconfidence that has profoundly alienated the populations of these areas. Well, these populations now want to govern themselves and to be able to form their own countries. They don’t want anymore to be ruled from afar

while Europeans living the easy life in their country treat them as if they are their personal slaves. The people of Indochina, of India, of Algeria and of the Dutch East Indies, to name only a few, now want true independence and they will fight to get that. You can either start to cut your imperialistic ties to those countries now or you can spend more blood and money trying to retain your empires. Either way, you will eventually lose control of those countries, I assure you. Some of you may dismiss this warning as the ranting of an idealist, but I am dead serious about this. Let your empires go now or be ready to pay an awful price in blood for nothing. On this word of caution, I will now let you enjoy the rest of the day. Thank you for your attention, ladies and gentlemen.”

Edward Murrow, sitting in the visitors’ gallery, thought that the applause were decidedly lukewarm this time as Nancy Laplante walked out of the council room. Edward, who favored frank and open talk and who was a true humanist, had actually enjoyed her stinging speech. So had Gandhi, from India, who was applauding about as loudly as the rest of the delegates put together.

Murrow, like the rest of the reporters, left the council room and went to the Salon des Arcades, where the communication booths were. He however changed his mind and, after giving his notes to be transmitted to an assistant, followed Nancy Laplante, who was disappearing inside the Salon Bertrand. It turned out that she was actually headed for the Salle des Fêtes, the largest room of the town hall. Murrow suddenly realized that something was up: assembled in the long, splendidly decorated room was more members of the Time Patrol than he had ever seen together in one spot, all wearing parade uniforms. He could now also see on the tribune at the end of the room a number of dignitaries, including General De Gaulle, the Polish Prime Minister Sikorski, King George the Sixth and the Global Chief Administrator, Tomi Kern. Standing near the tribune was that beautiful giant reporter from the future, Lori Kano. Seeing that Nancy had stopped just outside the door to the room and was pinning a row of medals on her uniform, Murrow hurried to her. Nancy smiled to him when he stopped near her and pointed at her medals.

“Aah, Mister Murrow, just in time to help me. I am having problems putting my medals on so that they are level. Could you adjust them for me, please?”

“With pleasure, miss.”

Murrow quickly repositioned the medals so that they would be both centered on her left breast and level, but couldn’t help notice that her British medals were absent.

"Here you are, miss. I don't see your Victoria Cross, or your Distinguished Service Order. Did you lose them, miss?"

His question seemed to embarrass her a bit.

"Uh, no. I am just not wearing my British medals anymore."

"Why, miss?" Asked Murrow, genuinely shocked. "I have been following your exploits since 1940: you earned these medals through your courage, suffering and sacrifices."

"Mister Murrow, let's say that I have political reasons for not wearing them."

"Are you talking about the attempt by the British to kill you in Colditz Castle, miss?"

"That and other things, Mister Murrow. If you will now excuse me, I have an official function to attend."

"May I watch, miss?"

Nancy hesitated only for an instant before pointing at Lori Kano.

"You can stand next to Lori over there, but please keep quiet during the ceremony. I will speak to you later."

"Thank you, Miss Laplante."

As Murrow entered with Nancy, two French soldiers closed the doors behind them: this was obviously going to be a strictly private ceremony. Walking along the left side line of decorated arches, Murrow finally took position to the right of Lori Kano, who smiled down to him.

"I see that you got lucky, Mister Murrow. Good for you!"

"Please, miss, just call me Ed."

"And you may call me Lori, Ed."

Murrow took out his notepad and a pen as Nancy went to the dignitaries and started speaking with them in a low voice. He had to strain his hearing to be able to make out what she said.

On the tribune, Nancy saluted first the dignitaries before going to General De Gaulle and speaking to him in a low voice, so that the other members of the Time Patrol could not hear her.

"General, you told me that you had medals for my troops but you didn't tell me that other dignitaries would be present as well."

De Gaulle smiled with malice, as if he was a kid who had pulled a swift one on a classmate.

"I'm sorry for that, Miss Laplante. They approached me at the start of the conference and expressed their desire to award your men and women for their bravery and dedication, so I decided to tag their presentations to mine and keep discreet about it."

"Hum, I see!" Said Nancy, a slight smile appearing on her face. She then went to King George the Sixth, who was accompanied by Sir Anthony Eden, Group Captain Peter Townsend and Princess Margaret. Nancy glanced briefly at her British medals, resting on a red cushion that lay on a nearby table, along with numerous other medals.

"Your Majesty, you know that I can't accept back my medals: it would be pure hypocrisy, especially since many of my men and women are German and won't get anything from you."

King George nodded his head gravely but replied in a soft voice.

"I know that Great Britain did you wrong twice, Miss Laplante. There are a few things you should know first, though. This is the text of a public apology from Prime Minister Churchill that was read in the House of Commons yesterday and will be published in tomorrow's London newspapers."

Taking the sheet of paper from the King, Nancy then read it carefully. It was actually a sincere apology that exposed all the facts concerning the Colditz Castle affair and the detention and brutalizing of Farah by the M.I.5. There was no hidden truth this time and it was certain to cost Churchill politically at the next British general elections. Farah, who was part of the pack of dignitaries, stepped forward and gently touched Nancy's arm.

"Please accept them back, Nancy. I have spoken with Prime Minister Churchill and he truly regrets what happened. I have forgiven him and so should you."

"But what about my German members? Are they going to be ignored?"

"No!" Replied King George. "Everyone will be honored today, without exception."

"In that case I will accept my medals back, Your Majesty." Said Nancy reluctantly.

"Then, if you don't mind, we will leave you last in the distribution, miss. General De Gaulle, as the host you should go first, I believe."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Signaling three officers who were bearing boxes full of medals and another one who held a list to follow him, De Gaulle went to the members of the Time Patrol lined up in two ranks and separated into two groups, Nancy by his right side. The ground assault specialists and the combat aircrews formed the first rank of the first group, while the new apprentices and the non-combat aircrews formed the second rank. The second, much larger group, consisted of the ground support specialists and of the administrative and scientific staff. Taking his cues from the officer holding the nominal list, De Gaulle then distributed French War Crosses and War Crosses with Leaves to the members of the Time Patrol, with the field agents receiving the medal of Knight of the Legion of Honor on top of their War Cross with Leaves. Even the German field agents got their medals, something Nancy was most grateful for to De Gaulle. Three small tables had been set to the left of the second group of members, bearing pictures of the three field agents killed in action. De Gaulle put medals as well on the red cushions lying in front of the pictures, gazing for a moment at the picture of young Martha Pfalz.

“Too many young people died in this war. Let’s hope that it will be the last we see in Europe, or in the rest of the World.”

“I am afraid that this would be asking too much from human nature, General.” Replied softly Nancy, getting a nod from De Gaulle.

“You are too right, miss. I have still more medals to give, but I will leave you and Doctor Tolkonen for the end of this ceremony.”

He then distributed War Crosses to the support members of the Time Patrol. Returning together to the tribune, De Gaulle handed Nancy over to King George, who first pinned her old British medals back on Nancy’s chest while smiling.

“Do you realize that you are the first person ever to win the Victoria Cross three times, miss?”

“Does that mean that I’m crazier than most, Your Majesty?”

“Something like that. You will not need back your C.B.E., as it is going to be replaced by a higher class of the Order of the British Empire. Let’s go honor your members now.”

Peter Townsend, Princess Margaret and two British officers followed the King and Nancy to the ranks of waiting men and women. Distributing medals of the Order of the British Empire in either the Member Class or the Officer Class, he soon came to his daughter Elizabeth, who stood proudly in the first rank.

“My dear Lilibet, you can't know how proud I am of you. I was sorely tempted to award you the K.B.E. but your sister pointed out that it would have been rank favoritism and I had to agree with her.”

Margaret, who was holding only one medal in her hands, then passed it to her father while smiling to her big sister.

“Sorry, Elizabeth, you get only the O.B.E. this time.”

“That's alright with me, Margaret.” Replied a grinning Elizabeth as her father pinned the O.B.E. besides her two French medals. She then exchanged an emotional hug with him and with Margaret. The King then continued down the ranks. He and his officers were frankly shocked when they faced the four young cadets lined up with the adult apprentices. Lakshmi Saduranidrasekar, Roger Stone and Carolyn Anderson stood beside a much taller but equally young Baran Mishtar. The King read himself their names and ranks on the list held by Peter Townsend.

“Cadets Lakshmi Saduranidrasekar, Roger Stone, Carolyn Anderson and Baran Mishtar... How old are you actually? Did you see action?”

“Me and Baran are both thirteen, Your Majesty, while Lakshmi and Roger are fifteen.” Answered timidly Carolyn. “We didn't have to shoot once but we were armed and helped our team in the Warsaw Ghetto and during the evacuation of the various German and Japanese internment camps.”

The King looked at the four teenagers, who were wearing gun belts like the other members of the first group, then took M.B.E. medals and pinned them besides the French War Crosses the teenagers were already wearing. The three last persons of the first group drew another confused look from the King, who looked at the letter 'B' following their names on their uniform nametags.

“First, Germans, then teenagers. Now, Imperium people. You do recruit from everywhere, do you, Miss Laplante?”

“I grab the best where I can find them, Your Majesty, and I am not done yet.”

“Hell, at this rate I will soon be giving away medals to Martians.” Mumbled the King, proceeding to the second group. As he was stopping in front of a ground crew technician and was about to pin a M.B.E. on his chest, Nancy smiled maliciously and spoke softly.

“Technician First Class Ron Buran was born on Mars, Your Majesty.”

King George the Sixth froze at those words, while Princess Margaret burst out in laughter. Peter Townsend and the two other British officers had to keep their own laughter in as the King looked crossly at Nancy.

“You do love to spring surprises on others, Miss Laplante. Well, I did ask for that one. Anything else I should know?”

“Nothing more, Your Majesty: we don’t have natives from the moons of Jupiter or Saturn in our ranks, yet.”

The King let it at that and completed his distribution, then returned to the tribune.

The Polish Prime Minister was next to distribute medals, rewarding Nancy and the members of the Warsaw Ghetto team. Lastly, General De Gaulle called in front of the tribune Nancy, Farah Tolkonen ‘A’ and Lori Kano. Lori, while surprised, did walk to the left of Farah. She was the first to be visited, but by King George, who pinned the M.B.E., Civilian Division, on her chest. The King smiled in embarrassment as he put the medal in place, having to touch the very wide opening of her cleavage.

“Miss Kano, you may not have fought in this war, but for a pacifist you showed a lot of courage under fire, apart of volunteering for some very difficult assignments. Your sterling support to the cause of the Time Patrol indirectly helped Great Britain, while your positive influence on the public of the Global Council secured crucial support for the fight to end this war. I thus award you the medal of Member of the Order of the British Empire. Congratulation, Miss Kano.”

When the King stepped in front of Farah Tolkonen ‘A’, General De Gaulle joined him there. Together, they put around her neck the long ribbons of Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire and of Commander of the French Legion of Honor. Both men then kissed Farah before moving to Nancy. De Gaulle stared in mock despair at her left chest, already covered with medals.

“My God, we will soon have to find another place to pin medals on her. Actually, a young officer had a suggestion about an appropriate spot on her.”

“Don’t say it, General.” Said the King, laughing. “I can guess what he was thinking. Let’s keep to her chest, though.”

De Gaulle was the first on Nancy, pinning on a War Cross with Leaves, then putting over her right shoulder the wide red ribbon sash of the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor and pinning on her lower left chest the large silver star of the order. He finally kissed her on both cheeks.

"I could not in good conscience award anything less to a national heroine. For me, Joan of Arc and Nancy Laplante will always be synonymous."

"You are too kind, General. However, I doubt that the British would want to honor Joan of Arc."

"But we will certainly honor Nancy Laplante." Said King George. He then put in place the rose-pink ribbon with pearl-gray central stripe sash of Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire, followed by the large gold star that went with it. As if this was not enough, Tomi Kern then stepped forward to join the two men in front of Nancy.

"Don't move yet, Nancy!" She said before adding the medal of the Purple Shield with three rubies, which denoted the fact that she had been wounded three times while on duty with the Time Patrol. She also pinned on her right chest two new golden campaign stars, adding to the three golden and two silver stars already pinned there.

"Here you are, Nancy. I believe that you are well fixed now. You may now distribute the Time Patrol awards to the others."

"Thank you, Chief Administrator Kern! Hell, I'm going to walk bent to the left with all this hardware on my chest."

"Oh, the heavy price of success." Quipped Tomi Kern. Both Tomi and Nancy thanked the dignitaries and waited for them to leave before continuing. Nancy elected to go to each member instead of calling them forward, distributing campaign stars to them and to Lori Kano and pinning Purple Shields on Tatiana Korbut, Klaus Manheim, Tom Allen and Ingrid Weiss. Nancy next pinned the Time Star medal for bravery on Lori Kano, kissing gently the reporter afterwards.

"Lori, you are one admirable woman. You can be proud of yourself."

"Thank you, Nancy. Could I ask you one favor later?"

"Sure! What is it?"

"I would like to explore my past incarnations with you, when you will be available of course."

"I will be most happy to assist you with this, Lori. I will visit you in the next few days."

"Thanks, Nancy!"

That left only two things to do for Nancy. The first was to pin Stars of Courage on the cushions in front of the pictures of Sandra Billings and Keith Strong. After a moment of respectful silence, she moved to Ingrid Weiss and Tom Allen, looking at them somberly and letting Tomi Kern speaking to them.

“What you did while attacking the ROYAL SOVEREIGN was brave to the point of recklessness. However, by risking point blank shots down the throat of its plasma cannon, you prevented it from doing much more damage and deaths on the ground. For your incredible act of courage under fire, which very nearly cost you your lives, I both award you our highest medal: the Valor Cluster.”

Tomi Kern took in succession the two medals and put their blood-red ribbons around the teenagers' necks, then kissed them on both cheeks.

“Well done, you two! You are going to have truly distinguished careers in the Time Patrol.”

Nancy then saluted the teenagers and returned with Tomi Kern to the microphone on the tribune.

“Men and women of the Time Patrol, what we accomplished in the last two weeks was crucial for the future of both this timeline and that of the Global Council. Our job is however far from finished. In fact, it is barely beginning. We do need however to blow off steam and relax if we are not to burn ourselves out. God knows we have been through tough times lately. I have thus decided to put our operations on minimum manning level and to give away as much vacation time as possible. I will work out a duty and vacation roster tomorrow and publish it as soon as it is ready. For this evening though, I want you all to go out and profit from the pleasures and sights of Paris. The only thing I will ask you is to be armed and vigilant: we don't have only friends around and I don't want to lose anyone after this war is over. Miss Lian Karosh will be at the door to provide you with local funds for your outing. Have a good evening and have fun!”

The members cheered as one and nearly assaulted Lian Karosh, who however had prepared herself in advance, anticipating such a rush. She and her assistant clerks had already rolls of pre-counted French Francs ready to hand out, with only a thumbprint needed to acknowledge receipt of the money. In less than ten minutes, the close to 340 members had departed with their money, leaving Nancy alone with Mike Crawford, Farah 'A', Tomi Kern and her husband Boran. Mike passed an arm around Nancy and Farah's shoulder, looking and smiling at both alternatively.

“What do you say to go have a nice drink at a Paris restaurant to celebrate this, the five of us?”

“That sounds like a very good idea, Mike.” Replied Nancy. “Let's go!”

They first collected a large sum in Francs at Lian Karosh's table and then walked out of the town hall at a calm pace while exchanging small talk. Crossing the nearby bridge to the Île de la Cité, the small island in the middle of the River Seine that had been the nucleus of Paris, they walked for fifteen minutes at an unhurried pace, ignoring the stares from the pedestrians they met. They finally settled on a small, quiet restaurant on the left bank of the Seine, from which they had a good view of the Notre-Dame Cathedral, across the river. The eyes of the Maitre D nearly popped out when he saw Nancy with her multiple rows of medals and her sashes. Bowing profusely, he quickly found them a quiet corner table besides a window and left them with a wine card, which Nancy studied.

"Would you say that this occasion warrants a bottle of Champagne, guys?"

"I would certainly agree with that." Replied Farah.

"Then we will go for the Dom Perignon. Waiter!"

Nancy gave her order to the waiter, then looked at Boran and Tomi Kern, who were holding each other like young lovers.

"Now that this crisis is over, are you going to take back your post as Global Administrator, Mister Kern?"

The giant surprised her by shaking his head.

"No! What the High Council did to you and the Time Patrol disgusted me forever about touching politics again. On the other hand, serving as the Time Patrol Chief of Personnel and Services proved to be a most rewarding job to me. Since Tomi has already been elected as interim Global Administrator, I will let her keep the big seat. I will of course continue to see her as often as possible. After all, you amply demonstrated yourself that living two separate lives in different time periods is quite feasible."

"Talking of you living two lives, Miss Laplante," said Tomi Kern, "I was told that you have started a new career as an actress in the 21st Century and that your first film opened in theatres in 2014 'A'. How did it do in the public opinion?"

Nancy grinned with pride as she answered, while Mike pressed an arm around her shoulders, equally proud.

"The movie 'CROSSROADS', while not a true blockbuster, was a frank success at the box office and was also well greeted by critics, apart from making more than enough money to make Universal executives happy. My role in it actually made a lot of

people talk and take notice of me. I was subsequently signed on to play in another action movie that will be presented to the public in 2015 'A'."

"Wow! Congratulations, miss! Could the public of the Global Council hope to be able to see this movie 'CROSSROADS', along with your next movie?"

"Only if it is distributed for free through the Global Council, Misses Kern. It would be dishonest to commercialize it in the 34th Century while the actors and the studio who made it in the 21st Century don't get a solar for it."

"That sounds fair enough. It would then be distributed the same way as all that music that was imported from the past by the Time Patrol and which has become so hugely popular with the Global Council public."

The waiter returned at that moment with their bottle of Champagne in a bucket of ice. They waited until they were served and then raised their glassed high.

"To peace!" Said Nancy.

"To peace!" Replied the others before taking a sip from their cups. Lowering her cup, Tomi Kern looked at Nancy, snuggled close to Mike Crawford.

"And what are your plans for the near future, Nancy?"

Nancy smiled, and then kissed Mike on the cheek.

"My plans? Let's say that I have one true ambition now: to have a baby in the year to come. I'm sure that Mike will do his best to help me realize that ambition."

ANCIENT MAP OF NORTHERN ISRAEL



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