

TRACKING: PART I OF III

by David R. Palmer

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Illustration by William Warren

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“There’s a fine line between preparedness and procrastination....”

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Warning: This story has scenes that some readers may find disturbing.

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Volume I

Mayfly, Trout, Hook

Excerpted from the Journals of Candidia Maria Smith-Foster:

Day I

Yes, Posterity, your Humble Historiographer does feel guilty about this—but what was Teacher thinking? What did he expect? What else could I do...?

Oops, forgetting manners. (There's a surprise.) Sorry. All right; let's start over:

Hi, Posterity; Candy Smith-Foster here again—Plucky Girl Adventurer, Intrepid Girl Aviatrix, Spunky Savior of Our People, etc., etc.—at your service.

To all appearances (with single, gastrolepidoptrosis-inducing exception), day had begun normally enough—for one of my days...

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F'rinstance, had wakened, as usual, looking forward to almost spiritual fulfillment intrinsic to starting day at chow hall, wrapping self around one of my Adam's routinely world-class breakfasts.

(Hmm ... That sounded possessive, didn't it. Well, am his "discoverer": Adam second living human being turned up during post-Armageddon exploration. Plus boy is my favorite proof-of-concept, show-and-tell exhibit for proposition that Y chromosomes are A Good Thing. And between times, exhibiting no hint of teasing, Adam does refer to me as "my woman." Not to mention, unblinking gaze, on occasions when holds me close, causes tingly sensations in interesting places.)

Naturally, not every morsel of food emerging from kitchens actually product of cleverest-boy-genius-in-whole-wide-world's own incredibly talented hands, but clearly finest of coequals in charge of food preparation these days; ergo, have every confidence will have influenced production, thereby assuring, at minimum, all dishes represent gustatory perfection.

Plus, under normal circumstances, Adam times culinary duties to make possible spending most meals with me, breakfast included, which never fails to launch day on endorphin high....

On top of which, being focus of unambiguous love radiating from entire population of

recently adopted-into Homo post hominem community, all of whom (tiresome but true) owe Yours Truly their lives, does enhance outlook generally.

Normally, positive attitude established by breakfast flows seamlessly into day's real fun—classes: academics (usually one-on-one instruction in college-level math, physics, chem, geology, agronomy, psychology [normal and ab-], etc.); as well as practical mechanics, electronics; regular proficiency maintenance and/or additional type-rating flight training sessions; plus daily advanced karate instruction (currently honing sixth-degree Black Belt skills; seventh still well beyond horizon) coupled with—probably most entertaining of all—personal tutoring in selected elements from Mossad field agents' mayhem manual.

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Apart from routine expectations, however, this morning not remotely normal. Awoke to ominous realization that that vague, recurrent disquiet, which, despite fiercely protective, almost crechelike environment in which have been enveloped since medical discharge (following treatment for side effects stemming from most recent round trip across River Styx) was back in force. Last time awoke to such depths of foreboding was morning of Daddy's departure for Washington—the day before Khraniteli turned capital, surrounding suburbs, into fine, black, glowing-in-dark ashes drifting in breeze, ending World As We Knew It, as well as reign of H. sapiens.

Clearly, in retrospect, from moment eyes opened today, chain of events resembled ballistic curve: foreordained progression, leading directly from bed to Teacher's announcement to Yours Truly's reluctant but immutable decision—thence to current AWOL status.

Well, a girl's gotta do what a girl's ... Etc.

As turned out, however, anarchic decision, subsequent obviously proscribed actions, took healthy bite out of unease dogging heels since morning's first awareness. Perhaps qualms more a function of psychic feedback spawned by own upcoming brash actions echoing back down timeline rather than intangible warning of yet another impending doomy threat.

In any event, Posterity, been some time since our last travelogue, hasn't it. Truthfully, though, hadn't expected—certainly never intended—ever again to do another travel, much less logue.

And not without justification: Even briefest reflection upon Yours Truly's conspicuously absent vital signs, to say nothing of generally bent, broken, and/or toasted medical condition by conclusion of events chronicled in most recent volumes of *The Journals of the Life & Times of Candy Smith-Foster, Plucky Girl Adventurer*,<sup>[1]</sup> should motivate thickest observer toward sober deliberation regarding wisdom of such endeavors.

[1: Archivist's note: This is a reference to Volume III, Part III, Finale, from the first collection of Candy Smith-Foster's journals, which have been assembled under the overall title, *Emergence*. ]

Take, for instance, side effects of saving Adam from wrecked, flaming automobile: Psilly pseudo Walter Mitty had achieved spectacular crash while indulging race-driver fantasies on deserted downtown Baltimore city streets. Ultimately, hysterical strength overuse required to extricate comatose boy from four-wheeled pyre, carry him at a dead run draped over shoulder to van, remain conscious long enough thereafter to suture young idiot's sliced femoral artery, resulted in your Humble Historiographer's heart joining ranks of flatlined.

Granted, own willful disregard of onrushing metabolic burnout symptoms spotlight descriptive limitations of reckless. Still, extra effort seemed warranted at the time: Had reason to fear lad might be sole other surviving human being on Planet Earth.

Happily, wasn't. Quite.

However, barely recovered from physiological deficits incurred during that girlish prank before found self in spacesuit, flambeing like lobster while being battered to pulp by unyielding interior structural members of decidedly non-passenger-rated, End of Days-bomb-carrying, Khraniteli winged missile during programmed-in, high-g, evasive acrobatics portion of incandescent atmospheric reentry. This event, too, capped by cessation of Plucky Girl Adventurer's cardiac functions.

Clearly, campaigns offering such potential direness not to be undertaken lightly. Odds too high that Closing Credits may have to be superimposed over marker under which bones have taken up residence at Our Lady of Perpetual Dandelions Memorial Landfill—or, more likely, just strewn willy-nilly across terrain, wherever carrion-disposal fauna lose interest.

In any event, none of those experiences ranks high amongst memories back upon which your Humble Historiographer looks most fondly—or has any difficulty not raising hand, joyously caroling "Again...!"

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But damn, Posterity! Really—what was Teacher thinking...? I mean, right after breakfast, even before leaving chow hall, practically skipped up, beaming ear-to-ear, gave me big, happy hug, and, straight out of blue, announced, “Candy, the Urals scouting expedition got in last night...”

Okay, I knew that. Actually, everybody knew that: Hominem community, slowly growing around Mt. Palomar blast/earthquake shelter, still in no danger of challenging New York, Moscow, Beijing for title of World’s Majorest Metropolis (even after *H. sapiens*’ effectively total extinction). As spin-off benefit of settlement’s cozy dimensions, airstrip located practically next-door—where seismic-level thrust-reverser sound effects from pair of C-17 Globemaster IIIs (aviation’s answer to Monster Trucks) braking to stop just after sundown not that readily overlooked.

So standing alone, beloved pedagogue’s breathless proclamation hardly qualified as news, let alone bombshell. Still, enthusiasm level suggested other shoe already in pattern, probably on final, if not actually preparing for touchdown...

And indeed was. Radiating what, for him, equated to gleeful intensity of Olde Tyme TV game-show host introducing prize lineup, Teacher continued, “And while they were there, they acquired information suggesting that your father is probably still alive, as well as where the Khraniteli may be holding him.”

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All right, Posterity; that part exceeded “bombshell” threshold!

In fact, as joyous revelation’s universe-reshuffling internal echoes faded, Terry expressed concern from habitual perch on big sister’s shoulder by swinging head around to front, turning cranium upside down, peering one-eyed up my nose. Fortunately, however, this time retarded adopted twin brother limited comment to wolf whistle’s long, low, closing diminuendo—as opposed to customary practice of sharing sapient sibling’s innermost cerebral contents with world at window-rattling volume.

Shushed silly symbiont by reaching up, gently stroking tiny soft feathers on head, cheeks, upper neck area just under huge clamshell beak.

And focused ki flow into effort required to maintain calm thoughts, serene, interested expression as world rocked, spun around me—and abruptly, cause of, solution to, morning's amorphous disquiet snapped into sharpest focus....

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Even if Terry hadn't felt elder sister turn to stone, Posterity, I knew featherheaded twin unfooled. Birdbrain alone, out of planet's entire remaining population (okay, arguably Lisa, too), equipped fully to appreciate shock Teacher's announcement had delivered. No one doubts anymore: Foster twins share one-way telepathic rapport. Despite being *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus* (i.e., Hyacinth Macaw), Terry can read my mind—and from quite a distance: last count, 32,500 miles; geosynchronous orbit height plus Earth's full diameter.

All of which demonstrated conclusively a few months ago when Intrepid Girl Astronaut found self trapped in orbit aboard crippled space shuttle (while saving all that remained of Humanity, she tossed in casually). On that occasion, thoughts apparently passed through planet's substance as if so much vacuum.

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In any event, notwithstanding smarty-mouth id's internal sarcasm, Teacher now had Plucky Girl Savior of Our People's undivided attention. But then, with typical clueless preoccupation borne of Overlapping Deep Thoughts, complicated by Weight of Responsibilities, dear old thing continued blithely, "And at this point, it looks as if it won't take much more than six months to put together another expedition back into the area to check into it...."

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Really now, Posterity.

As long as Teacher's known me (what?—almost whole life?), could not have expected

favorite (known to be impulse-control-challenged) student to hear that, then just sit around, waiting patiently while Daddy languishes in Khraniteli dungeon, no doubt being tortured, probably scheduled for execution—for another six solid months...?

Received news with enthusiasm of hungry trout rising to fat mayfly—and reached decision even before Teacher completed recital.

But. While Yours Truly may not be sharpest bulb in quiver (or is that brightest pencil in drawer?), have managed, during short, busy lifetime, to identify certain fundamentally human behavioral principles every bit as applicable to H. post hominems as H. sapiens; key among which: Objecting, arguing—even begging—adults to reverse what they regard as well-thought-out decisions generally has single practical effect: Spills beans concerning own intentions; opens door for inconvenient advice—potentially, even, orders: “Don’t do that.”

Clearly, last thing Plucky Girl Adventurer needed at this point was to trigger suspicions.

What was called for, however, was factual, mission-specific information: “intel,” if you will. So smiled beatifically, hugged, thanked Teacher fervently—then, moment sweet man out of sight, switched on stalker mode, tracked down Danya Feinberg, AAs’ number two special-operations reconnaissance/ infiltration/intelligence-gathering/sniper.

Prior to Mankind’s End, Danya had been top Mossad field operative; specialty, “proactive threat elimination”—euphemism for assassination. All too appropriately, since given name translates to Judgment of God.

(Which has always bothered me: How could parents have known? I mean, really, so soon after birth, to look down at freshly hatched, sweet-faced baby girl happily blowing bubbles against mother’s breast, announce to world, with perfectly straight face, “This child will grow up to become the instrument of the Judgment of God...”)

Moot question, of course. Did. And now, with other AAs, Danya works for Teacher.

Incidentally, number two ranking amongst AA spooks mostly result of coin toss. Wallace Griffin (describes himself as out-of-work Navy Seal) unabashedly admits his field skills fall short of hers, but even Danni agrees Wallace’s gift for strategy unmatched among hominem ranks. (In fact, with apparent seriousness, Number Two says world missed unmatched opportunity to experience Genghis Khan redux when Wallace opted not to focus talents on

Dark Side.) In any event, according to Teacher, even in pseudomilitary structure, someone has to be in charge.

As suspected, caught up with Danya at base showers. Following return from three-week, living-off-land, intel-gathering recon in Urals, existing mostly as solo marauder/gleaner, Momma Spook spending substantial portion of first morning home reveling in leisurely, luxurious, catch-up soak under virtually inexhaustible, solar-heated, steaming hot water.

Parked Terry on adjacent showerhead feeder gooseneck, turned on water. Manic twin promptly launched into joyous series of upside-down, furiously flapping, bathing gymnastics; continuing objective: Spread as much water as widely as possible, without actually coming into contact with any, except very tip of bill.

Shucked off own clothing, stepped under shower, then paused to regard Danni with usual carefully concealed resentment...

Visualize stereotypical barbarian warrior princess from vintage, heroic, Boris Vallejo cover painting for epic Thud & Blunder novel: Long, flowing, glowingly dark hair. Supermodel's face, with flawless brow, cheekbones, chin; perfect, gleaming white teeth. Eyes so blue, they seem to catch, amplify, reflect light across darkened rooms. Technically, only five-five but tall nonetheless, with almost rangy frame boasting deceptively sleek, well-developed musculature, marathoner's utterly dimple/jiggle-free, hard little glutei maximi, all wrapped in golden, line-free suntan. Presentation capped by secondary curves whose firmly assertive proportions sneer at Newton's second law....

Total effect (according to Adam) "reduces men to idiots"; and, from own experience, inspires less well-assembled females to engage in thoughtful deliberation regarding pros, cons of pacts with devil. (Eternal damnation ... hey, how bad could it be...?)

Eighth Degree Black Belt, unmitigated death in bare feet, since my arrival Danya has taken me under wing; have become, in fact, her favorite pseudo-Mossad apprentice. And few aspects of life these days deliver more sheer fun than training under Danni's supervision: very most advanced levels of hand-to-hand combat; nonstandard weapons; plus special-operations skills (infiltration, silently taking out sentries, sniping); undercover work; interrogation; etc.

Danni even managed to introduce element of humor into hysterical strength tap, concerning whose use Yours Truly has become almost phobic (not unreasonably, given death's recurring prominence in medical history): Persuaded me to replace original cumbersome,



four-word, self-hypnotic prompt phrase (“chocolate, cabbage, caterpillar, puck”) with quicker, more classically appropriate, single trigger word: “Sha-zam...!”

Plus, along with other two unofficial sisters, Kim and Gayle, Danni really fun snicker-buddy at whispering/giggling-about-boys get-togethers.

(Okay, okay—obviously, such gatherings chiefly for my benefit. No, don’t really believe Kim, Gayle, or Danni [older women, all—mid 20s, at least] regard boys as giggeworthy subjects per se. Not even Adam [who really is]. Still...)

Withal, no matter how hard I try on occasion, Danni difficult person to dislike. Except when forced unavoidably to compare her to...

Me: Candy Smith-Foster; months short of 12th birthday; still whole inches shy of five feet tall; hardly more than pro forma female thus far—

Never mind; among pointless exercises in frustration, self-flagellation over unavoidable surely ranks near list’s apex....

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No point beating around bush with Danya, Posterity; respected her too much even to make attempt. Plus (more than peripheralest of considerations), fact that, while superspook claims not to be actual mindreader, is way too smart for slow-dancing subterfuges; would spot oblique approach in heartbeat. And by this point, not arousing grownup suspicions regarding immediate plans for information’s application had taken on vital importance.

So got right to it; wide-eyed, unaffectedly enthusiastic as any other kid who’d just learned long-dead father possibly not: “Danni,” I demanded, “Teacher says you guys heard something about Daddy during your recon. Where is he? Who’s got him?”

Mentor regarded me thoughtfully before replying. Does that a lot. Depending upon circumstances, can generate sensations akin to those no doubt experienced by bird trying to stare down hungry snake.

"We don't know that anyone's actually got him got him," Danya began eventually; "at least at this point. While scouting Serdtsevina Rasovyi, the base outside their big shelter under the Urals, just north of the Russian/Kazakhstani border, I questioned a Khranitel who admitted to being part of the Bratstvo group who snatched Dr. Foster out of Washington just before they vaporized it."

Honest, Posterity, really tried to restrain self, but couldn't have held tongue at gunpoint: "So he is alive!"

"He was alive then," Danya corrected sympathically. "He didn't die when Washington did; we know that. He—"

"Did your contact tell you where he is?" I pressed.

Danni hesitated again; then: "You have to understand," she temporized, "this was not a contact per se; not a friendly conversation with a helpful local. I made this man disappear from the base in the middle of the night.

"And he was of course a Khranitel; by definition, a zealot. He did not wish to tell me anything. I had to..." paused again, obviously trying to choose words with care, "...encourage him..." Paused again, eyed me with detectible concern, then finished in rush, "—quite a lot."

Yet another pause. "And while I did want to hear more about Dr. Foster, my mission was to learn what I could about the Khraniteli's current military situation: strategy, assets, technology levels, agent deployment..."

A final pause. "His mention of Dr. Foster occurred early in the questioning. About all this man told me was that they had taken your father back to Serdtsevina Rasovyi. In addition to housing their headquarters, that's where one of their larger, better-equipped laboratories is located.

"The Khraniteli wanted to pick his brains. Apparently they've come up with the notion of using gene-engineering to try to develop a bug we hominems aren't immune to. They correctly surmise that, as probably the world's leading expert in combating biological warfare before the holocaust, today he's the only real expert in existence on how one goes

about developing such microbes.

“By the time I was certain I’d gotten everything from this fellow I could pertinent to my mission objectives, it was ... he was...” Danni trailed off tastefully, eyes averted.

Nodded silently to convey understanding, hint of sympathy for unpleasant necessities. But behind otherwise carefully nonreacting expression, had difficulty not grinding teeth: Whenever so-called grownup topics (e.g., killing, torture, generic mayhem of any description) intrude upon discussions, adults—even Danni, despite ongoing special-ops training’s patently lethal focus!—tend to walk on eggs in my presence; act as if somehow, despite short, blood-soaked history, am still vulnerable innocent, needing to be protected from realities of post-apocalypse life, death.

Sweet little self-deceptions like this no doubt helpful to adults’ emotional well-being—but damned nuisance for people who have things to do, places to go, people to rescue. Interferes with efficient information-gathering.

Delays departure.

So bit lip; maintained grateful, cheery smile; thanked her effusively. Finished shower; departed at apparent leisure.

—And immediately set out to track down Wallace Griffin. Happily, found officially number one spook not in shower.

(“Happily”: Though for majority of younger hominems, skinny-dipping down at lovely little creek-fed pond between housing and airfield pretty much routine, Wallace not one of Teacher’s actual AAs; not even of their generation; instead, one of those anomalous older H. post hominems who had emerged previously, differences unnoticed at the time by World at Large. Sweetly old-fashioned in so many ways; and, when too much skin involved, age/gender distinctions tend to distract, possibly even distress him.)

Found head spook in office, door open, informally closeted with Peter Bell, de facto number two hominem after Teacher.

Peter also (though don't think he knows this) subject of dearest leader's first delicate matchmaking suggestion for me.

This, of course, prior to my meeting Adam: unrivaled electromechanical genius; world-class pianist; universe-class chef; amateur EMT (who has restarted my heart twice thus far); frighteningly intelligent; side-splittingly funny; ruggedly handsome (for someone who doesn't shave yet—still sticking to age-18 story [but, sh-h-h, early on I found birth certificate; boy really only 13]); and actually (when not crashing cars), world-class driver; pilot, too...

Sorry, Posterity; yes, have been told I tend to digress.

Like most fundamentally innocent, older hominem males, where Yours Truly is concerned, Wallace can't help himself: Unambiguously dotes upon very ground I tread.

Usually I go out of my way not to, but this was special occasion: Took shameless advantage of slack grownups all cut me (cute little Selfless Savior of Our People, etc.) to interrupt intelmeister, pump dry: Gleaned everything he'd heard, deduced, divined about Daddy's purported/potential whereabouts. Got away with interrogating him in far greater depth than would have dared attempt with Danya. Even coaxed him into giving me copies of his, Danni's field reports.

Thanked him; hugged 'til eyes popped—

Went straight home.

Despite protests, dropped off Terry. Though would miss baby brother desperately, avians, even large ones (actually, especially larger ones), simply too fragile, too vulnerable to impact. Plus birds in general horribly susceptible to even faintest traces of airborne toxins. (Remember coal mine canaries?) Besides, exotic tropical species tend to be cold-sensitive, and nippy conditions definitely in travel forecast. Withal, unnecessary exposure to potentially fraught situations simply not rational.

(Additionally, in Terry's case, way too loud for covert enemy stronghold infiltration, recon....)

However, also had mission-specific reason (selfish sounds so negative): Leaving Terry

home ensured that, notwithstanding circumstances, as long as manage to remain more or less conscious, even if just barely, will be able to “phone home” from anywhere on planet. Given destination, not to mention likelihood of encounters with indigenes of unrivaled bloodthirstiness, malevolence (those are adversaries’ good qualities), Terrylink communication might well prove vital: for Daddy, if there (if alive), not to mention Intrepid Special-Ops Girl herself.

Made sure birdbrain’s stand provisioned for day. Unworried about featherheaded sibling’s care, feeding, need for snuggles during projected absence; knew family would love, care for him. Especially Lisa: Adores him; vice-versa. Plus Kim’s baby girl shares my mental connection with him—and thereby is linked to me, though in her case contact seems limited to empathy: sensing emotions, feelings, etc.

Threw together necessities for trip: weapons, tools.—Oh, yeah; also food, water, clothing, toiletries, etc. Loaded swag into van.

Left note: pro forma apology to Adam, Danni, Teacher, Kim, Gayle. Assigned Lisa responsibility for taking care of Terry. Suggested they might consider keeping eye on baby brother; take notes if babbling begins sounding relevant.

Adjourned thereafter to airfield. Noted, with relief, no one around. Skimmed hurriedly through maintenance logs covering hominem’s small fleet of STOL turboprop Helio Stallions. Identified plane with “youngest” engine; i.e., fewest operating hours since major overhaul. Preflighted ship; everything came up green.

Transferred duffle, necessities from van. Fired up, lifted off.

Headed north, bound for Canada, Alaska, Bering Strait, Siberia—Kazakhstani/Russian Urals beyond.

Six months in-bleeping-deed...!

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INTERLUDE

## Archivist's Note (a)

This semi-stream-of-consciousness opening passage is typical of the journals kept by young Candidia Maria Smith-Foster, as preserved in the Homo Post Hominem Genesis Library. Typically, when possible in the field, she has updated them at least daily.

In an earlier volume (informally titled Seeking), Candy indicated a preference (only partially, we suspect, tongue-in-cheek) that her memoirs be accumulated and maintained in an institution to be known one day as the Smith-Foster Post-Armageddon Historical Library and Archives. Obviously, it is too soon in the brief history of our budding species' civilization to divert those kinds of resources to the construction of a one-person library. However, if her contributions to the survival and perpetuation of our kind continue at the level of her past activities, such an institution is almost inevitable....

Candy has kept her journals in the condensed, cryptic, "pothook" symbols of the once nearly extinct written language known as Pitman shorthand. And though some of us have come to employ it personally nowadays, and its use is spreading, we have translated the original texts into English and typeset them for general consumption.

For a classically trained archivist, this has not been an entirely comfortable process...

First, Candy's narration employs a terse, telegraphic-style sentence structure, omitting almost all but the most necessary of pronouns, adjectives, conjunctions, and adverbs, eschewing what she refers to (with perceptible contempt) as "flowery academese."

Then, consistent with that compressed-text philosophy, while she does spell out numbers from zero to ten in accordance with conventional stylebook practice, for eleven and above she employs actual numerical digits.

Worse, she not only overuses *et cetera*, a lazy, almost sloppy literary device at best, but insists upon using the abbreviated form, *etc.*, rather than spelling out the full Latin phrase.

Worst of all, with some regularity, she even (heaven help us all) employs actual ampersands when stooping to her own, invariably initial-capped, often sideways fractured variations on

customary cliches, such as the “Thud & Blunder” novels mentioned above.

Now a personal note: As an archivist who, prior to the holocaust, had obtained his Ph.D. summa cum laude in library science from Yale, a university with generally acceptable academic qualifications, I am also accustomed to functioning as a copyeditor, assisting contributors in the production of clear historical records.

Candy, however, has been quite emphatic that each of her words, her every punctuation mark (or deliberate omission thereof), and even her formatting have been chosen with care: Each sentence, phrase, and/or word, initial capped or lower-case, is the precise assemblage of letters which conveys her exact shade of meaning. The actual wording of her instructions in this regard was devoid of ambiguity: “Don’t mess with my text.”

By all accounts, Candy Smith-Foster is a sweet, well-mannered, and particularly well-intentioned child. Each of her instructors report that, in their fields of expertise, she is one of the most attentive, most responsive, and, without exception, fastest learning students they’ve ever had the good fortune to mentor.

However, in areas in which she herself possesses a demonstrated competence, she does not lack for conviction. And she has a history of getting what she wants, despite the quality or quantity of opposition.

I am an academician. Though a hominem, I do not possess a Belt, black or any other color. Accordingly, I prefer that she not become cross with me. Wherefore, I must include this disclaimer:

Other than basic translation, transcription, and typesetting of the text from Pitman shorthand into English—and notwithstanding the inherent redundancy of one of her favorite all-capped, ironic self-descriptives, “Plucky Girl Aviatrix”[2]—nothing in this record has been “messed” with.

[2: Archivist’s note: Yes, your archivist did point out to Candy that aviatrix is by definition female. She responded that girl implies youth, and that therefore girl aviatrix, while superficially redundant, is in fact an accurate, if ironic, self-description. Your archivist did not press the issue....]

Now, from a practical standpoint, Candy’s merger of Pitman shorthand with telegraphic-style

sentence compression and simplified basic formatting cannot be argued with: The result is a compact, easily transportable, original physical record. More importantly, of course, an expert Pitman writer like Candy can memorialize her thoughts substantially in excess of two hundred words per minute, which encourages detailed journal-keeping, even under the most difficult of field conditions.

This, of course, typifies how many of her previous journal entries were made: One entire volume, for instance, was written sealed in a spacesuit, in darkness relieved only by a flashlight, while riding in the belly of that earlier-referred-to bomb-carrying missile.

Now, the reader will note that these journals are replete with what, at first glimpse, appear to be impulsive, almost reckless decisions, but which, as events develop, are revealed to have been as well thought-out as the press of circumstances permitted.

In this instance, of course, the controlling “circumstances” were that, since Teacher had informed her that it would be another six months before we would be able to mount another expedition into the area where her adopted father was reported to have been held, nothing short of imprisonment, behind actual solid bars, possibly in chains, would have prevented Candy from departing immediately to follow-up on that lead to his whereabouts. And even a cursory review of previous journals would suggest that even that might not suffice to stop her for long.

Now, for those who may not have had the benefit of earlier volumes, the background basics: We Homo post hominems are the heirs and successors to Homo sapiens. Multiple theories have been offered to explain our abrupt, simultaneous emergence upon the scene at a rate of roughly one of us to every twenty-nine hundred H. sapiens births worldwide.

It was Soo Kim McDivott, our discoverer (and world-renowned pediatrician, child psychiatrist, and anthropologist; known, of course, as Teacher to every hominem the world over) who proposed the current favorite: Since the grandmothers of these children were all born within a two-year span, conceived during the rampage of the great influenza pandemic of 1918-19, the “coincidence” fairly shouts its implications: sweeping genetic recombination due to specific viral invasion, affecting either of the gametes before, or both during, formation of the zygotes which became these grandmothers, creating in each half of the matrix which fitted together two generations later to become us.

In addition to an apparent complete immunity to the full spectrum of “human” disease, we’re stronger, faster, more resistant to trauma, and possess quicker reflexes. As well, visual, aural, and olfactory functions operate over a broader range and at higher levels of sensitivity than in H. sapiens.



As with all of us hominems, Candidia Maria was born to normal Homo sapiens parents. Those parents, the Smiths, were killed in a car accident only months later. Before day's end, she was placed temporarily with Marshall and Megan Foster, who moved formally to adopt her as soon thereafter as the system permitted.

Candy's identification as a hominem came about through amusing circumstances: At not quite five years of age, she glanced up and commented that the living-room wall looked "...awful hot." Testing the surface with his hand, Marshall discovered that she was correct; that a wiring fault was on the verge of burning down the house.

Aware of the newly emergent species from his long friendship and professional association with Soo Kim McDivott, the implications of a child whose vision extended into the fringes of the infrared spectrum could not be missed. They had her tested immediately, and indeed she did prove to be an H. post hominem.

Regrettably, however, also just before Candy's fifth birthday, Megan's long-in-remission leukemia returned with a vengeance. Medical science was unable to stop it, and she soon died. As a result, the child's bond with Marshall tightened—and vice-versa, we might add: She became, and remains to this day, very much a "Daddy's girl."

Candy's phenomenal rate of intellectual development remains an anomaly. She was reading entirely on her own by age two. By three she understood basic mathematical relationships, and could add, subtract, multiply, and divide three-, four-, and even five-digit numbers.

Teacher suspected that the whipsaw effect of Marshall's original heel-dragging desire to raise a stereotypically sweet, "normal" little girl, "full of sugar and spice," quietly opposed by Megan's determination to supply as much information (over or under the table, as necessary) as Candy could absorb on any subject about which she expressed an interest (and apparently she was interested in everything), offers at least a partial explanation of why, according to every benchmark, her progress was well ahead of his experience with members of Teacher's original AA study population—themselves a substantially accelerated group compared to H. sapiens norms. Accordingly, upon Megan Foster's death, Teacher moved in next-door and assumed her role as facilitator, while Marshall continued to pretend to act as the public brake.

In addition, as one of the few Tenth Degree Black Belt masters of karate on the planet, Teacher also took her on as his personal martial arts pupil. Under his instruction, her progress in this field was as phenomenal as her rate of education: She earned numerous championships in her age/weight group.

By eleven, her age at the time of the holocaust, she had acquired the equivalent of an advanced high school education with some college. She had mastered math through calculus, some chemistry, had acquired a strong foundation in physics, and had made a good start on college biology. Her progress in karate had progressed to the limits of Fifth Degree Black Belt advancement; Teacher was in the process of grooming her for Sixth when the Bratstvo struck.

Candy rode out the bionuclear attack that ended the reign of Homo sapiens in the large underground shelter beneath their Wisconsin small-town home, which Doctor Foster had built in secret, both for their protection and as a repository for copies of most of the accumulated science and art of mankind. The attack found her reading down in the shelter, alone except for Terry, her macaw, whom she regards, again we suspect only partially tongue-in-cheek, as her retarded twin sibling.

The day prior to the attack, Marshall Foster, publicly a practicing small-town pathologist, but in fact a covert top government biowarfare consultant, had been requested to go to Washington to discuss the deteriorating world situation. Since Washington was one of the few locations on the planet where surface-targeted missiles were used in quantity, Foster was assumed to have been killed outright, along with everyone else within about a thirty-mile radius.

Learning after the attack that she was herself a Homo post hominem, Candy set out across a depopulated America to find us, the now-grown young adults of Teacher's AA group.

At this point it occurs to me that, while I've used the term, AA group, several times already, I have yet to clarify what it means.

As a result of Teacher's exposure, early in his career, to the mixed results obtained by those attempting to rehabilitate children lost, adopted, and raised in the wild by animals of various species (real-world examples of Kiplingesque children like Mowgli, the wolf-boy), Teacher found himself drawn to the age-old debate about "nature versus nurture." He wondered whether ordinary parents, upon producing markedly superior children, might somehow tend to prevent the kids' development from exceeding their own attainments; and if that occurred, to what extent the child would in fact be limited.

He began a study directed toward identifying gifted children shortly after birth, before this theoretical environmental retardation could begin to have its effect. Various factors were isolated which, encountered as group, proved intrinsic to potentially superior children.

Once a sufficient population of them had been identified, the study shifted to phase two. The “positives” were assigned to two of four study groups.

AAs (positive/advantaged) were potentially gifted children whose parents were subsidized, guided, and assisted in every possible way to provide an optimum learning and developmental environment. The ABs (positive/nonadvantaged) were potential geniuses whose parents weren't told of their children's potential: controls, in other words.

At the other end of the scale were the BA (negative/advantaged) group: ordinary babies whose parents were encouraged to believe their offspring were geniuses. They, too, received the benefits of AA-type parental support and coaching—but of course the study was double-blind: None of the coaches knew whether they were dealing with AA or BA children.

And, of course, the fourth group were the BBs (negative/nonadvantaged); the true controls: ordinary babies raised by ordinary parents, without interference.

As expected, the AAs did well in school; their progress tended to triple national norms. Further, AA children were well adjusted, with happy, well-integrated personalities.

The BAs did well, too; however, they exceeded national figures by only fifteen percent. Most were happy, but isolated individuals demonstrated behavioral symptoms suggesting they might be being pushed close to or even beyond their capabilities.

Perhaps more intriguing were the ABs, who produced very spotty results: The best of them were extremely good, equaling AAs' figures in certain cases. However, the worst were very bad: The ABs had the highest proportion of academic failures, behavioral problems, and patently maladjusted personalities. Apparently conventional upbringing and education reduced many of them to pathological levels of boredom.

The BBs, of course, showed no variation at all from national curves; they were “just kids.”

Thereafter, from the AAs and ABs, we Homo post hominems were identified.

Ultimately, following a series of vague clues, Candy located us AAs, ostensibly by “coincidence”: having managed to place herself in a location where, when she heard the sonic boom and glanced up, she saw the contrail of one of the few air expeditions to have been sent out, which led her straight to us.

As an aside, during subsequent testing Candy has demonstrated a much higher percentage of successful “coincidental” trackings-down of hidden people and/or objects than mere luck would explain. This has led Teacher to postulate the existence of a “tracker” gene. Given the largely unknown commodity that we represent at this point, that probably is as good an explanation as any. In any event, when Candy refers to switching on her “stalker mode,” once again, she’s probably only about half kidding.

Following that contrail, she found us all gathered at the Vandenberg space shuttle complex, feverishly working to launch the Nathan Hale, one of H. sapiens’ space shuttles, which we had renamed to reflect the tone of its mission.

We had learned that the Holocaust had been a product of Russian-based nested conspiracies:

First, the Bratstvo, or Brotherhood, whose devastatingly successful plot to use the Russian military’s bionuclear capabilities to wipe out all Homo sapiens other than their own membership—as a mere collateral benefit of the nearly successful effort to eliminate us Homo post hominems before our new species could get a toehold and emerge from its endangered status.

Then the Khraniteli, or Guardians: a group of suicidally fanatical Homo sapiens, “true human beings,” of whose existence we had never had a clue until Candy uncovered them and warned us, dedicated to the proposition that, not only were hominems not to be permitted to supplant H. sapiens, but only humans of the Khraniteli’s own ideologically pure membership would be allowed to survive. Concealed and working within Bratstvo organization, the Khraniteli subtly misdirected their puppets’ efforts, leaked their locations, and ensured that the United States’ thermonuclear response to the initial attack would eliminate every Bratstvo installation and operative.

This left the Earth to the tender mercies of the Khraniteli’s own, much more sweeping follow-up purge: Operating through the Bratsvos, they had left a doomsday device in orbit—an unprecedentedly powerful strontium-90 bomb, programmed to commence reentry upon failing to receive a periodic coded signal, the next of which, according to intelligence reports, was due eleven days from then. Unfortunately, it seemed, the contents and radio

frequencies were known only to the long-dead fanatics who had triggered the holocaust in the first place.

The Hale had been modified extensively in order to reach geosynchronous orbit, twenty-two thousand five hundred miles above the Earth—seventy-five times higher than it had been designed for. The changes left it unable to return to Earth. The crew would reach the missile, disarm the bomb, and thereafter die. Hence the renaming: Nathan Hale—“My only regret is that I have but one life...”

At almost the last moment, however, it was discovered that the small, powerful, homegrown robot handler that we had been developing to penetrate the missile and disarm the bomb was not up to the challenge. And because the missile's nine-by-fourteen-inch internal hatches were too small to permit an adult in a spacesuit to reach the detonator and disarm it, suddenly it appeared that our species was destined to join the dinosaurs almost before it had emerged.

At that point, however, Candy stunned us all by volunteering to go on the suicide mission. She demonstrated that her diminutive stature allowed her effortless access to the warhead, and that her mastery of hysterical strength, gained during Teacher's karate training, would enable her to disarm it.

Obviously, there was a chorus of protests over the notion of sending a child on a suicide mission, but even more obviously, if our species were to survive, there was no alternative.

Mission personnel totaled three: Besides Candy, there was NASA astronaut Harris Gilbert, the mission commander, and Kyril Svetlanov, a Russian Bratstvo defector. Having participated in the design and construction of the bomb, Svetlanov had apparently experienced a change of heart. He was going up to help disarm it, thereafter to die—a most persuasive gesture of atonement.

However, once they arrived at geosynchronous orbit and matched orbits with the bomb, the Russian's true colors emerged: He knifed Harris in the back, killing him instantly. Svetlanov was in fact a Khranitel.

We hominems had been fed persuasive false intelligence about the missile, a delta-winged dart similar in appearance to our own space shuttles, but constructed of the Khraniteli's wondrously strong new material: Purportedly it was programmed to reenter the atmosphere, belly-land on the open ocean, sink to the bottom of the Murray Fracture Zone, seven hundred miles west-southwest of San Francisco, and detonate. This would set off a worldwide

paroxysm of earthquakes, volcanoes, and a lethal rain of strontium-90 fallout on all unprotected *H. sapiens* and hominems alike.

In fact, however, the missile was targeted to land just offshore of the Vandenberg launch facility. And though the warhead was smaller than advertised, it was more than powerful enough to trigger a tsunami certain to wipe out all the *Homo post hominems* of Teacher's AA group, assembled to launch the Hale—yes, the misinformation had been tailored specifically to draw us there.

Unfortunately, the data regarding the strontium-90 fallout was accurate: Earth would indeed be uninhabitable by unprotected humans of either variety for the next two hundred years. Only the Khraniteli, in their huge Serdtsevina Rasovyi shelter under the Ural Mountains, massively constructed of the new material and provisioned for the duration, would survive.

Day-by-day, however, and despite her hominem heritage, Svetlanov's admiration for Candy's self-sacrificing courage and determinedly cheerful spirit had mounted during the week of intensive prelaunch training. With Harris dead, and after having disabled the radios, he felt reluctant to murder her as well, since he could envision no way that Candy alone could possibly complete the mission and block the Khraniteli's plan from achieving fruition.

But Harris had never entirely trusted the Russian; he had deliberately kept him in the dark regarding Candy's karate skills. And within moments of the mission commander's death, she had distracted and disarmed the Khraniteli agent with tears—in her words, “surely most abjectly pitiable performance since Bambi calling for Mother in forest fire”—broken his neck, and resolutely assumed responsibility for the fate of all remaining Humankind.

First, of course, she had to disable the bomb. This was the element of the mission for which she had trained, so—apart from the challenge of navigating a five-mile spacesuited orbital transit between the Hale and the missile, for which she had not trained—that was not a major problem.

But thereafter, somehow, she had to figure out how to warn us, on the ground, of the Khraniteli's existence and their continuing genocidal intentions. The first solution to occur to her was to retarget the missile's landing site and send a handwritten message down inside it, wrapped in three nested spacesuits for protection against reentry heat.

Incredibly, however, to that point she had been so utterly focused upon warning us that she hadn't even considered her own survival. Only after safeguarding the message did it occur to her that, by riding down inside the missile herself, she might have an outside chance of

survival.

Naturally, given the missile's lack of heat shielding, and programmed-in, high-g evasive maneuvering, she barely lived through the heat and battering. Only the fact that Adam and Kim had belatedly realized that Terry's increasingly nonstop, almost weeklong "spaceflight news coverage" monologue was in fact a direct line into Candy's thoughts enabled them to follow the reentry drama and be there when the missile touched down at Edwards Dry Lake.

Braving significant scorching themselves, they extracted her from the still smokingly hot vehicle. In-flight pounding against the missile's internal structure had severed her spacesuit's life-support lines halfway through reentry, and she was clinically dead by that point: Both her respiration and heartbeat had stopped.

They removed her from the nested spacesuits and began resuscitation efforts. Ultimately, only Adam's utter refusal to stop performing CPR, when it had become obvious to everyone else that she was past any hope of revival, saved her. Even Teacher, whose launch-site radar had picked up the missile coming in over the Pacific, and who, with his team of AAs, arrived in helicopters shortly after the reentry vehicle had touched down, tried to tell him that she was gone. But Adam persisted, and, to everyone's astonishment, eventually her heart restarted.

Of course, in addition to clinical death, Candy had suffered multiple broken bones and extensive first- and second-degree burns. Months of treatment, physical therapy, and resumed karate training led to her complete recovery...

And to the situation in which we found ourselves at the point at which the current journal commences: Candy had "borrowed" an airplane, and embarked upon what any reasonable person (lacking knowledge of her determination and skills) would regard as a Quixotic quest to find and rescue her adopted father.

\* \* \* \*

Volume II

Grand Theft Aero

Candy's Journal:

Arguably, Posterity, descriptives borrowed, departed, perhaps oversimplify circumstances surrounding expedition's commencement. But needed plane. And needed at least as much not to be noticed, stopped.

Now, historical record amply demonstrates Plucky Girl Aviatrix's world-class ultralight piloting skills. Not to mention multidozenteen hours logged "flying" shuttle simulator prior to suicide mission to geosynchronous orbit, plus checkout flights in most ships in AAs' air fleet—okay, not the C-17s...

More pertinently, however, only two weeks previously had availed self of propinquitous opportunity to accumulate just shy of two hours' pilot-in-command Stallion time when Lennel Palindrome (how can parents be so cruel?) delivered Adam, Kim, Lisa, Terry, Tora-chan (Adam's cat), Plucky Girl Explorer herself, up to Sequoia National Forest to retrieve my unstoppably Adam-breathed-upon, four-wheel-drive van, boy's own luxurious, much-modified travel-trailer, our various camping/travel gear—including (oh, frabjous day!) his favorite gourmet cooking pots, pans, utensils, plus collection of herbs, spices, other possibly alchemy-based additives which may explain some of the difference between his offerings, those of other, merely world-class chefs.

After intense coaxing, cajoling, wheedling, and persuasion (whining imputation, however, rejected as undiluted calumny), Lennel let me fly takeoff, outbound cross-country leg; even coached me through float-down-like-leaf, short-field-mode, practice landing on turf next to runway at destination airfield.

\* \* \* \*

Historiographer's note: To ensure accurate Record for Ages (not to mention quell malicious gossip), Lennel's decision to yield controls prompted exclusively by lad's own big-hearted impulses, innately magnanimous nature. Completely unconnected to my rumored promise not to hurt him next time I conducted his Second-Degree Black Belt karate classes....

Mere coincidence, also, that, since equity demanded helping with preflight inspection, refueling upon arrival, postflight maintenance, etc., such activities enabled concurrent sucking of Lennel's brain generally regarding Stallions' care, feeding, idiosyncrasies, etc.



Now, unlikely as may seem in hindsight, at that point your Humble Historiographer actually had nothing more devious in mind than wallowing in adrenaline rush stemming from controlling big, powerful new toy. Ultralight's maximum takeoff weight, 525 pounds; with full fuel plus Intrepid Girl Aviatrix aboard, tips scales at barely 400. Stallion, on other hand, grosses 6100. Not to mention unmitigated epinephrine thrill—at full throttle, big bird accelerates like rocket, climbs as if laws of physics suspended.

However, at least as compelling, like Mr. Kipling's Elephant's Child, Yours Truly always on lookout for opportunities to feed 'satiabile curiosity. Pursuit of knowledge never wasted effort.

Which maxim's truth never more conclusively demonstrated than today....

\* \* \* \*

Recently reresurrected Helio Aircraft Company's latest edition of Stallion bushplane is big, gangly, awkward-looking bird: only a whisker less than forty feet from prop spinner to strobe-capped tail cone, wingspan slightly wider still. Towers nine feet high on extra-tall, so-called conventional tail-dragger landing gear, supported in front by two huge, fat, soft-terrain-flotation tires.

(Clearly, conventional reference in this context purest anachronism: Nosewheel-based tricycle gear, as seen on jetliners, military aircraft, etc. [including ultralight, aboard which Plucky Girl Aviatrix acquired initial experience], has long since replaced tail-dragger layout as norm; but two-big-tires-in-front/small-one-at-rear configuration still preferred by experienced bush pilots for soft, rough, short, unimproved fields.)

Technically, Stallions rated for two-person flight crew plus eight passengers; in fact, since solo pilot suffices for operation, can transport nine actual passengers.

For this trip, however, prior to departure, unlocked, took out, left behind six rearmost seats in favor of resultant unobstructed floor space, bulk cargo room, extra payload weight allowance.

On downside, seat removal provided convenient access to cargo-drop belly doors. When opened, yawning void useful for air-delivering supplies, etc., should such activities appear

on agenda. However, on occasions when must walk across, stand on them in flight, doors' presence underfoot generates very real (regardless how psychosomatic) sweaty, achy sensation in soles of feet, palms of hands. (Odd reaction, given fact am not particularly phobic about heights per se.)

From Plucky Girl Aviatrix's perspective, however, Stallion's primary benefit is advanced aerodynamic technology: Pop-out Fowler slats extending virtually entire length of wings' leading edges, combined with root-to-tip flaperons (ailerons doubling as flaps) produce astonishing slow-flight qualities: Minimum controllable maneuvering speed only 37 knots, or 42.5 mph; actual stall lower still. Most planes that size already falling out of sky at 70 or better.

Which slow-flight characteristics, when combined with 750-horsepower turboprop engine, huge, variable-pitch, reversible, three-blade prop, produce incredibly short takeoff/landing ground runs: just under length of football field; hardly more than needed by tiny ultralight. STOL: Short TakeOff/Landing—indeed.

\* \* \* \*

Aforementioned sophisticated aerodynamic engineering features combined to produce slightly wobbly takeoff; borderline maladroit performance no doubt exacerbated by haste. Had someone noticed preparations, asked entirely reasonable question, "Candy, what are you doing with that plane...?" would have had awkward time coming up with answer sufficiently disarming to send snoop back to minding own business.

(And really hated thought of having to pummel friend to make good escape.)

So took advantage of plane's STOL characteristics to minimize interception probabilities: Took off more or less directly out of hangar door.

Stallions particularly well suited for such highjinks. For all intents, purposes, turboprop warms up instantly. Hit starter, engine spins up to minimum ignition rpm. Light torch—thrill to nifty jet-engine wail as, within seconds, rpms come rest of the way up to operational speeds.

Sound level, however, not exactly stealthy; so prior to engaging starter, had already set prop pitch, flaperons, trim tabs for departure mode: Everything in short-field-takeoff configuration.

Wherefore, advanced throttle to stop, released brakes, eased yoke forward. Tailwheel off ground before Stallion fully out hangar door; plane lifted off without further pilot intervention only two, three seconds later—almost before clearing apron.

Banked immediately to establish climb-out parallel to active runway, just in case actual conflicting traffic might be present. (Not likely; airstrip boasts three, maybe five non-training-session operations per week.)

Once clear of traffic pattern, climbing away from field (with guilt feelings waning in direct proportion to distance covered), didn't take long regain feel for controls. Stabilized, trimmed for standard cruise-climb.

Upon reaching manual-listed maximum-efficiency altitude of 13,000 feet, netting 188-knot (201 mph) cruise, burning roughly 50 gallon per hour, leveled off, switched on autopilot.

Left ship's radios turned very much off. Same with pair of borrowed satellite phones. Little doubt what family, friends would have to say. Even less doubt—common-sense arguments, emotional entreaties alike would have no effect on decision.

Redundant GPS units operational; even more satisfying, agreed amongst themselves. Teacher says most GPS satellites can be counted upon to remain on-station, on-line for years to come; long enough, he feels, for hominems, led by AAs, to develop own space program based on lightweight Rutan-pioneered technology; take up global-comm maintenance duties; plus, in time, embark upon further exploration out into Big Dark.

Unbuckled, adjourned to improvised navigational station just aft of pilot's seat. Had "borrowed" one copy of each paper chart covering proposed route up U.S./Canadian/Alaskan west coast, straight across inland Alaska to Bering Strait, along with most of eastern, central, western Asia, eastern Europe. Plus had full collection of applicable GPS-linked 3-D topographical satellite-photo DVDs to load into Garmin moving-map "glass cockpit" big-screen primary flight-information display.

Spread out first chart. Rather than following westerly-then-northerly-curving coast all the way to Seattle area, point at which Canadian coast bends westward further still, had decided to plot inland-angling, less Pacifically scenic but shorter, geodesic "great circle" course.

Quick glance showed route workable: Regularly spaced general aviation fields within reasonable detouring distance on both sides of track.

Returned to pilot seat. Inserted first DVD into Garmin. After brief delay while system loaded, digested data, full-color moving map appeared, with cute little you-are-here airplane icon just below screen center. Quick glance out windows confirmed on-screen picture matched geography below.

(Amazing, what scientists can accomplish when not coming up with ever more imaginative ways to eliminate whole sapient species....)

Even without electronic goodies, Stallion's panel more than adequate to fly through soup. However, have no intention whatever of attempting IFR (instrument flight rules) operations. Yes, have demonstrated acceptable degree of proficiency, both in simulators as well as while wearing don't-peek, instrument-practice hood in real planes.

However, absent, at minimum, up-to-date weather information from ground-based air-traffic controller, pilot has no idea whether cloud one is driving through is merely local phenomenon—or perhaps zero-zero conditions exist all the way down to unplanned right-of-way dispute with unyielding minerals. Only way to be certain is to fly only when ground visible, meaning VFR operations for me exclusively, thank you very much.

Planned to fly short legs only, topping up tanks by halfway point whenever possible. If specific airport turns up dry, will have plenty of fuel remaining to move on.

\* \* \* \*

Had had variety of planes to choose from back at Mt. Palomar; some smaller, others larger (all the way up to Globemaster IIIs!). However, while Stallion larger than would have preferred, advanced aero technology actually simplifies piloting, maintenance chores; minimizes odds of potential mechanical failures.

Lennel says turboprops way more reliable than reciprocating engines. Oversimplifying proposition to almost comical degree, turboprop consists of only one moving part: turbine/compressor shaft. True, that single piece drives gearbox, which slows 125,000-plus-rpm turbine shaft rotation to 2000-2500 rpm-ish prop speed, as well as driving

peripherals such as alternators, etc.

Adam agrees with Lennel; says far fewer modern propjet engines and/or gearboxes fail than piston engines' exhaust valves—to say nothing of recip's' other eleven moving parts per cylinder (minimum); plus all those components in common, such as crankshaft bearings (or crank itself), connecting rods, camshaft, pushrods, rocker arms, valve springs, magnetos, distributors, sparkplugs, etc.

Of course, regardless which engine type, any failure beyond most minor of causes shifts expedition to Plan B in big way—substantive engine repairs simply beyond 11-year-old ingenue-type capabilities.

Wish had Plan B...

And sure wish had dared try to bring Adam. Merrily wicked, irrepressible good humor, coupled with our fundamental compatibility, would have made trip much more pleasant. Plus, of course, boy so useful: Even limited to campfire or crudest gasoline-fueled camp stove, routinely produces culinary miracles; and, though major aircraft engine blowup might crowd even his talents (at least without access to fully equipped aviation repair shop), can fix pretty much anything.

However, company simply not in cards. No question, Adam would have responded to invitation with attempt to stop me. Probably would even have stooped to irrefutable common-sense arguments. When that failed to work (as if!), favorite boytoy in whole wide world would have dug in heels, shifted to transcendently superior Male Authority mode: Forbidden Me To Go.

(And according to leading relationship experts, tying, gagging, locking Significant Other in closet prior to departure appears nowhere among top ten recommended couple-bonding strategies.)

Still, would have been nice to be able to count on intelligent, resourceful, fearless backup In The Event Of ... Particularly someone so familiar with the frequently out-of-boxly way Plucky Special-Ops Girl's brain operates—coordinated efforts, when working as team, sometimes leads family, friends, associates to accuse us (probably no more than half-kiddingly) of reading each other's minds.

Hmm ... No way to soft-shoe around it, Posterity; that was digression. Back to Stallion:

At least as important as reliability for traveler forced to glean necessities en route, turboprops' diet of choice: Jet-A/JP-4—staple of civilian passenger/air freight industry/military air fleets. Millions of gallons still conveniently available pretty much worldwide, even at modest-sized general aviation and/or military airports.

Toward which end, on-board tool inventory also includes pair of industrial-grade fuel-transfer hand-plumps, with hoses, high-tech filters to remove condensed water, screen out particulates, algae, etc.

In interests of historical accuracy, however, Dauntless Girl Flying Ace must confess: Deserve no credit for equipment's inclusion; not product of own foresight. Each of hominem community's planes carries them, since even officially condoned flights mostly involve refueling far afield.

Plus, even more critical for under-five-foot-tall airplane thie—er, borrower, inventory includes lightweight folding stepladder. No kidding: Fuel filler caps on this ship recessed into upper wing surfaces, tippy-tip-tops of wingtip tanks—all over nine feet off ground...!

Also brought along additional piece of equipment necessary to accommodate Yours Truly's "special" requirements: Firm, three-inch-thick, foam block on pilot's seat enables vision over instrument panel in level flight. More comfortable, as well as lighter (and surely more professional looking), than phone book, which had used during earlier flight with Lennel.

Lastly, homemade rudder/brake pedal lift blocks, transferred intact from pedals of own van. Neatly mini-C-clamped into place, pads enable leg-length-challenged pilot (hey, I resemble that remark!), falling outside designed-for specs, to steer, coordinate flaperons/rudders for smoothly banked turns; operate brakes when circumstances mandate.

\* \* \* \*

Teacher's bomb dropped just after breakfast. Ferreting out necessary details on Daddy's probable whereabouts took almost 'til noon. Packing required another two hours.

All Stallion maintenance logs kept in pigeonhole shelf unit mounted on hangar wall, so plane selection took only minutes. And since unwritten Mt. Palomar “air force” protocol states, “You fly it, you service it,” could be certain that, unless red-tagged, all ships present fueled, flight-ready.

Transferring gear (including pedal blocks) from van to plane took half hour.

Lifted off, finally, at about three p.m., leaving only about five hours’ daylight.

Night flying? Thank you, no. Hominem vision extension into infrared fringes not adequate substitute for runway lights during night landings. (Okay, if had really good reason, might be persuaded to take shot during warm, cloudless, full-moon-lit night.) Upon reflection, have decided to flightplan for solid, two-hours-before-sundown cushion, just to be sure.

Flying weather perfect: Glorious, haze-free, clear blue skies, intermittent fluffy, sparkingly white cumulus puffies (a few reminiscent of animals) above, below flight level; gorgeous panorama of forested mountains, rivers, lakes passing beneath, all the way from Palomar to Klamath Falls, Oregon.

Where redoubtable World-Class Ultralight Pilot/Retired Space Shuttle Copilot redeemed self, reestablished confidence eroded during flying-clown takeoff, by floating down, executing (tragically unwitnessed) perfectly squeaked-on three-point touchdown.

\* \* \* \*

Excerpts from the Journal of Kim Mellon:

Really, wouldn’t you think that by now we’d all have learned...

If there’s one quality that exemplifies Candy’s personality, it’s her decisiveness and determination.—Wait. Sorry; that’s two qualities. Her resourcefulness, decisiveness, and determination—Damn, that’s three. And—

Sorry; worry scrambles my brain, and of course I'm practically beside myself at this point, so naturally I sound like a refugee from a Monty Python Inquisition skit.

I think what I'm trying to say is that Candy isn't like other little girls; not even other Homo post hominem little girls.

(At least I don't think she is—or maybe I'm just hoping: Periodically, the recurring suspicion that one day Lisa may be just like her causes my blood to run cold.)

Prior to saving the world (and before dying even the first time), Candy had demonstrated a selfless courage and determination at least comparable to that of ... of...

Of an adult, obviously.

But an adult what...?

Sugar? Spice? Everything nice?

A warrior, of course. Though still essentially a child in appearance, and in her merry, uncomplicated devotion and loyalty to her friends and loved ones, the innermost core of Candy's soul of souls cannot be other than that of a warrior. Yes, four feet, ten inches in height, preteen—nearly prepubescent, for heaven's sake!—but clearly a warrior:

Repeatedly she's faced death in defense of others; sometimes spontaneously, reacting almost without thought, as when she dived into that flaming car to rescue Adam. But that last time...

With full awareness of the consequences, making a rational, calculated, "needs of the many" decision—displaying a courage which to this day brings tears to my eyes to contemplate—she stepped forward and volunteered to die for her newly discovered people.

And did.



But she's also killed. On the first occasion, she was hurried into mortal combat by a sociopath.

The second time, however, the killing was carried out in the coldest of blood: an utterly premeditated execution. Kyril Svetlanov, the Khraniteli agent, stood between her and the lives of those whom she had pledged herself to protect. Deliberately, efficiently, she distracted him with childlike tears, got close enough, and then, with a minimum of risk to herself and her mission, she invoked hysterical strength, twisted his neck, and killed his treacherous, back-stabbing, sorry Khraniteli ass...!

(Wow. Where did that come from? I must be even more upset than I realized.)

Anyway, certainly the courage and integrity are inborn, but those life-and-death experiences have ... changed her. Since returning from space (and, particularly this last time, from death), Candy has possessed a certain ... perhaps awareness would be the closest descriptive of her current outlook, though an adult-level element of confidence is part of it.

Now, whether that confidence is best described with the prefix over or not ... I'm barely a First Degree Black Belt and I've never died, so, in the language of my engineering background, I lack the training, experience, and/or data necessary to express an opinion.

In any event, I should have recognized the signs: I actually heard Teacher tell her that they'd gotten a line on her adopted father. More importantly, I also heard him tell her it would probably be another six months before we could mount another expedition into the area.

Then I bumped into Danni coming out of the showers, and she told me how Candy had grilled her for everything she'd heard about Doctor Foster.

However, it was only at dinnertime, when most of us were assembling in the chow hall, and I looked up to see Lisa arriving with Terry on her shoulder, that the dots began to connect, and the first squads of goosebumps started their march up my spine.

"Lisa, honey, how come you have Terry? Where's Candy?"

At six years of age and the product of a double dose of hominem genes (my beloved, dearly departed Jason almost certainly was one of us), Lisa is one of the most terrifyingly precocious children on the planet. An empath, having demonstrated beyond question her ability to tap into Candy's emotions, both directly and via Terry's mind, and almost as certainly mine and others, getting information from her which she feels might upset us can be an exercise in frustration.

She eyed me thoughtfully before replying. "Candy's not eating with us tonight," she said carefully. "So I thought I'd bring Terry."

Mm-hmm ... Not enough content to be a lie, and so not responsive to the question. (Daniel Webster would have gotten all misty-eyed with pride.)

I tried again, my voice dripping a warm, uncritical curiosity—knowing all the while that the tone was irrelevant; that she was picking up my mounting apprehension directly from the source: "Where is Candy eating?"

Lisa's eyes hooded. Another classic null-A pause ensued which would have warmed the cockles of A. E. van Vogt's slannish heart. This was followed by an even more painstakingly less informative reply: "She didn't say."

By this point, throughout the chamber all eyes were swiveling toward us. Conversation, after the briefest upward flurry, began tapering to a halt.

"Around eleven this morning," Wallace Griffin contributed unhappily into the deepening silence, "Candy dropped by my office and pumped everything out of me but my bone marrow about what we'd gleaned regarding her dad. She even left with copies of our field reports."

"Which would have been right after she'd wrung me dry," interjected Danya, regarding Lisa with that unblinking gaze so reminiscent of a cobra.

Whereupon, my daughter found that stroking and scritchng Terry required all her attention. Clearly no further assistance would be coming from that quarter.

Another pause followed, increasingly pregnant, broken when Lennel Palindrome, our leading aviation maintenance guru, cleared his throat and rose awkwardly to his feet. "If I could see a show of hands of anyone who knows why one of our Helio Stallions executed a remarkably nonstandard departure around three this afternoon?" he asked. "And is still gone...." he finished apologetically.

The dearth of hands in response was equaled only by the depth of the silence that finally had descended throughout the room, unbroken even by the sound of breathing.

The crash of Adam's chair toppling over ended it. Catapulting to his feet, he leaned forward, arms braced on the table, his face suddenly ashen. Wide-eyed, he glared around the room. "She's gone!" he hissed. "You all know she's gone! She's going to fly to Russia all by herself, and then, single-handedly, she's going to storm the goddamned castle...!"

\* \* \* \*

Candy's Journal:

Lovely area, Klamath Falls; could be talked into living here: Pretty town, prettier surrounding suburbs; located at southern end of large, lovely lake, among low, heavily forested mountains, rising higher to west. Whole area situated among eastern flanks of Cascades, some 60 miles south of Crater Lake.

Stallion's resting angle so steeply nose-up, on extra-tall, conventional, tail-dragger landing gear, renders vision straight ahead over nose while on ground effectively invisible. So S-turn taxied (snatching alternating peeks right, left, to see what lay directly ahead) over to fixed-base operator facilities.

Identified half-full Jet-A fuel truck. Employed hand pump, filters (ladder!) to refuel Stallion.

Thereafter performed plane's bedtime chores: Checked oil, various fluid reservoirs, battery electrolyte level, tire pressures. Removed aerodynamic contamination represented by bugspot accumulations from propeller's, wings', tail group's leading edges. Carefully washed windshield (formed from nearly bulletproof, but ever-so-scratchably soft, Lexan), etc.

Finally taxied over to pretty little grove of trees near airport perimeter. Deployed big T-handle wrench to twist tie-down kit's coiled-spring stakes deep into ground; one under ringbolt in each wing, one at tip of tail; secured plane against unexpected wind gusts with strong, kit-furnished ropes.

In shade under starboard wing, cooked dinner on Coleman camp stove transferred from van; stuffed face until comfortably full. Cleaned up "kitchen" by burying non-breakfast-reusable leftovers.

Then pulled out duffle bag containing clothes, blankets, etc., set down next to big main-gear wheel. Planted tush on bag's cushion, leaned back against side of tire. Closed eyes, composed, sent off wish-you-were-here-touristy message to family via Terryemail.

Wondered how much non-message-quality, random stream-of-consciousness, mental activity baby brother had already passed on. Probably mind-numbing duty for poor Terry-monitor—little doubt Teacher would have posted one already.

Which caused slight twinge of guilt: AAs perpetually short-handed; hated to inflict on them need to divert possibly essential personnel to remote baby-sitting duties. But then recalled: Decision to tiptoe off alone to Urals prompted in part by recognition, acceptance of fact could hardly expect Teacher to divert limited resources for mission just to rescue Daddy—assuming even still alive.

Viewed in which light, Terry-watching becomes bargain: Nets Teacher additional realtime Urals/Khraniteli intel without personnel/materiel costs attendant to mounting, dispatching actual mission.

(Wow, sounds so reasonable, almost believe it myself.)

Settled down, brought journal up-to-date.

And suddenly found self temporarily at loose ends, with too much time on hands, reflecting on plans—and at that point could not avoid facing fact that killings almost certainly lay in future. In fact, assuming don't manage further to martyr self in process, undoubtedly lots of killings.

More specifically, lots more killings: Yes, Posterity, despite chronologically tender age, your Humble Historiographer has already been forced to kill.

Twice, actually.

At which point, despite best efforts, horrific series of memories from astonishingly violent recent past floated before eyes...

On first occasion, Rollo Jones, brand-new acquaintance, had attacked Terry with big iron skillet. Impact would have crushed delicate avian skeleton like balsa-wood airplane model.

Now, to be fair, featherheaded baby brother started it. But to be even fairer, fact that situation was allowed to deteriorate to that level was fault of no one but Yours Truly. On so many levels.

First, ignored portents: Terry hated Rollo. Instantly. On sight. And for years, had never known birdbrain to be wrong about people.

Even today, if silly sibling likes someone, invariably new chum proves to be Best Friend material. If not—Wait. Come to think of it, haven't encountered any nots since being invited into AA/hominem community. (Terry never met Kyril...)

Rollo, an M.D., had been charming, funny, obviously terribly smart. And while at least thirty years older than self, was indisputably handsome, in dignified, gray-templed fashion. Plus much of age difference had been spent surviving variety of hostile environments during Peace Corps tour, among other adventures. By any measure, would have been asset.

Seemingly more important at the time, however, Rollo only third living soul to cross path since Armageddon; really had hoped would become friends. So shrugged off alarm bells sounded by Terry's instant hostility; allowed acquaintance to progress from introduction to tentative, cautious friendship.

That evening, Rollo served dinner for us (Adam, self)—and on that very first “date,”

proposed (or at least propositioned); i.e., suggested practical arrangement, as primitive societies had employed down through ages: Would pledge his loyalty, years of all-around survival experience, medical training—for access to your Humble Historiographer's bed.

In process of deliberating pros, cons; actually on point of accepting, largely for Adam's benefit (having doctor join expedition could have been of inestimable value). But just then Rollo came within reach of Terry for very first time since meeting—and birdbrain promptly bit living daylights out of him.

Injury triggered absolutely berserk rage; if hadn't stopped him, Rollo would have killed featherheaded touchstone/ prognosticator in heartbeat. Intervention had required karate, hysterical strength. But pain, frustration at being blocked by child had redirected Rollo's fury from Terry to self.

Still might have restrained attacker without killing, but Rollo big, strong, pretty fast. Hurried me. Ultimately, encounter ended badly.

Reaction to killing was to go catatonic for better part of twelve hours, brood for weeks. Didn't recover fully until Kim (who, with daughter, Lisa, were fourth, fifth live people encountered after Mankind's End) took me aside, administered metaphoric shake, helped set head back on straight.

Then came Kyril: bright, fun, good company; also eminently cuddlable in sweet, fatherly sort of way.

But when dust settled, proved to be Khraniteli agent. His people wanted my people dead. Russian stood between me and mine: those whom had volunteered to die to protect.

No anger involved, Kyril's or mine. Nor, on this occasion, stampeded into lethal violence, as with Rollo. Killing Kyril was coldest-blooded, most undilutely deliberate assassination imaginable: product of thoughtful, if brief, calculation, planning; methodical execution.

No two ways about it: Killing bad. And on indefinable levels, cost of having killed almost worse.

However, cost of losing genocidal war worse still. So whatever must do to defend my people, individually or as a whole, shall accept, pay price, whatever that may be.

Same holds at least as true for rescuing Daddy....

Well, gee, glad we settled that.

Finally found self reflecting on curious sense of accomplishment, depth of comfort imparted by simple activity of journal keeping. Though begun originally as mere therapy, to drain off nearly suicidal levels of depression experienced while trapped in shelter right after End of Days, since then have more or less come to regard keeping up journals as responsibility—personal Duty to Future Generations.

Hmm ... Hope Plucky Girl Savior of Our People not beginning to believe own publicity.

\* \* \* \*

Day I(b)

Yes, technically, this should be Day II entry, since being written next morning after having put journal to bed—not to mention minor detail that events about to be chronicled took place after midnight.

Whatever.

\* \* \* \*

Having concluded Day I(a)'s journal update, relaxed, leaned head back, rested against tire sidewall, settled in to enjoy gorgeous, colorful, sunset lightshow display over Cascades.

Mind you, may even have rested eyes briefly; perhaps moment here, second there. But

certainly not as if slept.

However, in view of sunset admirer's certified nonsleeping status, startlement level delivered by gentle impact on lap from what at first impression appeared to be lightweight, inverted, plastic dinner plate seemed anomalous at best.

Eyes snapped wide. As nearly simultaneously as physically possible, looked left, right, and—

Found self locked in staring contest, at point-blank range, with cold, almost luminous, ghostly whitish-blue eyes of

—Wiley Coyote...?

\* \* \* \*

Kim Mellon's Journal:

Unfortunately, Teacher's attempt at calming Adam was begun with the observation, "Now, we can't just go rushing off half-cocked..."

But Adam, clearly in the grip of that hyperintense, almost berserker-quality state of focused concentration I first saw the day Candy's ultralight engine failed and she went down in the Sequoias, was already dashing out the door.

Unlike the rest of us, he didn't hear Teacher say, "...however, Wallace, I have come to the conclusion that I may be in error. Though Candy's tactics at this point are open to question, I think perhaps that her decision was strategically correct. We've done enough information gathering, analysis, and reflection. It's time we moved actively against the Khraniteli. If you'd please organize an expedition for that specific purpose."

"My pleasure," said Wallace with a wolfish smile.



“In general,” Teacher continued, “I’d like to reduce all their known bases, beginning with Serdtsevina Rasovyi, and the research-and-development facility located there. If possible, I would prefer to recover whatever data it may contain. However, regardless of whether that proves possible, I want it neutralized, and everyone connected with it eliminated as a future threat.

“We know that most of the installation is underground, in that huge, so-called indestructible shelter of theirs. If you feel the need to use one or more thermonuclear warheads, so be it.

“Of course, at some point Candy will undoubtedly need assistance in determining whether Marshall really is alive and extracting him, so while we’re at it—”

Bouncing up, I forced myself to interrupt (no one interrupts Teacher—not that he minds; it just isn’t done): “Excuse me, Teacher. I’ve seen Adam in all-out Candy-rescue mode before. He’s impetuous, but he’s not half-cocked: Before he cleared that door, he’d already decided what equipment he was going to need, and I’ll bet he knows where every piece of it is located.

“If we don’t stop him”—I was already headed for the door myself, accelerating to a dead run—he’ll have it all accumulated, and by sundown we’ll be missing another Stallion.” Jumping up, Danya and Gayle followed me.

“How ‘bout that,” said Terry from Lisa’s shoulder. “Ooo,” he added so softly that probably only Lisa and I heard him as I raced past her and out the door; “that cloud looks just like a giraffe....”

\* \* \* \*

Volume III

Sidekick

Candy’s Journal:

Okay, Posterity, recognized new acquaintance as Border Collie almost instantly. Or as nearly instantly as possible, considering...

One: Fact that sun had quite unambiguously retired for evening; western horizon's bottommost fringes barely even hinted at pinkish tinge. Which meant Hair-Trigger-Alert Sentrygirl had been dead to world for probably two hours or more; and...

Two: Dog almost entirely black; relieved only by minimal white feet, modest chest blaze, narrow collar, slender stripe from nose to just behind flop-tipped ears.

Utterly motionless in pool of deeper darkness beneath wing created by slightly oblate moon hanging in crystal-clear, star-studded sky, canine effectively invisible at that moment, except for faintest infrared glowing auras detectible from areas where coat was thinnest; brighter glow from naked nose, edges of eyelids, outlining—

Only anatomical feature really visible: spooky, light blue eyes—picked out by random moonbeam reflected back under wing from polished metal propeller blade.

\* \* \* \*

Kim Mellon's Journal:

Gayle runs faster than I do, but Danya runs faster than anyone; she caught Adam only about a quarter mile from the chow hall. He had almost reached what I suspected was going to be his first stop: the armory.

However, when Danya really wants to speak with you, the sheer radiating power of her personality (even without an awareness of the potential for dislocated joints and broken bones to underscore the effect) makes it difficult to ignore her. Far more quickly than either Gayle or I could have managed, she gained Adam's attention and suggested he return with us to what was obviously about to turn into our first expeditionary planning session.

“Don’t you even think of skipping out ahead of us and running your own operation,” she told him sternly. “Wallace is going to want to arm-wrestle me for you, but I’m asking first: I need your fix-anything, mad-scientist talents on my team when we go in.”

Danni is so good. She couldn’t have picked a better stratagem. No hint of the “You young idiot; you’re just going to get yourself killed!” mom-style, common-sense approach I probably would have tried—which would have fallen upon the deaf ears of a mission-bent berserker.

No; with a perfectly straight face, Danni addressed him on the level of “us professional rescuers,” one to another: Teacher had just authorized a preemptive strike, we were going in to carry it out, as well as to help Candy get her dad out—and, she, Danni, needed Adam on her team to make it all work.

I’ve never encountered anyone, whose construction included Y chromosomes and normal concentrations of testosterone, whether Homo sapiens or H. post hominem, who wouldn’t have responded to such a matter-of-fact request for assistance from someone who looks like Danni with other than improved posture, a significantly expanded chest, a piercing, look-of-eagles expression, and a heightened overall aspect of manly determination.

Of course, at least equally important, by “drafting” him as part of her team, giving him mission responsibilities, and letting him know that she and we all are counting on him, Danni has also minimized the likelihood that he’ll go charging off on his own.

Which is a relief. I love Adam almost as much as Candy does, and he’s a terrifically talented young man. In his fields. But the fact is, special-operations skills and hand-to-hand combat simply are not among them. He is nowhere near Candy’s level. Heck, even I’m better at it than he is. There’s no doubt in my mind that, if he tried to go in on his own, he’d get caught in a heartbeat.

\* \* \* \*

Candy, on the other hand ... Even before beginning to train under Danya, Candy had much the same focused, thinking-all-the-time quality to her gaze as her tutor; and the more time she spends with Danni, the more she reminds me of our ex-Mossadniki.

Since then Danni has repeatedly confided to me that Candy is a natural-born ninja: Her talent for special-operations work, such as infiltration and stalking, are unmatched. Danya

says that, since taking her under her wing, Candy's learned to move with utter silence, and become virtually invisible in terrain offering less concealment than anyone she's ever met.

As a Sixth Degree Black Belt, Candy was already approaching her coach's skill level in hand-to-hand and nonfirearm-type weapons; but according to Danni, our lethal little sister has become an even better shot than she, a Mossad-trained professional sniper/assassin, ever was, particularly with the big rifles at extreme long range.

In short, under normal circumstances, the thought of an eleven-year-old girl prowling the Urals, stalking Khraniteli in their own territory, would be terribly distressing. In Candy's case, however, similes involving wolves in sheep's clothing fall almost blood-chillingly short. A more appropriate comparison might be something on the order of a wistfully helpless-looking Golden Retriever puppy—which transforms in the blink of an eye into a tiger. Or perhaps more accurately—a velociraptor....

Danni's only halfway tongue-in-cheek term-of-art for this phenomenon is the exploding baby bunny surprise: an adult adversary's momentarily confused hesitation upon the sudden discovery that within this innocent-appearing, small-for-her-age, apparently vulnerable, winsome, preteen girl dwells a supremely well-trained warrior who holds no ruth whatever for our enemies.

Intellectually, based on the above, I know that her chances of pulling it off are comparable to those of Wallace or Danya working alone. Possibly even better, actually, on some levels, because of the Q-ship factor.

Except, of course, for the language: They speak it like natives, but Candy's command of Russian is limited to about fifty words; with, I'm told, an atrocious American accent; most of it having to do with spaceflight and disarming orbiting doomsday bombs—an inventory of dubious utility on her current quest.

All of which raises the question: If she's like this now, what's she going to be like—Heaven help us all—when she grows up?

If she grows up...

\* \* \* \*

Candy's Journal:

Dwelling on 300-plus acres located not quite five miles outside Wausippi, small Wisconsin town where Daddy/ Momma Foster—then Daddy/Teacher—raised me, Weldon Helmrick was independently wealthy gentleman farmer. As part of operation, Helmrick ran commercial milking parlor. Sort of. Yes, did raise cows. Yes, did market lactate output (Wisconsin was Dairy State, after all) to pay for upkeep on 200-plus really contented (some almost borderline-obese) Holsteins.

Mostly, however, Weldon pocketed huge governmental subsidies for not operating anywhere near capacity, lest someone in government have to figure out how to avoid feeding excess to Third World poor.

(Hmm ... Really must stop getting diverted into these side issues. Not as if matters; those people all dead now—starving victims, soulless governmental dogs-in-the-manger alike.)

Point toward which your Humble-if-Scatterbrained Historiographer was tacking so obliquely, even prior to inadvertent digression into sociological-injustice rant: Weldon's actual motivation for keeping cows in first place was so his Border Collies would have herd of their very own to play with. (Weldon called it "training"; may even have believed it himself.)

Breeding, competing in herding, obedience, agility, tracking, catching Frisbees, plus occasional foray into conformation breed ring, were focus of joyous dilettante agriculturist's lifework.

As well, with such outlook, served as state coordinator for (surprise!), Border Collie Rescue.

BC population at Helmrick homestead seldom dropped below 15, 20: four, five of his own (more when one or more females had puppies on ground), plus 10, 20 rescuees being fostered, resocialized, retrained, in transit from/to old/new homes, etc. In point of fact, Weldon spent virtually every waking moment working, playing with, loving his dogs.

(Fair number of sleeping moments, too, based on Yours Truly's experience with Alpha, oldest daughter. [Yes—Heaven help them—Weldon named kids in order of arrival, as if two-legged pack members. He and wife had made it up to baby girl Epsilon(!) by

Armageddon time.] Seldom did any family member, or overnight guest, experience less than “three-dog night”—and can testify from own experience, actually pretty cozy arrangement during frigid Wisconsin winter nights....)

Alphie one of my best friends. Helmrick farm seriously fun place; spent considerable time there. Got to know Border Collies well; formed favorable impression.

Confession (don't tell Terry): But for potential risk to featherheaded twin posed by sharing abode with 45 pounds of spring-steel- and sinew-powered, obsessive-compulsive canine with herding instincts generally operating at Warp Nine, might well have worked on Daddy to get me BC puppy of my own.

Or, more likely, grownup rescuee. Weldon repeatedly told me would have given us Really Good Deal: his cost for one of his own pups—but free, if chose rescuee.

Weldon had much in common with beloved breed: unreasoning, monomaniacal focus on joys of pursuit of one's passion. In his case, Border Collie ownership. In BCs' case, monitoring/ controlling movement of any-/everything nonstationary, heading off any single critter departing from group, gathering scattered components of whatever description together in one place, sorted by related subgroups, etc.

Weldon oblivious to demands in time, training, personal attention (beyond what most people could begin to devote) required to keep intrinsically hyperactive breed happily, constructively—i.e., nondestructively—occupied. Felt no one should be without BC of her very own; several would be better....

True, without qualification, BCs are most intelligent quadrupeds have ever encountered. Not just my opinion; according to literature (as well as Weldon), dogs from good working bloodlines (as opposed to ruined, bred-for-pretty-only breeding types) have IQs comparable to five-year-old human children (mind-bogglingly focused five-year-old human children): capable of abstract reasoning, deducing answers from indirect evidence, operating independently once assigned projects. From own observations, never doubted assertion for a moment.

However.

Have also listened to many of Weldon's horror stories—“hilarious anecdotes,” in

Weldonspeak—of consequences of permitting Border Collies to succumb to ennui; each tale delivered howling with laughter at inventiveness, originality—sheer scope of mischief involved...

Narratives of owners who, upon waking from naps, found every single ball in entire house arranged in neat circle at feet. Or every kid in neighborhood tightly huddled in group at geometric center of front yard, most crying, all afraid to move. Or cats all clustered in living room corner, looking really outraged (yes, cats can be herded—by BCs).

Another dog, who turned out to be outstanding herding prospect, ended up in Rescue shortly after purchase by misguided housewife-lady owner, who only wanted nice, quiet house pet, but had heard BCs were “really smart.” Two weeks after bringing home nice, quiet (really smart) house pet, at last having been worn down by dog’s nonstop unblinking do-something-now stare (referred to by proud Border Collie cognoscente as The Eye—used by BCs to intimidate, work their will upon [i.e., bully] cows, sheep, goats, livestock generally [as well as cats, neighborhood children]), misguided owner put dog out in fenced backyard.

Alone. In empty yard. With no toys.

Nothing to do; nothing to hold interest—but especially no company; no one to play with...

Owner returned hours later to find vinyl siding all removed from house’s rear wall to uniform height of six feet. Apart from pulled-through nail-head holes, siding undamaged; just removed. And stacked.

Likewise, bark stripped to same height from every tree within enclosure; found in separate pile next to stacked siding.

Another farmer returned home to find barn completely jammed full of cows, with Border Collie still determinedly working to pack last few in.

On one occasion Weldon offered absolutely straight-faced opinion: Crop circles actually product of BCs relieving boredom.

And, of course, standard response to “How many Border Collies does it take to change a light bulb?”

“Only one; but while he’s at it, he’ll take out the garbage, empty the vacuum, defrost the freezer, repaint your house, upgrade your wiring, and defrag your hard-drive.”

\* \* \* \*

This Border Collie regarded me with almost sapiently aware, analytical expression, hyperalert intensity, joyous expectation of Good Things to Come typical of sound working bloodlines.

Reached out hand, allowed dog to sniff knuckles. Then offered caress followed by scratch.

At first touch, dog trembled momentarily. Then moved forward, pressed against me. Lowered head into lap. Trembled again. Sighed.

Then whimpered.

Well...

No one who knows Yours Truly could have any doubt what happened next: Plucky Girl Adventurer dissolved; dog and I shared good cry together over her long-lost family. Held close, scratched, stroked her all over. (Her status confirmed during tummy rubs.)

Presently managed to get self together sufficiently to grope for, locate big, six-cell Maglight. Reset 38,000-candlepower beam from spot to flood.

Inspected collar detected during snuggle session. Unsurprisingly, proved to be high-quality (i.e., expensive) leather, with brass plate, reading...



Fairwinds' Bagpipe

Supercharged Magneto

Ch OTCh, HCh, MAX, ATCh, TDX, TD

"Well, look at you," I snuffled damply into dog's ear, reveling in sensation of marvelously soft coat against cheek. "A celebrity overachiever: Breeding, obedience, herding—well, duh about that!—agility, tracking, even therapy, and, surprise, a champion at everything you do. So what's your calling name, sweetie? Magneto—did they call you 'Maggie'?"

"Maggie" lifted head; focused The Eye upon me with unblinking, suddenly mounting intensity. Opened mouth slightly, uttered soft, almost unvocalized bark.

"Ah-hah," I replied; "'Maggie' it is."

BC stood, The Eye intensifying further.

"So what have you been eating all this time, Maggie? Are you hungry? I feel ribs, but there's some meat on them, so obviously you're not starving. To stay even that well fed, I'll bet you're a terrific mouser and death on rabbits. Let's see what we can find in the canned, not-running-for-its-life section..."

Took Frisbee from lap, set to one side; stood. Maggie snatched it up, backed up one step, watched intently. Began to drool.

Rummaged through supplies; dug out can of turkey Spam (no sneering, please; turkey variety actually pretty tasty). Removed lid, extracted contents onto paper plate, set on ground before her.

Maggie sat; directed The Eye up at me expectantly. Then more intently. Expression grew concerned, then acquired overtones of outright worry.

Suddenly light dawned: Sometimes Weldon trained dogs to wait for permission; sometimes not. Individual decisions generally based upon dogs' intensity levels; in particular, whether setting down dishes involved risk of fingers being swallowed along with first mouthfuls of food. Other breeder/trainers merely considered it investment in canine good manners.

Stroked head, said, "Okay, Maggie; take it." Though a guess, must have been right words, or at least combination included enough of them to appease hungry dog's conscience. She offered single appreciative wave of tail, carefully set Frisbee down next to plate—then didn't so much eat as inhaled contents.

Improvised water dish for her from Frisbee. She drank gratefully. Then glanced up at me, picked up Frisbee, dumping remaining few drops. Walked back to my side, lay down. Set down Frisbee. Then watched me.

Eyed her thoughtfully in return. Clearly Maggie brilliant, superlatively trained dog. Could be significant asset on sortie like this—though figuring out what cues original owner used in training could prove challenge, given fact that BCs routinely learned upward of 75 individual commands, verbal as well as hand signals.

But also presented complications. For instance, air travel—on longer legs, with autopilot engaged, Intrepid Girl Flying Ace could use onboard potty located in tiny lavatory at extreme rear. Maggie could not. Her endurance levels might well cap flight durations. Plus would need to add appropriate canine food supplies to larder.

Not to mention worrying about her when on ground, lest she get in trouble with local wildlife—or even inadvertently betray me to Khraniteli once we get there...

Decided to give it a shot in morning, using some of Weldon's standard commands: come, sit, down, heel, stay, go out, to me, etc., along with usual related hand signals.

Then could decide whether to keep her.

Was on point of inviting her inside plane for night when it occurred to me: Didn't even know if new four-legged friend housebroken—having just eaten, drunk, might well, as Terry so colorfully expresses it, perform icky-poo or piddle during night. Given physical perfection,

obvious training levels, seemed unlikely in extreme; but if by-products managed to seep below deck, where couldn't be reached for cleanup, would not improve plane's ambiance during balance of trip.

Glanced around; noted weather: lovely cool, clear night. Decided would sleep outside with her under wing. If still around come morning, would get serious about making up mind.

Pulled out sleeping bag, unrolled, slid inside, cushioned head on pair of folded jeans.

Glanced at BC. Seemingly before "Maggie, here," cleared lips, dog already in motion: Glided over, moving in that marvelously slinky, head-low, feral gait characteristic of breed.

She lay down close, leaned against me. Put arm over her. She sighed.

Briefly got all teary-eyed again, thinking about how long pup had been on her own, missing her people, after humanity vanished. Poor baby.

Maggie pressed against me, closed eyes, whimpered briefly, sighed again.

\* \* \* \*

Indescribably frightful chorus of growls yanked me unceremoniously from dream-free depths of soundest sleep. Found self sitting bolt upright; eyes wide, staring, trying to focus; head snapping right, left, mentally scrambling to collect widely dispersed wits.

Slightly bloated half-moon had set long since; even darker now—but could make out half-circle of black silhouettes made somehow darker-looking by faint infrared glow highlighting noses, triangles of almost bare skin along edges of pricked ears, eyelids outlining occasional baleful, greenish-yellow flicker. Beasties, whatever they were, glided back, forth some 20, 30 feet away.

And between them and me—Maggie: head down, shoulders hunched, looking twice actual size; shifting slightly back, forth; always between closest marauder and me—and making

even worse noises than they were.

Eased Glock from low-slung, tied-down, special-ops (personally, regard it as “Lara Croft-style”), carbon-fiber holster as slid out of sleeping bag, mentally apologizing to weapon for earlier uncomplimentary sentiments regarding discomfort intrinsic to wearing heavy, lumpy thing to bed.

(Yes, small-frame Model 23 is better fit for 11-year-old’s hand than Grownups’ Gun, but even small pistol conclusively bars sleeping on that side, and not much more helpful turning over that direction. Not that silencer in fitted scabbard on other side likely to be mistaken for comfy improvement...)

Groped for Maglight with left hand, gratefully recalling hadn’t reset from wide-beam—much more useful at close quarters than spot. Flipped switch as rose to feet.

Dazzlingly white quartz-xenon flood bloomed out, picking out scene’s every detail in starkest contrast: Five Big Bads, eyes glowing bright yellow-green in light—even smallest wolf twice Maggie’s size, but she never wavered, never retreated single step toward me.

One round in chamber, 15 in extended clip. Decided to risk single warning shot, in hopes flash, bang, sudden explosion of soil beneath leader’s nose would disconcert, inspire her/him to lead pack away, seek more cooperative larder.

Because really preferred not to kill wolves if could avoid. Exemplary, mating-for-life, environmentally beneficial species. Excellent parents; take equally good care of own, each others’ children.

And not withstanding childhood lore, not wanton mass murderers of grandmothers or red-hooded children. Generally cull herds; take older, sicker, weaker specimens, or less-well-cared-for babies. (Hello, wolves!—do we look like any of above?) Actually, primary diet consists of mice.

Had no intentions, however, of participating in menu variation. Nor permitting Maggie to.

Seemed words barely forming on lips—”Maggie, here!”—before felt BC pressing against

leg; simultaneously squeezed off shot at dirt just below leader's nose.

Hydra-Shok 40-caliber slug drilled into soil, expanded in mere inches' penetration to nearly ten times original diameter. Only direction energy could go at that point was straight up.

Dirt exploded into wolf's face, traveling at many tens of feet per second. Undoubtedly broke skin dozens of places; no doubt burned like dickens.

Regardless, whether because of muzzle flash, pistol's roar, or landmine effect under nose, leader yelped, leaped back.

Instantly I jumped forward to capitalize on broken concentration, yelling universally recognized sound of maternal disapproval—"Aaaah!"—and squeezed off two more earth-boring rounds under noses of next largest and/or most aggressive specimens.

Success: Attack terminated. Wolves broke off; retreated back across airfield toward woods on far side.

Dropped to knees, gathered Maggie in arms. Hugged trembling form; scritch'd The Place; rubbed/stroked head, ears, tummy; generally praised her to high heavens for saving skin. Was rewarded by appreciative slurp up cheek, happily wagging tail.

\* \* \* \*

Well, all righty then ... One-woman Eurasian supercontinent invasion force may learn slowly, but not complete dunce. Gathered up camping gear, tossed into plane. Threw sleeping bag in through door.

Turned back toward Maggie, intending to lift her aboard (door sill easily four feet off ground), only to watch her soar effortlessly over my shoulder, in through opening, carrying Frisbee. By the time managed to swing self aboard, Maggie sitting smugly in midst of tumbled sleeping bag, tongue lolling in doggie grin.

Closed, secured door. Checked time. Only two a.m.; lots of quality sleeping time ahead.

Pulled bag from under Maggie; BC heroine thought procedure quite funny: Briefly crouched, pounced, tail wagging.

Only belatedly did happy thought occur to me: Maggie not gun-shy; warm pressure against leg never so much as twitched in reaction to Glock's repeated thunderclaps.

However, first things first: Before climbing into sleeping bag, popped out weapon's magazine. Used cute little Glock-supplied, patented pry-tool to squeeze in replacement rounds. Slapped magazine back up into gun butt.

Debated briefly. Only three rounds used. With any luck, would be half past forever before needed to fire weapon again. However, combustion products, barrel deposits should not be allowed to fester. Decided to field-strip, clean in morning. Slid weapon back into holster.

Then dug out M-1 carbine. Older weapon, but fits me better than more modern AR family. And for normal shooting (i.e., targets this side of horizon), prefer it to giant, much heavier, Barrett 50-caliber super sniper rifle.

Duct-taped two 30-round magazines together side-by-side, ends reversed, overlapping. Slid one end up into receiver. Yanked slide to charge chamber. Set safety. Placed weapon next to sleeping bag. Close.

Then slid in—and suddenly, without seeming to have moved, somehow Maggie lying next to me again, pressed close, chin resting on shoulder. Put arm over her. So close, could feel quivering, panting from residual fear, excitement, adrenaline.

Which pretty much summed up own feelings. Quite some time before fell back to sleep, holding My Dog....

\* \* \* \*

Day II (Officially)

Felt all cozy and not-alone this morning as drifted up from slumber. Noted that, though Maggie still snuggled against side, under arm, dog's chin no longer rested on shoulder.

Suppressed smile. From Weldon farm experience, knew where chin was; knew what awaited me upon opening eyes.

Tried to get away with squinty cheat-peek, but didn't work. Very instant eyelids quivered—busted: Maggie kissed me squarely on nose; prevented from expanding attentions only by quick head-turn, deployment of blocking/ scratching hand.

Opened eyes fully to meet spooky, pale-blue, delighted canine gaze regarding me from six inches away. Unblinkingly. Intensely. Just short of manically.

Classic example of The Eye, trying to get me to get up! Do something! Visible over BC's shoulder, happy tail waved gracefully.

Maggie definitely morning person.

(Though if anything like Border Collies of previous acquaintance, also afternoon person, evening person, night person...)

Before opening door, retrieved M-1. Told Maggie "Wait"; exited first. Performed quick 360-degree scan to make sure wolves not having second thoughts about breakfast. Heard Maggie's feet hit ground behind me as got to ohk point in "okay"—and marveled: BC's response time nothing less than incredible.

We adjourned to adjacent bushes. Smiled over Maggie's uncaninely modesty. Then realized: Following wolf encounter, had completely forgotten housebreaking issue. Nice to know would not be issue.

Shared some more turkey Spam for breakfast: One can for new mommy, one for

no-doubt-soon-to-be-spoiled-rotten kid sister. (Yes, human/dog familial references do tend to be confusing—or, if one thinks about them too deeply, downright disturbing.)

Used Maggie's Frisbee for water dish again. She drank, but quickly snatched up when done, dumping balance.

Eyed her thoughtfully. "You're really attached to that thing, aren't you."

BC spun, fixed me intensely with The Eye, projecting: Do it! Debated; seemed likely object of stare was she hoped big sister would throw Frisbee for her. Began, "Would you—"

Only to find dog already had executed perfectly aligned front-and-center, "tucked" sit (resembling four-legged version of stiffly "braced" ten-hutttt! posture so beloved by dearly departed military establishments), front toenails barely six inches from Reeboks. Arrival comprised of single, eye-blurring, twisting bound.

Nudged me in leg with Frisbee. The Eye intensified, sparkled. Tail wagged.

Grinned down at her. "I'll interpret that as a 'yes.'"

Accepted proffered disk. Then wondered about her usual Frisbee drill. Did previous owner start her from heel—

Another blur; Maggie now sitting at right side, again perfectly lined up, but also leaning forward, almost quivering in anticipation.

Dog seriously proficient student of body language, I thought. Said, "So am I supposed just to throw it, or should I have you stay, throw it, then release you?"

Decided just (she crouched) to throw it.



Unlike majority, who use backhand, away-from-body flip, am sidearm Frisbee ace: Grip rim like pencil, between thumb, index finger; thumb on top, straightened index finger lying along curved inner rim groove. Sidearm motion spins disk off fingertip; generates much faster rotation, more lift, nets way more distance. But directional control can be tricky.

Drew back, let fly—and surprised to find Maggie already 50 feet along intended flight path, running flat-out, well ahead of Frisbee but headed for likely eventual landing site.

However, as often happens with sidearm technique, disk begin to tilt, then curve. Instantly, without looking, dog angled in correct direction. Must have been tracking flight path by audio ranging.

Maggie slowed to let Frisbee overtake her. Bore slightly off to one side; only then glanced up, snatched out of air with precise sidelong snap, slid to stop.

Concluded retrieve with another perfect front-and-center stop, practically dancing sitting still with joy, excitement.

Second time, momentarily held her with stay command as threw Frisbee. Upon release, Maggie accelerated like rocket, overtook disk maybe 200 feet out. With Frisbee soaring almost horizontally, some six feet above grass, Maggie launched skyward, nailed it midair; then raced back again.

Gave hereditary new Best Friend half hour's worth of Frisbee chasing before announcing "Last one" prior to final throw.

(Another useful Weldonism: Formally declaring game's end just prior to conclusion helps familiarize BCs with concept of limits; reduces likelihood of activity becoming endlessly obsessive/ compulsive addiction.)

Thereafter, with M-1 leaning against leg, field-stripped, cleaned, lubricated, reassembled Glock.

Then slung M-1 over shoulder, dug out prybar, canteen; strolled across field to fixed-base operator's facility. Sampled various vehicles; found aged International Harvester station

wagon with charged-up battery, nearly full tank.

Checked yellow pages for holistic/organic pet supplies; amazed to find EarthPets outlet in such remote, if lovely, backwater.

Maggie loved riding in car: Not head-out-window type (wouldn't have permitted that in any event; eye injury risk from bug strike outweighs fun), but sat up very straight on seat, watched intently as scenery went by. Smiled nonstop.

Prybar proved unnecessary; store unlocked.

Surveyed inventory. Scrutinized food labels. Ultimately selected brand with artsy timber wolf logo (friendlier looking than last night's visitors). Came in several flavors; primary protein nutrients listed, respectively, as lamb, bison, caribou, venison, chicken, salmon—and specified actual meat cuts; not hooves, hair—with rice, together with healthful, selected herbal mix.

More importantly, contained no ingredients impossible to pronounce, nor patently toxic preservatives (butylated hydroxyanisole [BHA], butylated hydroxytoluene [BHT], or ethoxyquin) furnished free with nutrition prior to World's End by virtually all Big Name grocery-store dog food manufacturers—despite having been shown in studies to promote liver disease; related also to tumor production, dozens of other ultimately fatal conditions.

Likewise, since health food doggie-din-din oven-baked, not extruded, contains no trapped-superheated-steam-generated, cumulative toxins.

Final additional benefit: Packaged in forever-airtight foil/plastic bags, ruling out hideously toxic aflatoxin mold contamination.

Offered Maggie taste-test on the spot. Bottomless mobile appetite put away heaping cupful; seemed to find flavor acceptable. Fixed me with roguish sidelong version of The Eye, hinting without detectible subtlety that additional samples would be at least as acceptable.

Tossed dozen 50-pound bags into wagon. Figured at three, four cups daily, ought to carry her for expected few weeks' absence (with modest six-month reserve, just to be safe).

Gathered up bunch of containers of chewable vitamins, omega-3 complex fish oil capsules—figured if good for me (Teacher says so), good for new baby.

Also took along dozen plastic canisters of freeze-dried liver. Lasts forever, consists of nothing but little cubes of (surprise?) freeze-dried beef or chicken liver. Experience with Weldon's dogs suggests most canines regard flavor as little less than spiritual experience. After test, Maggie concurred here, too.

Collected several easily cleaned stainless steel dishes for water, feeding.

Next, since could foresee circumstances in which might need to limit Maggie's movement for her own safety, picked up selection of short leather leads, couple 25-foot "flexi" recoil reels, spare nylon buckle-on collars.

(Recalled Weldon's multiple-national-obedience-championships-based opinion that no one who actually knows anything about dog training uses choke collars—and especially not potentially larynx-damaging metal-chain chokers!)

Finally, picked out nylon seat-restraint harness. Resembled sled-dog harness. Carefully adjusted straps to fit. Locked onto car (or aircraft) seatbelt/shoulder harnesses, would provide whole-body support in sudden stop.

Ultimately, Foster sisters departed Klamath Falls around noon, headed for Bellingham. Only two-hour flight. Last stop before departing Lower 48.

Maggie untroubled by harness; perhaps reminds her of tracking leather. Required her to sit in seat, wear it only for takeoff, landing. Rest of time allowed her to wander cabin at will.

However, appears to like flying every bit as much as car riding. Spent majority of time sitting up in copilot's seat, peering out windows, nudging me for occasional scratch.

And smiling.

\* \* \* \*

Bellingham stop uneventful. Landed; fueled, serviced plane; ate.

Then experimented briefly with Weldon's voice commands, hand-signals. Pleased to discover Maggie knew every single one; responded flawlessly, no matter what maneuver asked her to perform.

Pleased but a little surprised: Not unreasonable to expect itinerant, lost-and-found BC to have regarded some of Weldon's commands as puzzling.

"Classical" herding system developed originally in Scotland; command structure tends to serve as boilerplate pattern worldwide. However, by the time trainers have brought dogs to Maggie's level of performance, most will have developed own unique variations on theme.

But apparently Maggie's owner/handler had trained under same grand master who had influenced Weldon; matched/followed Wisconsin dairy-farmer's system to the letter. No foolin'; if had been working with actual sheep, cows, could have had them square dancing in five minutes. Maggie that good.

Rewarded BC thereafter by playing Frisbee with her for two solid hours before bedtime. Maggie breathing almost normally by conclusion, eyes still laughing. By contrast, elder sister's throwing arm nearly ready to fall off.

Plan to take off for Ketchikan at first light. Tad over 600 miles; easy three-hour hop. Only challenges relate to potential pitfalls facing unlucky aviatrix in event of engine failure: Canadian west coast pretty much unsettled even prior to depopulation. Road count on nonexistent side of few. What towns existed were mostly water-/aircraft-dependent. Far between.

Terrain unforgiving: wrinkly, largely fjordic; multiple "arms of the sea" outlined by jaggedy cliffs, mostly low but heavily forested mountains.

Cruise-line-frequented waterway, euphemistically known as Bellingham-Ketchikan Marine Highway, wanders among mountainous offshore island chain extending from ... well ... Bellingham to Ketchikan. Most popular views from touristy ships related to whale watching, glaciers, scenic cliffs, etc.

But darned little in way of emergency landing accommodations for distressed aviators.

If get to Ketchikan in time to fuel, service plane by noon, Anchorage only four hours' flight beyond. True, slightly longer hop; will burn two-thirds of fuel load as opposed to half. But still well within absolute, no-reserve, 1200-mile cruising range, and cannot imagine finding less than unlimited fuel at Anchorage.

Of course, if Ketchikan stop should take longer than expected, will just spend night there; move on in morning. Not as if have schedule. Only considerations are weather, daylight.

(Ketchikan. Ketchikan-Ketchikan-Ketchikan. Tee-hee—fun word. Ketchikan...)

Hmm. Guess am really tired.

Good night, Posterity.

\* \* \* \*

Day III

Wonder if Northwest Canadians, Alaskans ever tired of being surrounded by gorgeous scenery 24 hours a day. Possible, I guess.

Personally, in no danger of satiation yet. Every time turn head, see something else just too darned beautiful for words: mountains, glaciers, forests, oceans, fjords, lakes, rivers—and more mountains, glaciers, forests, oceans, etc....

Ketchikan experience rivaled do-it-yourself NASCAR pit stop: Brim-full Jet-A fuel truck with charged-up battery (even came with own ladder) parked right there on ramp adjacent to fully stocked parts department. Fueling took ten minutes; topping up fluids another three.

Except for potty break, lunch (and hour-long Frisbee session for you-know-who), could have been back in air in 15 minutes.

As was, departed Ketchikan by 11:00; touched down in Anchorage just before 3:00, where found another Michelin Guide five-star, stocked-way-beyond-frontier-class airport.

Spent three hours prior to dinner, even before Frisbee session, taking advantage of local, fully equipped, bush "airline's" service facilities to give Stallion extra-thorough going-over in preparation for tomorrow's 600-mile-plus flight over trackless Alaskan interior wilderness.

Destination: Wales, small town, smaller airport, at very point of Bering Strait (Alaskan Airports Guide describes accommodations as "basic," but promises ample supplies of Jet-A).

Also stocked up with couple dozen cans of turbine oil, gearbox lubricant, plus hydraulic fluid for constant-speed prop, extra fuel & oil filters, igniter components, etc.; sorts of goodies unlikely to be found in abundance if find self nonscheduledly parked in unmarked clearing at heart of Alaskan outback, much less amidst desolation sure to encounter on far side of Strait.

Final step: Uncased, assembled massive Barrett 50-caliber sniper rifle. Had debated whether to bring huge, almost cartoonish weapon at all. Grosses, for heaven's sake, almost half what Intrepid Special-Ops girl does: Manual lists 34.6 pounds. Feels even heavier in field, but that's attributable in part to five-pound contents of Wallace's custom-fabricated 20-shot magazines, stuffed full of five-and-a-half-inch-long, quarter-pound cartridges. Standing on end, rifle only inch shorter than self: 57 inches from butt to muzzle brake.

Under most circumstances, less than ideal weapon for 11-year-old—all I can do just to hold it up, using classic freehand stance: standing, butt against shoulder, front grip supported (ha!) by left arm only. Can't begin to steady sights long enough in that position to hit anything at any distance.

On other hand, weight not unmixed curse: All that mass, combined with recoiling barrel and extraction-action assembly cushioned against cleverly opposing spring and buffer mechanism, in addition to remarkably efficient muzzle brake, does sop up incredible amount of recoil. Net effect only little more punishing than 12-gauge shotgun. Which is to say, plenty to dump unprepared 85-pound shooter on duff, as learned first time fired one freehand.

(Danni's imperfectly suppressed smile more annoying than belly-laugh—never happened again.)

As practical matter, however, only way can shoot this (only technically portable) personal field-artillery piece accurately is prone or from bench rest, using built-in bipod muzzle support, or, standing, with height-adjustable post-and-crotch pole holding up noisy end.

However, notwithstanding gripes, really have come to enjoy firing Barrett. Under Danni's supervision, have garnered modestly encouraging results: With big scope, no-wind conditions, shooting prone or bench, have repeatedly achieved three-inch groups at one mile; six inches at mile and half.

(Danya does her quietly frightening best to conceal inappropriate pride over preteen apprentice assassin's previously unsuspected aptitude for reach-way-out-and-touch-someone-style homicide, but somehow always does seem to come up in conversations with her colleagues.)

However, monstrous bangstick's presence on mission not due merely to anticipated need for long-range slaughter.

Motivation far more basic.

Yes, Posterity; Candy Smith-Foster—Intrepid Girl Adventurer—pathologically, deathly, just plain terrified of polar bears.

(Okay, can stop laughing now. Hey, not kidding—traumatized young person here!)

See, expedition's itinerary calls for spending several nights in Ursus Maritimus' territory.

Beginning tomorrow.

Now, to be fair, never been attacked by polar bear. In fact, never actually even met one in person; not even in zoo.

However, over time, neurosis-motivated research has turned up far more information regarding big white eating machines' attributes than ever wanted to know.

And for whatever reason, ever since earliest childhood, giant, flame-eyed, tusk-studded, saliva-dripping, shaggy white phantasms have starred in some of Yours Truly's better, more lastingly psyche-scarring, recurrent nightmares. Few of life's experiences are less restful than whole night spent fleeing in slow motion through pink, baby-blue, and fleecy-white cotton-candy arctic terrain (somehow always in neighborhood of towering, red/white-spiral-striped, candy-cane-style North Pole), with 11-foot-long, 1800-pound, highly intelligent, single-mindedly hungry carnivore nipping unstopably at heels.

(All right; nipping unstopably—usually wearing futuristic, wrap-around Foster Grants. Often with WWI flying ace's silk scarf around neck. Sometimes adorned with jaunty beret; alternating with menacingly ghetto-style backward baseball cap. Once showed up on Plucky Girl Psych-Eval Candidate's trail wearing classic Native American full war bonnet.)

But always smiling. Always drooling. Always licking lips.

And never more than three floatingly slow-motion bounds behind....

Practical bear-related consideration for lugging Barrett along on expedition, however, is fact that smallest, least motivated adult polar bear on planet could rip open Stallion's lightweight aluminum structure easier than I used to pop open Happy Meal boxes.

(Ooo ... could have lived long, happily fulfilled life without dredging up that image.)



Now, manifestly, odds on hitting charging white ursine freehand at any real distance comparable to winning PowerBall. (Remember? Back when lotteries existed?) But if should spot mobile appetite approaching in time, can use post-and-crotch support.

And even freehand, if target shows too much interest, gets scary close—absodamntively guarantee 20 two-inch-long, half-inch-thick, Hydra-Shok-type expanding slugs, each traveling at almost 3000 feet per second, will drain enthusiasm from biggest, baddest, hungriest (most stylishly attired) polar bear in or out of my nightmares.

However, regardless of explanation (rationale? excuse?), no doubt whatever, big gun's presence—assembled, loaded, conveniently at hand—will render tomorrow night's stopover at Wales (and subsequent three, four nights in northern Asia) more restful.

As will Maggie's wonderful, ever-twitching canine nose, marvelously sensitive ears.

\* \* \* \*

Day IV

Held off departure until nearly ten to give ground fog time to burn off. (Maggie didn't care: Leap, bound, gambol, frolic—crispy, cool mornings simply made for Frisbee.)

Finally launched into horizon-to-horizon crystal clear blue sky, settled down on course for Bering Strait, tiny seaside community of Wales.

Once again, Alaskan vistas simply breath-taking: Air so clear, snow-capped Mount McKinley & Associates in sight for over an hour; from shortly after takeoff to well after passed abeam, receded astern. Much gorgeous mountainscape to admire.

Thereafter, terrain began to descend, level, transition to endless expanses of solid forest, speckled with hundreds of lakes, multiple trceries of rivers.

By focusing attention narrowly (i.e., ignoring virtual nonexistence of safe potential

emergency landing opportunities for non-floatplanes), one could regard landscape as very pretty indeed.

Now, technically speaking, turbines' strictly rotary components don't actually beat. Addressing issue metaphorically, however, Stallion never missed one. Leveled off at optimum 13,000-foot cruising altitude. Airspeed edged up to 188 knots, though GPS true-speed readings showed Arctic Circle tradewinds cutting into groundspeed by nearly 35 knots, making trip take longer, use more fuel.

Still, well within flightplanning reserves as exited from tip of peninsula dividing Norton Sound from Norton Bay. Actual over-water flight no biggie; hardly twenty miles. From altitude, could have glided to dry landing from any point in crossing.

Comparable, in fact, to contemplated Bering Strait passage: Two potentially wet-feet legs of 24, 22 miles respectively, with pair of small islands, Diomedes, at halfway point. Followed by official Siberian Welcome Station: "All the seal blubber you can eat...." (Okay, yes, made that last part up.)

Anyway, barely an hour later found us circling Wales area at low altitude, admiring ramshackle collection of small buildings comprising pair of adjacent colorful (in desolate, barren, seashore-tundra sort of way) northern Alaskan small towns (Wales, Kingegan), cute little landlocked lagoon, tidy little airstrip...

(Oh, all right! Yes, scouting for polar bears. Happy now...?)

Landing uneventful, apart from Maggie's demonstration of how observant she is; how quickly picks up on even subtlest details of Life On (airborne) Road: Fuzzy sister dozed in back as I spent final half hour gradually letting down from 13,000-foot cruise to 500-foot height-above-ground altitude for local wildlife survey prior to landing.

But very moment decided to initiate approach, reached for flaps, trim controls to set up approach, canine cohort returned to copilot seat in single bound; then, without coaching, settled tush on cushion, leaned against seat back, thereby assuming position for convenient harness reattachment.

Mind you, Posterity, only her third flight. Known people who didn't learn that quickly....

\* \* \* \*

Based on geographic coordinates alone, Wales lies only four and a third longitudinal degrees farther north than Anchorage (65 degrees 37' N vs. 61 degrees 13' N). Turns out, however, geography and weather employ degrees in very different fashions—at least 30 real-world degrees colder here. Nippy temperatures combined with seriously raw onshore breeze to drill through every gap in clothing, real or imagined, moment set foot outside plane.

Though reasonably confident, following aerial recon, no polar bears immediately in offing, stood armed guard with M-1 in case of wolves, other smaller predators, while Maggie took advantage of convenient modesty bush for postflight relief.

Shivering from head to foot by time made it back inside plane. Rooted through duffle, dug out first planned stratum of warmer clothing: flannel-lined denim jacket, pants; poofy thick socks.

Chilly temperatures hardly unexpected, given locales through which course necessarily leads, so have made advance preparations. As we skirt Arctic Ocean (for roughly next 2,000 miles), will add additional layers to trousseau as goosebumps mandate: longjohns, flannel shirts, sheepskin-lined leather jacket. Several additional layers available, up to all-out Eskimo stealth mode: camo-colored, down-filled, hooded parka, matching pants; insulated snowmobile-type gloves, boots.

Maggie, on other hand, wasn't part of predeparture planning. Eyed her thoughtfully. Notwithstanding fairly widely held opinions of ignorant, uneducated (also questionably sapient and thankfully now dead) keep-'em-fenced-or-chained-outdoors pet owners of yore, nothing inherently coldproof about dogs. In fact, as temperatures approach freezing, hypothermia becomes factor. Below about 20, foot protection becomes increasingly necessary to prevent frostbite.

Resolved to keep close eye on canine companion as mercury sags; improvise stylish puppy jacket from some of my stuff if necessary.

Smiled then. Wondered how temperate-climate-raised, fleet-footed, furry Best Friend would view chasing Frisbees while wearing sled-dog-style, fur-lined booties.

My reflective gaze returned by mischief sparkling from The Eye (technically, both of them). Maggie snatched up Frisbee. Wagged tail. Looked hopeful. Unblinkingly so.

For the moment at least, concerns clearly wasted. Capersome canine obviously finds current brisk temperatures invigorating, if not downright enjoyable.

(Of course, to be objective, Maggie finds wakefulness invigorating, worthy of unflagging, gleeful enthusiasm—unblinking stare....)

\* \* \* \*

Day V

Despite surroundings, potential unwelcome guest list; despite night spent clutching Maggie in one arm, Barrett in other, managed not to dream of polar bears.

However nattily attired.

Unfortunately, morning turned out to be not only below-freezingly brisk, but proximity to ocean, absence of breeze, combined to produce thick coating of hoarfrost: on propeller, wings, tail group airfoils; fuselage, windshield, windows—everywhere.

With no way to de-ice. Save by hand-scraping every square inch of aerodynamically active surfaces; not to mention windshield—which latter component would have emerged from experience scratched opaque beyond usefulness.

And while personally have never encountered icing conditions during brief if intense piloting career, Lennel, as well as (during week's shuttle training prior to orbital mission launch), Harris and others with real experience, did share war stories; cumulative impact of which thoroughly canalized Plucky Girl Flying Ace's psyche regarding Evils & Potential Consequences of Flying in Icing Conditions. Moral of every one of which could be summarized tidily: Don't!

So waited until nearly noon for temperatures to rise sufficiently (if just barely) above freezing; first to melt, then evaporate every nubbin of frost adhering to every square inch of all flying surfaces: wings/flaperons, stabilizers/elevators, vertical fin/rudder, prop, plus windshield (the better to see through you, my dear).

By takeoff, a few patches still remained on ship's belly. But not of aerodynamic significance; not about to wait forever.

Besides, really wanted to get Bering Strait behind us while weather gods smiled, however coolly. Retain unpleasant memories of pre-Armageddon TV special concerning hazards of commercial fishing in northernmost Pacific. Narrator described activities as most dangerous job in world:

Freakish, all but unpredictable meteorological conditions—frequently below-fresh-water-freezing ocean temperatures, together with almost randomly shifting winds; waves so confused, due to many nearby land masses, as to all but moot expression, “weather patterns”—combine to make chances of survival in event of sinking, or even man-overboard, equate to wishful thinking.

Prognosis similarly bleak for passengers of aircraft forced down into wind-tossed, gunmetal-gray, frigid waters.

Nonetheless, with head held high (posture mandated partially by need to see over Stallion's instrument panel), maintained stiff upper lip whole way across.

Though could not help trying to “sit lightly.”

While Maggie napped.

\* \* \* \*

Volume IV

If Today is Tuesday,

This Must Be Chelyabinsk

Everything in life is compromise. Flight over potentially hostile terrain especially so; “hostile” in this context referring to dearth of relatively level ground upon which to execute emergency landing—issue quite separate from natives’ intentions.

Remaining at 13,000 feet would improve nonscheduled landing prospects, likewise allow overflying modestly upthrust terrain with reasonable degree of safety. However, higher we fly, more we face risk of radar detection—or unfriendly eyeballs, for that matter, particularly if weather conditions at altitude cause Stallion to emit contrail....

Staying low, on other hand—say 1,000 feet or less above ground—cuts down on naked-eye/microwave detection hazard radius, but also minimizes opportunities to come up with clever solution, identify survivable landing site, in event aircraft suddenly becomes very quiet.

Which brings up related problem: Turbine’s wail at cruise, though different from reciprocating engines’ drone, most unlikely to be heard on ground from optimum altitude, whereas down low, depending upon wind direction, engine noise audible for probably five, ten miles both sides of flight path.

Contemplated factors, rolled dice, sighed—chose low road.

Downside: Trip going to take lots longer. Will be detouring around, f’instance, any bodies of water spanning more than about five miles across, since won’t be high enough to glide to safety In Event Of; plus, of course, for same reason, need to follow flattest terrain available; i.e., no adventurous mountain-pass flying....

Accordingly, at halfway point between Diomed Islands and Siberia, started gradual altitude bleed-off. Gauged remaining height; kept enough in hand, as closed on coastline, to be able to glide to dry land from any point in descent. Completed overwater passage’s final mile just 1,000 feet above wavetops.

First Siberian soil to pass beneath wheels: easternmost tip of barren, semimountainous wart of tundra projecting toward Americas from equally barren eastern end of Chukchi Peninsula. Crossed surf just north of ghost community listed on charts as Naukan.

Adjusted flight path northwesterly as we came ashore, aiming generally for point where Bering Strait coast bends southward in vicinity of little town named Enurmino.

First, though, course briefly skirted stumpy peninsulette's southern coast. Then, shortly after landfall, Bering coast angled off southward, leaving us headed inland. Route soon converged upon, intersected with, paralleled Chukchi coastline, which served as almost geometrically straight-line VFR navigation aid.

First leg, from Wales, Alaska, USA, to Izba Tynupytku, Siberia, totaled some 400-plus miles, as crow flies. Not, however, flying as crow.

Because not crow. Am, in fact, "the very model of a modern major," er, aviatrix. (Sorry, ghosts of Messrs. Gilbert/Sullivan.) Cutting-edge-advanced, GPS-linked, big-screen "glass cockpit" primary flight-information displays offers many advantages over old-style compass/dead-reckoning/landmarks navigation. Among benefits: emancipation from punctiliously steered compass courses connecting points A, B.

With GPS-linked PFID, always know where we are; never lose basic orientation between self, ultimate objective. Can weave, wander, meander, juke, dido, dodge to, fro to heart's content to stay over relatively favorable potential emergency landing terrain, all the while remaining aware of directestmost course to, distance from, destination.

Following careful chart study, have determined best bet is to hug coast until all significant mountain ranges lie behind us; until can lay nearly great-circle course for south-central Urals without having to cross significantly rough, inhospitable terrain.

Probably not coincidentally, most settled areas in these desolate regions, not to mention airports at which can fuel, service plane, seem to have grown up along coastline, though charts reflected sprinkling of villages along rivers in more inland locations.

Shortly after regaining coast, crossed two more bays opening onto Chukchi Sea. First

hardly more than tidal lake; second resembled low-sided fjord. Neither triggered elevated “over-water” blood pressure.

After passing Enurmino, some 50 miles farther east, coast curved more westerly, then broke up into string of low, almost barrier-island-type formations separating bay/harbor on left from Chukchi on right.

Not quite 50 miles beyond that, we hop-scotched out along another sketchy chain of islands leading most of the way across bay sufficiently long, broad to have been named on charts: Ostrova Serykh Gusey.—No, wait; seem to recall ostrov means island. Name probably refers to rocky landmass near bay mouth.

Transliterated Russian chart identifiers consistently unhelpful in that regard. Hate being, in effect, functionally illiterate like this...!

Thereafter course edged back north to coastline, following chilly gray surf along another string of barrier islands, which played out at little town listed as Ryrkaypiy, which marked tip of big, scallopy bight off Chukchi Sea, necessitating brief westward detour.

Arriving shortly thereafter at Izba Tynupytku, first performed low, slow, vicinity flyover, local polar bear survey. Determined none in immediate proximity. Landed, fueled, serviced, tied down plane.

This far north (69 degrees, 15' north latitude), summer days lots longer. Despite just under five hours' flight since icing-delayed noon departure from Wales, landing at Izba Tynupytku found sun still well above western horizon. (Actually, more on order of north-north-northwestern horizon.)

So had dinner, conducted protracted Frisbee session by way of apologizing to Maggie for long, boring day; grudgingly endured canine dervish's enthusiastic response to raw, horrid, cutting-to-bone breeze driving off ocean—which, despite all this “Chukchi Sea” nonsense, really is no more than southern fringe of Arctic Ocean.

(Somewhere out across which, according to more authoritative Old Wives' Tales, Norse gods invented, handed down original concept of cold.)



\* \* \* \*

## Day VI

Good morning, Posterity.

Happily (seldom has adjective been so narrowly focused), though temperatures overnight dipped into teens, relative lack of humidity (despite ocean's proximity) mostly prevented frosted-up wings, windshield: patch here, speckles there; nothing worth delaying takeoff for.

Maggie got me up shortly after sunrise. We had breakfast followed by another Frisbee session. Frisbees fly well in dense air generated by subfreezing temperatures. On other hand, Frisbees thoroughly slimed with dog spit seriously cold to bare fingers' touch. Thank heavens for foil-pouched Handi Wipes.

Periodically throughout session, checked Maggie's feet. But no signs of frostbite; no diminution of enthusiasm. Guess weather still within BC's operating parameters.

Wish my parameters so tolerant. Added several additional layers of clothing, but suspect will never be warm again.

Turbine fired off promptly despite bracing temperatures, then we launched again into blue.

Planned midday destination this time much closer, in as-crow-flies distance: Rauchua, at mouth of good-sized river (do wish chart-makers had bothered to identify smaller landmarks), only about 300 miles in straight line. But huge bay in between necessitates detour; actual flight distance closer to 450.

\* \* \* \*

Siberian coastal tundra, even with low mountainscape generally visible on left, Chukchi Sea dominating view on right, not most inspiringly scenic vista have ever overflowed. Usually when

flying low, candid glimpses of wildlife on ground, opportunity to observe otherwise inaccessible terrain, keeps interest piqued (or arguably, around mountains, peaking—or even peeking: down into long-gone residents' backyards).

Regardless of spelling, however, flight over tundra generates little interest. Endless flight over rolling, essentially featureless grassy expanse terminating in surf pounding at rocks on one side, blending with age-softened, nondescript big hills/low mountains on other, unlikely to make way to apex of list of Sights Without Which Life is Not Complete.

In fact, staying awake actually became issue. Switched off autopilot; hand-flew for several hours just to keep eyelid margins above pupils.

Was a bit surprised to discover how closely coastal mountains regularly approached water's edge. In places, safe emergency landing sites not as abundant as expected, though nowhere nearly as scarce as along Canadian/Alaskan west coast.

However, turbine continued to wail (more a hum, actually, inside cabin); miles continued to tick off, 200 every hour; and eventually we came upon, then detoured around, huge bay; landed at Rauchua well before noon.

No polar bears there either.

Shortly after takeoff, skinned past mountain-wannabe ridge reaching almost to water's edge at seaside town labeled Dvurechye. Bent course slightly southward at that point to skirt broad bay into which huge Kolmya River system emptied.

Thereafter, terrain became slightly more varied: laced with streams, dotted with lakes. Crossed another major river identified as Alazeva; skirted some more rolling lands. Ultimately dead-centered Shevelela airfield, located at point at which Indigirka River's delta commences.

Landed, serviced, tied down plane. Ate. Frisbeed. Went to bed well before sunset.

\* \* \* \*

## Day VII

First half of morning's flight was over territory reminiscent of Alaska's northwestern outback: endless expanse of patchy plains, forests, speckled with lakes, streams. We hooked around tip of big V-shaped bay opening onto More Laptevykh (yet another euphemistic attempt to make Arctic Ocean sound warmer).

Hugged coast all the way to town called Sokol, on point of land beginning Lena River delta: massive sprawl of channels, islands, etc., which also ultimately dumps into More Laptevykh.

Performed routine polar bear sweep; landed, serviced plane. Ate, frisbeed Maggie. Launched again.

Terrain desolate as followed Lena's westernmost main channel to exit into More Laptevykh at Ulakhan-Krest. Then headed just south of due west across mostly fertile-looking flatlands, landing some 800 miles later at Chemaya, on Pyasina River, where, slightly cross-eyed after roughly 1,400 miles, over eight hours' flying time, called it quits for night.

\* \* \* \*

Kim Mellon's Journal:

If I were a proper mother (or maybe even a decent person), I would never even have considered taking Lisa with us on this mission—I mean, she's six, for heaven's sake!

However, unnatural mother and terrible person that I am, it never occurred to me, until much later, even to question the fact that everyone, including Lisa herself, had simply, unquestioningly assumed she's going. After all, Terry is full-time mindlinked with Candy; obviously he's going so we can keep track of her. And Lisa, mind- and emotion-linked to him, usually is able to clarify Candy's oftentimes cryptic Terry-relayed observations, as well as her sometimes even more ambiguous dictated communications.

In addition, of course, in the absence of our favorite, if most worrisome, adopted sister, Lisa

is the primary designated caretaker of Candy's "retarded adopted twin brother." So of course she's going.

Actually, she's been more than earning her passage: Almost single-handedly my amazing baby daughter has been monitoring and memorializing Candy's progress via Terry's mindlink during our superkid sister's every waking moment virtually since she left. Lisa hasn't tried to cherry-pick what to record; she has taken down in Pitman shorthand every single word to come out of Terry's beak since Candy's departure.

Like long-departed court reporters of my past acquaintance, her theory is that we can discard anything which, upon leisurely review, we conclude is merely the product of Terry's everyday rambling; however, she points out more than a little snidely, it would be difficult in the extreme to retrieve something that hadn't been written down but which we might realize, after-the-fact and only dimly remembered, was in fact Candy-related.

Thanks to Lisa's efforts, we know where Candy is within a fair degree of accuracy, as well as how her expedition is developing. If everything goes as planned—hers as well as ours—we should get there in time to intercept her, keep her out of trouble, as well as retrieve her foster father.

Toward that end, Adam has thrown himself into the operation with an intensity that those who haven't had previous occasion to observe him in one of these nonstop berserker states find at least eye-opening, if not actually a little alarming.

He's joined Kelli Watts and "Watts" Washington Kelly, our two best particle/wave scientist/engineers, and me (I was an electrical engineer Before, specializing in computers), in the care and feeding of the intelligence-sniffing/analysis installations aboard the Globemasters.

If it weren't for the tension, working with Kelli and Watts would be almost too much fun. They're a visually spectacular, pepper-and-salt couple who maintain a deadpan running joke based upon the potential confusion arising from their names: an "assumption" that no one can tell them apart—this notwithstanding their relative pigmentation; she's one of the darkest-skinned people I've ever met, whereas he's an Icelandic blond whose hair, in direct sunlight, is probably visible from orbit.

Apart from the circumstances, watching Adam work with us (them, really) would be a treat, because people who are as smart as he is always bring out the best in him. Somehow the implied competition hones his talents: His concentration intensifies; his eyes become

almost predatory; his processing of available information begins to blur the line between deduction and augury.

In this case, in only three days' "tinkering," with hardly more than an opportunity to learn his way around the hard- and software, he's achieved a significant increase in static suppression and signal isolation, which in effect boosts monitoring range and signal discrimination.

Of course, Adam's primary, unblinking focus is on finding Candy, keeping her out of trouble, or, if things have already progressed beyond that point, rescuing her, so those competitive tendencies are further sharpened by his nearly berserker-level intensity.

Then there's Adam the gourmet chef: Age notwithstanding, the boy is simply one of the finest chefs on the planet. According to Candy, all he has to do is wander through a kitchen, lift pot lids, and sniff contents, and somehow everything tastes better. Originally I thought she was engaging in hyperbole (no!—Candy?), but thereafter I personally witnessed the phenomenon, had the opportunity gratefully to sample the result, then found myself almost in mourning over the realization that we'd eaten it all.

Needless to say, therefore, everyone is delighted that he's also helping Kinsella Woodson, one of our food-services magicians, retool the big planes' on-board galleys to feed the couple hundred or so of our people who are going along during what's expected to be a protracted field operation, and he'll almost certainly participate regularly in food preparation.

(At which point I can almost hear Candy interject, "And the crowd went wild....")

On the actual mission-planning front, Teacher, Wallace, Danya, and Peter have spent the past several days going over everything we know about the Khraniteli and their Serdtsevina Rasovyi base, and teasing ever-finer resolution from satellite imagery. In one recent photo I saw, you can tell that, not only is the driver of an open vehicle not wearing a hat, but that he's attempted a comb-over and really shouldn't have. However, thus far they have not seen anyone who might be Marshall Foster.

Not counting the thermonuclear warheads, which, regardless of how safely they're packed, we all tend to give a lot of elbow room, it takes a great deal of materiel—weapons, ammunition, selected combat and cargo vehicles, spares for the planes, as well as living supplies—to fill up a C-17, never mind two of them, but provisioning is well under way.

We're scheduled to leave tomorrow at noon. At the C-17s' four-hundred-fifty-knot cruise (which translates to almost five hundred twenty miles an hour in my more old-fashioned frame of reference), the voyage will take about fourteen hours' actual flying time. And though the cruising range of one of these flying behemoths is about five thousand miles, Wallace plans two conservative runs of about twenty-five hundred and three thousand miles each, with refueling stops at Anchorage, Alaska, and Norilsk, a major Russian military base with which he's had experience.

A thousand miles after that will bring us to Kamensk-uralskiy, a civilian airfield located only some hundred fifteen miles from Serdtsevina Rasovyi, which he and Danya have selected as our operations center.

Between refueling and maintenance, the stops will add a good four or five hours to the trip.

Still, if everything goes as planned, we should arrive in-theater at about the same time Candy does. Then, eavesdropping via Terry, we'll zero in on her and, as Danni expressionlessly puts it, "invite" her back into the fold and keep her out of trouble while we locate Doctor Foster, if he's there, and clean out that Khraniteli nest.

Sure. That's just how it'll work. I mean, it's not as if there's any potential for something to go wrong....

\* \* \* \*

Volume V

Welcome Wagon

Candy's Journal:

Day VIII

This is bad, Posterity. Too early in mission to be getting this sloppy. But how else to explain this morning's security implosion?

Maggie woke big sister shortly after sunrise. Stretched, extracted self from sleeping bag. Retrieved M-1, popped open door, descended from ship, performed customary 360-degree, hungry-fauna scan, with usual negative results.

Thereafter, yawning demurely, scratching elegantly, rifle dangling absently from one hand, stumbled over to little environmentally friendly recycling pit excavated previous evening amongst scattered bushes/trees demarking airport's border.

Almost before Yours Truly had managed to undo belt, allow dignity to drop around ankles, Assume Position—and catch breath from initial thrill after brisk Siberian morning zephyr's caress raised goosebumps on skin unaccustomed to such familiarity—Maggie had completed own business without recourse to pit (“Real dogs don’ nee’ no steenking pit!”). Thereafter BC frisked back, companionably plunked down within convenient scritchng distance, settled in to wait for slower-starting human metabolism to complete appointed rounds.

Thereafter, while passing ... er ... time, peeled off appropriate length of tissue, and, following brief wrestling match with breeze, managed to fold neatly. Placed roll on ground, laid folded tissue packet on top, with Swiss Army universal appliance weighing it down. Then transferred attention to horizon, concentrated on thinking tranquil thoughts, attaining that all-important thousand-yard stare. Had time to wish had brought book.

Just finishing personal tidying-up phase when noticed Maggie's tail had shifted into high gear; plus BC's attention seemed to have switched from usual fond-if-intense gaze at elder sister to characteristically focused working-dog stare at something located beyond my shoulder, when—

“Good morning,” offered softly rusty-sounding male voice from somewhere behind me. “I love mornings, don't you? The colors are so bright and vibrant, and every breath is full of the scents of the night.”

Only just managed not to fall backward into pit during burst of enthusiasm surrounding abruptly refocused attention. In single motion, readjusted trousseau while scooping up M-1. Spun as rose, one hand leveling rifle, snapping off safety, seeking target, while other hand, in fumbling, distinctly after afterthought, buckled belt.

Whereupon, discovered, almost invisible in camos against bushes/trees background, slightly rotund, white-haired, -bearded, somehow elfish-looking individual, seated some thirty feet away on clever one-legged golfing stool/cane, rifle slung across back, faced three-quarters away, currently engrossed in elaborately detailed study of far horizon, apparently in deference to Plucky Girl Adventurer's prior state of dishabille.

"I think," mused new acquaintance wistfully, speech betraying no more accent than someone raised just up street from own house in Wausippi, "that of our regular imports, I miss the softness of that lovely American toilet paper most of all."

With which, apparently picking up my movement from peripheral vision, stranger rotated slowly on golf seat, like slightly worn, gnome-on-a-stick weathervane. Happy smile lit face as completed turn, our eyes met; not so much ignoring M-1 lined up on center of mass as apparently uninterested.

"Please forgive me," he said in tone conveying more amusement than apology, "for startling you. With my attention directed away from you, I misinterpreted the sound effects accompanying your activities to indicate that you were entirely finished. The intrusion was unintended.

"Let me introduce myself: Long ago, my parents, the Rozhdestvos, named me Otekh. However, by the end of my first few decades of operating the toy factory, people tended to call me Igrushka Izgotovlenie, which in English more or less means Toymaker. Then, of course, as I grew older, they began to call me Otets Igrushkayami, which translates loosely, though almost as compactly in English, to Father Toys. I suspect either translation will roll more easily off your American-educated tongue than either my name or the Russian versions of my nicknames."

Opened mouth to interject question; then realized Father Toys' cheerful rambling covering much of what would have wanted to grill him about anyway.

"Passing through the area late yesterday afternoon, I noticed your aircraft's approach. And may I say," he added, cocking approving eye, "your landing was very smoothly executed. My own sorely missed corporate pilots could have done no better.

"As you emerged, I noted your alertness, weapons, and your evident skill in handling them. It seemed to me that suddenly appearing and approaching might alarm you, to our mutual



detriment. So I remained out of sight, and also stayed downwind to be certain that your dog would not scent me. For the balance of the evening I merely kept watch, to be sure neither of you would be surprised by a bear or wolves. In the absence of poachers, the populations of both have begun to recover nicely in this region. This can be a mixed blessing.

“After you reentered your plane at sunset and failed to come out again within a reasonable interval, I assumed you had gone to sleep. I spent the night on a surprisingly comfortable couch in what once was the airport manager’s office.

“Early this morning I returned, settled down here at what I hoped you would regard as a sufficiently nonthreatening distance, and waited quietly for you to waken, emerge, and notice me. My hope, by appearing as innocuous as possible, was to get us through introductions without incident.”

Russian smiled apologetically. “And indeed, just as I planned, you appeared and promptly headed my way. I thought you had seen me. I was just about to introduce myself—when your sudden swoop placed me in a most awkward social position.”

Could not repress giggle. “Not as awkward as mine.” Despite best intentions, found self cautiously warming to Father Toys. On subtle levels, reminded me of Harris, Wallace, Teacher, other older AA males.

Grin spread across Father Toys’ slightly cherubic features. “I shall not debate the issue. Beyond any doubt, there was ample awkwardness to go around.”

But at that point, one of those endlessly fretting, loose-ends-noticing brain cells, with which have been saddled practically from birth, awoke, contributed observation: “Wait. Before I said a word, you greeted me in English; you called me American-educated. How did you guess that?”

Russian’s smile widened further. “Never mind the clues represented by the English lettering and numbers on your American-manufactured Helio aircraft. Here you are—forgive me; I mean this as a compliment, not as condescension—so young but flying a comparatively very large airplane all by yourself. After landing, you immediately fueled and serviced it. By yourself. Only thereafter did you play with your wonderfully clever dog. After you both ate, you went straight to bed without displaying more than a security interest in your surroundings.

“All in all, yours were not the actions of a tourist; someone merely exploring or wandering randomly. Your conduct could hardly have been more businesslike. Obviously, in today’s depopulated world, someone of your age, so serious, heavily armed, so obviously capable—you are on a quest.” Toymaker’s eyes twinkled. “—Where but America could you have come from?”

Didn’t quite scuff toe aw-shucksly in dirt. “Uh ... thank you.”

Curiously, something about Toymaker—demeanor perhaps, or maybe appearance—motivated Plucky Girl Quester to remember manners at that point. “I’m Candy Smith-Foster. This is Maggie. It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Toymaker.”

Which certainly was the case from Maggie’s perspective: BC had already migrated to sit at new Best Friend’s side, chin on knee, enjoying what appeared to be old gentleman’s autonomic scritch in response.

And, though still proceeding cautiously, found was beginning to agree with her: Father Toys one of those people who are just intrinsically comfortable to be around.

Obviously invited him to join us for breakfast.

Unsurprisingly, accepted with grace.

To Maggie’s delight, company inspired Plucky Girl Flying Chef to go a bit beyond usual a.m. culinary efforts: Pulled out powdered eggs, last of bacon from travel fridge, pancake mix, syrup (not that BC got any of latter goodies); dug out, fired up Coleman.

As we chatted, and I enjoyed cozy sensation of cooking for, sharing with, someone other than self (and Maggie, always ready to share), found Danni-implanted interrogation lessons edging toward fore: First impressions notwithstanding, clearly needed to know more about Toymaker before lowering guard all the way.

So by way of “making conversation” (i.e., priming pump), observed, “You said you were ‘passing through’ the area yesterday afternoon. Are you exploring or just wandering randomly?”

Laugh-lines surrounding Father Toys' eyes crinkled with delight. "Wonderful," he responded happily; "you actually heard what I said. At your age. I wonder if you can appreciate how rare that was, even among adults, back before people became an endangered species.

"I am, of course, searching for survivors. Originally the process did almost constitute random wandering. However, in the months since I began, I've found there is a tendency for the same factors to affect where people live today as those that influenced the original establishment of most settlements in pioneering days. First, one needs water and reasonably decent soil.

"Hence my presence in Chemaya: The Pyasina"—Father Toys made vague gesture toward broad stream just out of sight beyond trees—"over there, is my second river. I have already enjoyed some success while making my way northward down the Yenisey: I found eighteen people, almost evenly divided between genders, ranging in age from slightly younger than you to about my age. Since transferring my attention to the Pyasina, I have located two more, one of each. I invited them to my home in Mikhaleva, in Kraznoyarsk, southern Siberia. So far all have accepted.

"I live on a very large farm on the river. In the bad old U.S.S.R. days, it was a collective, so it has accommodations for many, as well as a wide variety of tools, equipment—a broad spectrum of resources. It seems to me that the more of us we can band together, the better our chances of survival, particularly if we can establish a viable, self-supporting settlement.

"Likewise"—for briefest moment Toymaker's intrinsically merry expression faded—"it will be less lonely....

"It appears," he continued in somber tones after a moment's pause, "that fewer than two to three percent of the world's population have survived the plague."

"The actual figure is on the order of three and a half hundredths of a percent," I blurted, without thinking.

The Toymaker paused, eyed loose-lipped Intrepid Girl Expert Interrogator thoughtfully; then mischievous smile crept back across features. "So confident a delivery of such a precise number from someone so young ... perhaps there is even more to you than appears on the surface, remarkable as that seems."

Okay, Posterity; clearly had blown cover. Decided to throw caution to winds; provide full disclosure, but thereafter drill straight in for key information.

(Hoped revelation would not prove mistake. As just plain likeable as Father Toys appeared to be at first impression, did not look forward to having to terminate relationship “with prejudice”...)

“I suspect there’s more to you than you suspect, too,” I replied obliquely. Fixed him with unambiguously gimlet eye. “Have you ever been sick?”

Heart sank as Russian burst into laughter. “Oh, my goodness, yes! Within a day of the holocaust, I became so ill that I thought I would die, too. For a week I could keep nothing down; for a day I couldn’t even raise my head.”

Barely had time to wonder whether sweet old gent could actually be authentic survivor of heretofore 100-percent-lethal, H. sapiens-targeting, airborne bioweapon’s ferocity before he dropped other shoe: “You see, one of the problems of growing up the overly-protected son of a post-Soviet-Union-collapse-wealthy industrialist is that one can miss out on key life lessons. For instance, I now know that, no matter how hungry you get, you should never eat unrefrigerated mayonnaise....”

Plucky Girl Adventurer only partially successful in restraining unmannerly sputter of laughter at relief that flooded soul at explanation. Teacher had experienced similar affliction during attack (though certainly not from mayonnaise).

Beloved pedagogue had been under impression at the time (had never been tested) was H. sapiens himself; convinced was dying, soon to join rest of species on History’s Compost Heap. But symptoms had proved to be result of botulism toxins. Not even we are immune to bad food.

So pressed on: “Ever been sick otherwise? Measles? Chicken pox? Mumps? Flu? Colds?”

Toymaker shook head at each question. “Now that you mention it, no, not that I can think of. Ever.” Brow furrowed ever deeper. “That does seem odd, doesn’t it.”

“How did you do academically in school?”

Replied: Russian equivalent of straight A's.

“Did you compete in scholastic athletics?”

Had, and been darned good at it.

“And have you found that your night vision is better than almost anyone else's?”

By now Father Toys regarding me with undisguised amazement, not unmixed with alarm. “Who are you...?” he demanded finally.

In response, told him who he was: Gave him rundown on heritage as H. post hominem. Then told him who started war, to what end; finishing up by bringing up-to-date, to degree possible, regarding threat posed by remaining Khraniteli.

Took news well. Better, in fact, than had myself.

“Well, this explains some questions I've wondered about most of my life—and even some I hadn't thought of,” said Toymaker presently, shaking head slowly in wonderment.

“Though it doesn't,” he mused, eyeing me thoughtfully, “explain what a nice girl like you is doing in a place like this—clearly on course for that hellhole, Serdtsevina Rasovyi.”

Spontaneous, right-out-of-blue mention of said hellhole caught Plucky Girl Adventurer flatfooted, Posterity. Forgot manners entirely. Without answering his question, demanded to know how he knew about Serdtsevina Rasovyi—never mind unsettlingly accurate characterization!

Father Toys regarded me for long moments before answering. "I have been to Serdtsevina Rasovyi," he said slowly. "The miniaturized sensing, computing, and power-storage technology, and electric motor designs that we developed for our voice- and remote-controlled toys was fairly advanced. Almost a year before the attack, I was 'invited,' I thought by the central government, to attend a conference held there. I demonstrated some of our more advanced products for them."

Toymaker's pause continued well beyond point at which could be considered pregnant before continuing. "They were so impressed that they requested data on our technology. In those days, when the government requested information, one provided it." Expression darkened. "It is not beyond the realm of possibility that some of the technology I gave them that day contributed to the end of Mankind."

Sighed. Then glanced up with worried expression. "And if you please, again, what business do you have at Serdtsevina Rasovyi?"

Explained about Daddy. By conclusion, Father Toys' expression was picture of distress. "You are so young; you are so—please forgive my bluntness—tiny! What can you hope to accomplish there all by yourself?"

Without going into specifics, replied had picked up specialized training, which ought to be helpful. In afterthought, added was pretty good shot.

During recital, Toymaker's expression metamorphosed from distress to borderline horror to resignation to resolve. "Then perhaps this will be of assistance to you. I was escorted in and around most of that base. I have an excellent graphical memory; I recall the base in detail. Would a map of the layout be helpful to you?"

Indeed; base schematic had not been included in materials Wallace supplied.

Working freehand, Toymaker quickly produced positively draftsman-quality sketch in black ballpoint on reverse side of nonpertinent aviation chart.

"However," he added darkly, "please understand, apart from the buildings into which I was invited, I have no knowledge of what any of the other facilities are used for."

Finally, with everything aboard Stallion but Foster twins, Father Toys cleared throat self-consciously. Glanced at him inquiringly. Russian's expression clearly unhappy. "Would you like me to come with you on this quest to rescue your father?"

Oh, dear. If caught-with-pants-down situation had been awkward, in many ways this was worse. But Toymaker deserved straight answer. So, in hopes would provide it himself, asked, "Have you been in the military?"

Had; two years' compulsory service twenty years ago. Qualified as marksman on range.

"Have you had special-forces- or commando-type training?"

Uh, had not.

"Have you ever killed anyone in cold blood?"

Toymaker blinked; eyes went round. "No!"

Sighed. Or maybe shivered slightly. "I have."

Sudden, visibly horrified comprehension, sympathy appeared in sweet old Russian's eyes as Special-Ops Girl continued relentlessly: "My plan is to sneak in, kill any sentries in the way, find Daddy, and get him out. Unless you have training or experience in that type of operation—"

"I will undoubtedly just get you caught," Father Toys finished thought sadly.

Paused, eyed me reflectively; then rueful smile flickered across features. "I think perhaps it is fortunate that we have become friends...."

\* \* \* \*

As always, Plucky Girl Aviatrix's actual departure preceded by morning Frisbee. Toymaker proved expert backhand-flip practitioner; BC approved of technique. Approval lasted something over hour.

Eventually though, time to leave. Russian hugged me as if own kin. Finally released, stepped back with brimming, worried eyes—which of course set off your Humble Historiographer as well: Amazing, how quickly bonds form in depopulated world....

\* \* \* \*

Chelyabinsk, penultimate destination, selected after due deliberation. Respectable-sized city, though by no means huge. Charts, as well as between-the-lines interpolation of Danya/Wallace's notes/off-the-cuff observations confirmed presence of well-equipped airport.

Location, depth of resources fundamental to strategy:

First, though Chelyabinsk barely 50 crow-flies miles from heart of Serdtsevina Rasovyi, Bad Guys' big headquarters/shelter/lab beneath Urals' spine, single entrance to which is drilled into side of valley some 15 miles east of Zlatoust, does lie beyond foothills, far enough back to minimize detection odds, either electronically or, via random malchance (worse luck even than mis-), being observed by, stumbling into, some wandering Khranitel.

Next, irrevocably final opportunity to service, prepare plane for potentially protracted storage. Servicing needs to be thorough: Last stop prior to tiptoeing on foot into heart of enemy territory in all-out recon/infiltration mode.

Intend to delay refueling until morrow; depart directly from Chelyabinsk's pumps with utterly brim-full tanks, following very-last-second refueling session. Shan't leave even manual-recommended margin for fuel expansion due to heating by outside air—much warmer than nearly permafrosted soil under which tank farm resides.



Stallion's total fuel capacity, including Lennel's custom-fabricated, extra fuselage tank, listed at 360 gallons. By morning, fuel remaining in ship's tanks, following today's final run, should be chilled nearly to temperature of that waiting underground. If heat differential between belowground fuel stores, daytime air, provides expected nearly ten percent expansion, that amounts to close to 35 spontaneously generated additional gallons as fuel warms, expands.

Expect turbine's thirst to account for pretty much whatever excess may come into being from atmospheric warming during short hop from Chelyabinsk to Serdtsevina Rasovyi, which means, until point reached where expansion fails to replace that disappearing into engine, fuel level shouldn't drop at all. Of course, overflow vents will bleed off whatever engine doesn't consume.

Takeoff, final 50 miles' treetop-level flight, plus landing, should take (plus-minus) 15 minutes. Turbine consumes 50 gallons per hour, of which roughly 70 percent will be magically replaced during flight—clearly, if scheme works as advertised, will arrive at destination with tanks still brim-full; i.e., no trapped air.

(Mmm ... Why does sophisticated, thermodynamics-based, fluid engineering plan sound so much like excerpt from brochure for perpetual-motion device...?)

Better work, however, regardless whether physics or Alternate Forces responsible. Otherwise, could find self returning to plane following multiple days'—possibly weeks' or even months'—storage to find diurnally repetitious warming, cooling of trapped air has generated a gallon or five of H<sub>2</sub>O condensate, every drop needing to be drained prior to departure.

Normally, accumulated water not problematical. Presence expected; sump draining part of any normal preflight inspection.

However, if exit happens to be motivated by unscheduled urgency, perhaps with pursuing Khraniteli's bullets parting hair, might forget to drain sumps altogether during abbreviated preflight inspection—i.e., leap aboard, slam door, switch on ignition, push starter button, jam throttle forward, haul back on yoke, hold breath.

Following which, assuming plane actually clears ground, almost certain to fall out of sky soon afterward as fundamentally noncombustible nature of water reaffirmed one more time.

Physics has long attention span....

\* \* \* \*

Chemaya to Chelyabinsk required long attention span as well. Too far to make in single hop, planned for touchdown at Surgut, on River Ob, for fuel, lunch, Frisbee. In terms of terrain, might as well have been flying over Midwest American heartland: flat to gently rolling terrain; now forested, now grasslands, now moth-eaten, abandoned farmlands; sprinkling of lakes, rivers. Mostly quite pretty landscape.

Arguable, of course, that plentiful array of potential emergency landing options contributed to favorable opinion of vistas. Particularly since had no idea what sort of radar coverage Khraniteli might have set up around Serdtsevina Rasovyi, even less desire to find out, so, as distance shrank, developed increasing aversion to height. Last two-thirds of flight consisted of progressive letdown from 1,000-foot cruising altitude.

Final hour closing in on Chelyabinsk spent snaking along valley floors, arcing around hilltops, skimming under power lines, wheels virtually brushing forest roofs (dodging between higher treetops) during final 100 miles. Flight rivaled better air combat simulator video games; furnished real-world epinephrine levels guaranteed to satisfy most demanding thrill junkie.

Arrived well before dark. Got good start on stem-to-stern aircraft checkover before dusk began to intrude.

We ate, then frisbeed. Gathering gloom appeared not to interfere with Maggie's enjoyment of pursuit; illumination sufficed for her simple purposes: Nailed Frisbee every time, even by the time I could hardly tell where it was. (IR vision component useless for frisbeeing; no temperature variation worth talking about.) Border Collie's motion tracker, however, apparently functions independently from visual-light spectrum.

Or maybe BCs related distantly to bats. Actually, have known several who, because of intensity, could be described as "batty." (Okay, sorry.)

Finally went to bed. Closed eyes, put arm over still happily panting, fuzzy baby sister snuggled against side—then found self wide awake, engrossed in detailed study of backs

of eyelids, trying very hard not to brood about fact that only about 15 minutes' flight remained before parking ship for last time, preferably someplace inconspicuous, covering with camouflage netting (borrowed from AAs' special forces' stash), commencing shanks'-mare area recon before—

("Attention, attention; this is not a drill.")

—engaging enemy.

Mmm ... Somehow, Posterity, this all seemed so much better idea during planning stages.

Or, put differently, as Sven Nordstrom, Norwegian "political refugee," slyly deadpan resident philosopher/fireman/EMT, back in pre-end-of-world Wausippi hometown days, was wont to observe in times of stress, "Hoooooh, jeeez...."

\* \* \* \*

Day IX

Palomar to Alaska's tip, 2,900 miles. Bering Strait crossing, 50. Then 4,300 or thereabouts wandering across Asia.

All in all, some 7,300 miles' flying lay behind us as, two hours after sunrise, following aircraft prestorage maintenance wrap-up, and moments after final, squeeze-in-very-last-chilled-drop, brimmest-full-possible fueling, we lifted off from Chelyabinsk, headed for Serdtsevina Rasovyi.

\* \* \* \*

Quarter hour later, eased through notch between tree-covered, rounded tops of relatively low, 40-mile-long, five-mile-wide, last-but-one, big-hill-bordering-on-small-mountain just north of Turgoyak. In interests of reduced visual conspicuousity, brushed uppermost leafy branch tips with main-gear tires as cleared summit.

Pulled back throttle, floated downhill at near idle, propeller just ticking over, keeping eyes peeled for suitable landing site/hiding place for Stallion.

Candidate emerged halfway down slope: Well before reaching broad, grassy valley floor, forest cover terminated in smooth, turf-covered hillside clearing, almost pastureland, whose uphill end disappeared into gloom under ancient oak grove, beneath whose sprawling limbs plane surely invisible from air, and pretty well hidden on ground as well, unless wandering indigene happens physically to stumble over it.

Now. Only actual experience with bush-pilot-style uphill landing/downhill takeoff took place months ago during ultralight phase of aviation career. (Oddly, bush-flying techniques not touched on during shuttle simulator training.) But flying is flying; Lennel agrees: Same set of physics governs Stallion's aerodynamic behavior as person-rated toy airplane. No big deal.

In theory.

Lowered flaperons, leading edge Fowler slats popped out. Executed low, slow, gently banked 180, maintaining barely enough altitude to keep from digging in wingtip. Rolled out of turn nicely lined up on clearing, whose lower end was still well above us on hillside.

Added power, raised nose; established gradually slowing climb calculated to intersect rising ground about a third of the way up-slope.

Raised nose higher, slowed further despite adding more power. Increased backpressure on yoke, added still more power. Airspeed bled off as terrain rose faster than climb rate. Skimmed over final hedgerow bordering clearing's lower end as rising ground finally intersected flight path.

Wheels down/terrain up—distinction without difference. Chopped throttle, hauled yoke all the way back at first bump to ensure plane remained fully stalled.

No need for brakes, reversed thrust; uphill rollout complete in less than hundred feet.

Whereupon freshly graduated mountain pilot resumed breathing.

Added power again; S-turn taxied rest of the way uphill to, between trees; parked beneath spreading branches of huge old oaks. Momentary blast of power gave rudder sufficient authority to aid one-wheel brake application in swinging tail around to face Stallion downhill.

Set brake. Killed ignition. Sat back, sighed, feeling flight tension bleed from soul—only to be replaced by mounting preinfiltration apprehension...

Maggie stretched neck, nudged elbow with nose. Reached over, unlocked BC's harness.

Thought about pulling her onto lap for hug, but, as usual, hyperalert puppy had picked up cues; already in motion. Held her for long moments as she leaned against me. Stroked, scritchd; thought Beautiful Thoughts—reflected on unlikely state of affairs:

Substantial portions of two continents, plus symbolic spit of (really cold) ocean, now lay behind us; Intrepid Girl Flying Ace had, in fact, successfully navigated almost third of the way around world in furtherance of quest.

Now all that separated us from Khraniteli stronghold (and, pleaseplease-please—Daddy!) was broad valley, big lake, plus single, modestly prepossessing mountain ridge.

(As well as, for detail-obsessed, whole base full of genocidally inclined, sociopathic fanatics.)

After chocking Stallion's wheels, tying down, covering with camo net, we celebrated with rousing Frisbee session, epicurean repast of Canned Stuff; then early off to bed, perchance to have nightmares....

TRACKING:

PART II OF III

by David R. Palmer

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Illustration by William Warren

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It's wisely said that "violence is the last refuge of the incompetent"—but sometimes even the very competent have few alternatives.

\* \* \* \*

## SYNOPSIS

### Archivist's Note(I)

Quoting some of her own favorite self-deprecating, self-descriptives, Candy Smith-Foster is a "Plucky Girl Adventurer," a "Spunky Girl Aviatrix," an "Intrepid Special-Ops Girl," an "Apprentice Girl Assassin," and, last but certainly not least (and, factually, the absolute, literal truth), the "Plucky Girl Savior of Our People." (Not to mention, as she is too, too fond of saying: "etc.")

An eleven-year-old Homo post hominem child, like the rest of us she is (we suspect) the product of evolution's genetic engineering, courtesy of the great influenza pandemic of 1918-1919, which killed at least fifty million people worldwide, and possibly as many as a hundred million, during its approximately two-year rampage.

We speculate that what happened is that, at the moment of conception, the flu virus invaded either or both of the participating gametes before or during formation of a very few female zygotes. Something in the virus mutated the DNA content of the target cells, which thereafter gestated, were born, and grew up to contribute, as mothers, half of the new matrix which fitted together two generations later to produce Homo post hominem: Man who follows Man.

Immune to all “human” disease; smarter, stronger, faster; with visual perception extending further into the ultraviolet and infrared spectrum; possessed of more sensitive hearing and olfactory senses; even “breeding true” when crossed with Homo sapiens; emerging finally from concealment within the population which produced it to inherit Earth after our predecessors eliminated themselves in a brief, efficient, radiation-triggered biological war, Homo post hominem is apparently destined to replace Homo sapiens.

Soo Kim McDivott, himself, as it turned out, a “typical” overachieving hominem, with doctorates in pediatrics, psychiatry, and anthropology, and a Tenth Degree Black Belt in karate, known as “Teacher” to hominems worldwide, had discovered the new species while exploring the question of “nurture versus nature”: whether the actions of “normal” (i.e., mediocre or worse) parents might tend to keep intrinsically genius-level children from achieving their potentials, inadvertently, or possibly even due to resentment.

Orphaned when her birth parents were killed in a traffic accident months after she was born, Candy was adopted immediately by Marshall and Megan Foster (“Daddy” and “Momma,” in Candy’s lexicon), Teacher’s long-time friends, and, in Marshall’s case, in everyday life an internationally well-regarded pathologist, but actually a top-secret government biowarfare consultant.

Following several years’ preternaturally rapid intellectual growth, possibly contributed to by the whipsaw effect of Momma’s quietly clandestine encouragement and furnishing of any reading matter the child indicated a curiosity about, while Marshall, unaware of Megan’s educational supplementation, worked to raise a “normal” girlchild, full of “sugar and spice,” Candy was revealed at about age five to be a Homo post hominem, and rather an advanced one at that.

Shortly thereafter, Megan died of leukemia. Teacher moved in next-door and assumed her role as Candy’s apparently clandestine educational facilitator and mentor, while Daddy, now aware of the situation, continued in his role as brake. Teacher also took her on as his personal karate student.

By the time Khraniteli zealots struck, wiping out all unprotected Homo sapiens on Earth,

Candy, at age eleven, had absorbed substantial elements of a college education and achieved a Fifth Degree Black Belt in karate.

Home alone at the time (Marshall had been summoned to Washington, which was in effect carpet-bombed during the attack), Candy rode out the holocaust in the huge shelter complex which Daddy had had built in secret deep beneath their small-town Wisconsin home. Thereafter she and Terry, her “retarded adopted twin brother,” a Hyacinth Macaw and her closest companion nearly from birth (with a history of never having been wrong about whether a new acquaintance was really friendship material), emerged into a depopulated world.

Learning of her Homo post hominem heritage from the letter Teacher had left her, Candy set off to search for others of her kind. The first person she met during her travels was “Adam,” a thirteen-year-old hominem boy (actually named Melville Winchester Higginbotham Grosvenor Penobscot-Jones, IV, by his parents, who had died in the holocaust), whose brashly obnoxious, rich-kid persona concealed astonishing electromechanical, musical, paramedical, and culinary talents. Ultimately, these qualities, as well as his compulsion for outrageous puns, helped endear him to her almost as much as the fact that, within hours of meeting, they had saved each others’ lives:

Initially, during their first encounter, Adam was unconscious, trapped in a burning car. Employing conscious control of hysterical strength, which Teacher had taught her as part of karate discipline, to extract him, she then had to overuse it further to remain conscious long enough to complete the necessary trauma treatment, which included stitching a nicked femoral artery (she had acquired advanced paramedic training “at Daddy’s knee”). This cost her a metabolic burnout and, ultimately, cardiac arrest. However, her treatment had been adequate: Adam woke shortly afterward, found her unconscious and fading, was able to restart her heart when it stopped, nursed her back to health, and they’ve been together since.

During their search they encountered Rollo, an adult hominem physician with years of worldwide survival skills, who turned out to be a sociopath, living with his dead wife’s cat, Tora-chan, who hated him. Rollo offered Candy his loyalty, skills, and experience in exchange for access to her bed. Candy deliberated and concluded, objectively, the benefits to Adam and herself outweighed the cost, and was on the point of accepting when Terry, who had disliked the man on sight, bit him severely. Rollo went berserk, tried to kill the bird, and, when Candy used her karate skills and hysterical strength to intervene, he turned on her. Strong and fast, he hurried her; she was forced to kill him. Thereafter, of course, Tora-chan joined their party.

Later, in California, while chasing on foot after a half-glimpsed child, Adam tripped and broke his arm; then taught Candy to fly his ultralight aircraft to perform a grid search, which turned up Kim Mellon, a young computer engineer, and her daughter, six-year-old Lisa, who



joined them in the quest.

A subsequent engine failure forced Candy down in the Sequoia National Forest and separated her from the others. Repairing and restarting the engine, she observed a contrail that led her to the Vandenberg Space Shuttle Launch Complex, where she found Teacher and his community of hominems in the process of readying an orbiter for launch.

They had learned of a huge strontium-90 bomb left in orbit by the Khraniteli, programmed to descend and render the Earth uninhabitable for unprotected human life for the next two hundred years. Because the bomb lay in geosynchronous orbit, far above the shuttle's normal operating range, the necessary modifications meant the launch would be a one-way, suicide flight: The three-person crew would neutralize the weapon and die.

Almost at the last moment, the robotic device with which the hominems had planned to disarm the bomb proved inadequate, and Candy realized that only the unique combination of her diminutive size and hysterical strength could save what remained of humanity, so she volunteered for the mission.

Once in orbit, however, crewman Kyril Svetlanov turned out to be a Khraniteli agent and killed the third crewmember. And while Candy managed to kill him and then successfully disarm the bomb, in the process she learned that the Khraniteli were alive, well, and still actively plotting to kill off everyone who wasn't one of them, which meant all her newly found hominem friends and unofficial family members such as Adam, Teacher, Kim, and Lisa still were in danger.

At about the same time, Adam and Kim, searching the sequoias for Candy's downed plane, were coming to the unlikely conclusion that Terry's endless blatherings, reminiscent of CNN's spaceflight coverage, might actually be connected to Candy; that perhaps she was not where they thought she had crashed; that, unlikely as it seemed, she really might be in orbit, and in danger.

Belatedly, Candy realized that, with the detonator pulled, she could send a warning back down to Earth in the bomb-delivery vehicle; she could reprogram it to land at Edwards Dry Lake air force base—then it occurred to her that maybe she could ride down in it herself. But the vehicle was far from man-rated, and, by the time it touched down, she was again clinically dead.

However, having become convinced by then that Terry's continuing spaceflight monologue was in fact a direct, realtime link into Candy's mind, Adam and Kim made it to Edwards just

in time to extricate her from the smoking hot reentry vehicle, and for Adam again to resuscitate her.

Thereafter, Candy, Adam, Kim, Lisa, Terry, and Tora-chan moved in with the hominems in Teacher's growing community near Mount Palomar, where, following Candy's recuperation, he and his colleagues resumed her education.

To Candy, however, the most enjoyable part was special-operations training under Danya Feinberg, an ex-Mossad field agent, and number two among Teacher's pseudomilitary operatives. With her karate Black Belt as a departure point, Candy progressed rapidly, achieving proficiency in the most advanced levels of hand-to-hand combat, use of nonstandard weapons, plus the more arcane skills which form the basis of special operations: infiltration, taking out sentries, undercover work, interrogation, ultra-long-range sniper marksmanship, and the like.

Several months into this idyllic existence, one of the hominems' recon expeditions brought back word from the Russian/Kazakhstani Urals that Candy's adoptive father had not died in the bombing of Washington; that he might in fact still be alive, a prisoner of the Khraniteli in the laboratory at their main base, Serdtsevina Rasovyi. But, Teacher told her, regretfully, it would be at least another six months before the hominems could mount another expedition into the area.

The delay simply was not to be borne. Within hours Candy had gathered copies of the hominems' expeditionary recon reports, weapons, clothing, supplies, and equipment, left a note assigning Lisa Terry-sitting duties, and was in the air in a "borrowed" bushplane, bound for Serdtsevina Rasovyi.

Her absence was not discovered until day's end. However, little detective work was required to figure out where she was headed.

At which point Teacher reconsidered: It was time after all, he announced, that they went on the offensive, and the hominems began preparing an all-out invasion. Their primary objective was elimination of the base and cleaning out the Khraniteli living there; but rescuing Marshall and intercepting Candy before she got into trouble were next on the to-do list.

Unaware of these developments, of course, Candy flew on.

Cognizant of the Candy-Terry mindlink, Teacher asked Lisa to listen for and take down anything the bird said which sounded as if it might be from Candy.

During her first stopover, at Klamath Falls, Oregon, Candy encountered Maggie, a Border Collie, preternaturally intelligent, typical of the breed, who had been surviving on her own since the Khraniteli's attack. That night the BC awakened Candy with snarls—holding a pack of wolves at bay. Candy drove them off with warning shots. This ended Candy's indecision: Maggie was on the plane when she departed the next morning.

Crossing into Asia via the Bering Strait, Candy encountered no one until the morning of the eighth day, when she met a likeable, white-bearded, slightly rotund, older gentleman who went by the nicknames, Igrushka Izgotovlenie or "Toymaker," and Otets Igrushkayami or "Father Toys." In pre-armageddon days Toymaker had been a manufacturer of high-end, high-tech games and toys. He had once attended a technical conference at Serdtsevina Rasovyi, and was able to furnish Candy with a detailed, hand-drawn map of the base.

The following day Candy landed in the wilds just outside Serdtsevina Rasovyi, pulled up under trees, tied the plane down, covered it with camouflage netting, and went to bed early, prepared to begin infiltration of the Khraniteli's headquarters in the morning....

[Footnote 1: Lisa's note: Blanks? Hah...!]

\* \* \* \*

Volume VI

Unseen, Unheard, Uneasy

Day X

Subtle difference exists, Posterity, between practice infiltration runs back home, where penalty for getting caught limited to abrupt stinging sensation courtesy of Wrist Rocket-driven acorns impacting whatever piece of anatomy presents—versus reconnoitering real enemy installation, populated by genuinely murderous hostiles, folk who

sincerely want everyone with H. post hominem DNA dead.

Not that have ever been blase about practice penalties: Danni seldom fails to spot something sticking up; never misses with damned slingshot. Training consequences leave red, burning welts to aid memory, encourage improvement.

In current milieu, however, suspect failing test would make one nostalgic for acorns.

Debated odds of infiltrating at night, under cover of darkness, versus invisible ninja/zen approach: Becoming terrain, slipping in in broad daylight, right under Bad Guys' noses.

Obviously, under normal conditions, darkness preferred venue. But depending upon Khraniteli's paranoia level, security personnel might well be using infrared-based night-vision gear. If so, regardless of care taken, skill level employed, Plucky Girl Infiltrator's body temperature would stand out against crisp night air like light bulb. And that, experience suggests, would be bad.

So chose daylight. Spent whole day stalking installation from various directions, costumed largely as clump of field grasses, with single sickly bush adhering to fundament, clump of sod gracing crown. Shiny nose, exposed skin generally, rendered less noticeable courtesy of handful of nearly dead-black goo from perimeter of convenient puddle. Good-quality stuff, too; had to remove only single leech before applying. (Chose to use "local color" for preliminary recon in interest of saving real special-forces face paint for actual, for-blood Daddy-extraction sortie.)

Maggie regarded her own veggie disguise with amusement: mostly weeds/grasses woven into coat; though did blacken white patches by rubbing in locally grown organic makeup. But BC seemed to grasp premise; managed to limit joke's celebration to sparkling eyes every time met mine. (Amazing, how that seemed to be every time I glanced at her; Border Collies so alert.)

However, stalking wily Khraniteli on own turf turned out easier than expected. First, no one on Bad Guys' payroll in danger of being mistaken for fussy English groundskeepers: Not big on neatly cropped, weed-free lawns; converting bushes, hedges into mulch or topiary.

In fact, without exception, surrounding fields downright unkempt: Acres of knee- to waist-deep grasses, weeds; dotted with innumerable scraggly bushes, actual thickets, even

occasional hedgerows running here, there. Danya would have displayed someone's head on pike for negligence on this scale.

Sneaking-up challenge nearly laughable. Well-motivated Daisy Scout troop could have conducted infiltration, accomplished objective, made escape, been home in time to present freshly washed, sparkly clean faces, hands at lunch.

Periodically employed tiny Mossad-surplus multipurpose detector/tester to reassure self no antipersonnel radar in use. Of three-dozen Danni brought back with her for AAs' use after World Ended, had borrowed only two. (Redundancy good; greed bad.)

Eyeball survey, employing tiny, U.S. special-forces-supplied, folded-optics monocular tentatively classified various structures; also confirmed accuracy of Father Toys' map. Rows of boxy, prefabish-looking, industrial-style, metal buildings, neatly aligned proximate to shelter's hillside entrance, likely housed research/manufacturing facilities. Variety of barracks, obvious infrastructure buildings (kitchens, chow halls, common rooms, motor pool, etc.) more informally scattered around periphery.

However, first real estate to seize attention not on map: Prison camp near southern fringe apparently had come into being since Toymaker's visit.

And no mistaking enclosure's purpose: tall, razor-wire-topped, chain-link fence all the way around. Guard shack at double-gated sally port on north side. Interior structures all ramshackle, southeastern U.S. chicken coop-style, clapboard dormitories. Supported by concrete pylons instead of foundations, with at least 18 inches' wind-tunnel air space between floors, ground—heat loss on cold nights must have been ferocious.

Doubtless where Daddy kept.

One leg of unseen prowlings took us through motor pool. Having recently discovered own propensity for grand theft motor vehicle, occurred to me, should haste become issue, liberated vehicle might well facilitate exit with Daddy.

(Though given Stallion's original price tag, "spectacular theft motor vehicle" probably more accurately reflects offense level.)

En passant, snooped interiors of several Humvee-looking things known as UAZs, automobiles, trucks of various classifications. Verified that not only were all vehicles unlocked, keys apparently left in ignitions as matter of course.

(Danya would have fashioned necklace from teeth of those responsible. While they watched!)

Nightfall eventually found Foster sisters enjoying field rations, cozily ensconced at heart of apparently impenetrable hedgerow behind conveniently located hummock just over hundred yards laterally from prison camp, waiting to see if security forces would trot out night-vision goodies as light faded.

If so, would spend night there.

And if so, promised to be long night....

\* \* \* \*

We overprepared, Posterity. Here at very heart of their own territory, never mind continent, on fringes of Russian/Kazakhstani border Urals, not only are Khraniteli not obsessing over local security, substantial numbers of those charged with actual, physical safeguarding of primary base not, in fact, even remaining awake over security.

Such, at least, was case at prison camp: At about six, night-shift crew wandered out in ones, twos, loaded down with baskets of food, liquor bottles. Settled down with day-shift folk at picnic tables outside sally port guard shack (no other guard stations, no gun towers, etc.); then all fell to, enjoyed leisurely, comradely dinner.

Multiple food courses comprising jolly double-shift get-together lasted from almost sundown to good two hours after complex's lights came on. Libations ran out around midnight.

Stumbling a bit, slapping backs, laughing like loons, day people finally lurched to feet, weaved imprecisely down trail toward residential area, leaving substantial majority of crack p.m. security squad (about whom had been worrying self into hissy-spaz all day long!)

snoring in chairs.

Have seen The Great Escape, Posterity (okay, several dozen times—youthful James Garner, Steve McQueen seriously ogleable specimens of Homo sapient males).

However, after watching Khraniteli guards' Sergeant Schultzly performance, failure to encounter battery of endlessly probing searchlights scouring fence, grounds beyond, evoked little astonishment. In fact, prison camp nightlighting consisted of bare half dozen examples of same electric-eye-controlled blue-white iodine vapor lamps most farmers used back home.

In short, Stalag Luft III this is not. In fact, at first impression, may not even rise to level of Stalag 13....

Initial phase of storming castle consisted of feeding Maggie, giving hug; telling her "Watch," indicating camp, supply cache; walking (okay, worming along through ground cover a little) to darker section of fence located equidistant between most widely separated iodine vapor lamps.

Used Danni's gimmick to test fence, rule out fry-the-burglar-level voltage/amperage, contact alarms, or fabric-integrity-interruption detectors monitoring chain-link fence's structure.

Razor-wire along very top limited to single lonely strand, coils stretched so far apart to span distance, promised to serve less as barrier than minor inconvenience.

Oozed silently up chain-link mesh like Spider-Man, propped razor coils even farther apart with stick brought from thicket. Wormed past pointy bits without significant blood loss, removed stick, dropped to ground inside.

Tah-dah.

Now all had to do was find Daddy.

Oh, and get us out.

Hey, what could go wrong...?

\* \* \* \*

Now, Posterity, notwithstanding known tendency to knock wood while crossing fingers, legs, on occasion even eyes, while yielding to black cats' right-of-way under stepladders resting on sidewalk cracks on triskaidektic Fridays, am not superstitious person. Really, do not believe previous question received, interpreted by Powers That Be as dare. Quite.

Still, answer not long in coming: Daddy not bleeping here!

Which isn't even worst part...

\* \* \* \*

Recon leading to these conclusions would have made Danya proud, Posterity: Switched on ninja mode; ghosted in, out of dorms like wraith, checking for occupants. First eight buildings empty; no one home at all.

Wondered for briefest moment, exiting Dorm 6, whether whole camp would prove empty; but then common sense reemerged—regardless of personnel's blood-alcohol levels, surely Khranteli wouldn't bother guarding empty prison.

But not until last stop—Dorm Number 9—did answer materialize. Eased in through door, closed softly behind me, and, as floated silently down central aisle, realized some third of bunks at far end contained shapeless forms huddled under ragged blanket scraps.

Edged closer, took look at sleepers.



And jaw dropped.

Children. All children. Nothing but children.

Quick census revealed about two dozen kids, genders indeterminate. Appeared to range in age from maybe four to a bit older than self. All skinny, filthy. Some showed bruises, healing abrasions, even cuts.

But children? Why children? And why on earth would anyone imprison, starve, abuse pack of kids?

Gee, let's review...

Here we all were, in heart of Khraniteli Central—primary base/research center. Danya had mentioned Khraniteli trying to develop pathogens capable of affecting hominems. Straightforward research; but how to test bugs' effectiveness as study progresses, without risks attendant to keeping group of really ticked-off grown-up hominems around?

Gosh, I'm stumped...

Took deep breath then, held it, let out slo-ow-ly.

Undoubtedly these kids all Homo post hominems, I being used as culture media/test subjects—multiply condemned, imaginatively described Khraniteli using my people as lab rats!

Forced anger down. Now not the time.

But made solemn promise—with overtones of blood oath: Time would come....

\* \* \* \*

However, this complicated matters: Regardless of whether found Daddy, had to get kids out; simply no choice there.

But spoke no Russian, nor any of dozens—possibly hundreds—of Slavic/Baltic languages/splinter dialects that could form mother tongue for any/all these kids; and certainly no reason to expect any to speak English.

Absence of which left informal sign language—hardly most efficient tool for communicating subtle concepts like,  
“Be-very-very-quiet-I’m-getting-you-all-out-of-here-follow-me-duck-through-the-hole-in-the-fence-stay-low-crawl-over-to-that-thicket-don’t-be-scared-of-the-nice-doggie-you-meet-there....”

Original plan, if term could be stretched to cover it, had been to slip in, find Daddy, get him out, killing bloody hell out of any-, everybody standing in way, fly home; scenario which, as stated, involved minimal reliance on Intrepid Special-Ops Girl’s linguistic skills.

But even as mulled problem, became aware of round, distinctly non-sleepy-looking eyeball peering up from one of larger, shapeless, huddled lumps.

Barely had time to speculate about chances of leaping across distance separating us quickly enough to clap hand over mouth to prevent outcry—when kid raised finger to lips, breathed softest possible, “Sh-h-h.”

No doubt own eyes round as nodded agreement.

Slowly kid eased out of bed, tiptoed over to me, moving pretty quietly for untrained civilian. Cocked head toward dorm’s empty far end. Again I nodded.

Led to enclosure built into corner. Eased door open, slid through, beckoned to me to follow, closed door behind.

Small room turned out to be minimally equipped but surprisingly clean, relatively odor-free

“comfort” station, illuminated by small window, tiniest of plug-in nightlight LED glows.

Once inside, new acquaintance peeked out window, then turned back to me. Noted at this point, new acquaintance also of distaff persuasion, half a head taller, possibly a year or two older than self, though, due to emaciation, surely outweighed her by good ten pounds (and my nonexistent curves farther along than hers, though malnutrition surely gave me unfair edge).

Momentarily girl's eyes performed head-to-foot flicker, taking in camos, mud-darkened face; lingered briefly, thoughtfully, on katana grip projecting above shoulder, various web-belted utility pouches, low-slung Glock, conspicuously nightscope-, silencer-equipped M-1 in right hand.

Then—surprise!—whispered Russian turned out even more difficult to understand than spoken-from-diaphragm version. Shook head regretfully. “Sorry. I’m an American. I don’t understand. Do you speak English?”

Girl's brow rose. “Eeengleeess?” came hesitant reply.

I nodded.

“So very bad I little spikking Eeengleeess. Under you stand?”

Tiny shiver of relief warmed cockles of my worrywart. Communication solved. One problem down.

(At this point couldn't be more than thousand or so to go.)

Replied gratefully: “Yes, American. Your English is much better than my Russian.”

“Hokay. Eeengleeess we spikking. You who are? Here why?—Here how?”

Nearly blurted was looking for Daddy; had she seen him?—as if locked-up, starving, effectively condemned kid would have knowledge of, interest in, problems beyond own immediate survival.

So took metaphorical step back; briefly allowed opening elements of Danya's incremental, information-gathering matrix to flash through brain: Quickest way to get information from people, she opines (apart from, where necessary, judicious applications of flexion, torsion, tension, compression, blunt, sharp, hot), generally involves identifying, then applying leverage against fulcrum comprising interviewee's self-interest.

Given circumstances, motivation obvious; solution even more so: "Hi, I'm Candy. I'm going to get you out of here..."

\* \* \* \*

"Tasha." Declaration accompanied by universally self-identifying finger tap to yclept's own chest. Then, clearly not proponent of empty conventions, irrelevant small-talk, girl got down to fundamentals: "You too kid. Got how you in? Get how us out?"

Replied, "I came in over the fence."

Girl's expression fell. "Maybe can I do this. Bigger also one, twos, threes. But weak littlests being; not can climbing."

Had solution to that: Unslung backpack, reached in, pulled out lovely, ultralightweight, Israeli special-forces-surplus, telescopic-handled, titanium bolt-cutter; handed over with smile.

Tasha expanded handles to full three-foot length; opened, closed jaws. Nodded approvingly. Recollapsed device, handed back. Crooked brow. "Guards ... ?"

Tucked bolt cutters back into papoose pack, closed flap; shrugged back into straps. "They probably won't be much of a factor; they seem to prefer spending their nights in postparty comas."

Tasha's brow lowered in obvious noncomprehension. Mmm ... given our combined cross-linguistic skills, probably needed to dial down syntax, never mind customary ambiguity level, if hoped regularly to be understood. Dick-and-Jane-emulation time.

Mimed tossing back drink. Crossed, rolled eyes up into forehead; lolled head, jaw saggy, tongue drooping to side. Never been fond of, good at charades, but here performance sufficed.

Girl almost laughed at impression; then smile acquired overtones of contempt. "Guards many so stumbling p'yanitsa. Such duties assigned being too stupid, too lazy real workings for. Time most spending vipivka." She returned my tossing-back gesture perfectly.

(Whee, new Russian words, at least one unmistakably pejorative in context. Hoped would remember later, when had more time, to have Tasha clarify which meant drunks vs. drinking.)

"But others," she added expressionlessly, with sudden shiver which snapped full attention back to here-now, "not stupid. Very smart. Very also bad. Some very, very, very bad-smart. Evil-smart."

Well, so much for any lingering doubts about whether both of us on same side. Nice also to have own opinion of Khraniteli confirmed. Nice in scary way.

"But out gettings after?" she continued, tone anxious. "Littlests not can far walking. Khraniteli searchable; trucks, UAZs. Escaping so how?"

Found was warming to Tasha. Not for single moment had girl implied leaving smaller, slower kids behind might be acceptable solution.

"I have an airplane." Clarified with universal hand gesture.

Tasha's expression lightened—then just as quickly darkened; brow crooking dubiously. "You? Kid? Airplane?"

Could not repress grin. "Yes, a kid with a plane. I'm a pilot. I started young. It's a pretty big plane; it'll carry all of us."

After another moment's thoughtful hesitation, girl nodded, accepted assurance at face value. Ghost of smile returned. "Good." Then looked worried again. "But tonight please not ... ?"

Okay, that went better than expected. Had foreseen at least some debate over that very point. Had to find Daddy first, but if positions reversed, I'd have wanted out soonest.

Shook head regretfully. "No, we can't leave tonight. First I have to find someone."

"Good. Katia tonight here not. Driutsk ... has her." Tasha paused bleakly, but behind eyes glowed something reminiscent of vulcanism. Girl took long, slow, shaky breath; continued in almost rasping tone, "Katia nine. Not can leaving her. Not must leaving her. With him."

Hmm ... Clearly, subtext operating here, but passing right over head. "Who's Driutsk?" Glanced at watch. "It's past one; why on earth would a Khranitel have a nine-year-old girl with him at this late whoa..."

Blissfully wheel-spinning, blank moment concluded much too quickly. Suddenly understood. Too much.

Have read expression, "Her eyes flamed." Never actually seen it done before, but at aborted question, Tasha's expression metamorphosed into mask of ... well, never actually seen such loathing on any human face before, never mind kid's.

Still had no clue who Driutsk was. But at that point didn't care. Didn't matter. What overrode interest in whom: Monster, beyond peradventure of doubt. Needed killing in worst way, earliest opportunity.

Made mental note, if at all possible, to take care of that little detail before leaving with Daddy. And kids.

And especially Katia.

\* \* \* \*

Remarkably, given obvious depth of bond with victim, Tasha came down first. Voice nearly steady when asked, “Looking you who for?”

Before answering, performed moment’s breathing-discipline exercise to restore own semblance of poise. “Another American. A doctor.”

“American Foster doctor?”

Posterity ... ? Please, whatever you do—never ever let me succumb to temptation (granted, currently nonexistent) to try to earn living playing poker. Thought, for briefest moment, had weathered shock of hearing stranger say Daddy’s name out of blue without turning so much as a hair.

But at that point, curious expression stole across Tasha’s face. Looked oddly like sympathetic smile. Still quivering inside over sudden, blindsided, Daddy’s-name impact, probably spent several whole seconds speculating about cause.

But then girl reached out fingertip, brushed tear from Plucky Stonefaced Girl’s cheek. “More to here you than just broking us and doctor out of tyur’ma.” Statement, not question.

Sighed. (Okay, probably sniffled.) Didn’t know if daddy even had Russian equivalent (subsequently learned counterpart pappa, of all things), but irrelevant; ignored genetic issue altogether as responded, “He’s my father. I thought he was killed in Washington during the Khraniteli’s attack. Then I heard he might be here.”

“Ah...” Tasha’s expression cleared. “Out sticking butt to finding him no wonder.” Paused; eyed me cryptically. “Reminding me of him you.”

Smiled absently. Russian girl's sidewaysly inverted/mismatched syntactical elements reminded me of Kyril, before true colors surf

—So deafening was internal click triggered by dots' belated connection, would have sworn must have wakened kids out in dorm: Tasha had not just heard of Daddy—"You've met him? Is he here ... ?"

She nodded. "Main building laboratory keeping in Foster doctor. Kazimirov"—another shiver—"very, very top evil Khraniteli boss, telling Foster doctor new germs making us being for sick—being for die."

Girl paused then; expression softened, hint of smile crept across features. (Suppressed own smile: Clearly Tasha had met Daddy; inspires those feelings in everyone.) "But does small-of-hand, Foster doctor," she continued, with hint of mischief. "Fooling eye, switching needles. Tricking Kazimirov—even Fedka, evil, evil, evil doctor supervising. First sticking day, Foster doctor whispering on ear, kids telling, 'Don't being worry'; vitamins water just sticking. Sick making never, promise."

Yes, that would be Daddy; die thousand times over before harming child—but smart: If simply refused, died nobly, Khraniteli would have turned project over to someone else. Obviously someone less knowledgeable, less likely to succeed—but certainly less principled.

Found self smiling. Could just see him: laboring away in lab (with earnest, utterly absorbed expression) like wholesome, ruggedly handsome version of Ming the Merciless, formulating compounds whose sole purpose, notwithstanding long list of ingredients, centered on emission of noxious vapors—while actually turning out vitamin cocktails, probably occasional real medicines, too, where judged appropriate, to help malnutrition-ravaged children.

Pulled out, unfolded Toymaker's map. "Can you show me where they're keeping him?"

Tasha eyed sketch; indicated oblong almost adjacent to underground shelter entrance. Then grinned; glanced up, pointed out through window: Dark shape visible looming at mountain's base. "There," she breathed in barely audible whisper. "Main laboratory, there keeping Foster doctor."



Nodded, thanked her; but, as turned to door—

“Foster doctor father being,” Tasha blurted suddenly, tightly. “Of course must him getting out.” Lip quiver barely visible, final word hardly audible: “First.”

Stopped in tracks. Spun; fixed her with what hoped would be regarded as resolute eye. Declared, “I will come back for you. All of you.”

Struck by thought. Again unslung backpack. Extracted bolt cutters, handed over. “Hide them inside a mattress or somewhere. If something bad happens—if I don’t get back, you get those kids out of here.” Told her about sloppy motor pool discipline; should be easy to steal vehicle, get away cleanly.

Finally, recalling again Danni’s lessons in people-management techniques, put arms around Tasha, administered big, deliberately lingering hug in shamelessly manipulative attempt to bolster spirits, boost confidence. Told her firmly, in mock-Austrian accent, “Ah’ll be bock.”

Should have known better, Posterity. Terminator impression drew not so much as eyelid flicker—but shamelessly manipulative hug ended with both of us leaking tears.

\* \* \* \*

Amazingly, back at hidey-hole in heart of thicket, Maggie managed to confine delight at big sister’s return to persuasive rendition of leaping joy without actually moving muscle or making sound. Almost as if understood reason behind need for silence.

Shared snugly quarter hour with fuzzy sibling, gave her stingy partial handful of freeze-dried liver, topped up water dish; then, with night still young, again told her, “Watch,” headed off for further snooping.

Glided past installation’s peripheral elements, with which already familiar, straight into heart of encampment; object: Acquaint self with interior layout, particularly area of big laboratory building in which Tasha felt Daddy imprisoned. Must have circled structure half dozen times,

edging closer each time, until aware of every bush, leaf, blade of grass which might furnish cover, as well security details.

Vexed to discover lab security relatively tight, by Serdtsevina Rasovyi standards. Even pretty darned tight. Both entrances boasted four-man squads—

Hey, Posterity! Just realized something else: Have seen nothing to suggest women play active role in Khraniteli's plans, operations. Both shifts of prison camp guards comprised exclusively of men; likewise, all personnel guarding lab. In fact, every single soul have seen Out & About during day's prowling has been male.

Unless women begin turning up (at all, never mind in significant numbers, responsible roles—regardless of intensity with which I oppose them), current growing suspicion likely to mature into conclusion: Khraniteli "society" borrows from "world-is-a-male-playground" cultural bias enjoyed by (at least males of) oil-rich, middle-eastern countries prior to Mankind's End.

Actually, wouldn't surprise me at all to find casually genocidal ideology emerged in toto from that zealot-nourishing environment, with its oddly hypnotic belief structure. Certainly ample history for it in those parts.

Just ask Danya....

All right—enough philosophical gnat-straining; more than ample selection of real problems ahead just making sure right people emerge from this encounter with skins intact.

Wait ... Isn't that pretty much a casually genocidal ideology, too...?

No! Stupid notion—stupider still to have ping-pong moral debate going on inside own head while reconnoitering. Issue could not be simpler: My people didn't start this; didn't strike first—particularly didn't cheerfully snuff 7 billion people just to provide fresh start for own exclusive membership. That single fact provides sufficient distinction to differentiate sociopaths from those whose refusal to be victims includes doing whatever takes to solve problem.

Solve for good. Solve, as Danya is wont to observe, for never again....

My job simple: Get Daddy, children, self, Maggie the hell out of here, alive, minimizing risks in process. Shan't go out of my way to kill anyone (except Driutsk, of course, if opportunity arises—okay, maybe Kazimirov, too), but don't plan to waste energy, sympathy keeping any opposition members alive who insist on getting in way.

All the while keeping in mind Danni's more relevant combat maxims, most of which boil down to some version of "Never leave live enemy behind you," which distills down further to perennial catchall: "Dead guys don't get back up...."

Okay. With that nonsense settled—out of mind, out of the way—got down to reconnoitering in earnest: identifying specific lab security installations, how manned, equipped, how alert various members appeared to be.

Even employed Wrist Rocket from extreme long range to sample startlement reactions by exploding iodine vapor bulb suspended practically over heads of lab's front entrance security team.

Results mixed: Learned several intriguing new Russian words, phrases, about which intended to ask Tasha later.

More importantly, however, determined which team members reacted constructively; i.e., instantly taking cover, bringing up weaponry, while scanning vicinity from behind solid objects; as opposed to those who merely jumped up swearing, brushing glass fragments off clothing with expressions of offended dignity. As with any population, competents in minority.

All in all, night's stalking concluded on generally successful-but-unsatisfactory note: Lived through adventure; but no possible way to get past security, gain unseen entry to lab, look for Daddy.

Finally called off recon as bad job; and by sunrise Foster sisters had adjourned to more remote, better concealed location in heart of mature copse, where we pitched semipermanent base camp, ate proper meal, mourned absence of shower (okay, that part limited to self), conducted brief, short-range Frisbee session amongst trees; thereafter, somehow, managing to get to sleep.

Not, however, most restful of slumbers. First mulled over (okay, worried, fretted, brooded, agonized about) strategic/tactical dilemma of getting inside lab, finding Daddy. Finally dropped off into troubled sleep, during which subconscious picked up baton, kept chewing on problem, causing serial bad dreams, until—

Oh! Of course. How obvious...

—awoke with answer.

\* \* \* \*

Kim Mellon's Journal:

Well, we're a full day behind schedule now, at least.

Some weeks ago, Adam dropped a wrench through and out the bottom of the engine compartment of the truck he was working on. It bounced to the exact geometric center of the vehicle's mass, thereby making it equally difficult to reach from every direction.

As he climbed under to retrieve it, he offered his personal theory of the mechanism underlying Murphy's Law: Ages ago, he explained deadpan, after the ancient Norse Gods had retired, Loki, the God of Mischief, grew bored and decided He needed a hobby...

We all laughed, then. Now I'm not so sure.

In any event, regardless whether the responsible party is supra-Norwegian or merely Irish, about halfway between Anchorage and Norilsk, our karma reserves ran dangerously low.

Adam, Lisa, Terry, and I were traveling on the B plane with Danya. Teacher, Peter, and Wallace were aboard the A plane.

At the specific moment when Chaos elected to descend, Danni and I were in the cockpit, visiting with the pilots: Scott London, an “active-duty” Air Force pilot...

(“Hey, I haven’t retired, and the Pentagon has yet to notify me of my release.”)

...with thousands of hours of C-17 pilot-in-command time, and Lennel Palindrome, who’s second-chairing for Scott. They were swapping that-reminds-mes, I-learned-about-flying-from-thats, mixed with patent, blatantly outrageous there-I-was-upside-down-in-the-clouds-with-both-engines-on-fire-style whoppers, when Lennel broke off midhomily with, “Oh-oh...”

Hearing such sentiments expressed by a member of one’s flight crew at midnight, eight miles above the full-moon-lit Arctic icecap, possibly four hundred miles from the North Pole, will clear away one’s cobwebs.

Lennel’s exclamation was followed almost instantly by Scott’s terse comment on the short-range walkie-talkies we’re using for interplane communication (under some conditions—sunspot-induced signal “skip” among them—normal aviation radio transmissions could be picked up by Khraniteli electronic eavesdropping even at this range): “Kenny, is your number two on fire ... ?”

Happily, it wasn’t, quite, though the fifty-foot-long orange flames and the volume and density of black smoke gushing from the jet exhaust surely would have fooled me.

Still, as a precaution, they shut it down and we crippled the rest of the way across the Arctic Ocean at three-engine speeds.

Landing at the sprawling military base at Norilsk, we taxied up to the largest of the service hangars, shut down, disembarked, and all our aircraft-oriented people rolled up their sleeves.

Including Adam, of course—whose eyes are positively smoldering at the delay. While he has no background whatever in jet engines, he understands the theory, he’s a preternaturally quick study (Cameron, Lennel’s second-in-command, says Adam absorbed the engine

schematics in a single glance, as if by osmosis); and, of course, in matters mechanical, his instincts approach the level of extrasensory perception. In addition, hand tools in general seem to become extensions of his nervous system.

Accordingly, he has been welcomed with open arms by our aircraft tech people; both for the assistance he might furnish, as well as the opportunity his involvement provides to keep an inconspicuous eye on him.

If only Danya were as easily distracted—or supervised: Even during the most tranquil of times I've never heard anyone describe her as mellow, but the more tightly wound she becomes, the quieter she gets, and for the past few hours she's been so quiet that I positively fear for her.

A little while ago I encountered her stalking thoughtfully around the Black Hawk helicopter stowed in the A plane, its rotors folded for transport. Operational manual in hand, she was calculating how long it would take to fly it from here to Serdtsevina Rasovyi, if we can't get the C-17 back into the air really soon. The answer, she told me, ever so softly, is about ten hours, not including fuel stops.

Actually, we could get there lots faster in the B plane alone; however, standing policy has been always to fly the C-17s in pairs, in case of situations exactly like this: Between them, these ships carry enough spares and trained personnel almost to build another Globemaster, never mind repair one.

Still, these practical considerations are not sitting well with Danya, to say nothing of Adam....

\* \* \* \*

Candy's Journal:

Day XI

There. Wasn't even all that difficult to get antediluvian People's Vehicle running—ancient Volva, Mulletov Couptail, or whatever long-gone rural Russians called this 1940s American POS clone. No idea of actual brand, of course; can't begin to read Cyrillic lettering on hood,

trunk. And while retaining bright colors, ceramic-coated manufacturer's emblem offers even less insight.

Found vehicle in parking lot of what passed for gas station hereabouts, in little, not-quite-town/crossroads settlement just east of lake.

Tracked down gasoline generator in nearby (sorta) farm/general store. Hauled over to station, gave it pro-est, most forma tune-up in history of infernal combustion engine repairs: Wire-brushed carbon-embalmed sparkplug; filed corroded points; removed, pitched gunk-obstructed in-line fuel filter altogether. Thereafter, generator actually started on first pull (fortunate, since probably wouldn't recognize replacement parts even if had been sitting right on counter).

As machine began charging Mulletov's battery, dealt with car's similar operational bits at least as unceremoniously as had treated generator's. Clearly unaccustomed even to such cursory attention, vehicle demonstrated gratitude by firing right up once reassembled.

At least mostly; five of six cylinders responded, ran smoothly; sixth chimed in with occasional counterpoint as spirit moved it.

Withal, getting expedition on wheels not difficult, but was time-consuming. Started at sunup. Three hours' trek to town (chasing Frisbee nonstop en route, Maggie probably covered 20 times distance I did; regarded entire trip as lark, excuse to frolic) followed by another almost three hours' labor, which she regarded as pleasantly boring excuse to explore, sample local olfactory palette.

Thereafter, mere 15-minute drive took us to within half mile of Stallion's hideout; at which point left car, went rest of way on foot. Judged leaving fresh tire tracks close to plane would have been less than scintillating tactics.

Changed back to civvies—but not before spending five minutes scrubbing clothes into ground to eliminate any suggestion of freshly-laundered, colors-brighter-than-new/whites-whiter-than-white appearance. Similarly grimed own hair, following irregular snipping back bangs to give coiffe that practical, spontaneous, "just-haggled-off" look. Then pulled off scrunchy securing ponytail, gathered hair into two separate little-kid-type ponytails departing head just above, behind ears—gambit which alone probably took three years off apparent age, underscored innocent, harmless appearance.

However, most convincing detail required no added attention: After nearly two weeks' shower-free life on road, personal ambiance had acquired sufficient authority to bolster illusion of travel-weary wanderer beyond any challenge.

Finally, after applying smudge of dirt to forehead, another to back of hand, dragging fingernails firmly against hard ground to pack with dirt, headed back to "base" camp—but again, as with Stallion, and for same reason, came no closer than about half mile.

Have brought journal up-to-date. Wrapped camouflage clothing, weapons, equipment in weatherproof plastic sheet. Shall tuck this volume in there, too.

Fed Maggie, told her, "Watch," and (without Austrian accent), "I'll be back."

Thereafter, plan calls for walking back to car, firing up, and driving openly, unarmed, right into Serdtsevina Rasovyi....

\* \* \* \*

## INTERLUDE

### Archivist's Note (b)

Up to this point, these chronicles have been transcribed directly from Candy's daily journal entries. Hereafter, however, this record has been assembled by merging her far less frequent, personally written, after-the-fact entries with other participants' contributions, as well as the stream-of-consciousness account that she transmitted in real time via her mental link with Terry.

By far, most of the labor of taking down the bird's almost incessant chatter was performed by Lisa Mellon. Relieved by her mother and others only long enough to catch a few hours' sleep, even eating on duty most of the time, the child spent virtually every waking moment with Terry, pen and steno tablet in hand, making a verbatim record of Candy's thoughts in real time, as events developed.



Apart from combining the various accounts, the bulk of my editorial participation as Candy's chronicler during this segment has been limited to transmuting the present-tense text, which emerged from the Candy-Terry-Lisa link, to the more conventionally comfortable past-tense format.

\* \* \* \*

Volume VII

Parlor, Fly, Spider...

Opportunities to update journal likely to be few, far between during this phase of operation, Posterity. Going to have to rely upon Terrylink; hope someone back home making notes of birdbrain's rambling adequate to fill in blanks later<sup>1</sup>.

Because obviously doesn't carry journal with me—not even James Bond, at peak of Roger Moore-tenure cluelessness, would go undercover with detailed account of actions-to-date, future plans, carried physically on person.

True, Pitman nearly as archaic, arcane as classical written Latin. However, if Loki's sense of humor should manifest in form of Khraniteli capable of deciphering your Humble Historiographer's unique version of pothook shorthand (in English?), sure would put crimp in strategy.

Oh, well, if not, assuming I live through this, can always reconstruct events from memory; then merge personal record with whatever AAs have preserved from Terry's stream-of-consciousness blathering. After all, not as if haven't possessed near-eidetic recall practically from birth.

At least I think I have.

I forget....

\* \* \* \*

Drive took barely long enough to lash self into heartstring-yanking rendition of pitiful-little-match-girl, oh-so-happy-finally-to-find-someone-else-alive! level of hysteria. Initially, tears began to flow almost too easily, raising worries about peaking too soon, particularly since encountered no one to play to between settlement fringes, laboratory.

However, as rounded last corner prior to lab, played final method-actor card: Quite deliberately dredged up, dwelled upon, wrenching image of Lassie Come-Home's return through village after months-long cross-country trek to meet Her Boy at three o'clock as left school at movie's end: staggering, limping, all but collapsing, driven onward by almost inconceivable depths of unconditional canine love, loyalty...

Image ensured rivers of tears flowing as, shortly after noon, slammed on brakes, skidded Mulletov to stop yards from security post. Streaming tears, stared wide-eyed out open window at guards. Deliberately released clutch, lurching vehicle clumsily as engine killed.

Flung door open, burst from car, squeaking inarticulately. Sprinted across intervening neglected lawn, hurled self into nearest Russian's arms, sobbing, "I can't believe it! I thought everybody else was dead!"

My targeted Khranitel glanced around at comrades with slightly embarrassed air, patted me awkwardly on back, said something incomprehensibly Russian in borderline-kindly tones.

Pulled back slightly to look up into mark's eyes. "Oh, darn," I blubbered; "you don't speak English, do you. And I don't speak Russian."

"English ... ?" inquired cold voice from lab doorway behind "my" Russian—who almost physically leaped clear of me, so quickly did he remove comforting arm from shoulders, step back. Then turned, delivered brief, uncomfortable-sounding burst of Russian; saluted, positively quick-stepped back to post.

"I speak English," said new arrival, eyeing me coldly down nose.

Took every ounce of control I possessed, Posterity, not to blow cover; to remain in character as almost deliriously relieved/overjoyed, unlost-after-all-this-time, unquestioningly trusting waif. Because, based on AAs' intelligence report, Tasha's pithy description, new acquaintance emerging from doorway could be none other than Vladislav Kazimirov—Hitlerian cult-leader-analog responsible for formation of Khraniteli, primary architect of Grand Plan, plus most of their strategy, tactics.

In short, single individual most responsible for butchering more than 7 billion souls.

Clearly belonged on list with Driutsk. By rights, on line above...

Monster eyed me disapprovingly. "I am Kazimirov. I am in charge. You will answer my questions or you will be punished severely. Where did you come from?"

\* \* \* \*

"Always remember who you are," Danya cautioned repeatedly, when discussing finer points of undercover work. "Keep your false identity's persona and history in mind at all times. However, never try to lead your interrogator to the facts you wish him to learn; a pro is almost certain to notice. Instead, let him coax it out of you at his own pace.

"But," she added with one of those rare, quick, genuine grins, "don't be too quick to understand. If you're not bright enough to comprehend what they're asking, simplifying the questions down to your level will make them feel all superior. Superior people"—eyes twinkled—"are sure they can tell when they're being lied to...."

\* \* \* \*

Responded with shy smile: "I'm Elizabeth Borden. You can call me Lizzy."

All right, yes, I know, I know—foolish impulse; but odds Russian might comprehend joke far outweighed by satisfaction contained in subliminal threat's delivery.

(Yes, Danni warned me about that, too.)

“I did not ask your name,” Kazimirov snapped rudely; “I asked you where you came from.”

“A big factory farm,” responded helpfully, with only slightly puzzled distress at hostility.

Kazimirov’s brow darkened further. “Where ... ?”

“It’s in Plas-Plastinov-Plastinovskaya,” I stuttered, allowing growing dismay to show, “in Ipolitoff, just north of the Caucasus mountains. Mr. Ivanov gave my family a whole suite in the workers’ dormitory there on the farm.”

(Lawsey, lawsey ... Ivanov’s suite in Ipolitoff, near Caucasians?—Ipolitoff-Ivanov’s Caucasian Suite, of course. But just knew Kazimirov not classical music buff. Okay, yes, still playing with fire; yes, still dumb—but simply couldn’t help self; pulling supercilious dragon’s whiskers was like drug!)

“Why were you in Plastinovskaya?”

Radiating round-eyed, earnest helpfulness: “We were visiting Russia.”

Khraniteli leader’s breath departed with sound like big truck’s air brakes. Tone acquired distinct menace. “Why were you in Plastinovskaya?”

Still helpfully, but a bit worried; dialing in slightly protesty tone: “It was part of our tour.”

“What was the purpose of the tour? Why were you staying on a factory farm in—wait.” Paused. Head genocide eyed captive sternly. Could see wheels turn as tried to figure out how to dumb down question sufficiently. “Before you were in Russia, where did you come from?”

Expression cleared—at last, question little Lizzy could answer: “Germany.”

“So you are German?”

“Oh, no.”

“What were you doing in Germany?”

“It was part of our tour.”

Slightest touch of pink brightened Kazimirov’s cheeks. Entrance security detail personnel found occasion to focus attention elsewhere. “Why did your family go there?—And do not tell me it was on the tour.”

Hesitated, eyed monster with confusion, distress bordering upon renewed tears. “But it was.”

Russian regarded Plucky Secret-Agent Girl with undisguised contempt, but paused for further thought before trying again: “Before the tour started, where were you living?”

Added slight nervous stutter for artistic effect: “Wau-Wausip-p-p-pi.”

“What ... ?”

Repeated answer with very most earnest demeanor, obviously doing best to clear up pronunciation.

“Where is this Wausippi?”

“Waushara County.”

Kazimirov shook head as if trying to dislodge gnat. Could see wheels turning: How could anyone be that provincial! For slow provincial's benefit, in slightly less threatening tones, clarified, “What country is Waushara County in?”

“America.”

“Hah. I thought I heard the contamination of that vile American accent in your English. Never mind, never mind; what was your family's interest in the factory farm?”

“We were part of a farmers' tour. We were exchanging farming techniques and advanced ag-agri-agricultural t-technology.”

“Where is your family now?”

Made silent fish mouths, as if trying to speak. Allowed tears to resurge in earnest, broke into silent sobs; finally gasped, “R-right after we g-got th-there, my family, Mr. Ivanov's fa-fam—eh-eh-everybody got all sick and they died ... !”

Abruptly Kazimirov looked pleased. “But you didn't die...”

“N-n-no, sir,” I blubbered, mopping eyes with filthy sleeve, while admiring Russian's mastery of obvious.

“You did not get sick,” he repeated thoughtfully. Then snapped grimly, “Have you ever been sick? Have you ever had colds, the flu, measles, tonsillitis?”

Shook head; concentrated on keeping expression textbook study in silent, puzzled, tear-streaming misery.

By now Russian looked positively delighted, in own ominous fashion. Turned then to strange-looking specimen just emerging from lab entrance behind him. “Driutsk, here’s another one for your collection. Put her in with them. The doctor can test her tomorrow.”

\* \* \* \*

Heart sang, but strove to control features, as “The doctor can test her tomorrow” echoed, reechoed in head: doctor!—doctor!—DOCTOR!—tomorrow would be reunited with Daddy! On top of controlling features, maintaining grieving appearance, suppressing reaction to prospect of seeing Daddy, was running pretty close to multitasking limit—

Until Driutsk stepped forward, eyed me up, down, sideways; gently took hand, started leading me off.

Abruptly, then, attention snapped to, refocused exclusively on, escort. Had been so excited at infiltration strategy’s success, Driutsk’s presence—who, what he was—failed at first to register.

Returning recollection, realization, brought instant chill, sobriety. Almost forgot necessity to dial down tragic affect progressively.

Glanced at captor through residual tears. Noted was studying me in turn, with entirely too much interest: Wet, almost runny, unnaturally bright, fast-blinking, pale eyes lingered here, there, every—

No. Mostly just here, there.

(At least to degree here, there actually discernable on someone my age...)

At no time, Posterity, has partying with Driutsk, or anyone else for that matter, ever been first-choice element of Daddy-rescuing strategy. Never have felt so uncomfortable in presence of any man—not even Rollo, whose intentions, though unambiguous, were at least arguably honorable. (To degree would-be wife-beating sociopath comprehends honor.)

Risked another glance at Driutsk. Strangely constructed little man. And “little” appropriate adjective: really short for adult male; no more than half head taller than self.

Overall, features disturbing: small, round, utterly bald head (lacking even eyebrows) mounted, apparently without benefit of neck, directly on steeply sloping shoulders; almost nonexistent, piggish nose with slitlike nostrils; aforementioned pale, fast-blinking eyes; big, slack lips; no chin to speak of.

Realized, upon reflection, Driutsk bore eerily close resemblance to Addams Family’s Uncle Fester—original New Yorker magazine version (Adam has entire NY cartoon collection on CDs), not TV series or movies.

Still, intel is intel. In hopes of ascertaining hint of degenerate’s schedule, agenda, preferably in time to avoid them, tried to get him talking. Began hesitantly, “Do you speak English?”

“I speak seven languages,” Russian answered smugly. “I am a much decorated soldier and an accomplished electromechanical engineer. I have killed many, many of our enemies, and our leader depends upon me to solve many, many technical problems. I have served our cause in many, many ways, with great distinction.”

Well, so much for trying to get repulsive little slug talking. But abruptly, despite situation’s patently skin-crawly aspects, found self having to fight down impulse to laugh: Like nerdiest, least appealing boy in school trying clumsily to overawe new girl on whom Has Designs, Driutsk clearly trying to impress me.

Suppressed shudder. Based on Tasha’s summary of Katia’s situation, would have thought was too old for him. Apparently refugee disguise’s twin-ponytail “angel-wings” hairdo had achieved too much success in “rolling back years.”

Yay.

\* \* \* \*



Regrettably, at least from Driutsk's perspective, conflicting duties, no doubt based on "many, many" talents, apparently required presence elsewhere that evening, eliminating opportunity to follow through with flirtation. (Oh, darn.)

However, during approximately mile-long promenade through settlement, from laboratory to prison camp, little troll worked hard at being charming. This involved stilted version of sightseeing guide's patter: pointing out, describing functions of various significant buildings, recounting Khranitelis' plans for world, accomplishments thus far (though skipped lightly past that whole genocide thing). Plus guiding captive, by means of "many, many" touches from soft, pallid, flutteringly busy, helpful little hands.

Actually, though little degenerate certainly blurred line, never quite crossed from annoying to overtly offensive contact during walk. Got impression was fishing to see whether "importance" within Khraniteli ranks, coupled with friendliness, might encourage new girl to show interest, meet him partway (perhaps before other kids could warn her what a thundering, creepy dweeb he was). If so, must have found me disappointingly obtuse: Never noticed roaming hands; comprehended what was up to.

Still, as departed, Driutsk intimated would see me later—underscoring point, intentions, by actually wiggling single hairless brow suggestively.

Disinterested prison camp guards reluctantly broke away from picnic table, cycled new capture unceremoniously through sally port's double gates. Didn't even bother patting down inductee first, never mind conducting actual weapons/contraband search. Apparently eagerness to return full attention to food, drink (or vice versa; clearly each individual possessed own view of how God intended him to celebrate evening) overrode minor considerations such as institutional security.

Once inside, briefly maintained cover identity behavior: Stood looking mournfully out through fence long enough to impress any observer with fact new prisoner found situation distressing. Then, with big, theatrical sigh, slowly turned around—

To find Tasha leaning against nearest dorm wall, surrounded by rest of kids, regarding me with cryptic expression. After moment, girl pushed away from wall, strolled up, draped arm around shoulders, led away. In process, mouth grazed past ear and, without moving lips, she breathed, "Having violet special lamp selling on bolts cutter...."

\* \* \* \*

Already high regard for Tasha rose further still when, before we exchanged first words beyond original, barely audible wisecrack, girl gathered balance of kids around us; had them begin singing traditional Russian children's/grownups' folk songs as we strolled around enclosure's open areas, apparently by purest coincidence never coming close to light/utility poles, structures generally, as swapped gossip, bringing each other up-to-date on developments.

Singing? Could not resist asking.

Amazingly, despite complete lack of spook training, formal or in-, Tasha had figured out, all by self, Khraniteli might have hidden microphones around compound. Had kids perform inconspicuous, inch-by-inch scan. Ultimately located over dozen bugs concealed in yard, determined were monitored by guards in sally port guard shack; then came up with low-tech, white-noise solution to conduct unmonitorable conversation in case had missed some.

Likewise had turned up microphones in dorms. Curiously, only tiny, one-per-dorm, unisex restrooms unbugged. Apparently, with only one commode, tiny sink, no shower, never crossed Khraniteli's minds that non-hygiene-related business might be transacted within. Which of course explained girl's invitation to confer there previous night.

At every turn, Tasha's foresight, perceptiveness, inventiveness, sheer native intelligence leave me more in awe. No kidding, Posterity; Danni simply going to love her.

"Caught by accident not, yes?" she said in mock-prosecutorial tones, once amateur antieavesdropping chorus had reached full volume.

"No; I checked out the area. There's no inconspicuous way to get into the laboratory to find out where they're holding Daddy. I finally decided that the simplest way in is—"

"Them you letting take in," Tasha finished, eyes mirroring wonderment, "to be sticking by Foster doctor. Together then brains putting; talk, plan," she guessed—"escape."

Eyed me with concern. "Obviously, over getting fence, choosing you whenever, or bolts cutter making hole. But if so tight laboratory security, how Foster doctor getting out after you

finding?”

“I said there was no low-key way to get in,” replied darkly. “I can get in. In fact, unless I come up with something really clever—or even marginally less stupid—after I talk to Daddy and we decide on timing, I’m going to slip over the fence, collect my gear, go back to the lab in the middle of the night, take out all the guards, go in and get Daddy, take a truck, and pick up you guys on the way out of town.”

“Take out’?” Tasha sputtered, round-eyed. “Meaning kill? Guards kill intending you all—all killing you can... ?” Expression with which girl regarded me combined astonishment, disbelief, hope.

Horror, on other hand, conspicuously absent. Sole expressed reservation practical: “All killing guards how? Not gun. Whole base waking.”

Suppressed smile; explained: “My guns are extremely quiet. Mossad silencers make a tiny noise, hardly louder than a gerbil’s cough.”

Tasha brightened; no shrinking fialka, she.

I continued: “The lab building’s over a hundred yards long—meters to you, I guess. There’s an entrance at each end. They’re out of sight of each other, and there’s no way anybody at one end will hear silenced gunfire from the other. There are only four men on duty at each door; at least half are asleep most of the night. And I’m a really good shot.”

“Good only coming from kill Khraniteli,” Tasha stated thoughtfully. “Helping I can how?”

Eyed her, deliberated momentarily; then reached decision: “Can you drive?”

Girl crooked brow. “Badly.” Then smiled. “Also dislegally, since nine. But things not hitting. Mostly.”

Didn’t even try to repress grin at Tasha’s patently spurious self-deprecation. “Good.

Assuming they take me to Daddy sometime tomorrow, and unless he has other plans, let's schedule the great escape for tomorrow night, say just after midnight. We'll cut a hole in the fence for the little kids and take them to the motor pool, and I'll liberate a truck for you.

"At about the two-hour point, drive past the laboratory and look for us. Don't try to be careful or sneaky; as lax as they are around here, if you act as though you're supposed to be there, no one will even notice."

Tasha nodded scornfully. "From my watching, rankings-low Khraniteli inflicted by not too many awareness of surroundings or ons-going."

"That was my impression, too." Paused; turned serious. "Okay now, listen—this is important: If Daddy and I are out there waiting for you, great. If not, or if there seems to be a commotion going on, it's a pretty good bet that things haven't gone well. In that case, you'll need to get those kids out of here—put as many kilometers behind you as you can. Get them clear and keep them safe."

Tasha's expression darkened. "Without you leaving not."

Stuck out own lower lip, mustered frown. "You damn well better. If Daddy and I haven't made it out by then, the Khraniteli undoubtedly will have caught me red-handed. Those who survive the experience will have learned that dealing with a kid isn't necessarily safe. If Kazimirov is as smart as I think he is, I'll be dead by then or shortly afterward, and he'll have a whole new attitude toward you guys. Getting yourselves caught again will not be a good idea, and won't help anyone."

Then realized had overlooked vital detail—and abruptly found self unsuccessfully fighting back tears: "And Tasha? Take care of my dog ... ?"

\* \* \* \*

Kim Mellon's Journal:

Terry settled his feathers and looked around at us with a self-satisfied expression.

“She’s a little scared,” Lisa confirmed, her expression uncertain, “but she’s really excited and ... and she’s happy.”

Adam stood. At that moment he looked taller than usual. “I think we’re all agreed,” he stated, “that it’s going to take another day to get the A plane back into the air.” Uncharacteristically, he seemed calm.

Even more uncharacteristically, Danya seemed less so. Long before the discussion had begun, even as we eavesdropped on Candy via Terry, she had begun to pace—or perhaps stalk would be a more appropriate descriptive; her movements were reminiscent of a caged panther. “I do not think we can wait,” she offered softly.

Teacher’s nod was thoughtfully. “The only question is whether we should risk getting you there quickly, in the operational C-17, or whether it would be preferable to unload and assemble the Black Hawks.”

“I vote helicopters,” said Wallace regretfully. “I’m as worried about Candy as the next hopelessly besotted male, and I’m just as eager to rescue Marshall Foster. But if we have a failure on the B plane while the ships are separated, it would leave our forces stranded, divided in hostile territory. All personnel involved would be jeopardized, as well as the entire mission, which means increased risk to our people back home.”

Astonishingly, the awkward silence that followed was broken by Adam. His expression somber, he took a deep breath and said, “I agree with Wallace: We should not risk separating the C-17s.” He paused, clearly forcing himself to continue. “Candy would never want us to endanger our people just to pull her and her dad out.

“Sending in a strike force in the Black Hawks is risky, too—however,” he added, in tones which brooked no argument, “if we do, I am going with them.”

“The problem with the helicopters,” Danya mused, apparently thinking aloud as much as speaking for our benefit, “is that, even after we unload everything stored between them and the cargo doors, and get them out, and assemble them, and preflight and fuel them, then, counting the three fuel stops conservative cross-country operation calls for, it’s still going to take us fifteen hours’ flying time to get there.

“And the fact is that, once we’re there, we won’t really even be there there: With only two ships, we can’t just fly in openly, guns blazing. We’ll have to land twenty, thirty miles out, find usable local vehicles or walk to make our way to within working distance. We face a minimum of thirty to forty hours before we can begin even a simple extraction, never mind actual support of Candy’s operation.

“Much as I hate to say it, I think it makes more sense to wait for repairs to be finished on the C-17, and then go in as a fully assembled strike force.”

The silence that followed this summary was painful; but, slowly, beginning with Teacher, one after another, everyone nodded.

Including Adam.

\* \* \* \*

Candy’s Journal:

Late that afternoon, just prior to “dinner,” guard/messenger/probably just nearest available warm body showed up (with no appointment—what kind of gulag is this?) with nonoptional invitation to accompany him “...now.”

Unscheduled constitutional wound up at massively armored entrance to Khraniteli’s huge underground shelter. Followed escort along endless series of corridors to doorway, which opened to reveal...

“Ah,” rasped Kazimirov, from behind broad desk, “Lizzy Borden, the American...” Tone turned country of origin into pejorative.

Instantly Plucky Special-Ops Girl’s internal “battle stations” alarms went off; combat computer engaged. This definitely not on schedule. Inconspicuously (I hoped) adjusted balance, stance.

Then, full-bore chainsaw mode held in abeyance by thinnest of hair triggers, but ready to explode at slightest hint that jig might be up, made round, mystified eyes; said, in meekest, most submissive tones, “Hello, Mr. Kazimirov. Is everything all right? Why am I here ... ?”

Russian’s face contorted in odd fashion; in someone else, might have been mistaken for attempt at friendly smile, but on Fearless Leader, looked almost painful.

Unexpectedly, waved me into chair; opened with, “Borden, you are young; you must have gone to many movies in America. I collect movies. What American movies have you seen, and which have you found most enjoyable?”

Inquiry registered so high on non sequitur meter, “sense” of question almost eluded me. Must have taken whole seconds to collect, refocus wits—then pull back from edge, throttle down homicidal response matrix to idle.

Decision not to toy with monster’s brain this time around arrived at separately, but no less emphatically.

Conducted quick review; decided own personal favorites list offered sufficient variation for opening response: “I’ve always preferred older, funny movies. The funniest movie of all time is *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. Have you seen it? It was made by some people from South Africa. They were completely unknown in America at the time.

“Of kids’ movies, my favorites would be any of *The Pirates of the Caribbean* series; they were almost as funny. Of more grownup movies, the non-Disney version of *Peter Pan*, with Rachel Hurd-Wood, and, not funny but I love it, the original *Lassie Come Home*, with Roddy McDowall.

“However”—occurred to Intrepid Apprentice Spook at that point that by employing reverse variation on Scheherazade strategy, if didn’t overdo it, possibly could learn something useful about opposition. So changed final answer, tossed in off-the-wall ringer for bait—“I think my all-time favorite action movie is the first *Die Hard*, with Bruce Willis.”

There, own list should suffice to undermine head sociopath’s mundane preconceptions about preteen American girls; but *Die Hard* so anomalous, so violent by comparison, perhaps would trigger revealing questions.

And worked. I guess. Whatever.

Monster looked pleased (to degree that face capable of expressing pleasure); rose to bait like hungry toad to big, fat fly. “Yes,” he almost enthused; “the Die Hard movies are particularly enjoyable; they are among my own favorites.”

(Oh, goodie, Posterity; massest murderer of all time thinks airheaded ingenue refugee shares his cinematic tastes. Daddy will be so proud.)

“For a male,” he continued, expression softening further, “the appeal is obvious. But what about that first film caused you, a young girl, to enjoy it so?”

Double-goodie—Fearless Leader fancied self movie critic. Perhaps even intellectual. Hadn’t anticipated cross-examination regarding motives; hadn’t, in fact, ever particularly thought about which nuts, bolts, specific structural bits make one movie more enjoyable than another. Might as well ask, “What specifically do you like about the taste of chocolate?” Don’t know; just do. Movies largely similar: Ring bell or not.

Yes, have heard discussions among normal (i.e., nonsociopathic, nongenocidal) people generally centering on what bits each found exciting, funny, touching. However, only movie critics publicly pretended interest in motivations, subliminal messages.

On other hand, had dropped Die Hard into discussion while fishing for reaction. Okay, had it. Be careful what you wish for—now what...?

Debated briefly. Apart from Die Hard (which actually had enjoyed, on unabashedly primitive, viscerally combative level), list basically truthful. Safest approach, therefore, probably to limit observations to truth, or at least cautious variations based on truth.

—So instead blurted, “I liked Bruce Willis’ character in Die Hard. John McClane was intelligent and brave. But...” paused as if thinking, then delivered jab: “...most important of all, he had absolute, unswerving moral integrity.”



There—see how that goes down, you soulless, homicidal ghoul.

But ethical belly-kick fell flat. Kazimirov simply disagreed—intellectual superior to noncomprehending, lower-order being—“McClane is a predictable hero; this makes him boring. I feel more kinship with Hans Gruber.”

(Hah, big surprise there.) Made wide, round eyes. “The terrorist?”

Kazimirov offered superior smile at my simple-minded (deliberate) missing of point. “The ‘exceptional thief.’ He was a villain only in the eyes of screenwriters genuflecting to conventional Hollywood morality. McClane emerged victorious only by virtue of repeated convenient accidents and several clever tricks.

“Hans’ scheme to loot the money-grubbing Asians’ vault was well researched, thoroughly planned, and soundly grounded in human psychology. Except for the screenwriters’ morally bankrupt tilting of the playing field, he would have succeeded.”

Really, Posterity, had meant self-promise not to play with monster’s head this time. Really. But—

“Oh, no, sir,” I burred brightly, projecting ingenue so shallow, was incapable even of remembering surroundings, captive status. “What really happened is, Hans had the bad luck to run into the King of the Cowboys. John McClane identified with Roy Rogers because he’s just as incorruptible—and Roy never loses.” Paused, eyed him solemnly, finished emphatically, “Ever.”

Kazimirov’s expression darkened slightly. “Hah! Roy Rogers—a mere icon of American naivete.”

“Of American optimism,” I demurred, projecting my best young Shirley Temple earnestness, “and personal integrity.”

As continued to hammer blithely on integrity theme, good humor began to ebb from Russian’s eyes. Perhaps had begun to occur to him, was having philosophical debate with

patently air-headed enemy preteen ... and losing.

Still, completely bereft of self-respect (soulless genocidal ghoul union has rules), Khraniteli unhesitatingly chose low road to regain points lead: "Neither the Americans' optimism nor their so-called integrity saved them, did it."

Performed one of his apparently patented boiler-venting exhalations through nose. "With the exception of you, our American doctor, and a small, troublesome group, all Americans are dead now. And soon those few annoying survivors will join the rest."

Required major effort, but managed to keep expression from changing—at least Kazimirov failed to notice anything untoward—as, trying for natural, childlike curiosity, replied, "What do you mean, sir?"

Pretty sure was beginning to get handle on Khraniteli's primary personality disorders and, if reading him correctly—if seriously bad mojo for AAs truly afoot—Fearless Leader would enjoy watching helpless young captive's distress upon hearing terrible news. Still, required all available concentration not to show was holding breath until...

Kazimirov smiled again. Unambiguously bad smile. "There are something approaching 2,000 Americans gathered in a single location in the mountains of southern California. We had arranged to eliminate them previously, but something went wrong. Since then they have regularly caused us problems."

(Suppressing flash of private smugness cost major effort: Wondered how revelation that the "something" which had gone wrong stood before him would impact "Hans'" opinion of "Roy Rogers.")

"However, I have wearied of them and their interference," continued head sociopath. "Accordingly, we have searched across Eurasia, located, and brought back a number of very large, multiple-warhead, thermonuclear, intercontinental ballistic missiles. Today is Saturday. Tuesday, barring some unprecedentedly widespread problem discovered during the countdown, we will launch them en masse.

"Even with the significant percentage of mechanical and/or electronic failures which we can expect due to age and lack of maintenance during storage, the very numbers of missiles make it certain that more than enough will get through to carpet-bomb a hundred-kilometer

radius around their headquarters.”

Monster leaned back then; eyed me smugly. Smile metamorphosed into nameless projection of almost satanic satisfaction. “Three days from now, you and Marshall Foster will be the last Americans....”

\* \* \* \*

Required little acting skill to reward sociopath with slow, horrified tears (but required lots of multitasking effort not to react to ghoul’s confirmation Daddy was indeed “other American”).

Kazimirov chuckled. “I don’t think Roy Rogers will save them this time, do you?”

(In point of fact, “Roy” already juggling options—of which most triggered horrid hollow feelings in belly: Clearly only way to be certain of ending missile threat for good would be to wipe out warheads. Only way to be certain of that would be thermonuclear detonation. Hoped against hope setting off fireworks would not require personal, on-site attention. Notwithstanding primary mission’s patently suicidal odds, pushing thermonuke’s built-in Red Button with own finger had never figured into plans....)

Chewed over what had learned about Kazimirov’s psyche thus far; concluded hint of spunk might be appropriate reaction at this point. Rose, glared down nose at fiend; declared, “None of the back-shooting, cowardly villains he faced ever thought so either.”

Spun wordlessly, stalked haughtily out door. Experienced bad moment, wondering belatedly whether imputation of cowardice, never mind exit without permission, might have overstepped bounds, would bring down inconvenient, possibly even dangerous, wrath; but after only moment’s hesitation, Kazimirov’s scornful laugh followed.

Then, amazingly—”In a few days, you will have come to a clearer understanding of reality in this new world. We will speak again of American movies.”

Reality? From perspective of worst sociopathic butcher in all history—who cheerfully identifies with Hans Gruber? Pretty sure that word didn’t mean what he thought it did....

As followed guard back toward entrance, mind whirled with rush of sudden complications, conflicting thoughts, considerations—not to mention barely restrained homicidal impulses...

\* \* \* \*

Kim Mellon's Journal:

Just what we needed—another Khraniteli threat to the precarious foothold our too-vulnerably incipient species is trying to gain. Wide eyes were in evidence all around at the conclusion of Candy's second Terry-relayed encounter with Kazimirov; and before its conclusion, Kelli Watts was already on the satellite phone, giving the people back at Palomar the unsettling news. If we can't stop the launch, they'll need to evacuate, and there's an awful lot of data and equipment that will need to be relocated as well.

However, work on the A plane's engine is already proceeding with the utmost haste, and nothing can be done to shorten the time required for completion.

In any event, Wallace is confident that, though the timing may be tighter than strictly comfortable, we'll get there in time to deal with this latest threat, and, of course, to rescue Candy, Doctor Foster, and those captive children.

\* \* \* \*

Candy's Journal:

Once sally port security personnel settled back down after clearly unwelcome interruption represented by Yours Truly's return to camp (i.e., refocused attention back to bottles' contents, as God intended), Intrepid Special-Ops Girl draped arm firmly over Tasha's shoulder, dragged girl off for brief stroll around compound. Maintaining separation from microphones, quickly brought her up-to-date on Kazimirov's fireworks surprise.

Except for prior demonstrations of intelligence, might have wondered whether girl comprehended situation's gravity: Seemed supremely unimpressed. Response limited to

sanguine, "So before escaping, we stopping them."

Glad Tasha's confidence high; impending missile launch, together with own possible personal involvement in solving problem, left stomach so tied in knots, couldn't force down gourmet offerings children had saved me from evening meal. (To be fair, while primary appetite deficit grew out of tension-induced acid stomach, suspicion that entree's meat content probably started life as card-carrying member of Rodentia was less than helpful.) Divided up my portion amongst youngest campers, who clearly needed it more than I, regardless of source.

Later that night, showed Tasha how to use stick to keep razor wire out of mischief while eeling over fence. Adjourned together to base camp, where girl, Maggie hit it off instantly—in fact, within moments of arrival, Tasha found self snookered into moonlight Frisbee. Watched them briefly with smile: Clearly girl had proper doggie-parenting instincts; would take best care of BC possible, In The Event Of...

Once Maggie sufficiently frisbeed out (our opinion, not hers), fed, watered, BC diagnosed Tasha as snuggle-deprived, set about rendering treatment.

However, with dog in arms, girl found herself reliving Russian perspective on Mankind's End, replay centered on fact that her beloved, fiercely protective Dobie, out of town with father when plague, panic, riots started up, had never made it home. Flashback soon deteriorated into silent, convulsively whole-body-racking sobs, clearly born of pain beyond capacity to contain or express.

As involuntarily self-taught, rule-of-thumb psychologist (like all H. post hominems, been there, done that, understood suffering's dynamics all too well), could tell Tasha's determined focus upon long-lost dog classic grief-substitution syndrome: Yes, dog's loss almost too painful to contemplate, but intensified by transference mechanism: Dog's loss represented family, friends—whole of her world. Like most of us, girl was, in fact, to best of her knowledge, community's sole survivor. Also like most of us, had spent terrible protracted interval fearing was all alone on planet.

From appearances, this was first time Tasha had let anyone, anything get past barriers behind which bottled-up pain had mounted steadily, festering, well on way to turning septic.

Holding her tightly in my arms as she clung to Maggie, we helped her ride it out. By time emotional purge slowed, ground to quivering halt, girl was limp, barely responsive, but catharsis finally behind her. Based on own experience, that of friends', new family

members', knew girl would be all right now.

(By rights, TD on Maggie's collar should have read, CTD, for champion therapy dog; never so much as twitched muscle to pull away as long as Tasha needed her.)

Outing concluded finally with gathering selected tools; swallowing couple mouthfuls of C-rations, accumulating balance to take back for kids; returning to prison camp; divvying up food. Finally made it into filthy beds shortly after one, both still red-eyed, borderline sniffily.

\* \* \* \*

Kim Mellon's Journal:

At dawn's first pinkish glow this morning, those of us not already awake and working under the lights on the A plane's engine were rudely jarred from our bunks by the mounting shriek of jet engines—not ours—spooling up to a full-throated roar.

Stumbling blearily en masse down the C-17s' ramps to the ground, we saw what appeared to be a small, business-class jet, something on the order of a ten-passenger Gulfstream, accelerating briskly down the nearest runway. In the dim light, it was just possible to make out the Cyrillic lettering on the hull.

Banking steeply the moment it left the ground, the small jet climbed out rapidly toward the still-dark southwestern sky, clearly on course for Serdtsevina Rasovyi.

Teacher watched in silence, his face a poster portrait for the phrase, enigmatic expression. Next to him, Wallace shook his head and grumbled something which, if it had come from anyone else, could have been mistaken for a sarcastic observation about the special personal satisfactions of being included in precision operational choreography, as well as left and right hands each sharing what the other had in mind.

Adam, who had been up all night working on the engine, said nothing. Briefly he glared after the plane, but then turned and went back to work.

For myself, the burst of relief I felt when I saw that plane, and realized what was happening, was so profound that I couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry, and ended up doing a little of both simultaneously.

On the other hand, Danya's actions have reinforced my growing impression that, as a young girl, she probably was very much like Candy; and that, as our favorite problem stepchild grows up, it's going to be increasingly difficult to tell them apart.

Which contributes a somewhat less comfortable overlay to those feelings of relief...

\* \* \* \*

Volume VIII

Candle, Moth, Flame

\* \* \* \*

Candy's Journal:

Day XII

Achieved little sleep that night, Posterity, and even that not restful: Tossed, turned, obsessed (consciously and sub-) about morrow (okay, technically, today), not to mention Kazimirov's thermonuclear plans for (actual) day after tomorrow.

And when finally did manage to nod off, however briefly, promptly found self once again fleeing in slow-motion, inches ahead of polar bear—this one with recognizable elements of Kazimirov's face superimposed over, blended with ursine features.

But worse, bear allied this time with weaselly looking, bald-headed hyena—with slopey shoulders; almost nonexistent piggy nose with slitlike nostrils; wet, almost runny, unnaturally bright, fast-blinking, pale eyes; big, slack lips; no chin to speak of.

Just behind us as we fled—me pulling Daddy, him towing Tasha, rest of kids strung out behind her, all bouncing along like linked balloons—carnivores pursued, moving in synchronized, slow-motion bounds.

And as usual, no matter how steeply forward I leaned, or how glidey managed to make strides in effort to speed progress through syrup-consistency air, we gained no ground on anthropomorphically featured mobile appetites.

Worse, Daddy kept trying to pull away, turn back; kept muttering something about having forgotten to leave water running in stove, turn on electricity in bathtub, light fuse—whatever!

By two o'clock, when dormitory door banged open, jarring me blearily awake, was ready to smack him.

But adrenaline surge, upon opening eyes, cleared out blearies in short order: With no attempt at stealth, Driutsk, accompanied by two other men, marched up center aisle, stopped at foot of bed; stood regarding me: licking big, slack lips; unnaturally bright, fast-blinking, pale eyes shining even brighter....

\* \* \* \*

Kim Mellon's Journal:

At breakfast this morning, about seven, Lisa suddenly dropped her utensils and began writing furiously in the ever-present steno tablet.

"Hello, Mr. Driutsk," said Terry, from her shoulder. "Gee, it's late; it must be the middle of the night. What are you doing here?"



Lisa glanced up at me, her eyes worried. "Mommy," she murmured, "Candy's scared..."

\* \* \* \*

Candy's Journal:

"I told you I would see you later," said Driutsk, making visible effort to suppress smirk. "Get up, child. Come with me."

Eased from beneath ragged blanket; rose cautiously. Switched on combat computer's peripheral hyperawareness, the better to watch all three simultaneously.

"Where?"

"With me." Driutsk's big, wet, loose-lipped smile raised goosebumps up, down spine's full length.

"At this hour? Why?"

Breathily, Russian simpered, "It is time for you to cross the threshold into adulthood. I am going to expand your horizons...."

\* \* \* \*

Kim Mellon's Journal:

I found myself standing, staring at Terry, my feelings no doubt apparent in my face. But I wasn't sure whether I was more afraid for Candy or worried about how eavesdropping telepathically and/or empathetically on what appeared to be about to happen might affect Lisa.

Around the table, others had begun to notice. Adam, too, was on his feet, his face pale, eyes flinty.

Her pen never missing a word as they cascaded from Terry's bill, Lisa's eyes flickered up and around at us uncomfortably. But then, after a moment's visible deliberation, her expression firmed. "If hearing things like this is going to affect you this much," she said sternly, her tone and delivery unmistakably my worried voice, "I'm not sure I should let you listen..."

\* \* \* \*

Candy's Journal:

"No ... !" Unexpected little voice shrill, angry, but curiously unafraid.

All eyes turned to see tiny Katia on her feet, eyes blazing, marching up aisle, bearing down on Driutsk. Child glared up monster's nostrils from vicinity of furcula; poked him firmly in chest with stiffened index finger. "Be her leaving alone. Not she knowing. With you I am being go—is enough!"

Irrelevant-but-analytical-detail-obsessed corner of brain enjoyed momentary internal dialogue over surprise at noting: First, Katia spoke English; second, marveling at how well—and only then, belatedly, realized just how smart tiny girl really was: Extra effort just to keep me in loop!

In response, Russian's smirk became, if possible, even more palpably loathsome. But then laughed; said (in English; repellant little dweeb lacked strength of character to resist being led—by child), "Yes, you will come with us." Pointed at another girl, about Katia's age, shrinking back under blanket. "You too. My friends wish to experiment."

"But you..." Turned back to me; leer faded to horrid caricature of smile whose contrived friendliness somehow more disturbing than unambiguous lechery; "...you I think may be special. You are for me."

Double bunks abutting wall on either side of unscheduled Kitten-in-Cage Girl formed cul-de-sac—tactically, situation could have served as dictionary definition/illustration of cornered.

Carefully, stepped past trio out into aisle, furiously evaluating unexpected strategic/tactical complications...

First, quite apart from obvious negatives, situation strategically inconvenient: Still hadn't found Daddy; could not afford to attract attention at this point.

And tactically, even with theoretical advantage conferred by momentary startlement paralysis inherent in what Danni likes to call exploding baby bunny factor, three opponents, all staring fixedly at me, almost certainly too many to dispose of. Certainly not quietly.

True, Driutsk himself clearly easy meat: soft-bellied little desk-jockey; hardly significant factor.

Associates, on other hand, typically robust six-foot-plussers; strapping, healthy young Russian males. (One actually kind of cute, if preferences run to sexual deviates.) Grown men both; plus stance, movements suggested at minimum some training. Not to be taken lightly.

All of which highlighted question: Go quietly? Cooperate? Or blow cover in biggest possible way, thereby imperiling mission?

What would Danya do...?

But before could come up with answer, Tasha forced herself between Katia, Driutsk; hissed, "Enough! Be taking me!—never Katia you hurting again!"

Words barely cleared lips before Driutsk's expression turned contemptuous; launched casual, roundhouse fist at Tasha's head.

And suddenly, strategic considerations notwithstanding, tactical situation reshuffled: Like jackals circling crippled baby antelope, all three degenerates' attention now focused exclusively on Tasha. For all intents, purposes, rest of us became invisible.

“Shazam....” Muttered trigger word came almost as surprise—but relief, too: Worrying phase now behind me.

Combat computer kicked in fully, time slowed...

Was already some five feet off floor, approaching apogee of leap, rotating to horizontal, as Driutsk's fist converged with Tasha's cheekbone. Time passing so slowly now, even had time for flash of apologetic empathy for girl: Had to leave easiest adversary for last, which meant Driutsk's blow no doubt would land before I finished with other two. Desperately hoped would do no permanent damage...

Arriving at targets' shoulder height, legs coiled, cocked, then initiated half bicycle-pedaling motion: two almost simultaneous, hysterical-strength-driven kicks, one for each opponent. Left heel slashed in under number one's chin, crushing larynx, separating cervical vertebrae.

Impact provided fulcrum, leverage to drive ball of right foot inches deep into number two's temple, which—

Details of how Cross-Eyed Special-Ops Girl came to be lying flat on back, staring up through clouds of spots swirling about Driutsk's mask of rage, had been obscured by sudden, blinding explosion of light behind eyes.

Still, from this perspective, could hardly fail to notice: Heretofore-assumed-soft little slug's posture now epitomized textbook karate stance. Driutsk must indeed have been soldier; perhaps even “much decorated.” At very least, possessed first-rate hand-to-hand skills.

Obviously picked up my attack via peripheral vision; reacted automatically. Judging from pain location, had back-fisted me along cheekbone, just below ear, while my attention fixed on other two.

(Hey, no fair!—blindsiding my idea...)

Fortunately, blow delivered off-balance; target horizontal, floating. Majority of force glanced off unproductively due to angle. If had connected solidly, would have been in coma, if not dead.

Now, Homo post hominem reflexes intrinsically faster at peak efficiency than Russian's, but as lay there blinking to clear vision, combat computer seemed to be experiencing momentary bout of low-grade-concussion-induced off-peak efficiency—condition not all that easily distinguishable from paralysis.

Barely enough time-slowing function remained operational at that point to permit impact-crossed eyes to admire Driutsk's technical form as Russian drove right fist straight down toward Smith-Foster cardiac central—technique affectionately known among kung-foo movie aficionados as “heart-burster.” In fact, lying flat, with back supported by unyielding floor, if punch had landed, consequences no doubt would have justified blow's nickname.

All of which takes much longer to tell than do. Despite flickery vision, pain thundering inside skull, conditioned reflexes managed to slap weakly at Russian's fist, deflecting slightly; simultaneously, combat computer twisted torso—barely out of harm's way.

Recombined vectors, targeting parameters caused fist to brush sternum only lightly in passing, graze ribs hardly more firmly—then crash squarely into floor. Using excellent karate form, Driutsk had delivered simply devastating blow: Quite literally, whole building shook.

Unquestionably, if Russian had been performing karate demonstration, fist would have driven straight through plywood.

Except for presence of heavy joist, located directly beneath impacted floorboard.

Also unlike usual exhibition stunt, appeared to hurt like the dickens. And certainly, from expression, Driutsk's disposition not improved as scrambled to straighten up, reestablish balance, stance.

However, since intended target's block-slap had morphed into grabbing firmly onto attacker's forearm as fist blurred past, was able to use it for leverage to yank/swing self up

past him. Even had time to inconvenience Russian further by planting audibly rib-cracking elbow en passant. Actually made it to own feet slightly ahead of him.

Not that mattered.

Because as both came fully upright, blood turned to ice in belly: Noticed small, black, semiautomatic pistol in Driutsk's undamaged hand, aimed precisely at Intrepid Special-Ops Girl's favorite center of mass....

If time had slowed before, now stopped altogether for oxymoronically significant interval. Only sound in dorm was rasp of Driutsk's breathing, as eyes momentarily flicked, in purest, flaming rage, from me to broken, bleeding knuckles, to bodies on floor, then back to me.

Really surprised, Posterity, degenerate didn't just shoot me out of hand. Sure thought was going to. (Certainly would have had roles been reversed.) Undoubtedly would have been terrified, if had had time.

As things stood, however—gun hand fractionally beyond kicking range, ruling out disarmament attempt—only hope remaining was attempting legendary karate masters' fabled twist/wiggle/sidestep from bullet's path at precise moment trigger pulled, followed by all-out, banzai-mode attack before opponent could get off second shot.

Regrettably, reputable authorities—Teacher, Danya, Gayle among them—uniformly agree such stories really are fables....

Still, in absence of alternatives, cranked up hyperalertness/focus to highest levels; tried to divide attention between ghoul's unnaturally bright, fast-blinking, pale eyes and trigger finger.

Wondered if dying would hurt a lot...

Instead, Driutsk dipped single functional finger of bleeding hand into pocket, extracted pair of handcuffs. Eyes never left mine as tossed restraints at Tasha—

Who, astonishingly, still was on feet; apparently blow aimed at her hadn't quite had time to land before monster shifted attention to me.

"Put them on her, or I will shoot her right now," he snarled, "and then I will shoot you."

To me, in rage-filled whisper: "Now I will expand your horizons until you beg to die—then I will give you to Fedka..."

Have no doubt, every detail of tableau's next few seconds will remain fresh in memory until dying day—scene may well replace slow-motion polar bear chases as favorite nightmare hangout: Tasha, handcuffs dangling from hand, frozen in indecision. Horrified expressions of children standing around us. Brutally efficient-looking little gun, whose muzzle looked big enough to park UAZ in. Driutsk's rage-, hate-filled eyes blazing at me over pistol sights

—Rage-, hate-filled eyes abruptly losing focus, as crushed-watermelon sound broke silence, carrying softly but distinctly throughout dorm.

Russian blinked. Looked puzzled. Lowered gun. Dropped heavily to knees, swayed briefly, then pitched forward onto face...

Revealing tiny Katia, right behind him, eyes sparkling with expression of almost spiritual satisfaction.

With own head still ringing like cathedral bell, took several moments' labored thought to realize Driutsk probably not born with semipointy, business end of Mossad bolt-cutter embedded several inches into occiput.

\* \* \* \*

Own functioning level immaterial at that point. Tasha already in motion; situation well in hand: Briskly, girl grabbed nearest ragged blanket, doubled once, and again; then matter-of-factly used conveniently projecting, newly installed handles to lift Driutsk's head as slid pad underneath; thereafter allowed to thump back onto floor. As blood began to leak out around tool, pad neatly caught, absorbed.

Simultaneously, other kids also shifting smoothly into gear: One sprinted to window facing sally port, peeked out; then turned back with smile, pantomiming sleep, with tilted head resting on nested hands.

Experienced momentary, threefold flash of horror/relief/guilt, as realized Unthinking Special-Ops Girl had undeservingly dodged another bullet: Had entirely forgotten intradorm microphones, possibility that commotion could have been overheard by crack security troops manning sally port.

—Okay, never mind, Posterity; even I can't say that with straight face. Odds that prison camp personnel might have been listening at that hour...

But even if I had remembered, undoubtedly would have rolled dice, responded in precisely same fashion....

Hastily, other children pushed several bunks to one side, lifted heretofore unnoticed loose flooring section. Swarming like ants around bodies, kids dragged/pushed to opening, rolled limply over edge, where fell between joists, landing bonelessly on bare soil paving crawlspace beneath pylon-supported building. Jumping down after them, children produced improvised shovels from under edges, began digging furiously.

Vaulting lightly down into hole, Tasha used foot to hold Driutsk's head immobile as wrenched at bolt-cutter handles. Took only couple yanks before audible crunch announced tool's release. As blockage vanished, blood, pureed brain tissue gushed forth in earnest, soaking into earth.

Wiping majority of scarlet evidence from bolt-cutter with corpse's own shirttail, Tasha tossed unsuspectingly multipurpose tool up to smaller girl, who first brandished aloft in wordless triumph, grinned at me, then skipped off to bathroom. Shortly, sounds of washing could be heard through open door.

Once disposal project underway, functioning smoothly, Tasha paused momentarily. Our eyes met; she offered worried little smile. "Head how?"



Before could round up, coordinate enough brain cells to respond, felt warm little fingers take hand. Looking down, found Katia's almost worshipful expression looking back. With other hand, child offered borderline-filthy communal scoop filled with rusty water.

Clearly not the time to fuss about hygiene; obviously Katia needed to share, to help. Steeled self, took brief sip, handed back; mumbled, "Thank you."

And discovered forming words made head hurt even worse.

Abruptly, Katia hugged me—harder than would have believed emaciated little frame could manage. From somewhere in vicinity of wishbone (little head's crown didn't quite reach chin) came whispered, "Thanking you."

Dully wondered why Katia thanking me; girl unquestionably had just saved life. Hugged her back, though almost gingerly, in deference to prominent ribs.

Tried not to think about horrors child must have endured. Hoped staving in monster's skull would prove as long-run beneficial as actual moment of revenge seemed to have been short-term.

Unsurprised to find internal dam crumbling at that point. Tried, with little success, not to dribble tears all over little girl's head.

Presently Katia drew back slightly, blotted my face on grimy sleeve. Led to nearest bed, made me sit.

From bottom of rapidly deepening hole beneath dorm, Tasha smiled, whispered, "Resting you; out we being take musor—garbage."

\* \* \* \*

Kim Mellon's Journal:

Both Lisa and Terry were looking terribly pleased with themselves by the time Candy's immediate life-and-death crisis had resolved.

For Terry, of course, showing off is its own reward.

However, I suspect Lisa's sense of personal contribution to the expedition (ego has such negative semantic implications) was particularly well fed by the uniformly thunderstruck expressions worn by everyone present—who, by the event's conclusion, had comprised the entire crew: All work on the plane had ground briefly to a halt; everyone was listening with, depending upon personal inclination, angry or horrified eyes.

Not a few were blinking back tears. As usual, I'd given up even trying to blink them back....

\* \* \* \*

Candy's Journal:

Once pounding behind eyes had eased, vision mostly cleared, joined kids taking turns digging. Not as difficult as sounds; goal turned out to be three-foot-diameter, round hole straight down about six feet.

Reshaped boards proved remarkably efficient shovels. Head still hurt too much to ask when, for what purpose kids had made them in first place. Maybe later...

Finally rolled corpses in, dovetailed on excavation's floor like limp Chinese puzzle components. Shoveled dirt back in; finished up by artistically smoothing surface to match previously undisturbed condition.

\* \* \* \*

No one paused to Say Words per se over grave. Yes, many words spoken throughout, but

though all in Russian, majority almost certainly unrepeatable, even in rude company.

Withal, less than most classical of entombments, but sufficient unto our modest needs. And much better than disposees deserved.

No one got any more sleep: Interring Khraniteli degenerates took much of remaining night; restoring dorm's interior to cozy, prepervicide squalor ate up balance. Plus superelevated adrenaline levels not that conducive to drowsiness.

(Hmm. "Khraniteli degenerates" ... Redundancy? No, don't think so. "Normal" Khraniteli [yes, clearly an oxymoron] merely characterized by active pursuit of genocidal impulses—not rampant psychosexual deviance.)

What passed for breakfast at prison camp served couple hours after sunup. One look at offerings revealed why children all skinny.

Almost incidentally, sometime between fight and breakfast, picked up on fact that kids all understood, spoke at least some English. In recognition of fact that only friend beyond fence was Daddy, Tasha had been doing best to teach kids, in hopes improved communication could enhance odds.

Danni really going to love her, Posterity....

Judging by appearances, bored food-delivery guards not overburdened by curiosity (or even much in way of self-awareness); failed to notice that, despite continuing horrible food, conditions generally, kids all seemed oddly buoyed-up this morning: full of everything's-funny giggles.

Given our night's activities, came as little surprise that, despite Kazimirov's announced intentions, no one came to collect Lizzie Borden for trip to lab. Nor that by midmorning, even new kid, peering dispiritedly through fence, could tell Khraniteli Central appeared preoccupied: Multiple groups prowled, on foot as well as in vehicles, weapons in evidence. Clearly, Driutsk & Company's absence noticed; Khraniteli in all-out search mode.

However, no one so much as glanced our direction. Obviously, following previous evening's

collective postdinner blotto session, guards all had slept straight through night; unsurprisingly, hadn't related sleep habits to cohorts' disappearance, nor (big surprise this) bothered to mention night's alertness level to Powers That Be. As a result, Driutsk's late-night tiptoe in through sally port remained Our Little Secret.

(Is helpful, when karma squishing up through toes occasionally turns out to be positive variety....)

But then, from deeply buried (even more deeply stupid) corner of brain, unworthy thought trickled out: Would give almost anything to be fly on wall, watch Kazimirov's face, when finds Driutsk. Preferably after several weeks' ripening. Especially if figures out who cost him his favorite "much decorated soldier ... accomplished electromechanical engineer"...

Lapse brief, however; clearly, once explanation surfaces (ooo; sorry), best to be somewhere emphatically else.

\* \* \* \*

Serditsevina Rasovyi community's upset so generalized, so intense, wasn't until evening, just prior to feeding time (again!), that bored guard wandered by to collect Yours Truly for ride to lab. Functionary so disinterested or stupid (distinction appeared subtle among lower-ranking security personnel), didn't even notice spectacularly multicolored bruise now brightening just below ear, from point of cheekbone to well back into hairline: lingering memento of Driutsk's back-fist.

Happily, as rainbow-hued souvenir intensified, concussive symptoms had faded. At this point, vision clear, brain again functioning at what serves me for normal.

And good thing, too. Because had more than enough to worry about without impaired neural connections: About to meet Daddy for first time since day before World Ended, and found self needing to exercise maximum control to avoid getting into "quite a state."

Okay, bald-faced lie—already in state, well beyond quite, actually, which was growing rapidly more intense, and becoming more and more worried about it: If couldn't control reactions upon meeting Daddy after all this time, would put him, not to mention self, in danger.

Because no doubt at all: If Khraniteli tumbled to relationship, would use me as lever to try to control Daddy.

Which could only end badly for both: Daddy loves me as much as I do him, but understands ultimate stakes. If push comes to shove, if forced into Needs of Many situation—if has to choose between my life, his life, either/both—versus survival of our people, his answer not in question for single minute. Or mine. Though unquestionably, Daddy would be more manly about it.

Personally, if torture involved, his or mine, intend to cry a lot.

Accordingly, had zenned self almost into stupor by time guard pulled car to stop in front of lab building. Stopped, got out, walked around. Opened door, seized collar, yanked me out without comment, marched us up walk to lab door.

Brief Russian conversation ensued as driver logged me in with security. Then situation got ugly:

Among gun-totin' staff present, recognized guard whom had hugged previous day. Object of affections recognized me as well—and immediately set about being extra-nasty in front of superiors to overcompensate for prior momentary display of humanity. Seizing arm, twisted painfully. Then barked ugly laugh, grabbed hair, angled head to display bruise to admiring colleagues. Even demonstrated mastery of what passes for physical humor among Khraniteli by thumb-jabbing well-known nerve ganglion just behind jaw—well within bruised area.

Required no acting to reward bully's efforts with authentic, agonized squeak—poke there hurts even without bruise.

(Made note to return favor, if opportunity presents—with interest...)

Thereafter, barely able to maintain feet as bully propelled me roughly through door, down corridor, to, through second door on left. Slammed me down into chair next to empty reception desk. Pounded on inner door, shouted something in Russian.

One last time, braced self not to react to Daddy's appearance, as door opened and—

In walked Dead Man....

\* \* \* \*

Volume IX

Paging Dr. Zombie

Not making this up, Posterity: Man who stalked into room, stared down at your Humble Historiographer with interest level barely appropriate to receipt of yet another uninteresting biological specimen, was cold-sweat-inducing, prickles-all-up/down-spine-triggering, sinking-feeling-in-belly-inspiring, barely-can-breathe-in-presence dead.

Okay, not horror-genre-comic-book dead: Hair clean, fingernails groomed; both neatly trimmed. Skin, though well toward pale end of normal range, grossly ordinary. But eyes...

From first glimpse, Kazimirov's eyes had suggested Khraniteli's Fearless Leader had emerged from womb with chip already permanently affixed to shoulder.

Driutsk's, until challenge from mere children sent him frothing over edge, much too bright, too jolly, too excited—and spent way too much time staring, with politically incorrect intensity, at key components of intended object of affection's anatomy.

Dead Man's eyes, by contrast, empty. Not so much devoid of emotion as simply no hint that anyone dwelt in there.

Or more accurate characterization perhaps might be ... seemed not even to be any there in there.

Gaze of great white shark, circling thrashing, bleeding swimmer, positively grandmotherly by comparison.

Balance of appearance superficially odd but medically unremarkable: NBA-caliber tall; lean, just short of skeletally so; thinning, more-salt-than-pepper hair. Unusually broad, slightly rounded shoulders surmounting tall, thin frame invited comparisons to king cobra, hood spread, reared up to strike.

However, as studied walking cadaver, word “ascetic” came unbidden to mind, though seemed, somehow, inadequate...

“You are an American,” enunciated Dead Man, as led way into next room, which proved to be garden-variety doctor’s exam cubicle. “What is your name, American?”

Diction almost inhumanly precise; English lacked any detectible trace of accent—or emotion, for that matter; have heard computer-synthesized speech containing more warmth, animation, humanity.

More chilling, however, facial expression utterly without affect.

“Elizabeth Borden, sir.” Prompt, scrupulously responsive (however fictional) answer on my part popped out almost involuntarily, triggered by realization that, unlike Kazimirov, Dead Man inspired no temptation whatever to engage in head games.

In fact, within moments of meeting, had arrived at utter conviction that, if somehow managed to trip Dead Man’s alarms, would have no choice but to kill him (conventionally, all the way, really, really, really dead), right then, there.

Or probably die. Right then, there.

Because in Yours Truly’s brief but intense experience in life, real fanaticism expressed in two ways: noisy vs. silent.

Adherents of loud variety tend gather in multitudes, rage in streets en masse. Regularly expend vast amounts of live ammunition upon unoffending sky without hint of thought for anyone who might find self beneath hail of bullets when “what goes up” arrives at logical conclusion. Hordes of noisy extremists usually audible miles off; plenty of time to make appropriate preparations.

Silent type, on other hand, tends to work alone, observe opposition without objection, argument, without even detectible interest—until stealth analysis completed; then strikes without warning, hesitation, mercy, regret. Sole objective: dead unbeliever.

Tends also to be more intelligent, disciplined, better trained.

Dead Man impressed me as especially quiet zealot exemplar.

Which prompted realization that, under circumstances, even exploding baby bunny factor inspired less than customary brash confidence in outcome.

Exam commenced; and though preliminary medical history interview cursory by any standard, conduct otherwise irreproachably professional. Began with obvious: “Where are you from?”

“Wausippi, Wisconsin, Amer—”

“Are you the only survivor of your family?” Chop-off seemed less exercise in control, dominance, than simple disinterest.

“Yes, sir.” Only belatedly, realized had made no attempt to wrap inherently trauma-loaded question’s response in appropriate emotional overlay, as might be expected from “normal” grief-stricken kid suddenly reminded of tragedy’s details.

But Dead Man seemed not to notice. Suspected was accustomed to flattened affects from children he dealt with—most, at least on short-term basis, probably more traumatized by his mere presence than recounting loved ones’ demise.



“I am Fedka,” continued Dead Man. “I am director of medical research. First I will take a DNA sample from you. Open your mouth.”

Did so. Instantly. Wide.

Fedka produced package of Russian-cloned Q-Tip-ish swabs. Tearing open wrapper, used them to scrub inner cheek surfaces thoroughly, meticulously: up, down, up, down; six firm scrubs per side. Dropped samples into tray, set to side.

Then reached out hand; astonishingly long, spiderlike fingers enveloped head as completely as I would grip tennis ball. Fedka tilted, rotated cranium; eyeballed jumbo, rainbow-hued ecchymosis. Palpated with surprisingly gentle fingertips.

“How did this happen?” Inquiry lacked any hint of sympathy, animation, but professional in context; could almost delude self into believing question motivated by normal healer’s desire to help.

Deliberated briefly; concluded sprinkling of truth over mix might help deepen confusion currently gripping community. With only hint of self-pitying, lower-lip projection, replied, “Mr. Driutsk hit me.”

Disinterest with which Fedka greeted news quickly evaporated any illusions about motivations. Dead Man made no effort to treat, even palliate; merely jotted note on medical record, moved on.

(Assumed was medical record; Cyrillic does befog such issues.)

Thereafter Russian performed cursory physical exam: Checked pulse, blood pressure. Employed otoscope to examine eyes, ears, nostrils; stethoscope to listen to lungs, heart, bowel sounds. Checked reflexes, joint range-of-movement, etc.

Happily, Dead Man displayed no interest whatever in X chromosomes’ primary/secondary

expressions. Only garment removed during exam was jacket. Thereafter, shirt-sleeve rolled up to take blood pressure; shirttail pulled out, drawn up minimum distance necessary to accommodate stethoscope; top button opened to facilitate eavesdropping on heart, upper lung lobes.

Breathed private sigh: At least Fedka not another Driutsk. Immense relief, that; notion of physical interest from zombie somehow even more disturbing than that of unambiguously Depravedly Departed.

Presently, as Fedka appeared to be wrapping up, I ventured, "Excuse me, doctor, sir. The other children said there was another American working here. Another doctor? Do you think I could meet him?"

Fedka paused. Or froze, actually, almost lizardlike. Soulless eyes traversed as if mechanically operated, came to rest on me. Stared for long moments, still without expression; but gained subliminal impression of low-grade surprise, as if unaccustomed to children actually speaking to him, ever, apart from responding to direct questions in fewest possible words, then shutting up, trying to resume invisibility.

Dead Man inclined head; not quite nodding. "You speak of Doctor Foster. He will see you tomorrow."

Response encouraged Little Lizzie to essay further behavioral research. Pasted on small, cautiously grateful smile. "Oh, thank you, sir. I haven't met another American since..." allowed hint of lower lip quiver, "...since my family all died."

Depths of ennui with which this bid for sympathy was greeted left me almost breathless. Closest Fedka came to responding was on way out of exam room: "Doctor Foster insists upon taking all his samples personally. You will be brought back tomorrow.

"He will need fasting blood." Empty eyes again traversed to mine. "Eat nothing after midnight until your blood sample has been collected. You may drink water, nothing else. If you violate this order you will be punished." This last delivered without emphasis, almost without interest, but somehow set off stampede of goosebumps up, down spine.

Replied earnestly, "Yes, sir. I understand about fasting." Paused; then, added fawningly, "I'll see you tomorrow, sir. Thank you."

Fedka's response limited to opening anteroom door into corridor, hissing something in Russian, turning, gathering up DNA sample swabs, exiting in unhurried silence through doorway whence had emerged. Guard apparently waiting just outside; back within seconds.

However, instead of returning to doorway through which we'd entered lab building, went other way, headed for far end. Happily, in absence of audience, Bully-Boy contained enthusiasm; merely kept firm controlling hand on upper arm.

Halfway down hall, guard paused, parked me against wall with stern, warning glare, incomprehensibly Russian muttered phrase. Released grip, fumbled through clothing, extracted cigarette.

At which point, from adjacent doorway, raised voices became audible: Kazimirov's unmistakably arrogant Russian, followed by testy-sounding reply in English—

Daddy's voice...!

"You realize, of course, if I begin the process right now, it will have to be watched closely all night."

Kazimirov's reply, in English this time, dripped sarcasm: "You will need much caffeine then. For by tomorrow, I want it finished, operational, ready for testing."

"What, no threats? Don't you feel well?" Clearly Daddy's opinion of Kazimirov mirrored Lizzie's.

Even through door, Russian's steam-vent sigh was audible. "Must I couch every deadline in terms of a fresh threat? All right; the word, deadline, contains the word, dead. Disappoint me and I will give another child to Fedka to take apart for his ... studies."

"You do know," said Daddy, tone so chillingly conversational, was barely recognizable, "that someday I am going to kill that aberration, don't you?"

In context, genuine, unaffected merriment ringing in Kazimirov's laugh rendered it all the more disturbing. "That is between you and him. Do your job and neither of you will have to worry."

Glanced up, down hall to get feel for location within long corridor; then memorized Cyrillic characters adorning door ID plate. Waited as guard completed light-up, enjoyed several apparently luxurious, vile-smelling puffs. Thereafter moved on, dragging unresisting charge behind him.

Of course unresisting—now knew where Daddy would be all night. Needed to get back to prison camp, tell Tasha, start wheels turning.

Developments thereafter, of course, conditional upon Daddy's situation, input—and what to do about missiles...

Withal, promised to be long night.

\* \* \* \*

Tasha's eyes went round, expression clearly horror-stricken as said, "Meeting you did Fedka ... ?"

Assured her had indeed. "Why?"

Girl's reply accompanied by headshake generated mostly as side effect of whole-body shudder of purest revulsion. "Chudovishche!—worstest, evilest, most monster here!" Paused, as if mentally comparing checklists, then: "Even Driutsk so bad not as Fedka. Children slicing up, organs he being study—still while alive ... !"

With own sudden shiver, recalled Kazimirov's gibe to Daddy about giving Fedka another child "...to take apart..."

Shivers stopped abruptly. Rage bloomed in soul, grew like something alive. Ground teeth. Nazi/Khraniteli super-race parallel now complete: Genocidal Russian zealots boasted very own Mengele.

Yet another entry for Intrepid Special-Ops Girl's "little list"—on its way to accumulating more names than Mikado's hapless executioner's.

And "they'd none of 'em be missed...."

\* \* \* \*

Kim Mellon's Journal:

Finally, the engine's fixed, and we're back in the air. But I find myself still chewing my nails. Clearly, based on Terry and Lisa's latest information, we're going to get there slightly too late to help Candy try to retrieve Marshall Foster and save the children—and maybe even too late to do anything useful about those nukes.

Which latter problem scares me spittleless: If we run out of time, I can foresee Teacher and Wallace, with tears in their eyes, concluding that the only way to save our people might be just to drop one of our own thermonuclear warheads from altitude.

With Candy, her father, and all those children still there.

I haven't said anything about this. I don't have to. Adam has become a mobile statue for the moment: He's working in the galley, his expression pale, towering rage and mortal fear obviously arm-wrestling just beneath the surface. I'm not certain that we'd be able to drop a bomb on Candy as long as he's alive. I pray we don't find out.

Even Teacher's expression is little more than a death mask from the strain. He, Wallace, and Peter have transferred to the B plane to listen to Terry with us and update their planning in real time.

The special-operations members of both planes' complements are double-checking field equipment and practicing their hand-to-hand skills.

If all that weren't enough, we face yet another complicating factor: Given our starting time, the time zones and distance involved, we're going to arrive before sunrise—in the dark, no runway lights.

When I worried aloud about that, Lennel explained soothingly that quite some time ago they'd installed very, very bright infrared landing lights on the C-17s (so hot, in fact, that they almost qualify as energy weapons). Partly this was to take advantage of the broader hominem visual spectrum for night operations; but mostly it was to keep the other side in the dark (sorry) when we drop in for a night's reconnoitering, intelligence gathering, and general marauding.

So at this point, Teacher, Wallace, Peter, Lisa, Terry, Adam, the flight crews, our equipment-maintenance people, and all the combat people have something to do.

But it's not as if I'm completely useless; along with the Kellys, I'm helping listen to absolutely dead air with the electronics-sniffing equipment—and someone has to do the jittering....

\* \* \* \*

Candy's Journal:

Cautioned Tasha, "You understand, even though I know where Daddy is, we still may not be leaving tonight. He's very, very smart, and resourceful. I have no idea whether he's aware of the missiles yet. But once I tell him, he may have an entirely different idea of how to deal with the situation."

"Silly duck," retorted Tasha with grin.

By now didn't even bother correcting girl's syntax; just heard it as "goose."

“Shooting laboratory way into—tomorrow thinking then conditions ever never again being feasibility for trying? Hah! Complex full on toes being whole personnels will.”

Um ... Girl had a point. Again. Irritating quality in new comrade-in-arms/friend-for-life. Only way into lab will be over bodies of security detail. First shift change thereafter...

Heck, even if could dispose of so many corpses, somehow eliminate forensic evidence, sudden disappearances on that scale sure to trigger reaction comparable to lobbing rock into big, round, paper wasp nest: full-blown alert—all-out, real panic (perhaps even prison camp security personnel remaining awake)—uproar lasting for days, probably weeks.

Okay, yes, may well be taken to Daddy tomorrow, as Fedka promised. But know where to be found tonight.

And day after tomorrow, missiles launch.

No choice: Must go in tonight. Can't risk missing Daddy connection. Just have to trust that between Daddy, me, plus Tasha, rest of kids, combined improvisational talents up to challenge.

Night promises to be Chinesely interesting as well as long...

\* \* \* \*

Volume X

Checkout Time

Really, Posterity, given fact that earlier that day Khraniteli had been in throes of major swivet over Driutsk's disappearance, wouldn't you expect night-shift prison camp security detail at least to pretend to pay attention? Figured would have to wait until late to slip out again.

But could hardly believe eyes: Well before dark, guards already deep into cups. By sundown, entire prisoner population probably could have exited via sally port itself, strolled openly through guards' midst without being noticed.

By final stages of dusk, those still technically awake appeared to be engrossed in sleepy word game, whose every question/answer seemed to trigger gales of uproarious, if muzzy-sounding, laughter. Game's volume level ebbed as evening progressed, participants dropped off one by one.

Seemed to take forever for darkness to settle in in earnest, but finally time arrived to bid adieu to Serdtsevina Rasovyi Hilton. Gathered kids at previously selected darkest area along fence, deployed Mossad bolt-cutter, made neat little horizontal slit in fence right at soil level, plus two vertical cuts extending up about two feet. Carefully, quietly, flexed resulting top-hinged chain-link mesh panel out minimum distance necessary for egress, supported as children all slithered through. Then swung fabric back into place, readjusted cut ends to degree possible. When finished, unless looked closely, opening really not all that noticeable.

Ushered mob straight to base camp.

Oops, sorry, Posterity; forgot to mention revised schedule. On further reflection, could see no profit having Tasha expose kids, herself to risk of discovery by trying to collect Daddy, me at lab.

Yes, still planned to liberate vehicle to carry children—given numbers, something on order of covered troop truck called for. Thereafter would have kids stand by at base camp, waiting for us. If, however, not there by specified hour—made Tasha promise—would be on their way.

Maggie greeted us with silent but joyous hysteria. Prewarned, even smallest kids got through introductions without panic. And shortly thereafter, all had become Maggie's new Very Best Friends.

Tasha experienced (happily brief) teary flashback, then settled down. We fed Maggie—yes, "we"; lots of help: BC allowed as how meal delivered via children's one-nugget-at-a-time, repeat-as-necessary, handfeeding technique at least as acceptable as elder sister's boringly impersonal, twice daily cup-and-a-half-filled dish. Of course, with dog's subtle



positive reinforcement, children's "assistance" probably resulted in bigger meal than I would have set out.

However, shortly found self back in tooth-grinding mode as noticed starving children first smelling, then gingerly sampling Maggie's food themselves—finally scarfing down in earnest. Sighed. At least holistic/organic canine diet fundamentally healthful: wholesome, balanced; protein content from good meat cuts (as opposed to ground-up noses, hooves, etc.); plus all ingredients hypoallergenic.

But Khraniteli have so much to answer for....

\* \* \* \*

Had been operating in Intrepid Girl Infiltrator mode during first night's dorm visit; hence, Tasha already familiar with no-nonsense alter ego. But other children watched transformation with round, wondering eyes: camos; real face paint this time; web belt adorned with pouches stuffed with extra magazines, as well as nonstandard weaponry such as shurikens, Wrist Rocket, sheath containing Camillus combat knife, etc.; plus, of course, low-slung, tied-down Glock holster, scope-equipped M-1.

Kids particularly taken by gleaming length of katana, whose saya, or scabbard, rode between scapulas, grip projecting conveniently just above right shoulder.

(Nigel Kuluwara, AAs' self-described "token" Aussie [full-blooded Aborigine, Oxford physics Ph.D. by age 18, but tribe-raised as kid in Outback until 13 (better even than Danya at wraith-in-darkness stuff—way better than Yours Truly)], delights in referring to it as "Now, that's a noyf.")

Still, as Tasha watched new kid sister preflight equipment—cycling extractors on M-1, Glock to ensure actions still clean, well lubricated, all smooth and glidey; securing silencers to muzzles; thereafter verifying chambers primed—got impression girl might be realizing for very first time that this was no theoretical exercise: Dead-Serious Special-Ops Girl really did intend to enter lab over bleeding bodies (no doubt quite a lot of bodies), extract Daddy, plus (somehow) permanently cancel threat posed by missiles.

Notwithstanding last night's exploding baby bunny demonstration, pretty sure Tasha had begun regarding me as spiritual sister/girlfriend/confidante first, fellow prisoner next;

weapon-studded, rescuer-girl/stone-cold killing-machine persona having faded with time to dim, distant, unlikely future figment of imagination.

\* \* \* \*

Reality can be jarring: Driutsk & Company's deaths had resulted from classic, sudden-combat, heat-of-battle, them-or-us battle dynamics. Further, little troll was evil personified (not to mention way ugly). As for cohorts, encounter too brief to learn anything substantive; but arrived at destinies fatally tarred by association, intentions, which eased, if not eliminating entirely, potential guilt arising from killings. Accordingly, like fellow gulagees, Tasha had emerged from experience positively glowing with satisfaction, ready to kill 'em all again, dozen times over.

In combat.

However.

Necessarily cold-blooded, flow-silently-in-from-dark, shoot-carefully-at-pointest-blank-range-with-no-warning, out-and-out assassination which enabled truck theft provided girl with experience of very different flavor; left her looking more than a little green around edges.

Night-duty motor pool mechanic nothing like Driutsk: pink-cheeked, wholesome-appearing lad of perhaps 25.

Looked even younger dead.

At very last moment, must have sensed something amiss; glanced around with mild-mannered, startled expression, highlighted by sad, remarkably blue eyes, barely in time for 40-caliber Hydra-Shok bullet, announced by Glock's gerbil-cough, to open small, dark, red-rimmed hole just above eye, spray most of skull's contents out through huge opening in opposite rear quadrant, coating wall behind workbench at which had been rebuilding starter with mostly reddish mix of jellylike lumps of lighter-colored materials and bone splinters oozing down surface.

And must confess, Posterity: Even Danya's favorite Apprentice Assassin had to steel self to maintain professional aplomb at moment of truth.

Even more so afterward.

Became necessary, in fact, to issue stern internal reminder that victim was Khranitel, one of those who had massacred all of H. sapiens without warning; who, in addition, single-mindedly wanted Tasha, me, all her people, all mine, dead; who had already made serious attempt toward that goal, which, but for good luck on our part, plus own small contributions, surely would have succeeded.

Clinging to that thought, almost managed to get through killing's initial aftermath without wondering whether boy had had any idea what was getting self into—or whether, f'rinstance, might have been one of those clinically depressed outsider/loners who gravitated to hate groups seeking kinship, support, adulation of equally crippled "peers" to compensate for overwhelming misery inflicted by onion-layered, multiple inferiority complexes.

(Whoa, how's that for breathtaking psychiatric concept?—support group whose therapeutic modality-of-choice is total obliteration of everybody else. Makes horror stories from Olden Tymes, about sociopaths who yearned for scope-equipped high-powered rifles, while casting longing glances at tall clock towers in crowded locations, sound almost normal....)

Never mind; told self didn't matter. Told firmly.

Had to repeat admonition. Twice.

Okay, maybe more.

Thereafter confiscated dead man's watch, synchronized with mine; required Tasha to take it—so would have no excuse not to leave when time came, regardless whether Daddy and I had made it back.

Selected truck; verified fuel tanks full; engine oil, coolant topped up. Cheat-checked tires using Adam-taught quickie shortcut: Whacked treads with hammer. Favorite cuddly knowitall says when resultant bonks all match within ear's limit to discriminate, tire pressures

usefully identical. (Tasha watched test with ill-concealed concern, but held tongue; and was too preoccupied at the time to think to explain.)

Finally slid underneath, located air brake master valve, yanked off stoplight wires. If Daddy and I failed to get out, meet them, children would need to run dark, relying on infrared vision extension to improve chances of undetected escape. Last thing kids would need would be brake lights giving away position to airborne observers.

Hadn't had occasion to check out Khraniteli's airfield thus far, but arrow on Father Toys' map showed which direction located, noted was some three miles "out of town," so genocides surely list aircraft among assets. And at night, from helicopter, brake light flare no doubt visible ten miles or more.

Started engine, tiptoed truck gently, quietly (for military diesel) out into night. Returned to base camp by circuitous route, spending substantial portions of trip on pavement to avoid telltale tracks.

Had left Maggie babysitting kids (or vice-versa) while engaging in Grand Theft Six-by-Six. Children greeted us with rapture, particularly in case of youngests, rivaling BC's.

Delivered final strategic review/pep talk, mostly for those younger children's benefit; then hug-and-go time. Briefly, second element proved problematic, but presently managed physically to unwrap Tasha's, Katia's arms, blot tears—only to be swept up in group hug as balance of kids suddenly realized also needed to wish godspeed; safe, successful castle-storming; many happy killings. Tender sentiments generated need for additional blotting all around before sendoff wound down.

Finally extricated self sufficiently to gather up gear, tell Maggie remain with Tasha, ease into night. Kids appeared impressed when became effectively invisible only about ten feet out, in what common sense told them should have been plain sight. "Later showing how doing that," Tasha whispered after me. Smiled privately as contemplated girl's introduction to Zen of Wrist Rocket-Driven Acorns.

Made it possibly 50 feet out before saw Maggie whack Katia smartly in shins with Frisbee. Grinned. Wondered whether, with two dozen kids on hand, BC might actually get frisbeed-out for once before arms all fall off.

\* \* \* \*

## Day XIII

Settled down to traveling invisibly, floating soundlessly, as one with darkened landscape. Using infiltration discipline, return to Serdtsevina Rasovyi lab took longer. Slightly after midnight before could begin final both-ends lab recon, identify luckless-of-draw security targets at doors.

As before, eight: four at each door. Three at east end snoring in chairs; fourth also seated, but awake. Of west-enders, split was two-two; again all in chairs. After observation, deliberation, concluded eastern crew likely to generate least commotion.

Curiously, found self hoping bully who thumb-poked bruise earlier wouldn't be among either group. Second day's bad conduct obviously result of embarrassment over first day's momentary display of compassion, which suggested potentially decent human being lurked in there. Somewhere.

Don't know; never found out. Took care not to look closely enough thereafter to identify individuals.

M-1's gerbil-cough slightly deeper-toned than Glock, though no louder. Results, however, identical: On-dutiest sentry twitched slightly at impact; then head nodded slowly forward onto chest. Victim remained unmoving in chair. Two seconds later, without waking, other three had joined comrade in final stillness.

Experienced briefest flashback to motor pool kid's sad blue eyes, which had focused on mine just as squeezed Glock's trigger; but quickly froze those feelings, packed tightly into small, horrid bundle along with new batch, tucked away in quiet, darkish corner of brain to deal with later. Pretty sure dealing will require many teary hugs in bosom of family. No doubt fair amount of throwing up, too. Hope will get opportunity.

Glided back to west end. Studied wakeful pair briefly. One seemed more alert than other. Beginning with him, then, put ugly business behind me as efficiently as on east.

Nearly succumbed to shakes at that point, but simply too much to do, no time to indulge human frailties. Besides, reminded self, technically not human; Homo post hominem—at war with humans. At least these humans.

Edged up to door, peeked in through window, saw no one. Eased open, took first step inside

—And almost bumped into Three Bears: two sturdy young Russians, first barely shaving; plus third, older, harder, more aware-looking; all with rifles in hand—emerging from office door immediately adjacent entrance on left.

Plucky Girl Infiltrator may not have understood actual word, but little ambiguity to youngest Bolshevik's hissed "Stoyat!", accompanied by actual view of rifling lands visible inside hollow end of latest-model Kalashnikov. By whatever name, object of exercise abruptly had become immobility.

One step behind, Middle-Sized Bear slightly older; but his follow-up "Brosajte oruzhie!", particularly coupled with unmistakable drop it gesture with AK muzzle, required no translation either.

Unfortunately, however, on the heels of this command came emphatic upward twitch from Baby Bear's rifle, followed by even more insistent "Ruki vverkh!" Hands up indeed. (Dammit, guys—make up minds!)

Behind them, older man hadn't bothered to contribute or raise AK, but already busy looking around; clearly, from expression, Pappa Bear sentry trained, thinking.

Blood ran cold. Presence of additional personnel inside doors unlikely to be coincidence. Apparently Driutsk's disappearance had impacted security—at least in areas Khraniteli regarded as key. Evidently Daddy, or at least something inside lab, so qualified.

Worse, since outside security had been symmetrical, three interior guards here suggested three more at far end.

Whatever—this had to be concluded quickly, quietly.

Somehow.

And before any of them thought to sound alarm...

Moving slowly, one hand in air, keeping left side toward unanticipated uniformed complications in wan hope might not have noticed Glock yet, backed out door, squatted, laid rifle on walkway, gently so as not to disturb lovingly sighted-in scope alignment.

Three unscheduled Lab-Mart greeters followed outside—then froze as noticed comrades' telltale limpness, sprawled in chairs. Baby Bear continued to cover me with AK in one hand as shook nearest dead sentry's shoulder with other. Of course head merely lolled.

Glanced wildly back at cohorts, said something that sounded like, "On dokhlyi!" Gun trained on me suddenly trembled as other two comrades moved forward quickly to check others.

Looking ever more distressed, my young sentry glanced back and forth between me and live, dead comrades, paying ever more attention to them, devoting less and less to keeping unblinking eye on baby bunny, despite patently caught-red-handed situation: camos, face paint, visibly silenced M-1—dead bodies...

At which point, noticed Baby Bear's AK safety still in on position; clearly young Russian didn't know or had forgotten. Despite moment's fundamental desperation, had to suppress impulse to shake head sadly: Idiot amateur genocide truly poster boy for untrained.

Couldn't tell about other two's weapons—not that mattered: Though not looking at Intrepid Special-Ops Girl at that very moment, tactically, both too far away...

Never mind; at this point had no choice: Could not afford to throw away opportunity merely because odds patently suicidal.

Figured angles: Tried to analyze which opponent likely to respond quickest, most constructively, versus how far out of reach.

Focused inward. Controlled breathing. As gathered, focused ki, found self experiencing momentary wistful longing for distraction. Any sort of distraction, however brief. Perhaps no more than momentary loss of balance for even one of more distant pair. Though if had druthers, would have preferred first to see alert-looking Pappa Bear stumble, trip, have stroke—whatever. Wished hard...

Still, last thing would have occurred to me to wish for was blur of darker blackness flashing out of night into iodine vapor lamp's cone of illumination. Detected flicker of gleeful, spooky blue eyes as shadow passed me at about shoulder height.

Then 45 pounds of spring steel and joyous spirits, traveling at least 40 miles an hour, landed squarely between older man's shoulder blades with all four feet. Impact very nearly forward-flipped Russian midair.

Without slowing—without even touching ground—Maggie ricocheted from initial target to another four-footed landing in Middle-Sized Bear's solar plexus, knocking victim gasping, heels-over-head backward, weapon flying from hands.

By which point older man had completed midair arc, landing on face, feet in air, then got all tangled up with two previously dead associates as further rotation, collision, spilled both from chairs.

And at that precise moment, right behind Baby Bear, left-hand door cracked, began to swing open; caught initial glimpse of white-coated figure beginning to emerge.

But even with new arrival to complicate equation, still obvious in which order sentries would get acts back together, become threats again. Time to go.

"Shazam!" Time slowed; hysterical strength surged through body. Effortlessly yanked safetied rifle from youngest Russian's grasp with one hand, flung far out of reach. Simultaneously rammed heel of other hand upward into underside of young man's nose; object: driving nasal and/or ethmoid bone splinters straight up into brain.

Impact sent opponent stumbling backward against half-open door, momentarily pinning



lab-coat—

“What the hell—”

—between door halves.

“—is going on here!” came muttered complaint.

In English.

Sudden, unexpected, on-the-fly recognition nearly derailed concentration as traversed distance to oldest sentry in single bound, katana leading way.

Half-hoped Middle-Sized Bear would be so stunned thereafter by sheer messiness of Pappa Bear’s demise, might pause for helpfully fatal half second, allow time enough to get back to him, treat similarly. But no; was in fact already groping for sidearm.

Flicked glance then back at Baby Bear, who by rights should have been dead on ground from bone-splinter-induced brain hemorrhage. Instead, backward momentum interrupted by door, young Russian still upright. And notwithstanding fact that lower half of face now masked by blood cascading from shattered nose, despite eyes almost crossed from pain, he, too, clawed at holster, trying to pull handgun.

From where Special-Ops Girl had landed, would have had ample time to get to either separately. Two clearly impossible—time to shift gears: Left hand flipped back selected belt-pouch flap, extracted contents. Simultaneously, right hand dropped katana, snatched Glock, index finger ticking retention release in passing, reminding self to lift extra high to ensure silencer’s added length cleared holster. Right hand brought up, leveled Glock even as left already drawing back, sweeping forward, ending in smooth, Danni-schooled wrist-flip just as gerbil coughed once again.

Mere inches from white-coated, inadvertent spectator’s nose, Baby Bear again bounced off door, then began downward slide, shuriken embedded between brows. Simultaneously, new buttonhole appeared over Middle-Sized Bear’s right ventricle. Russian staggered half step back from impact, expression went blank, then fell.

“Whoa,” said onlooker in wondering tones, extracting self from between doors. Stared wildly around at scene; then turned speculative gaze on camo-clad, weapon-festooned, height-challenged Second Horseman, whose metabolism was only just beginning to slow after feverishly plying trade. Obviously recognition had yet to set in.

“Hi, Daddy,” I puffed, holstering Glock; retrieving katana, using victim’s uniform to wipe off blood, zipping blade back over shoulder into saya without looking; wrenching embedded shuriken free from kid’s skull, scrubbing bone bits, blood off in grass, tucking back into pouch, securing. “We have to go now.”

Announcement followed by seconds’-long silence, which could have served as training-film exemplar for term, pregnant; then: “Candy ... ? How on earth—”

“Now!”

TRACKING

PART III OF III

by David R. Palmer

Illustration by William Warren

\* \* \* \*

Big problems may require extreme measures—and truly final solutions are hard to come by.

\* \* \* \*

Warning: This story has scenes that some readers may find disturbing.

\* \* \* \*

## SYNOPSIS

### Archivist's Note (II)

Quoting some of her own favorite self-deprecating, self-descriptives, Candy Smith-Foster is a "Plucky Girl Adventurer," a "Spunky Girl Aviatrix," an "Intrepid Special-Ops Girl," an "Apprentice Girl Assassin," and, last but certainly not least (and, factually, the absolute, literal truth), the "Plucky Girl Savior of Our People." (Not to mention, as she is too, too fond of saying: "etc.")

An eleven-year-old Homo post hominem child, like the rest of us she is (we suspect) the product of evolution's genetic engineering, courtesy of the great influenza pandemic of 1918-1919, which killed at least fifty million people worldwide, and possibly as many as a hundred million, during its approximately two-year rampage.

We speculate that what happened is that, at the moment of conception, the flu virus invaded either or both of the participating gametes before or during formation of a very few female zygotes. Something in the virus mutated the DNA content of the target cells, which thereafter gestated, were born, and grew up to contribute, as mothers, half of the new matrix which fitted together two generations later to produce Homo post hominem: Man who follows Man.

Immune to all "human" disease; smarter, stronger, faster; with visual perception extending farther into the ultraviolet and infrared spectrum; possessed of more sensitive hearing and olfactory senses; even "breeding true" when crossed with Homo sapiens; emerging finally from concealment within the population which produced it to inherit Earth after our predecessors eliminated themselves in a brief, efficient, radiation-triggered biological war, Homo post hominem is apparently destined to replace Homo sapiens.

Soo Kim McDivott, himself, as it turned out, a "typical" overachieving hominem, with doctorates in pediatrics, psychiatry, and anthropology, and a Tenth Degree Black Belt in karate, known as "Teacher" to hominem worldwide, had discovered the new species while exploring the question of "nurture versus nature": whether the actions of "normal" (i.e.,

mediocre or worse) parents might tend to keep intrinsically genius-level children from achieving their potentials, inadvertently, or possibly even due to resentment.

Orphaned when her birth parents were killed in a traffic accident months after she was born, Candy was adopted immediately by Marshall and Megan Foster ("Daddy" and "Momma," in Candy's lexicon), Teacher's long-time friends, and, in Marshall's case, in everyday life an internationally well-regarded pathologist, but actually a top-secret government biowarfare consultant.

Following several years' preternaturally rapid intellectual growth, possibly contributed to by the whipsaw effect of Momma's quietly clandestine encouragement and furnishing of any reading matter the child indicated a curiosity about, while Marshall, unaware of Megan's educational supplementation, worked to raise a "normal" girlchild, full of "sugar and spice," Candy was revealed at about age five to be a Homo post hominem, and rather an advanced one at that.

Shortly thereafter, Megan died of leukemia. Teacher moved in next door and assumed her role as Candy's apparently clandestine educational facilitator and mentor, while Daddy, now aware of the situation, continued in his role as brake. Teacher also took her on as his personal karate student.

By the time Khraniteli zealots struck, wiping out all unprotected Homo sapiens on Earth, Candy, at age eleven, had absorbed substantial elements of a college education and achieved a Fifth Degree Black Belt in karate.

Home alone at the time (Marshall had been summoned to Washington, which was in effect carpet bombed during the attack), Candy rode out the holocaust in the huge shelter complex that Daddy had had built in secret deep beneath their small-town Wisconsin home. Thereafter she and Terry, her "retarded adopted twin brother," a Hyacinth Macaw and her closest companion nearly from birth (with a history of never having been wrong about whether a new acquaintance was really friendship material), emerged into a depopulated world.

Learning of her Homo post hominem heritage from the letter Teacher had left her, Candy set off to search for others of her kind. The first person she met during her travels was "Adam," a thirteen-year-old hominem boy (actually named Melville Winchester Higginbotham Grosvenor Penobscot-Jones, IV, by his parents, who had died in the holocaust), whose brashly obnoxious, rich-kid persona concealed astonishing electromechanical, musical, paramedical, and culinary talents. Ultimately, these qualities, as well as his compulsion for outrageous puns, helped endear him to her almost as much as the fact that, within hours of meeting, they had saved each others' lives:

Initially, during their first encounter, Adam was unconscious, trapped in a burning car. Employing conscious control of hysterical strength, which Teacher had taught her as part of karate discipline, to extract him, she then had to overuse it further to remain conscious long enough to complete the necessary trauma treatment, which included stitching a nicked femoral artery (she had acquired advanced paramedic training “at Daddy’s knee”). This cost her a metabolic burnout and, ultimately, cardiac arrest. However, her treatment had been adequate: Adam woke shortly afterward, found her unconscious and fading, was able to restart her heart when it stopped, nursed her back to health, and they’ve been together since.

During their search they encountered Rollo, an adult hominem physician with years of worldwide survival skills, who turned out to be a sociopath, living with his dead wife’s cat, Tora-chan, who hated him. Rollo offered Candy his loyalty, skills, and experience in exchange for access to her bed. Candy deliberated and concluded, objectively, the benefits to Adam and herself outweighed the cost, and was on the point of accepting when Terry, who had disliked the man on sight, bit him severely. Rollo went berserk, tried to kill the bird, and, when Candy used her karate skills and hysterical strength to intervene, he turned on her. Strong and fast, he hurried her; she was forced to kill him. Thereafter, of course, Tora-chan joined their party.

Later, in California, while chasing on foot after a half-glimpsed child, Adam tripped and broke his arm; then taught Candy to fly his ultralight aircraft to perform a grid search, which turned up Kim Mellon, a young computer engineer, and her daughter, six-year-old Lisa, who joined them in the quest.

A subsequent engine failure forced Candy down in the Sequoia National Forest and separated her from the others. Repairing and restarting the engine, she observed a contrail that led her to the Vandenberg Space Shuttle Launch Complex, where she found Teacher and his community of hominems in the process of readying an orbiter for launch.

They had learned of a huge strontium-90 bomb left in orbit by the Khraniteli, programmed to descend and render the Earth uninhabitable for unprotected human life for the next two hundred years. Because the bomb lay in geosynchronous orbit, far above the shuttle’s normal operating range, the necessary modifications meant the launch would be a one-way, suicide flight: The three-person crew would neutralize the weapon and die.

Almost at the last moment, the robotic device with which the hominems had planned to disarm the bomb proved inadequate, and Candy realized that only the unique combination of her diminutive size and hysterical strength could save what remained of humanity, so she volunteered for the mission.

Once in orbit, however, crewman Kyril Svetlanov turned out to be a Khraniteli agent and killed the third crewmember. And while Candy managed to kill him and then successfully disarm the bomb, in the process she learned that the Khraniteli were alive, well, and still actively plotting to kill off everyone who wasn't one of them, which meant all her newly found hominem friends and unofficial family members such as Adam, Teacher, Kim, and Lisa still were in danger.

At about the same time, Adam and Kim, searching the sequoias for Candy's downed plane, were coming to the unlikely conclusion that Terry's endless blatherings, reminiscent of CNN's spaceflight coverage, might actually be connected to Candy; that perhaps she was not where they thought she had crashed; that, unlikely as it seemed, she really might be in orbit, and in danger.

Belatedly, Candy realized that, with the detonator pulled, she could send a warning back down to Earth in the bomb-delivery vehicle; she could reprogram it to land at Edwards Dry Lake air force base—then it occurred to her that maybe she could ride down in it herself. But the vehicle was far from man-rated, and, by the time it touched down, she was again clinically dead.

However, having become convinced by then that Terry's continuing spaceflight monologue was in fact a direct, realtime link into Candy's mind, Adam and Kim made it to Edwards just in time to extricate her from the smoking hot reentry vehicle, and for Adam again to resuscitate her.

Thereafter, Candy, Adam, Kim, Lisa, Terry, and Tora-chan moved in with the hominems in Teacher's growing community near Mount Palomar, where, following Candy's recuperation, he and his colleagues resumed her education.

To Candy, however, the most enjoyable part was special-operations training under Danya Feinberg, an ex-Mossad field agent, and number two among Teacher's pseudomilitary operatives. With her karate Black Belt as a departure point, Candy progressed rapidly, achieving proficiency in the most advanced levels of hand-to-hand combat, use of nonstandard weapons, plus the more arcane skills that form the basis of special operations: infiltration, taking out sentries, undercover work, interrogation, ultra-long-range sniper marksmanship, and the like.

Several months into this idyllic existence, one of the hominems' recon expeditions brought back word from the Russian/Kazakhstani Urals that Candy's adoptive father had not died in

the bombing of Washington; that he might in fact still be alive, a prisoner of the Khraniteli in the laboratory at their main base, Serdtsevina Rasovyi. But, Teacher told her, regretfully, it would be at least another six months before the hominems could mount another expedition into the area.

The delay simply was not to be borne. Within hours Candy had gathered copies of the hominems' expeditionary recon reports, weapons, clothing, supplies, and equipment, left a note assigning Lisa Terry-sitting duties, and was in the air in a "borrowed" bushplane, bound for Serdtsevina Rasovyi.

Her absence was not discovered until day's end. However, little detective work was required to figure out where she was headed.

At which point Teacher reconsidered: It was time after all, he announced, that they went on the offensive, and the hominems began preparing an all-out invasion. Their primary objective was elimination of the base and cleaning out the Khraniteli living there; but rescuing Marshall and intercepting Candy before she got into trouble were next on the to-do list.

Unaware of these developments, of course, Candy flew on.

Cognizant of the Candy-Terry mindlink, Teacher asked Lisa to listen for and take down anything the bird said that sounded as if it might be from Candy.

During her first stopover, at Klamath Falls, Oregon, Candy encountered Maggie, a Border Collie, preternaturally intelligent, typical of the breed, who had been surviving on her own since the Khraniteli's attack. That night the BC awakened Candy with snarls—holding a pack of wolves at bay. Candy drove them off with warning shots. This ended Candy's indecision: Maggie was on the plane when she departed the next morning.

Crossing into Asia via the Bering Strait, Candy encountered no one until the morning of the eighth day, when she met a likeable, white-bearded, slightly rotund, older gentleman who went by the nicknames, Igrushka Izgotovlenie or "Toymaker," and Otets Igrushkayami or "Father Toys." In pre-armageddon days Toymaker had been a manufacturer of high-end, high-tech games and toys. He had once attended a technical conference at Serdtsevina Rasovyi and was able to furnish Candy with a detailed, hand-drawn map of the base.

The following day Candy landed in the wilds just outside Serdtsevina Rasovyi, pulled up under trees, tied the plane down, covered it with camouflage netting, and went to bed early, prepared to begin infiltration of the Khraniteli's headquarters in the morning....

Disguised as clumps of field grass, Candy and Maggie spent the day in special-ops mode, infiltrating and reconnoitering Serdtsevina Rasovyi. It turned out to be easier than she expected: Here in their homeland, Khraniteli security was laughable. She had no difficulty prowling the installation and confirming the accuracy of Father Toys' map. However, she did find one structure not on the diagram: a razorwire-topped, fenced compound, obviously a prison.

Suspecting this was where Daddy was confined, Candy waited for nightfall, parked Maggie safely at a temporary encampment some distance outside Serdtsevina Rasovyi, assigned the BC to watch the campsite, their food, and camping gear, returned to the prison, and slipped over the fence.

Quickly she determined that Daddy wasn't there—but that some two dozen malnourished children were: captured Homo post hominem children, being used by the Khraniteli as lab rats in their effort to develop a biowarfare agent effective against them.

Candy gained the confidence of the children's leader, Tasha, a girl slightly older than herself, by promising to take them with her when she broke Daddy out. Tasha confirmed that Marshall was indeed there, but was being kept in the main laboratory building, which she pointed out, but asked that they not leave that night because Katia, one of the younger girls, had been taken for the night by Driutsk, a degenerate little troll high in the confidence of Vladislav Kazimirov, the cult leader originally responsible for founding the Khraniteli, and the primary architect of their strategy and tactics: the single individual most responsible for the deaths of more than seven billion people.

As Candy departed the prison camp to reconnoiter the laboratory's security situation, she left her lightweight, folding, Israeli bolt-cutter with Tasha, with instructions that, if she got caught, the Russian girl was to get the children out herself.

Investigation of the laboratory and its surroundings revealed that there were only two doors, both guarded. Sneaking in to find Daddy was impossible.

Returning to her camp, Candy decided to sleep on the problem.



At the same time, Teacher's expedition had gotten under way on schedule. They planned to arrive just in time to intercept Candy, rescue Marshall, and take out Serdtsevina Rasovyi. But over the Arctic Ocean, one of their two C-17s experienced engine trouble. They completed the crossing at reduced speed, put down at Norilsk, a Russian military base, and began repairs.

Everyone was chafing at the delay, but especially Danya, who was observed speculating whether it would be worthwhile to unload the two Black Hawk helicopters they carried to complete the journey. But upon sober consideration, everyone agreed that the resulting strike force would be so reduced in strength that the risk was unacceptable. Reluctantly, it was decided to complete repairs on the engine and go in in full force.

Candy, meanwhile, awoke with the solution to getting into the laboratory. She and Maggie adjourned to a nearby abandoned village where she got an old Russian automobile running, drove it back to the plane, dug out her civilian clothing, drove to her camp, parked Maggie with instructions again to watch the special-ops gear she stored there, and then drove openly into Serdtsevina Rasovyi, playing the role of an ordinary survivor.

Preliminarily, Kazimirov himself questioned her; then turned her over to Driutsk (a spooky, strangely built little man, who resembled Uncle Fester from New Yorker magazine's Addams Family cartoons) to be warehoused with the other children in the prison camp. But he ordered her brought to see the doctor in the morning....

To Candy, this meant Daddy! Maintaining a straight face with difficulty, she allowed Driutsk to lead her off the prison camp. Unfortunately, Driutsk evinced an immediate interest in her. Candy pretended not to understand his overtures, but as he dropped her off at the prison, he told her he would see her later.

Unexpectedly, however, later that afternoon Kazimirov summoned her to his office—to discuss American cinema: The Khraniteli leader was a collector of American movies, and fancied himself an authority.

Candy used the occasion to pick the monster's brain, finishing up with discussion of the Roy Rogers motif in Bruce Willis' Die Hard movie. To irritate the Russian, Candy began hammering on the unswerving integrity of Willis' character, John McClane; almost but not quite contrasting his qualities with Kazimirov's patent moral failings. The Khranitel responded by sneering that not even Roy Rogers would be able to save the few remaining Americans, who had been annoying him from their base near Mount Palomar, from the flight of thermonuclear ICBM missiles, which he planned to launch at them in a matter of days ... !

Learning this via the Terrylink, Teacher's expeditionary force, still making repairs on the ground at Norilsk, immediately called home and advised everyone to begin packing, though clearly there wouldn't be time.

That night Candy took Tasha over the fence and back to her camp to pick up some tools, where the Russian girl met Maggie. A snuggle session with the BC triggered Tasha's holocaust catharsis, and Candy and the dog held her and cried her through it.

Meanwhile, at Norilsk, those not working on the engine were jarred rudely from their bunks by the sound of jet engines spooling up to takeoff power. Spilling outside, they saw a small business jet lift off the runway and climb toward the horizon, clearly on course for Serdtsevina Rasovyi: Despite her grudging agreement that they should wait until the engine was repaired so they could go in full force, Danya's patience had run out.

Returning to the prison camp, Candy barely got to sleep before Driutsk and a pair of cohorts arrived to take her, Katia, and another girl off for a night's "partying." Torn between the prospect of resisting, with three-to-one odds against her, thereby calling attention to her training and endangering her mission, versus the loathsome prospects otherwise, Candy had not quite decided what to do when Tasha pushed between Driutsk and Katia, telling him he was never to hurt the child again.

Driutsk aimed a contemptuous fist at Tasha's head. With all three Russians momentarily distracted, Candy exploded into action, simultaneously killing both of Driutsk's goons with a leaping double-kick—then abruptly found herself flat on her back on the floor, half stunned: Unexpectedly, despite his nebbishy appearance, Driutsk's hand-to-hand skills were first rate.

With spots before her eyes, Candy barely dodged the heart-burster punch the Russian launched down at her, which crashed painfully into the floor, smashing his hand. She made it to her feet; however, before she could take further action, Driutsk pulled a gun and ordered Tasha to handcuff her or watch her die right then and there, declaring that he now intended to torture Candy until she begged to die—then give her to Fedka, the Khraniteli's Mengele-equivalent, who ran the biowarfare program, and who, the children reported, was fond of vivisectioning live, conscious subjects.

But abruptly, Driutsk dropped the gun and toppled to the floor, revealing the Israeli bolt-cutter embedded in the back of his head, and Katia right behind him, beaming from ear to ear.

Efficiently Tasha and rest of the prison camp children pulled up floorboards, produced boards usable as shovels, and buried the three bodies beneath the dormitory.

Candy was not taken to “the doctor” the next morning, and, looking through the fence, it was obvious that the base was in an uproar; obviously Driutsk and his minions had been missed. As usual, prison camp security personnel had been sleeping on the job when the three had entered, so no one suspected that the children had had anything to do with the disappearance.

It was nearly evening before someone came for Candy. She spent the ride psyching herself up to meet Daddy without reacting, lest the Khraniteli realize they now had a lever to use against him. But as the door opened and she braced herself, in walked a tall, pale, cadaverous man—the vivisectionist Fedka....

After the buildup, the monster’s examination of Candy was anticlimactic; his conduct was merely professionally impersonal: He took her vitals, a brief medical history, collected her DNA, and left, mentioning in parting that she’d be taken to Doctor Foster the next day.

However, instead of retracing their steps back down the central corridor on the way out, the guard took her the other way. And when he paused to light a cigarette at a closed door halfway between the ends of the building, Candy heard Kazimirov’s voice raised in argument—with Daddy! The snippet she overheard before the guard again grabbed her arm and they moved on was brief, but it was enough to let her know that Daddy would be right there all night. That was all she needed....

Meanwhile, Teacher and his team were finally back in the air. But there was more than a little question in everyone’s minds as to whether they’d be there in time to save Candy, her dad, and the children—never mind in time to prevent Kazimirov from launching his missiles. And failing that, the alternative would be to drop one of their own nukes from altitude....

Unaware of this development, Candy proceeded with her own plans: Once darkness had fallen, she cut a hole in the fence, got all the children out, and took them to her camp.

Gearing up in full special-ops mode, with camos, weapons, and face paint, she took Tasha with her to the motor pool, where the Russian girl discovered that cold-blooded assassination of relative innocents wasn’t nearly as much fun as killing unmitigated evil-doers: Using her silenced Glock, Candy executed the solitary young motor pool night mechanic without warning. Stealing a six-by-six truck, they returned to camp, driving without

lights, groping their way mostly via the infrared spectrum.

Browbeating Tasha into swearing to leave on time whether she and Daddy made it back or not, Candy again stole through the night, returning to the laboratory where, following careful study of the four men stationed at each end of the building (most of them asleep), she killed them all with her silenced M-1.

But then, entering one end of the building, she practically ran into three more armed men coming out of the first office adjacent to the door. Hands up, she backed out the door and gently laid her rifle down as the Russians suddenly realized their four colleagues were dead.

As Candy prepared to trigger hysterical strength and attack, hoping their momentary confusion might even the odds, she found herself wishing desperately that at least one of them, preferably two, would be distracted by something: a stumble, a stroke—anything!

But the very last thing she was hoping for, never mind expecting, was Maggie, soaring out of the darkness at full speed, at shoulder level, achieving a four-point landing between the shoulder blades of one Russian, then ricocheting to the solar plexus of another. Both tumbled into the chairs containing their dead comrades and went down in a tangle of live and dead limbs and bodies.

At which point one of the double doors behind the Russian still standing, covering Candy with his AK, began to swing open and someone in a white lab coat started to emerge.

Instantly Candy snatched the rifle from the soldier with one hand and did her best to drive his nose up into his brain with the heel of the other hand. Leaping across the intervening space, she beheaded the second man with her katana before he could rise; then, spinning, she saw both remaining opponents beginning to fumble for their sidearms.

Drawing the Glock with one hand while snatching a shuriken from a belt pouch with the other, she shot the third Russian as the shuriken thudded between the eyes of the first, driving him back into the door, only inches from the white-coated spectator as he extracted himself from between the doors.

“Whoa...” said the onlooker, who had not yet recognized her under the paint and camos.

“Hi, Daddy,” puffed Candy. “We have to go now.”

“Candy ... ? How on Earth—”

“Now ... !”

\* \* \* \*

Volume XI

Quality Time

Okay, Posterity; no, events did not proceed quite as smoothly from that point as above soullessly brief greeting/exchange might seem to imply. F'rinstance, remember all that careful emotional preparation to deal suavely with meeting Daddy?

Hah ... !

Two heartbeats after “Now!”, discovered had flung self into paternal arms, almost paralyzed with teary combination of relief/joy.

After which, celebration segued without discernable hesitation into complete meltdown—really, only fair description: Majority of brain tried simply to shut down, retreat into peacefully oblivious fugue state; drop entire horrible business into Daddy’s lap to Make All Better...

See, Posterity, even all-out, epinephrine-laced, hand-to-hand combat killings not without emotional toll. However, deliberate, cold-blooded assassinations much more costly; each trigger pull weighed heavier on soul.

But beheading ... Ghastly way to die—and even though committed in heat of battle, infinitely worse way to kill! Yesyesyes, have long understood relationships between anatomical components, hydraulic laws, at least on intellectual level.

But in training, Danya had glossed over real-world side effects: Neurology, f'rinstance—like kitchen-bound, guillotined chicken, suddenly headless human body goes into wild spasms, convulsions.

Not to mention, carotid contents spew yards above stump!

In any event, for disgracefully protracted interval—whole minutes at least—Plucky Girl Savior of Our People simply folded under pressure: Responsibility for getting Daddy, children, Maggie out safely; psychic reverberations of all those killings, awful certainty that future could not fail to bring more—never mind figuring out how to save loved ones in hominem community back at Palomar from missiles. Altogether, Intrepid Special-Ops Girl suddenly found things simply had become Too Much.

Daddy's wordless, comforting murmurs helped, but warm, safe, "loved" feelings engendered by being held in protective circle of strong arms probably helped most of all.

However.

Life not influenced by how much you want specific outcome. Apart from possibly helping focus efforts, wanting does not itself improve likelihood matters will turn out as desired.

At this point, discovery, capture, death impended on all sides; and hovering above all, missiles awaited. If situation were to have any chance of ending well, someone had to get back up on that damned red Second Horse.

Regrettably, no one in attendance more qualified than aforementioned (but currently clingy, tearful) Intrepid Special-Ops Girl.

So eventually, notwithstanding momentary overwhelming bail-out impulse, unrelenting pressure of selfsame responsibilities forced awareness to expand again to include strategic/tactical considerations, implications—necessities.

Sighed. Gathered up icky mental baggage, dumped on top of big steaming pile of deferred guilt already accumulating in that ever darker corner of brain. Sniffled. Mopped eyes with sleeve. Then, reluctantly, mind again began gnawing at problems.

Curiously, however, before could refocus full attention on End of Days stuff, queued up at very head of unresolveds lineup was brand new, seemingly peripheral observation that qualified as distinctly anomalous. Even in midst of emotional implosion, couldn't help noticing Maggie's behavior...

At that moment, like one-dog Apache war party circling wagon train, BC ringing us nonstop; silently but at top speed, in absolute frenzy of self-satisfaction. Delight so utter, recalled yet another Weldonism: Executing complicated commands perfectly, especially those which involve running, jumping, overcoming opposition (which under normal circumstances would involve no more than bullying recalcitrant sheep, cows) makes Border Collies happier than almost anything; happier than hugs, happier sometimes even than food. Have seen occasional BC, caught up in frenzied rejoicing after successful, fault-free agility contest run, bounce into air, actually nip owner in heat of excitement.

At first blush, though Maggie had inarguably Saved the Day, had no right to be so pleased with self; had not, f'rinstance, obeyed parting instruction to stay with Tasha—

But wait. Recalled: Had remained dutifully at base camp every other outing. And had company this time, so would have felt much more comfortable with big sister's absence. Almost certainly, then, girl had sent her after me.

Hmm ... Okay. Well, performance obviously had involved speed, altitude, opposition, fair degree of complexity. But command ... ?

How could Wonderpup possibly have known how desperately big sister needed foes distracted—never mind in which specific order distractions would prove most help—

Maggie skidded to stop, eyes locked with mine. As light dawned, BC offered nearly soundless rfff! of agreement, approval, possibly even congratulation—with only faint overtones of Well, finally...

With reluctance, let go of Daddy. Well, mostly.

Turned to BC. Thought, Maggie, heel! Dog blurred into sitting position at right ankle. Maggie, stand! BC bounced to feet, eyes sparkling, poised for more action. Maggie, go out! Streaked into darkness along mentally indicated line. Maggie, here! Black flash terminated in soft, warm thump against leg, from vicinity of which spooky blue eyes grinned up at me.

Sudden, sputtered, barely muffled laughter probably originated at least as much from heart as diaphragm. Barely had time to hold out arms, after realizing just how much needed to hug her right then, before Maggie landed in them, promptly administering big slurpy kiss.

Wow. Eat your heart out, Terry.

Daddy eyed us with mounting fascination....

\* \* \* \*

With Maggie ranging ahead to warn of insomniacs (once again carrying Frisbee; had parked it under nearby bush just prior to “launching” distraction), favorite surviving parent looked rakish in liberated Khraniteli uniform as we stole through darkness. Had abandoned visible-as-lighthouse white coat back at lab. Likewise, Daddy now armed with rifle, sidearm, combat knife, all confiscated from three final interior sentries, who now had no further need of them.

Patriarch had earned booty. Had done, in fact, yeoman job of strolling casually to far end of central corridor, engaging remaining sentries in small-talk, persuading them to accompany him outside “...to catch a breath of air that isn’t reeking of all those bleep-bleep-bleeping chemicals”; all rendered in Russian, of course.

Once outside, however, dedicated healer, doting père, forced to stand, watch favorite baby girl lean unhurriedly from around building’s corner, M-1 leveled. Two seconds, three gerbil coughs later, having deliberately limited damage to heads in two cases to avoid fabric stains, drilled third’s center of mass to avoid headgear spoilage, uniforms became available.



By this point, as made our way soundlessly, invisibly (even without benefit of acorns, Daddy learned quickly) out of downtown Serdtsevina Rasovyi toward missile launch facility, Pater clearly working through conflicting emotions:

First, foremost, awash with long-accumulated parental love; plus simply bursting with amazement, glowing with pride over darling daughter's accomplishments, as brought him up-to-date (high points only): finding AAs across length, breadth of America—and now, based on Danya's, Wallace's intel, finding, springing him from heart of secure location within far greater span of Eurasia.

(And, okay, may even have let slip something about that whole Saving The World business....)

Resultant warmly glowing parental fuzzies surely warred with mortally jarring discovery that aforementioned Sugar 'n' Spice-raised, darling baby girl now full-fledged, card-carrying, multiply blooded, journey-person assassin; capable, when necessary, of explosions of unspeakably violent butchery, not to mention calculatingly cold-blooded slaughter—even of those enemies whose bad luck it was merely to be in the way.

Experienced another sudden stomach-turning chill as realized, in past day and a half had killed 16 people. Yes, five in two separate two- and three-to-one, odds-against combat, but rest in coldest of blood.

Instantly flinched away from arithmetic, but too late: Except that no food had passed lips since previous night, might have had difficulty keeping down.

And considering how much review distressed me, no doubt such thoughts counterindicated for gently doting father/dedicated healer, whose first warning of preteen offspring's expanded extracurricular activities was watching her single-handedly wipe out armed, three-man security team—not to mention immediately thereafter, before those bodies had had chance even to cool, using him as Judas goat to commit next three utterly cold-blooded terminations.

(And Tasha thought merely watching new girlbuddy suit up for sortie gave her collywobbles....)

Nonetheless, regardless of ick factor, Daddy doing level best to absorb new data, be supportive. “Okay—but ‘shazam’ ... ?” he demanded teasingly, once got past immediate catchings-up. Which led to discussion of Danya’s current role in training; plus Teacher’s, other AAs’ participation in education generally.

Presently, however, ran out of family-oriented conversational topics. Pauses occurred, mounting in numbers, durations. Finally, semitraditional father/daughter chitchat morphed back to deadly business at hand: “shop talk”—no-nonsense exchange of strategic/tactical facts/suggestions/opinions, policy guy to field agent/assassin, vice versa.

Except in this case, policy guy turned out to have accumulated significant field time himself. (Who’d’a thunk?—“Foster, Marshall Foster; shaken, not stirred....”)

Daddy said, “Kazimirov has been bragging for months now about his plans for these missiles. They’re old Russian Cold War assets—for some models of which,” grinned suddenly, “due to an only peripherally medically related assignment in my checkered past, I actually remember the master arming and disarming codes, with which I can override whatever on-site programming the Khraniteli may have plugged in.”

Made bogus round eyes at him. “What did you do ... ?”

Daddy grinned. “Remember the Chernobyl-style disaster at that so-called civilian nuclear power plant in Iran a few years back?”

“That was you?”

“I had a role in it. And you won’t be surprised to learn that it wasn’t just a civilian power plant?”

“Never crossed my mind that it might be.”

“You were only nine at that time!”

“Eight.”

“I never realized you were that aware of world events back then.”

“Oh, I started worrying about the implications of what I heard on the news when I was just a kid.” Only after uttered words did Intrepid Special-Ops Girl realize sheer magnitude of non sequitur that had just blundered past lips.

But if Daddy noticed, never blinked. “You never said anything.”

Snickered at irony as replied, “I didn’t want to worry you.”

This set Daddy off as well. “And I was worried about the potential effects on impressionable little you.”

Effects ... Took act of purest will to conceal flinch from Daddy as yet another batch of out-of-control brain cells fired, delivering latest gruesome flashback variation: Behind eyes bloomed this week’s “player statistics”—thus far, beginning midnight Sunday, Intrepid Apprentice Assassin averaging almost a dozen killings per day.

And, of course, Monday mere hours old.

Took deep breath, held, released slowly. Forced distracting mental detritus into background. Again. For now.

“So that’s why you agreed to let me study karate under Teacher: the state of the world, and the direction events were moving.”

Daddy smiled fondly. “It was my idea, actually. By the time you came along, I’d picked up some rudimentary hand-to-hand skills during basic training at The Farm, and Soo Kim had given me occasional lessons.

“But a couple of times in the field, I’d have sold my soul to be even a tenth as dangerous as you are now.” Grinned sheepishly. “As it was, I’ve had to schmooze my way out of a number of situations as the helpful, friendly-but-naive visiting physician, when a dose of judicially applied violence would have saved so much time and stomach acidity. I figured Teacher would be able to make some of that unnecessary for you.”

Paused. Smile faded. Eyed me with expression underlying which effort not to show dismay was plainly visible. “I had no idea...”

Occurred to me then, following another few moments’ awkward silence, had not yet told Daddy about Tasha, kids. Could tell from startled, slightly guilty reaction, had been so focused on eliminating nukes, hadn’t even thought about their fate if succeeded in arming detonators.

But then looked almost inexpressibly relieved. “You’ve gotten them out ... ?”

“Yes. They’re waiting for us at my camp about two miles east of the prison.” Paused then; regarded him with respectful but uncompromising eye. “I promised to come back for them once I got you out and we finish here. I can’t leave without them.”

May have been stray moonbeam, or perhaps just reflection from streetlights among whose shadows we flitted, but pretty sure detected momentary extra sparkle in corner of Daddy’s eye; heard him breathe heavily for moment. Then, a bit huskily, said, “Have I told you yet how proud I am of you?”

Getting all teary-eyed does not enhance terrain-zenning performance, Posterity, so for a bit, concentrated really hard on making sure both two-legged Fosters blended silently with landscape.

“Most Russian multiple-payload packages,” said Doctor Spook presently, voice approximately normal again, “consisted of, in effect, multipurpose warheads, assembled from off-the-shelf components. They could be delivered, one or severally, via missile, from an aircraft, by car, or, if you had a really big briefcase and a husky agent, you could even place one on foot.

“Russian detonators of that vintage were generic components as well, and they came in at

least three flavors. The most common model was self-contained, with several alternative, input-based settings. Before arming them, you have to decide whether you want them to go off at a specific altitude, from a proximity detector, from a remote controller, such as a phone, cordless or hardwired, use the built-in timers, or on impact.

“In addition, most models can be configured either as masters or slaves. What that means is, you can arm the master to broadcast a triggering impulse to the slaves, using some of the same circuitry as the remote controllers, so all detonate simultaneously, producing a vastly more powerful explosion.

“If these do turn out to be warheads I’m familiar with—and they should be, based on Kazimirov’s boasting—I’ll be able to arm them for delayed detonation. Likewise, if we have any masters and/or slaves, we can set up simultaneous multiple explosions, which will do a much more thorough job of closing down this operation.”

Daddy smiled. “Unlike in the movies, lacking microsecond-level master/slave synchronization, the initial burst of radiation from the first warhead to detonate contaminates any other fissionables in the area, which converts all the other warheads to radioactive paperweights—only very briefly, of course, because the entire arsenal will be vaporized in the first fireball.

“On the other hand, if the Khraniteli have no master/slave warheads, setting multiple detonators will give us redundancy, which, after all this time, will offer a measure of insurance against the likelihood that some warheads will prove defective.”

Daddy looked thoughtful. “I hope we do find some master/slave units though. While these are really powerful warheads, and a single bomb will do considerable damage to the Khraniteli’s shelter, I doubt if it’ll take it out completely. They built it almost entirely from that new metallic polymer alloy of theirs, and its weight, strength, and insulation properties are little short of supernatural. The structure extends thousands of feet underground, with endless, really thick shock wave/firestop bulkheads, and bank-vault hatches.

“But”—Daddy eyed me with haunted expression—“regardless of how many I can get to go off at once, generally the maximum timer delay for these detonators is something on the order of four hours.” Paused. “I don’t know how we’ll all get clear in time.”

Didn’t even try not to look smug. “Did I mention I have a plane?”

For possibly two-dozen-th time since reunion, Daddy's eyes went round—but then looked almost ready to collapse with relief.

And experienced yet another surge of daughterly adoration: No doubt sweet, incredibly brave man had fully expected to take advantage of breakout to set off bombs, almost certainly die thereafter; regrets limited to fact that, unless managed to steal Khraniteli plane (and didn't even know if he could fly!), couldn't see any way to avoid expressing gratitude for rescue by sharing immolation with favorite baby daughter.

"A plane will be good," he sighed. "These are probably the second-most powerful warheads ever assembled—ask me later about the Russians' so-called wheat-burner experimental debacle. Total destruction from only one of these bombs extends five miles plus from ground zero. The maximum number of slaves that can be controlled by a single master is three. If I can manage that, we'll need to be at least fifty miles away to survive the radiation, heat, and shock waves."

\* \* \* \*

Arrived at launch facility about three A.M. Left Daddy under cover near gate with filially deferential but strongly worded request to remain quiet and out of sight while scouted installation.

Happily, launch compound turned out to be not-quite-valley-configured dimple in terrain adjacent to mountain under which shelter buried, which, combined with monocular, made it unnecessary to circumnavigate whole site to determine sally port before us was only way in through towering, triple chain-link fences. Five-man security team at gate obviously comprised entire complement; unlike lab entrances, nowhere for others to hide: Single tiny guard shack, similar to that at prison camp, obviously incapable of sheltering additional personnel. (Unless napping under now-known-to-be-ubiquitous security installation picnic tables.)

Presently returned to Daddy. Briefed him on layout; then: "Ready? After I take out the guards, you get in there and do your detonator thing. If anyone comes, duck out of sight. I'll be just outside, under cover. I'll handle them."

Daddy agreed. But then eyes reacquired haunted look as visibly braced self to watch once-innocent baby daughter kill five more unsuspecting men (three sleeping) from concealment, in just under four seconds.

However, no shrinking violet, my Daddy. Hugged me when done; kissed on forehead.

Then, with no hint of smile, ordered me not to let killings fester in soul: Voice deepening, speaking as healer, not just beloved parent, opined, under circumstances, killings equated to amputation. Certain self-selected (Daddy emphasized point) members of *H. sapiens* survivors had to be excised to save whole of *Homo post hominem* people. He underscored—they started conflict; chose venue, stakes.

Hugged me again. Long. Hard.

Thereafter, however, Daddy became all business: With lethal baby girl standing guard over him, calmly checked dead men for vital signs; rifled quickly through pockets.

We entered compound, Doctor Spook carrying several hand tools from my backpack. Camouflaged missiles reclined under netting in launch cradles mounted on massive flatbed trucks. Followed Daddy as strode purposefully out into compound, picked missile on far side, seemingly at random, climbed aboard.

Shinnying out to rocket's nose, released Dzus-like fasteners, popped open cover exposing warhead control panel, began pushing Cyrillic-labeled buttons very much as if knew what was doing.

Yours Truly didn't quite flinch as each button depressed.

Presently, though, almost as afterthought, paternal spook glanced down, noticed favorite adopted daughter standing below; noted, likewise, expression. Visibly suppressing smile, reminded me of previously agreed-upon division of labors: Plucky Special-Ops Girl supposed to find strategic exterior location, keep watch, discourage unscheduled company.

Then, with earnest expression, Daddy tapped finger on thermonuclear warhead currently supporting fatherly fundament, crooked brow, finished, "Though you might want to keep your ears covered...."

Okay, Posterity; just between us, for maybe half second, hands may have twitched. Possibly even in direction of ears.

But Daddy just kidding.

I knew that.

\* \* \* \*

Then began longest hour of entire short life. Daddy began tinkering with first missile shortly before 4:30 A.M. Prison camp security changed shifts at 6:00; had no reason to think launch complex would operate differently. We had barely hour and half, if that—if no one among security day shift, missile-refurbishers, or countdown-prep crews inclined toward annoyingly morning-person-type displays of go-getter initiative, commitment to cause.

Selected cozy, sheltered location among trees just outside sally port. Popped M-1's magazine; quickly replaced expended rounds, reinserted, recharged chamber. Settled down with Maggie at my side.

Line-of-sight visibility along serpentine dirt track from Serdtsevina Rasovyi limited to perhaps 200 feet into dense forest. Tried to keep attention focused on roadway; not watch Daddy.

Anticipated interruption, when (not if) arrived, would be something on order of already half-drunk, shambling, five-man group amble demonstrated by prison camp guards. Could handle that.

\* \* \* \*

Not, however, prepared for 30-odd, wide-awake, heavily armed men split between pair of troop trucks, each with roof-mounted Gatling cannon, trailing in choking dust cloud raised by huge Nizhnyi Tagil T-93-S tank, whole convoy exploding from woods, traveling probably in excess of 50 miles per hour.



(Tank recognition courtesy of training session silhouette flashcards; thank you, Danni.)

As eastern horizon began to lighten, Maggie's head had come up; BC peered intently up road. Oddly, from hidey-hole, own ears picked up only Nature's Night Songs. Plus, of course, at first nothing visible.

Still, took Maggie at her word: Had gotten about two steps toward sally port to warn Daddy—by then working on ninth missile—when Doctor Spook suddenly glanced up. Apparently, tank's quasisubsonic rumbling had reached him via different acoustical route.

Daddy not handicapped by indecision: Instantly snapped access hatch shut, locked down; leaped to ground, sprinted across compound, out through gates. Slapped interior, exterior close buttons en passant.

But then paused, stood waiting, apparently watching to be sure sally port secured properly.

As gates ground slowly toward closed-and-locked position—and I agonized, wondering why experienced spook would risk capture like this—Daddy suddenly glanced at watch, turned head my direction, called out: "I've set two master detonators with three slaves each, and one single. The first two are multiples; the earliest is set for two hours, 42 minutes, 35 seconds—mark."

Hastily began pushing buttons on own watch. Setting countdown timer took almost exactly 30 seconds; made mental note to remember to subtract figure from reading.

Heard outer gate click shut as finished. Glanced up to see Daddy spin, take single step toward cover

—just as Khraniteli convoy thundered out of woods. Trucks broke formation, fanned out from behind tank as all three vehicles almost skidded to stop.

Own blood froze, heart sank, as with chorus of sharply metallic clack-clacks audible even over engines, quite literally everyone unsafetied, charged AKs' chambers, drew bead on

Daddy. Even tank's almost 15-foot-long, approximately five-inch-internal-diameter turret gun's barrel depressed slightly to align on Daddy's sternum, muzzle barely ten feet away.

You don't get much busteder than that, Posterity.

Watching Daddy standing frozen before Khraniteli's massed firepower, found self turning slowly in karmic breeze, agonizing with indecision. For possibly half-second's total madness, Intrepid Assassin Girl actually reflected upon fact that, between two taped-together magazines, M-1 held 60 rounds, whereas couldn't have been more than half that many Bad Guys present.

Hmm...

Fortunately, sanity stepped out only briefly: Even if somehow had managed to mow down whole crowd of fully alerted, heavily armed men surrounding Daddy before found self focus of hail of return fire, could have done nothing about tank.

More accurately, last sentence should have concluded could do nothing.

Clearly Daddy's thoughts paralleling own; likewise visibly spun wheels for possibly two seconds, staring around wide-eyed at captors. But way smarter than homicidal baby daughter; arrived almost immediately at only workable solution:

Put on dejected expression. Slumped shoulders dramatically. Tossed weapons well out to side. Slowly raised hands.

Head popping up from tank's hatch like groundhog checking winter's status, Kazimirov's tone bordered on admiration as called out, "You have had a busy night, Foster."

Khraniteli's Fearless Leader then waved arm, yelled, "Take him!" Troops swarmed down from trucks, swirled around Daddy like army ants on caterpillar. First dozen or so approached with evident caution; grabbed, using variety of restraint-type holds. One man collected weapons. Several others brought up, applied belt-shackled handcuffs, leg irons.

Given circumstances (among them, five obviously dead compatriots' bodies sprawled mere yards away), were surprisingly gentle about it. Which probably is why at-that-point-borderline-suicidal Special-Ops Girl survived: Crosshairs neatly quadrisected Kazimirov's head throughout recapture. Regardless of overall futility, had troops behaved with less restraint, top Khranitel would have been first to die.

"To take out 14 armed men single-handedly, at least three all at once in personal combat," Kazimirov continued, "I am impressed. I had no idea you possessed such training. My first thought was that a strike force of your people's commandos had arrived to rescue you, but here you are alone.

"Be assured, however, that while I still intend to have your knowledge of biological warfare, you will be given no further opportunities to put those combat skills to use."

Daddy sighed loudly, dramatically; shook head mournfully; didn't quite whine: "If you'd been only five minutes later, I'd have made it inside—and we'd all be radioactive dust by now."

Ah-ha! Now understood Daddy's impromptu fallback strategy. More importantly, knew what own role must be to ensure success: Despite nearly paralyzing grief, maddening frustration at recapture, would wait, watch; make sure no one had second thoughts regarding warheads' integrity.

Fervently hoped opposition forces would be present in lesser numbers if became issue. Hoped even more tank no longer part of mix. And especially hoped question resolved soon; clock ticking—now only two hours, 38 minutes, 11 seconds (minus 30) to fireworks....

Concerns proved moot, however; Kazimirov bought Daddy's song-and-dance number hook, line, sinker, replete with optional deeds to Brooklyn Bridge, prime Florida swampland homesite. Never even glanced toward missiles.

Expression now verged upon sneer as responded, "Such a hero ... I knew you would be determined to give your life to save your precious hominems. So predictable—it was unnecessary even to search for you. This was the first place I looked. Lizzy Borden's Roy Rogers would be proud of you."

Daddy's puzzled expression genuine at that point: During catching-up session on way to

missile compound, had failed to get around to passing on that conversation. Somehow.

(Okay, okay; maybe even had been a little reluctant to admit had been playing circumstance-inappropriate games with Kazimirov's head.)

"Take him back to his laboratory and then to his quarters," rasped Khraniteli leader. "Assist him in collection and copying of the records of his research, and retrieve his personal effects. He is to be on a plane to Meyrin within the hour."

Breath which gushed suddenly into Apprentice Assassin Girl's lungs following monster's unexpected announcement felt like first had drawn since column rumbled from forest. Blinking back tears, probably came close to fainting as relief coursed through soul—Daddy would be in clear! Now had only kids, Maggie, self to worry about.

Russian turned back to Daddy. "Obviously, Foster, you cannot work in chains. Even more obviously, however, you are much too clever and dangerous; I do not want you loose anywhere near warheads ever again, not even under the closest supervision.

"But"—Kazimirov refocused attention on those holding Daddy, though continued in English, apparently to ensure all working from same page—"watch him. If he tries again to escape, you are authorized to do whatever is required to restrain him—short of killing him. If he dies, your deaths will follow immediately.

"However, if you let him escape, even if he doesn't kill you in the process, which, based on tonight's performance I have no doubt he will, I will harvest your organs for the transplantation bank—as you watch!"

With which tender sentiment, Kazimirov ordered Daddy tossed aboard truck like sack of wheat; then entire parade wheeled about, rumbled back toward Serdtsevina Rasovyi, taking bodies with them, leaving behind replacement security personnel glancing around uncomfortably at blood-soaked turf beneath feet.

Leaving also one-woman (plus BC) infiltration/extraction team, now grinding teeth, savoring near-mortal levels of frustration—never mind rage!—intrinsic to rescueus interruptus....

\* \* \* \*

Hung around long enough to ensure Daddy's misdirection had worked; that, in fact, zealots would not think to check warheads for tampering. But presently (two hours, 23 minutes to go), with no one showing slightest interest, concluded, with relief, Kazimirov & Company had swallowed paternal spook's implication: Had been apprehended before gaining entry, never mind committing thermonuclear mischief.

Okay. Barring additional unexpected catastrophes (hey, day still young), about which under circumstances could do nothing, Kazimirov should have Daddy safely on plane to Meyrin (where?) long before deuterium nuclei got too chummy; should be clear by time upcoming fireworks went off.

At this point, then, only parties in whom had interest, whose chestnuts remained within scorching distance, were kids, Maggie, self. And clearly, for those of us lacking sunblock rated in excess of 100 million degrees Kelvin, was time to stay not upon order of our going—time to boogie ... !

\* \* \* \*

Volume XII

And Your Little Dog, Too...

Persistent tear leakage, combined with almost continuous sniffing, both stubbornly resistant to best efforts to control them, made it difficult for Eldest Foster sister to concentrate entirely on keeping us invisible—being one with landscape—as made our way back toward base camp through early morning's first golden sunlight.

Was equally difficult to keep from glancing at watch while trying not to dwell upon possibility that, if things went even a little wronger in immediate future, might well become one with 40-60 square miles of fine, glowing-in-the-dark ash, which was all that was likely to remain of local terrain postdetonation.

Accordingly, must confess, Special-Ops Girl significantly preoccupied as approached

camp. Which explains, though certainly doesn't excuse, failure to notice...

One: Maggie's barely audible but steadily mounting grumbles under breath, uneasy glancing around as we approached, entered grove, then trotted past final randomly scattered trees/bushes comprising campsite's boundary.

Two: Escapee kids (despite late return, Tasha's heartfelt promises to contrary, just knew they'd still be there!) all sitting perfectly still on ground, faces frozen; no reaction at all to Plucky Girl Rescuer's reappearance. In fact, no greeting at all until—

"Being run!" screamed Katia abruptly, fetching ground next to her mighty, two-handed whack with heavy Maglite, and—

Ground swore. In Russian. Ground had deep, bass voice.

High points for Katia's good intentions, Posterity; extra credit for effort—no score at all for outcome: Air suddenly full of flying camouflage blankets (each as artfully festooned with weeds, grass, leaves, twigs, etc., as if had done them myself), revealing mob of hard-eyed, armed men rising smoothly from shallow depressions scraped into turf, AKs leveled at Intrepid Special-Ops Girl's center of mass with unwavering steadiness which fairly screamed training.

\* \* \* \*

"Are others where?" demanded captain (or, as Tasha told me later, sotnik) eyes blazing. "Rest of strike force—are ... they ... where?"

Encountering full sotnik in charge of escaped human lab rat recovery not good sign. Generally, according to Danni, in regular Russian army captains commanded bodies of troops numbering in excess of 100. Presence here suggested children's disappearance, perhaps in conjunction with Daddy's attempted bailout, being viewed seriously indeed.

Thankfully, took only single head-rattling slap to establish Yours Truly's linguistic skills limited to English, and even had Tasha to thank for that: Hadn't occurred to me, following first impact for failure to respond promptly to Russian-language inquiry, to attempt clarification.

(Ooo, pretty stars...) But happily, girl shrilled something at him, from which could discern only po-Angleeskeee; after which inquisitor switched to thickly accented, almost equally incomprehensible rendition of UncleSamspeak.

Even so, most recent interrogatory's last three words each emphasized by slap: backhand, forehand, backhand. With two others holding onto upper arms, not only couldn't duck, couldn't even fall away from impacts.

Once managed to get eyes focused again somewhere in inquisitor's direction, however, puffed, "I'm alone."

Wrong answer, apparently: Russian drew back hand again ... then paused. Expression changed.

Had mind-commanded Maggie to go sit with Tasha; stay out of expected physical stuff. BC had obeyed, but as man continued to cuff older sister around, lips wrinkled nonstop; rumbling voce commentary grew increasingly less sotto.

Abruptly sotnik turned to eye BC; then back to me, expression turning even nastier. Suddenly intention writ plain as day across Russian's face: Had decided to hurt, probably kill Maggie to "soften" up interrogee further.

No doubt start on kids thereafter.

Reaching for handgun, Russian began rotation toward Maggie—who, at my thought, bolted instantly. Mentally steered her streaking between other soldiers' legs to provide short-term cover, then zigzagged her out across narrow clear area into woods proper—as rest of squad belatedly began leveling rifles.

Kept BC behind trees, changing directions again and again, from one second to next, in response to where gunfire concentrated. Ultimately, once out of sight, had her circle clearing, then wait quietly behind trees in woods behind us, on opposite side from direction squad focusing barrage.

Evil, would-be dog-killing sotnik, on other hand, got off no shots personally, because...

Really, Posterity, had intended to go along with abuse; wait meekly for opportune moment. (At least briefly; imminent drastic local climate change mandated resolving situation PDQ.) Still, numerical odds at that point too steep even to consider resisting: Opposition composed of in excess of dozen and half obviously regular army troops.

But sotnik's attempt on Maggie, together with sudden conviction that this would be only phase one of process leading to torturing children next, overrode impulse-control-challenged Special-Ops Girl's good intentions, expunged every hint of common sense.

Or maybe still in grip of blind rage stemming from loss of Daddy—again ... !

Whatever—even before fully realized was in motion, had breathed “Shazam,” slowed time, triggered combat computer at starkest level.

Few species as vulnerable to unarmed attack as human male caught with pa ... er ... guard down. Plus, since supercilious sotnik had every confidence two burly, six-foot-plus, trained professionals would have no difficulty keeping one small girlchild out of trouble, was focusing attention exclusively on Maggie's flashing, broken-field-running progress into woods. Paying no attention at all to intended abusee.

Bad luck for him.

Hysterical-strength-driven leg lashed out. Toe hooked in around thigh, drove up into tenderest anatomy with enough force to fracture surrounding bones. In addition to crunch, impact produced satisfyingly strangled gasp.

Simultaneously, reached up, grabbed hairy forearms attached to hands holding my upper arms; employed as fulcrum to pivot body over backward, launching other foot upward with even more force. Toe met sotnik's larynx coming down as Khranitel doubled over. Crushing-celery noise, icky grinding sensation through boot confirmed this Russian would not be factor in Yours Truly's impending death.

Which now seemed assured, probably only seconds away: Going berserk amidst mob of trained, heavily armed men—for heaven's sake, what was Idiot Special-Ops Girl thinking!



Okay, Posterity; wasn't.

But no time to mourn strategic error; best could hope for was to concentrate on tactics, take as many with me as possible, hoping—ignoring thermonuke issue for the moment—some kids might get away, as well as to pay own Ferryman's Fee.

With combat barely approaching waning milliseconds of first full second, two holding me had just enough time to notice small captive had exploded in their grasp before continued over-backward rotation, supported by their own arms, drove hysterical-strength-powered, upside-down boot toe into each captor's face—energy targeted on very backs of heads. Heard, felt both flanking Russians' facial bones crunch, plus detected unmistakable bonus vertebral-snap from man on right as both began falling.

Completed backflip, landing on (icky-toed) feet, already coiling to launch toward next-closest soldier. This one, attention focused over shoulder on Maggie as BC streaked into woods, held my katana blade-up in left fist, AK dangling idly from right.

Drove knuckles of bladed right hand into back of Russian's left hand; paralyzed fingers instantly released katana, dropping grip into my left.

Simultaneously, combat computer perceived man some ten feet away notice untoward developments. In time-slowed mode, had ample interval during which to watch eyes shift, track, widen, awareness begin to enter expression.

Russian began shifting rifle my direction. Too far away, couldn't possibly have gotten there before targeting complete; so instead, using right hand, snatched shuriken from pouch and almost completely buried pointy flying star between eyes.

Fellow from whom had retrieved katana barely had had time to react to losing sword; only just now turning back from woods with surprised, hurt expression. Since couldn't leave live, armed foe behind me, executed spinning leap as if delivering left back-fist, but instead guided katana to, through Russian's neck before flipping blade to dominant right hand; then moved on to next adversary.

Thereafter, for two, three, possibly four whole seconds, bounded to, fro, dancing almost silently among squad like demented whirligig beetle in grip of phencyclidine frenzy, doing level best to wreak maximum havoc in minimum time: Katana hummed like weedeater on nitromethane—disarming, gutting, beheading, etc.; taking out probably half dozen more men before activities started to attract remaining troops' belated notice; before soldiers began refocusing attention from attempted dog-shooting festivities, recognized peril, commenced traversing, leveling AKs.

First of those whom combat computer identified as imminent threat clearly skilled with weapon: Didn't just turn; swung rifle crisply up over shoulder as rotated torso, brought down, bead drawn on spot barely behind hustling Plucky Special-Ops Girl as flashed about clearing, but well on way to catching up. Two-, three-tenths of a second more at most, would constitute problem.

Had glanced wistfully at fallen enemies' handguns at rampage's very outset. But weapons all trapped in awkwardly well-secured flap holsters; would have taken far too long to extract. And thus far, dispatched foes' AKs had fallen inconveniently out of reach; under bodies, too far away, etc.

So instead, hurled another shuriken with left hand as dealt with nearest opposition with katana. Barely in time to prevent soldier from getting off what evidence suggested would have been well-aimed shot, razor-tipped flying star half-buried self in adversary's forehead.

But then, after attention had shifted to next most pressing threat, had to make special effort to avoid distraction of sudden, only half-perceived, obviously illusory afterimage of shuriken's leading point dead-centering somehow previously unnoticed, red-with-darker-center, half-inch-diameter, circular mole, or perhaps caste mark, between brows.

Whatever!—if hadn't been so preoccupied, trying to be three places at once, cope with at least that many threats simultaneously, anarchical, detail-fixated corner of brain would have spent at least some time obsessing about how Intrepid Special-Ops Girl had managed to overlook so obvious a reference while targeting. But by that point, other soldiers, alerted and unambiguously alarmed, well beyond katana-reach, were trying to bring additional AKs to bear; now clearly not ideal moment to squander multitasking capacity on trivia.

Fortunately, however, at that moment spotted own silenced Glock tucked into belt of man with whom had dealt earlier—currently writhing on ground, screaming, clutching arm's fountaining stub. Reached him in single dive; retrieved weapon as passed just above.

Landed rolling, in hopes of providing less convenient target, already bringing weapon to bear on most pressingly imminent threat; squeezed off round. Experienced momentary flash of relief as soldier released grip on AK, began to topple; as well as twinge of sympathy for Tasha, now crouched alertly, following suicidal Special-Ops Girl with roundest possible eyes: Body would land right on top of her; rifle falling practically on head—details picked up only peripherally, as primary focus already had resumed triaging, targeting next most worrisome attackers.

Likewise, though only in retrospect—and impression hardly reliable, given numbers of unmuffled AKs still blazing away into forest after Maggie—yet another tiny, otherwise unoccupied group of brain cells noted first shot's gerbil-cough seemed to have had curiously doubled tone quality, almost as if Glock had generated echo in little clearing. Also, if not fabricating impression from imaginary whole cloth, reflected sound seemed slightly deeper in tone.

Now hardly the time for abstract contemplation of local acoustics, however: Other Khraniteli well on way to bringing weapons to bear—though many of those who finally had noticed peril found selves out of ammo, having spent whole magazines on unoffending trees, bushes (also, no doubt, flashing BC afterimages), now fumblingly in process of attempting to reload.

Still, own sole advantage, if any element of situation could be so characterized, fact that remaining foes so closely bunched at this point, most couldn't get clear sightlines. So completed roll in crouch and, just as quickly as could get off rounds, began methodically targeting, shooting those on near side of clustered enemies; targeting, shooting, targeting, shooting, targetingshootingtargeting...

As did so, however, found self fretting over whether, working in such haste, might be losing track of whom had already shot, who remained candidate. With mounting concern, noted occasional men dropping even as prepared to draw bead on them. Plus, despite generalized cacophony, still seemed to be hearing those doubled gerbil-coughs.

But finally matters came to head: Four, five, six, maybe more surviving Khraniteli got selves spread out; began leveling AKs simultaneously. No possible way to get all before most would get off shots—and Glock's extractor slide suddenly locked back—empty!—informing Plucky Special-Ops Girl she had committed cardinal, no doubt fatal, fire-zone sin: lost track of rounds expended.

Involuntarily, reptilian hindbrain flinched internally from crown to toenails. For single instant, as prepared to die, reflexes attempted to take over: convulse, compact whole body; raise arms in silly, self-consciously futile attempt to cover head; trying to shield torso behind

raised leg. Even tried to squeeze eyes shut.

But Candy Smith-Foster, Plucky Savior of Our People, Intrepid (etc., etc.—sigh), not reptile. Probably (judging by recent actions) nowhere near as evolved, smart as reptile. Instead, kept eyes open, focused on Glock. Kept moving purposefully. Fought down manic internal giggle as resolved that, like apocryphal reptilian primogenitor, no matter how many bullets found mark, wouldn't stop shooting 'til sundown.

So even as massed AKs drew down, right thumb already depressing magazine-ejector button while left hand snatched replacement from belt pouch. In time-slowed mode, single, unoccupied, idiot brain cell had time peripherally to mourn that Danya was missing this magazine change—absolutely fastest had ever performed, possibly fastest in entire history of semi-auto handgun: Empty mag had covered not quite half crouch-shortened distance to ground before Intrepid Apprentice Assassin Girl already sliding replacement into gun butt, preparing to slap home, release slide, resume firing—

But at that precise moment there came absolutely deafening fusillade of characteristic ratchety, fully automatic AK gunfire; for maybe whole second, sounded as if pair of fully staffed armies had declared all-out war in little glade.

During course of which, yet another unoccupied brain cell (with serious priority-ranking issues!) marveled sardonically: All this just to kill single, in-way-over-her-head kid...

However, simply not possible so many guns could go off without somebody scoring. And indeed, with full attention focused on reloading Glock, felt multiple tapping sensations all over clothing, exposed skin—true scope of damage no doubt masked by raging epinephrine overdose.

Noted, with gratitude, at least no pain thus far, so slapped home magazine anyway. Figured might as well keep shooting while still could. Wondered how long before end. Wondered when pain would begin.

Wondered how much would hurt...

Pressed release—

And rage flared anew—wondered how many more could take with me ... !

—slide snapped forward, charging chamber even as empty magazine hit ground, bounced.

Looked up, scanning for more targets...

And blinked in confusion. None visible.

At which point additional datum slowly percolated through skull: Clearing had fallen silent.

Looked around wildly—only to realize that, in addition to Yours Truly, no one but Tasha plus handful of older kids still standing (on knees, actually). As well as little Katia.

All held smoking AKs.

All wore ear-to-ear grins.

Without consultation, combat computer disengaged with internally audible thump. Time's passage snapped back to customary pace.

Noted, as hysterical strength abruptly throttled back to normal, was breathing hard, though nothing approaching desperate, convulsive panting that had followed previous metabolic burn-out attempts. Made sense: Battle intense, but probably hadn't spent six, seven full seconds operating above redline.

Belatedly, then, occurred to your Humble Historiographer, might not be dying after all. Tried not to be obvious, as rose to feet, about patting anatomy here, there, checking for holes.

Probably took as long as several more full seconds before realized: Multiple impacts felt during final volley had been muzzle blasts from kids' AKs, redirected sideways at close

range by muzzle brakes.

Gazed round-eyed at carnage surrounding us. Experienced another twinge of nausea as realized how many bodies attributable to own efforts.

Generally the messier ones...

“Apparently,” murmured Danya, resting hand lightly on shoulder, “apart from a better appreciation of the concept of odds, I don’t have that much more to teach you.”

Jumped as if goosed—someday, someone really needed to tie a bell to that woman ... !

At which point, fact of mentor’s presence actually registered. Never mind astronomical level of improbability—

Squealed, “Danni?” Dropped weaponry, fell into her arms, hugged breathless. “What are you doing here ... ?”

For long moments, Momma Spook hugged me back just as hard with left arm (smoke still rising from favorite silenced Israeli sniper rifle cradled in right); then gently pushed away. “All right; maybe I do have something more to teach you.” Hint of smile gave lie to reproachful tone. “This is an active combat theater. Pick up your weapons. Prepare for the next engagement. We can small-talk while reloading.

“Now,” she continued, suiting actions to words, smoothly popping out own magazine, beginning to refill from stash in backpack, “the first thing we need to do is get in while they’re in disarray and get your father out. Then we need to destroy those missiles—”

Brain reengaged with click—bringing with it momentary flash of grief, tear-clouded vision (instantly suppressed), restored sense of urgency. Interrupted Danya’s situation-review minilecture by grabbing arm to focus attention—of course unnecessary, but too wound up at that moment to recall apprentice-level comportment. “Danni, I broke Daddy out last night. Then they caught us again, but not until he’d set timers on nine warheads.

“Daddy should be safe; he’s already on a plane to another gulag, someplace that sounded like—have you ever heard of Meyrin? We, on the other hand...”—glanced at watch—“...have 59 minutes and change to be at least 50 miles away from here if we don’t want to glow in the dark. And, Danni—the Khraniteli don’t know that!”

Not easy to catch Danya by surprise. Stared round-eyed at me; actually made momentary, unproductive fish-mouths.

Then, unexpectedly, handed off rifle to nearest kid, took me in both arms, held tenderly for long moments. Finally released, took back rifle.

Turned back to children; voice deepened as said: “People, not long ago this woman”—really, Posterity, actually said woman!—“quite literally saved the lives of every man, woman, and child on this planet. Today she’s pretty much done it again.

“You have been part of a pivotal moment in the history of our people. If we make it out of here, remember this day; remember what you did here. You should only tell your grandchildren...”

Unexpectedly, mayhem mentor ground to halt. Could have been imagination, but thought I detected tiniest hint of quaver in voice. Simultaneously, seemed blink rate might have picked up briefly; even noticed possible extra sparkle in corner of eye.

Danya?—didn’t know Mossad agents even came with tear ducts.

Kids, on other hand, listened in round-eyed silence. Turned, stared at me with expressions that thickest observer couldn’t fail to recognize as naked admiration. Slowly, softly then, Katia began to clap. Still quietly, rest joined in. Finally, Danni, too.

However, five seconds into tender display of approbation, Intrepid Special-Ops Girl also remembered what had happened here this day—and abruptly dropped to knees, fell forward onto hands, almost physically turned inside-out as empty stomach reacted, finally, to cumulative effects of all those killings by doing rib-cracking best to eject by-now purely imaginary contents, along with what felt like portions of most adjacent major organs; possibly even including, before completely done, toenails, socks....

\* \* \* \*

Only 48 minutes to go by the time we got back to truck. But...

“Oh, dear,” said Danya mildly, eyeing two UAZs parked alongside six-by-six under trees at grove’s edge. “There were three. This is not good.”

Wondered how Khraniteli had found truck; Tasha and I had, after all, taken elaborately indirect route back, even spent fair amount of time on pavement. Couldn’t have tracked us. Grumbled something to that effect.

Danya looked thoughtful all of two seconds—then dived inverted under dashboard, standing on shoulders, feet waving in air, while briefly rooting around up behind speedometer.

Shortly muttered something sulphurous-sounding in Hebrew, made convulsive movement, resurfaced holding small, black, thickish plastic disk trailing visibly yanked-loose wiring.

“You were right. Apparently Kazimirov likes to keep track of his personnel while they’re out and about. This is a GPS transponder. All they had to do was ping it, and they were able to drive straight to where you’d left the truck. I bet the UAZs have them, too.”

Did. Easily remedied, though yanking out wires by roots, flinging offending artifacts as far as possible offered only transitory satisfaction. Particularly since now only 45 minutes remained.

Which is why we’d bothered debugging UAZs: Faster than lumbering truck—and faster acquiring ever-increasing importance.

Danni jumped in behind wheel of one, hit starter, as I tried other. Both fired right up, leading to sighs of relief all around—if escaped Khraniteli survivor had used head, could just as easily have sabotaged all three vehicles: Slashed fuel-pump tubing f’instance, never mind something as quick and easy as lopping off all tire stems, effectively anchoring us there to be collected at their leisure.



Splitting up kids between vehicles, we pulled out, headed cross-country at flank speed, bee-lining for plane—tracks be damned; needed to get into air soonest.

Your Humble Historiographer led, since Danni didn't know where had stashed Stallion.

En route, attempted to listen in on opposition: Sotnik, both desyatniks (sergeant/corporals), had worn field comm units: cute little one-piece radios consisting of single hook-on earpiece, plus voice-activated microphone wand reaching from ear to mouth's corner; looked rather like moddish cell phone accessory.

Danni, Tasha, and I, swallowing hard to overcome repugnance (certainly in own case) wiped all visible traces of Khraniteli from earpieces (at least to degree possible in field, lacking actual boiling water, 20 minutes' un-previously-spoken-for time), hooked plastic retainers over ears, tucked speaker buds into auditory canals; positioned mics, but with sound-activated send switches off.

Since Danya spoke Russian like native, Tasha rode with me, the better to furnish instant translation if comm traffic developed. Had eavesdropped nonstop since leaving combat scene; however, no mention of us thus far on Khraniteli's tactical radio channel.

Tasha held youngest child in lap with one arm, kept firm grip on UAZ's structure with other. Maggie crouched between us, eyes laughing, tail wagging furiously. Rest of children, piled high in rear, hung onto everything in reach, plus each other, as we pelted over uneven terrain.

Tried to stick to reasonably survivable surfaces, avoid fallen logs, sticky-up boulders, potential launching ramps of any description, but still found ourselves pretty much careening from one high spot to next.

Also tried not to keep looking at watch while driving. At least no more frequently than about every 15 seconds.

\* \* \* \*

## Volume XIII

### Runway Maintenance

By the time Demon Hippodrome Driver Girl skidded UAZ to halt just off camouflaged Stallion's starboard wingtip, everybody's knuckles uniformly white; even Tasha's grin had become forced. (Only Maggie still having fun.) Nonetheless, even though everyone downright round-eyed, and some smaller kids' grimy cheeks visibly tear-streaked, all still maintaining brave silence, along with mostly stiff upper lips.

And just between us, Posterity, couldn't blame them: Maybe ten miles from base camp to plane—up hill, down dale, through woods, across open fields; none of it likely to be confused with PGA golf green. Portions of Wild Ride would have left even Mr. Toad feeling twitchy: Once managed to yank wheel barely in time to correct lateral rotational displacement—right-side wheels must have traveled three, four feet off ground for good 50 yards.

But, like aircraft landings, any headlong pursuit one can walk away from is good one—and had saved enough time on ground to get ship into air, out of range.

Probably.

Glanced again at watch as stopped; countdown timer (minus 30 seconds) showed 35 minutes 32 seconds left.

Comm unit lodged in ear still broadcasting nothing but occasional crackles of static; no radio traffic.

No news good news? Hoped so.

Still, wondered if maybe had occurred to Khraniteli, if intruders had wiped out squad, might be eavesdropping. Bad Guys might have changed frequencies, or possibly just abandoned system altogether for nonce.

In any event, had UAZ's ignition switched off, handbrake set, and was over the side, switching from Demon Hippodrome Driver Girl mode to Intrepid Girl Aviatrix almost before vehicle fully stopped. Slashed tie-down securing camouflage netting over Stallion's door. Flipped up edge to gain access. Then unlatched, propped plane's door wide open.

Grabbed nearest little kid, pitched up through opening. Tasha followed example.

Maggie preceded second kid by whisker, spun as landed, jumped back down. Unsurprisingly, prevailing epinephrine-laced ambiance to her liking.

However, as reached back for third, noticed Danya executing statue impression, attention all downhill.

Paused myself. Without asking, knew what must have attracted attention. "How close?"

"Too," came cryptic response, with what I regarded as entirely inappropriate calmness; adding, "How long before you can get us in the air?"

Turnabout crypticness only fair play: "Too, too." Breathlessness level, however, vitiated attempt at projecting matching calm. Gave it up as bad job; rushed over to stand beside her.

Even with naked eye, could make out UAZ command car, plus two six-by-six trucks, similar to those that had accompanied tank during Daddy-retrieval; each, once again, equipped with roof-mounted Gatling cannon. Open cargo beds overflowed with additional armed bodies.

Obviously, third UAZ's occupant had made it back to base, raised alarm, returned with reinforcements.

Sole positive note—at least tank not among pursuers....

Just over two miles back, three vehicles coming fast (though not as fast as us!), driving with confidence—well, yeah, blind man could have followed our tracks through otherwise virgin, grassy, shrub-speckled terrain, across which, however faintly, could actually hear diesels' snorting.

"They're already too close," I fretted aloud. "We have to take off downhill. We'll pass right over them. As low as we'll be, they won't miss if they only throw rocks."

Danya looked thoughtful. "What assets do you have?"

Patted holstered Glock. "This, my M-1, and, in the plane, another M-1, the Barrett, lots of ammuni—"

"You brought a Barrett ... ?"

Grinned sheepishly. Until that moment, had actually managed to forget huge personal cannon. "Do you think Wallace will be mad?"

One of those tight little expressions Danni sometimes uses for a smile flickered across face. "Not if you strip, clean, and lube it really well after we're done, put it back," she replied dryly; finishing, "—and don't miss."

Then turned serious: "You're the better shot. Tasha can get the kids aboard while I strip the camo netting and preflight the plane. You see what you can do to discourage our progenitors."

"Right." Spun, dived up into plane. Tossed Barrett's aiming crotch support pole out onto ground. Lugged big gun over to door, set down. Returned for field shooting kit (heavier still). Hopped down, carried load over to UAZ, set on hood.

Slid huge rifle from case, locked scope into place.

Dug out handful of magazines. Arranged in row on hood. Picked up nearest; extracted first round, a flamboyantly non-Geneva-Convention-compliant, expanding-tip, antipersonnel slug. Slid in sharply pointed, steel-jacketed, Teflon-coated, armor-piercing round from shooting kit's boxed ammo.

Slapped home magazine, yanked lever to charge chamber. Rested barrel end in pole's crotch. Took exploratory peek through scope; tried traversing: left, right, up, down...

No good; target area too broad; barrel support too restrictive.

Unclicked bipod legs, rested feet on UAZ's hood. Tried again.

Worse.

Debated briefly. Solution obvious, but did not like it.

Turned back to Danya as swarmed past, engrossed in own chores. "Can you fly a Stallion?"

Mentor paused, shook head. "Never even ridden in one." Momentarily, actual, regular-people-style grin flashed across face. "No pressure, boobula—you're it..."

Abruptly sobered then, realizing question not product of idle curiosity. "Why?"

"I can't do this with the bench rest or barrel support," I sighed. "I need more freedom of movement if I'm going to get them all before they start scattering. There's only one way to do that."

"Get them all ... ?" For second time today—not to mention ever—Danni's eyes actually went round. But, as professional, zeroed in immediately on key issue: "What one way?"

"I have to get them all. It'll only take one leftover Khranitel still in condition to shoot, putting

one bullet into the wrong place, to bring us down. To do that, I need to shoot freehand—but the only way I can hold it steady is by using hysterical strength.”

Hesitated unhappily. “And I’m pretty sure holding up that much gun for that long, combined with absorbing all the recoil, will require more of a sustained effort than I’m capable of. This will be my third hysterical-strength session today. I may not be much use afterward.”

Momma Spook’s eyes narrowed in concern. “Would you rather I shoot while you ready the plane?”

So tempted. Really, really, really didn’t want to dabble again in physiological equivalent of Black Arts. (Been there, done that; been “just dead” afterward.) “Yes—but I am the better shot.”

“That you are.” Again, that hint of a smile. “If it’ll make you feel better,” she added comfortingly, “while I’ve never flown a Stallion, or any tail-dragger for that matter, I am not the worst pilot the Israeli air force ever let slip through flight training. If I have to do the driving, I may not collect a lot of style points, but I won’t actually crash us.”

Sighed again. But fresh out of inspired alternatives. “Oh, hell,” I muttered. “Shazam.”

Response, on occasions when have had time to appreciate it, never ceases to amaze: Instantly, day’s accumulated fatigue evaporated, breathing stabilized, mind cleared, time slowed again—plus near-godlike sensation of power just feels so good.

For briefest moment, wondered if experience in any way akin to high that brought drug addicts of yore back time after time, despite awareness of consequences.

Then shook head, blanked thoughts of own forthcoming consequences from mind. Focused on job at hand.

Twisted left arm into sling, swung now effectively weightless monster rifle up into effortless freehand stance. Despite fact that majority of thunderstick’s nearly 40-pound weight (with full magazine) now supported exclusively by one arm, muzzle could hardly have been steadier if permanently cast into prestressed concrete bridge truss.

Noted as well, with usual heightened peripheral awareness, local meteorology: typical early morning; absolutely dead calm conditions prevailed; windage would not be factor.

Centered crosshairs on Ulyanovsk Automobile Works' emblem in middle of lead vehicle's grille. Pressed rangefinder button. Invisible (ha!—to them) infrared laser reached out, reported vehicle still roughly 7,500 feet off, closing at about 30 miles per hour; straight-on approach, no lateral motion: Unnecessary to lead target.

Vertical crosshair equipped with handy, vernierish array of ranging crossbars. Selected appropriate elevation adjustment for indicated distance, subtracted slight gut-feeling increment, squeeEEEEezed off shot.

Probably says something lamentable about your Humble Historiographer's fundamental evolvedness (or un-) that precision shooting monster gun at such long range delivers so visceral a gratification.

Whatever. Slug's arrival, within two inches of intended target after nearly three seconds' ballistic trajectory, generated almost physical rush of self-satisfaction.

As did results: With spectacular gout of flame, smoke, vapor, UAZ's engine exploded as big armor-piercing slug passed through radiator as if so much tissue paper, then bored unpreengineered corridor from one end of engine block nearly to other, sundering crankshaft, connecting rods, pistons, etc.; trashing quite literally everything in path.

Vehicle ground to stop, smoking, steaming, hemorrhaging miscellaneous fluids onto ground beneath. Gun trucks skidded to halt right behind them so abruptly, actually dislodged several unwary members of troop complement.

Comm unit awoke with explosion of unmistakable Russian profanity. Voice sounded familiar...

But then (hardly dared believe eyes!), rising into view like heavy-set, bad-tempered bear, Khraniteli's Fearless Leader himself, Vladislav Kazimirov in the flesh—only truly successful genocide ever to emerge from history of planet—stood up in rear seat of lead vehicle to

loom over driver. Lip movements visible through scope synced with tirade carried by comm; no doubt inquiring into failure's cause. More or less. Between descriptives.

As well as—talk about Christmas coming early!—to Kazimirov's immediate left, rising slowly to tower over scene like hood-spreading snake monster from bad old weekly TV horror serial—Fedka...

Was all could do not to laugh out loud as eyed pair through scope; listened to Kazimirov rage over comm. Clearly vehicles making so much noise on their own, concussion from mile-and-a-half-distant rifle shot had arrived unnoticed. At this point, occupants still thought engine simply had blown.

However.

Kazimirov, for all his silly, pompous mannerisms, surface distractibility, fascination with western movies, still Khraniteli's most important strategist: Single-handedly had come up with breathtakingly overkill planetary-cleansing scheme in first place, as well as directing scientific program, which made atrocity possible.

But Fedka was ... Fedka.

Loss of either would significantly weaken whatever Khraniteli opposition survived Serdtsevina Rasovyi's thermonuclear destruction; but eliminating both would constitute major strategic benefit—separate and apart from personal satisfaction to be gained from correcting nature's mistakes.

Yes, inconceivable that impending detonation would fail to take out both after our departure. But standing there, clearly outlined against rugged background, Khraniteli leaders presented unmatched opportunity to make sure....

Offered up wordless prayer of thanks (hoped uneasily would be received in spirit intended). Centered crosshairs on second button of chief sociopath's shirt with sensation approaching spiritual ecstasy.

Then...



(At this point, Posterity, must confess: Did something incredibly stupid—though to be fair, probably laboring under influence of compulsion; couldn't have resisted had fate of entire universe hung in balance.)

...keyed mike: "Hans, this is Roy. Yippee-ki-yay, mother—"

\* \* \* \*

Kim Mellon's Journal:

Briefly Terry flapped his wings in startled reaction, as most of us, huddled around his stand in the cavernous, toasty-warm cargo hold of the B plane rumbling through the stratosphere toward Serdtsevina Rasovyi at maximum cruising speed, erupted in cheers, laughter, and applause—which tapered off abruptly, leaving us all staring at each other in awkward silence.

Glancing around the huge chamber, the macaw settled his feathers with a satisfied expression; then, clearly expressing his own opinion, he said, "How 'bout that...."

Lisa suppressed the tiny beginnings of a giggle—over our reaction, I think; I'm pretty sure she herself has no particularly feelings about "bad" words.

Everyone recognized the movie quote, of course—but this was Candy, and heretofore, about the most brimstone-laden observations or commentaries any of us had ever heard her use were the mildest of standard four-letter condemnations, and even those infrequently. Personally, I had never heard her say anything even remotely approaching that level of vehemence.

Not even while dying....

\* \* \* \*

Candy's Journal:

Barrett's thunderclap obliterated soul-satisfying final two syllables. Heard them only in my head.

But Kazimirov obviously heard them in earpiece. And clearly, from expression, recognized voice. Brow furrowed. Eyes began shifting, head swiveled, looking around for source. Mouth opened, no doubt to issue command.

Prayed would make connection before bullet's arrival.

But no time to waste gloating. As barrel settled from recoil (okay, yes; not supposed to, but did hurry it some), retargeted on Fedka (arguably one of most loathsome blotches ever to soil H. sapiens' escutcheon); squeezed off another shot.

Shifted immediately to man on ground on right, fired again. Continued retargeting, shooting, as rapidly as possible.

After dispatching bullet to each of those in, around UAZ, shifted attention to first gun/troop truck. Initially chose targets in ever-widening pattern, moving out from center, but shortly switched to targeting those closest to anything which might serve as cover.

(Took real effort not to waste time waiting, watching for each impact. In fact, operated purely on faith throughout: Due to scope's narrow visual field of view, haste with which was having to work, length of time each projectile spent in transit, apart from UAZ's grille emblem, had yet actually to see any bullet's arrival, or resultant bodies on ground.)

Following fifth shot at first truck's occupants, Barrett's semi-auto action's "empty-now" lock-back caught me by surprise (bad Candy—second offense). But endless reloading practice under Danni's efficiency-expert's gimlet eye now paid dividends: Took just over training-session-best second and a half to pop out empty, snatch up next magazine in line, slap home, recharge, resume sight picture, find next target, fire again.

And again. And again. And...

\* \* \* \*

Excerpts from the journal of Danya Feinberg:

With the assistance of Tasha, clearly the de facto leader of the rescued children, and her unofficial lieutenant, a smaller, even more intense child named Katia, stripping off the camo netting and getting the rest of the kids aboard was quickly accomplished.

Preflighting the plane, including draining the fuel sumps, took a little longer. But during flight training, not departing with water in the fuel had been the subject of so much discussion, delivered with such frequency and intensity, that by now I could probably eat a bacon cheeseburger while scrubbing the temple floor bareheaded on the Sabbath with less personal distress than not verifying that the fuel was water-free before a flight.

Thankfully, however, and unexpectedly considering how long the plane had sat there in the woods, the tanks contained no water at all, which speeded up the process.

Afterward I joined Candy at the UAZ just in time to watch her swing the Barrett up to her shoulder and, in a single, continuous, fluid motion, level and fire it.

Under my breath, I offered up a brief thank-you to YHWH for Candy's preexpedition foresight: She had even included those huge spotter's binoculars in her field shooting kit.

(YHWH? Well, it's less awkward to pronounce, never mind spell, than Tetragrammaton. Okay, does Yahweh sound more familiar? By whatever Name, during my Mossad career, which prior to Armageddon had consisted primarily of killing bad people before they could kill good people [not to mention me], I've tended to prefer the ancient face of our people's Lord. Not to imply criticism of His more recent activities, but back then His assistance tended toward less ambiguous manifestations—floods, plagues, the occasional judiciously applied rain of fire and brimstone, flattening city walls with impolitically loud music—and, of course, though they're not uppermost among my personal favorite anatomical targets during hand-to-hand combat, He seemed a lot bigger then on actively supporting us Chosen People in our smiting of the non-Chosen "...hip and thigh, with great slaughter." I do like that in a deity.)

The big binoculars were wonderful: If one could hold them steady enough, one could very nearly resolve pores on the Khraniteli's noses, as our now-stationary pursuers began milling around, scratching their heads over the UAZ's smoking engine.

However, I barely had time to admire the strategic elements of the picture before Candy muttered something under her breath (the Khraniteli headset had gotten in the way while preflighting the plane, so I'd discarded it) and fired again, this time, I knew, for blood.

As with the armor-piercing round which had disemboweled the UAZ's engine, the first of the human-targeted slugs was in transit for nearly three seconds. During that interim, Candy got off four additional shots, and I found myself tempted to worry that she might have allowed herself to get caught up in the frenzy of combat—the condition known to Viking raiders of old as going berserk: Her shots were so closely spaced that she seemed almost just to be spraying lead.

However, even during that *melée* back in the woods, despite the odds and intensity, Candy had remained focused, and not a single shot had been wasted. Really, regardless of circumstances, I could not imagine her losing her head.

On the other hand, neither could I quite believe that anyone, even someone burning calories at the rate she was at that point, could possibly hold, aim, and fire so huge a rifle, freehand, so very quickly: Never did appreciably more than half a second separate each shot from its predecessor.

Still, this struck me as a poor time to kibitz, never mind kvetch, so I suppressed my mother's internal voice, held "her" tongue as well as my own breath, and waited. And waited. And...

Almost concurrently with Candy's sixth shot, a scarlet bloom appeared in the center of Kazimirov's chest. Backward, end over end, the Khraniteli leader launched off the rear of the UAZ. As he rotated midair, it became apparent that, on exit, the fifty-caliber expanding slug had transformed his back into an outward-exploded, red-spraying ruin.

Then, barely half a second later, even before Kazimirov could become fully airborne, Fedka, to his left, followed suit—and momentarily I indulged in an unworthy gloat: Another local Auschwitz chapter closed down for good; this latter-day Mengele-pretender would torture no more children.

Half a second after that, the man to Kazimirov's right, down on the ground, was her target. He was followed, after the same eyeblink, by the one to the left of Fedka. Then two others on the ground, who had had the bad fortune to find themselves momentarily lined up from Candy's sightline, were struck down by a single bullet. Then the next went down. And the next, and...

Supported by her invocation of hysterical strength to support the gun and hold it steady, Candy's hypnotically augmented concentration was doing exactly what it had been summoned for: Regardless how quickly one followed another, every shot was precisely aimed; each had a Khranitel's name on it.

I spared a quick glance at her. The metabolic supercharge had been running for only a few seconds thus far, so apart from a sudden beading-up of perspiration on her face, and the suggestion of rivulets pooling up to trickle down her cheeks and neck (with temperatures barely into the fifties), no evidence of the calories hemorrhaging from her reserves was visible. I crossed my fingers and hoped the ultimate cost would not be higher than we could afford.

Turning my attention back to the binoculars, once again I marveled that somehow human beings had managed to become the dominant species on this planet: Almost invariably, in the absence of clearly audible gunshots from somewhere near at hand (and sometimes even then), untrained civilians spend an incredibly long time standing frozen, staring in disbelief, watching people drop all around them, before even beginning to respond.

And though soulless murderers all, single-mindedly dedicated to the extermination of every man, woman, and child of our species (not to mention those possessing *H. sapiens* DNA but not members of their own private club), the majority of Khraniteli were mere worker bees: engineers, clerks, machinists, physicists; carpenters, computer specialists, chemists; infrastructure maintenance personnel—from a military perspective, untrained civilians. And happily, unlike the squad who had tried to recapture the escaped children, apparently most of these were untrained civilians, for their responses proved no different from that of any other group of their peers.

The distance-muffled sound of the shot that cleansed the Earth of the corruption represented by the very existence of Vladislav Kazimirov would not have arrived until about the seven-second mark (following twelve or thirteen more kills), and may not have been audible at all over the clanking idle of the gun trucks' big, smoky diesels.

But even after that, it took over five more seconds, and yet another nine or ten casualties, for

even the first of those who remained unscathed to comprehend that the air suddenly had become filled with death; and another three or four seconds after that for the expressions of the rapidly shrinking pool of survivors to cycle through that slow progression from dawning realization to the sudden onset of mortal fear, and finally, for those who hadn't simply turned to stone, the beginnings of constructive reaction.

By which time Candy had long-since emptied her first magazine, executed a flawless combat rapid-reload, burned through the second, and, by the time she had started on the third magazine, not even a handful, from the three dozen or so Khraniteli who had arrived in those vehicles, were still in condition even to try to scramble under cover.

Of the forty-plus rounds she had expended thus far, I doubted if ten percent of her targets had managed to move out of the way while the bullets had been in transit, and those final few were among the well and truly panic-motivated.

Briefly, concern flickered through my mind regarding the emotional consequences to my apprentice. More and more, Candy reminds me of me at that age; except that, even after having passed through a succession of trials, some darker and more stressful even than those that forged and tempered me—many even before she found us—she's remained an innocent. Somehow, her soul has remained fundamentally uncorrupted; yet she's stronger, tougher, and better balanced than I ever was back then.

As a member of various regular military units, I've taken part in my share of all-out firefights, yet I remember very few of the killings that occurred under those circumstances. However, I think I've probably killed more people in individual assassinations than in battle—and of those, I remember every one. None was easy, at the time or afterward.

Some of my peers among the Mossad tried to forget their assigned killings as soon afterward as they could, pretending to themselves that they had never happened, or just tried to suppress their reactions. Others made bad jokes. I found it impossible to do any of that.

But never, not even as an adult (apart from manually detonating bombs), have I found myself in a position where I was required methodically to kill the majority of three platoons at a single sitting in the line of duty—never mind having had to do it when I was Candy's age.

At best, if we live, the aftermath of this day will be difficult for her. She will need the support of every one of us, with hugs and encouragement, and perhaps even counseling. But ultimately, what she must endure and overcome will be her own self-scourging—which certainly will be more severe than anything anyone else could inflict upon her. However, the

person who emerges should be even stronger and more resilient.

I hope.

Please, dear HaShem...

In any event, at that point I glanced back at her and noted with alarm that, where her skin wasn't covered by camouflage paint, she had acquired a positively grayish cast, and she was sluicing perspiration from head to foot.

Quickly I reached a decision: Seizing the Barrett's forestock with one hand, I attempted to take the gun from her. However, I might as well have been yanking on a bedrock outcropping: Nothing budged; I don't think she noticed—and even with me pulling on the rifle, she got off two more shots.

"Candy," I said then, shaking her gently with the other hand, "enough with the elim already—let's dial down the superpowers. You've won."

At my touch, Candy started, almost as if I'd wakened her suddenly. The eyes she turned on me glowed with the feral hyperalertness and absolute concentration that mortal combat can bring out in those of us with an aptitude for it.

"Wait," she replied, almost preternaturally calm; "two more." Moving with near-mechanical rapidity and precision, she ejected the magazine, slipped in two more armor-piercing rounds, slapped it back in, and recharged the chamber.

Swinging the gun back up to her shoulder, she aimed, and fired twice, the shots even more closely spaced than before. Three seconds later, peering through the binoculars, I watched both Gatling cannons' compressed-air-driven rotor motors shatter as the Teflon-coated, steel-jacketed, solid rounds lanced through them.

Momentarily, I enjoyed a flash of pride at my apprentice's quick thinking—overlaid with a private flush of embarrassment at the failure of my own oversight: Destroying the Gatlings was brilliant—but basic, and I hadn't thought of it.

Regardless, now, no matter how many Khraniteli remained able to shoot, they would be limited to hand weapons; those frightful, long-range scythes could not be used against us as we took off.

“Wonderful,” I said with probably overdone heartiness; “excellent, you’ve done so well. But that’s enough now.” With an effort, I wrenched the huge gun from her grasp, and continued, “The handful who are left, I can keep them pinned down with my own rifle through the belly doors as we pass over.”

Candy blinked slowly at me. Then, as abruptly as if a candle wick had been pinched, the flame went out. “Hooo-kay,” she murmured dreamily, with a dazed smile. Her knees buckled; she would have fallen except for my arm around her.

“Wow...” she added, her eyes apparently tracking random dust motes in the air; “lookit all the spots...”

\* \* \* \*

Volume XIV

Weight, Drag, Lift

Candy’s Journal:

For thousand-plus generations, Posterity, Danya’s ancestors have studied Applied Guilt: as art form and hard-science discipline, as well as social-engineering tool. In this case, Momma Spook unleashed diabolical powers not only to deny Apprentice Assassin Girl well-earned bout of catatonia following most recent massacre, but clearly intended even to cheat her out of comfy wallow in short-term remorse.

First, of course, even before had resumed full situational awareness, Danni plied me with Gatorade, supplemented with complex-carbohydrate-based quick-energy bars. (Doubtless having to suppress her own self-inflicted guilt over having failed to include chicken soup in



backpack!)

Thereafter, before tummy had opportunity to realize now at least partially restocked, capable, if still in mood, of messy reverse peristalsis in reaction to killings, mentor shamelessly dispatched little Katia to come sit with me, hold hand.

For long moments, child regarded me with those huge, Precious Moments eyes, worried expression; then said earnestly, “Candy, until boomness, only timings being now 20 minutes.”

Girl paused. Then, with furtive glance over shoulder at BC (currently starfished flat on back, all four legs sprawled limply, tongue lolling, tail sweeping deck in languorous slow-motion, being snuggled, scritchd by at least ten kids simultaneously), continued in conspiratorial whisper, “Thinking am, scared being Maggie.”

Hah! Did your Humble Historiographer imply subtle laying of guilt? Golly gee whillikers, Posterity; if “scared being Maggie,” because thermonuclear detonation only 20 minutes off, clearly time for Plucky Girl Flying Ace to knock off goldbricking, get on with job. Hey, bad enough to disappoint Katia, Tasha, other kids, even Danni—not to mention being converted to energy myself—but letting Maggie down would be just wrong....

Suppressed smile at Danni’s blatant chicanery. Gave head exploratory shake. Noted eyes focused mostly where, on what wanted them to.

Stood carefully, headed forward, still unsteady on feet, but really not in bad shape overall. Pretty sure would have no difficulty functioning adequately sitting down.

Eyed Danni as tottered past. Seated cross-legged on deck by belly doors, mayhem mentor setting out Israeli sniper rifle’s magazines for quick access.

Resisted momentary suicidal impulse to cuff her gently up back of head; instead, leaned close, whispered, “That was just mean....”

Danni flashed brilliant smile. “You’re welcome.”

Regarded Maggie, surrounded by new lifelong Best Friends. Pretty sure BC too smart accidentally to fall and/or jump out belly doors once open, but just to be on safe side, mind-invited her to accompany big sister forward.

Tasha already strapped into copilot's seat, covetously studying instruments, controls, so put Superpup in lap. Girl grinned; enveloped dog in arms. BC rewarded her with big kiss.

Plucky Girl Flying Ace settled tush into pilot's seat. Quickly ran through power-up checklist; everything came up green. Then mentally kicked self for wasting time: As if green mattered—had to go now!

Switches on, hit starter, and—

Ignition ... ! Sighed with relief: Engine-start after multiple days' inactivity single go/no-go, live/die threshold event upon which escape absolutely contingent—elephant in living room about which everyone carefully had not been talking.

As turbine spooled up to takeoff rpms, strapped in, trimmed for liftoff.

Unfortunately, not counting Tasha, me, only two other kids had actual seats with restraints; six others had managed to squeeze into those seats, sitting in their laps, arms, legs interlaced about one another. Rest sat on deck in rear, backs against hull.

If things went south at any point during flight, would just have to hold on—for all the good that would do (see any battle/attack scene from randomly selected Star Trek episode—multiply by factor of 100).

Called out anyway: "Hold tight, everybody." Then added, "Danni, are you ready? I'll release the belly doors just as soon as we lift off."

"Ready," came reply. Heard her cycle rifle's action to charge chamber. In passenger-observation mirror mounted above windshield between sunshades, could see dainty Grim Reaper Personified now lay prone, most of torso just behind belly doors' rear

edges; head, shoulders overhung crack.

Noted Momma Spook had roped self to cargo tie-downs at rear. Plus on either side, two older boys had death grip on belt with one hand, equally firm hold of plane's exposed aluminum ribs with other. Kids' expressions promised arms would come off long before would let new companion/co-rescuer/(most gorgeous woman had ever seen) fall.

Firewalled throttle; released brakes. Stallion moved forward, but only slowly—in fact, downright lethargically...

Belatedly, performed quick weights review in head: Big ship tips scales at 3,100 pounds empty; certified maximum gross, 6,100.

Okay, add two dozen starving kids, most around Tasha's size, only a few very small ones: average, maybe 80 pounds each. Plus Danni, Maggie, me. Bit over a ton total. Subtract probably 200 pounds for missing seats.

Jet-A weighs just under seven pounds per gallon. And, thanks to Yours Truly's too-clever cold-fueling trick, tanks virtually full: 360 gallons ... not quite 2,500 pounds.

So carry the one, and...

Oh, goody—Plucky Girl Aviatrix & Friends taking off at least 600 pounds overgross! Which, according to Lennel, other experienced aviators among AAs' ranks, qualifies as nothing less than recipe for disaster.

Well, too late to do anything about it now. Fortunately, takeoff run all downhill, over smooth, if softer than strictly preferred, turf. Trying to build speed downhill, gravity would be our friend; fact that it pressed tires into soft footing made it less so.

In fact, with turbine wailing at max, almost a third of clearing lay behind us before managed to coax tailwheel off ground—with hedgerow delineating field's lower margin growing rapidly in windshield.

By then, of course, Dauntless Girl Flying Ace had begun feverish review of everything had ever heard about aviation physics, as well as every flying tall tale Lennel, Scott, Kenny, and others had repeated in presence, trying to remember tips for getting recalcitrant aircraft off ground prior to running out of room.

Flashback!—to discussion centered around lift vs. drag: Lift is drag, but with powers “used for good rather than...”

Okay. Quickly retracted flaps, Fowler slats stowing automatically, thereby eliminating unnecessary drag prior to actual moment of liftoff. Applied slight down elevator to raise tail further, flattening wing’s angle-of-attack, reducing lift/drag even further—but staying alert to make sure mushy turf’s resistance, dragging at tires, wouldn’t snag gear, trigger sudden nose-over!

Speed mounted slowly; however, performance improved steadily as weight transferred from tires pressing ruts into turf to wings slicing through air.

Perhaps 200 feet from hedgerow, at 40 knots indicated (only three above official minimum fully controllable maneuvering speed at full gross,) popped flaps, which brought out Fowlers again. Hauled back yoke at very last moment; felt main gear’s big, fat tires suck free of turf, swish through brush tops as we ballooned laboriously upward, barely clearing obstacle.

But still not actually flying flying at this point, Posterity; clearly just mushing along some ten feet up, wings mostly supported by ground-effect compression layer rather than true aerodynamic lift.

However, once past hedgerow, with unobstructed terrain ahead, had room to lower nose a tick, allow ship to settle deeper into ground-effect, perhaps four, six feet above ground; milk cushion to keep laboring ship airborne, continuing to build speed until going fast enough to ease off flaps, Fowlers; then retrim; complete transition from stone skipping over pond’s surface to actual, aerodynamically clean, stable flight.

Had barely topped 150 mph mark when Danni called, “Candy, the belly doors...”

This—simultaneously with sudden, surprisingly quiet appearance of small round hole low in windshield’s center, accompanied by refreshingly cool breeze directed at sweating face,

plus much louder bang from somewhere aft, abruptly reminded Plucky Girl Flying Ace, successful takeoff not sole challenge remaining.

Unlocked belly doors with almost convulsive yank, rolled into climbing turn, presenting Danya with view of whatever surviving Khraniteli still attempting to kill us from down at scene of bloodbath.

Special-ops coach began firing immediately. Initially sprayed whole magazine as full-auto burst to get their attention, keep heads down. Two-second interlude followed as flipped siamesed magazines. Then, firing perhaps one per second, got off 25 aimed rounds before next pause; then 25 more.

No further hostile fire struck ship throughout Danya's response; and, by the time last wildly optimistic round started earthward, Stallion probably three miles from takeoff point, climbing east by northeast, still maintaining almost 150 mph, passing 2,000 feet, way out of range.

Of bullets.

Thermonuclear warheads, on other hand, constituted separate issue entirely...

Danni hauled up belly doors, locked, safetied; came forward to kneel just behind front seats. "How much time left?"

Showed her watch: Countdown timer displayed 14-plus minutes.

Mentor looked thoughtful for moment, glanced at airspeed indicator, then: "How fast can this thing go?"

Responded with minilecture regarding 188-knot cruise, but equivocated because still climbing, and nowhere near 13,000-foot maximum-efficiency altitude.

Danni shook head. "Even full speed won't get us clear in time if those master/slave detonators your dad armed work. Turn left; head southwest. Level off; pick up speed."

Blinked in bemusement not unmixed with concern. First impression suggested turning back toward ground zero unlikely to improve prospects.

Likewise, would take us back past Serdtsevina Rasovyi; not directly over, but close. Wondered how long would take surviving command structure to get act sufficiently together to mobilize surface-to-air defenses. Pretty sure Stallion's bush-flying designers hadn't contemplated dealing with missiles.

Still, figured Danni had to know more about Surviving Thermonuclear Detonations for Fun & Profit than your Humble Historiographer, so lowered nose, cranked into steep turn; rolled out on 270 degrees heading. Watched airspeed mount, stabilize at whisker over 180 knots. Not bad, given overload, low altitude.

Then, in hopes of coaxing forth additional clarification regarding mentor's plans, offered, "As I figure it, 14 minutes at cruise would have taken us 45 miles—"

"Which wouldn't have been enough. Not even on the ground. Out in the open, we'd need to be in excess of 50 miles from a simultaneous multiple-warhead burst of that magnitude—airborne, we'll need a whole lot more: In the air, the shock wave, which is an almost simultaneous push-pull impact, propagating outward from the detonation at nearly the speed of sound, will shred us like a butterfly hovering too close to a detonating hand grenade. Since we lack anywhere near enough time to get far enough away in straight-line distance, we need to put some solid rock between us and the explosion."

Light dawned: "And everywhere except to the northwest, the terrain is more or less flat."

"Right. I've done a fair amount of recon around here. About 30 miles northwest of Serdtsevina Rasovyi, there's a steep, mountainous valley bordered on the east by almost sheer cliff. I've climbed it; it's at least 2,000 feet high.

"Land close, taxi up next to the rock face, and we'll have about five miles of as-the-mole-bores bedrock between us and the detonation to soak up that initial flood of hard radiation—gamma, x-rays, and a huge burst of neutrons—as well as to block the actual blast forces. If we take off again as soon as the shock wave has passed, we'll have no trouble getting clear of the fallout."

“Not being shredded like a butterfly appeals to me. What’s our course?”

Danni reached out, fiddled briefly with GPS. Destination appeared on moving map at terminus of follow-me course line.

Along with distance/speed/ETA figures, updated second-by-second in real time.

Going to be close.

Had forgotten how much I used to hate Mondays....

\* \* \* \*

Volume XV

Push, Pull, Toast

Passed by Serdtsevina Rasovyi at 5,000 feet, perhaps eight miles north of actual base.

Not far enough.

Viewed objectively (ignoring obvious), handful of fleecy-white, slightly wiggly, surface-to-air missile contrails rather pretty as they hone in on one’s aircraft. But since your Humble Historiographer’s perspective necessarily based upon observation from controls of aforementioned target, found that difficult: “Danni—they’re shooting at us ... !”

“I expected they would,” came tranquil reply.

Couldn't decide whether serene demeanor helped, hindered—or just annoyed. “What should I do?”

“Nothing that would slow us down. Hold your course; fly straight and level. I'll take care of them.”

“You brought surface-to-air missile countermeasures ... ?”

“Of a sort.”

Really impressed by mentor's foresight, Posterity—until watched her pull half dozen ordinary railroad fusees from backpack, force door open fractionally against 180-plus-knot slipstream, then activate each, one at a time, in measured cadence, let drop out. As each fired up, cabin filled briefly with nasty, sulphurous fumes that made Maggie, several kids sneeze (and me want to), but upon exit, slipstream sucked out just as quickly.

Between fusees, Danni produced tufts of what appeared to be short-cut lengths of shiny thread, released in loose handfuls.

Obviously to allay children's fears (under circumstances, didn't mind being included in “target” audience), Momma Spook called over shoulder, “The flares are much hotter than our exhaust, which will attract any heatseekers. The chaff creates large, diffuse microwave targets that confuse conventional radar-targeting systems.”

Happily, initial doubts, along with blood pressure, began to ebb as, within moments, approaching contrails could be seen curving aft and downward, chasing small but intense heat signatures and/or clouds of reflectorized thread.

Shortly found ourselves out of range, with destination in view, but only seven minutes remaining. Eyeballed distance/altitude differential—then trimmed into descent differing from outright dive only in subtlest particulars.

Lennel has “breathed upon” AAs' Stallions, incorporating mods rendering structures more durable than factory-fresh specimens. Ours placarded at never-exceed velocity, or Vne, of



305 knots, substantially higher than stock. Obviously, exceeding that figure raised specter of catastrophic structural failure due to spontaneous, self-destructive control surface flutter and/or aerodynamic overloads.

Still, weighing time remaining, applicable engineering factors, little question but that alternatives had narrowed to three....

1. Being crispy-fried by high-four-digit temperatures contained in heat/radiation wavefront; or,

2. Given proximity to burst (and assuming anything tangibly Stallion-related remains aloft following heat wave's passage), being shattered into component molecules by ferocious, atmospheric whack-yank shock wave following closely behind.

Neither seemed to constitute significant improvement over (3) mere midair breakup. Accordingly, trimmed for descent angle calculated just barely to reach destination valley—and left power at full.

Watched, holding breath, as speed mounted slowly, stabilizing finally at just under 335. Waited, with tush hypersensitized for aerodynamic disturbances; but detected no flutter in controls, sensed no aerodynamic instability.

Even better, wings remained attached.

However, only a tick over two minutes remained prior to fireballfest as cliff's edge passed barely 50 feet beneath wheels. At which point, chopped throttle, pulled prop pitch back to full flat to act as aerodynamic brake, pushed yoke forward, cranked in left rudder, right aileron, plunged over edge in only arguably under-control sideslip. Then, even though still well above maximum rated deployment speed, popped full flaps. That did cause bumpy moments, particularly as Fowler slats emerged; but despite steep nose-down attitude, plane slowed as if towing drag chute.

Thereafter, with ship aerodynamically "dirty" as possible (between flaps, slats, full-flat-pitch idling prop, plus radical sideslip), once airspeed dipped below 100 mph, found ourselves almost "parachuting" downward at about 40-degree angle, suspended by big, slow-flight-configured wing. At this point descent spiral netted better than 5,000 feet per minute.

Now all Intrepid Girl Flying Ace had to do was find modestly level patch of ground large enough to accommodate touchdown, get us stopped in one piece.

All in under 90 seconds. Thank goodness no pressure...

Scrutinized terrain as rose swiftly to meet us. Immediately noted valley floor well populated with rock outcroppings, trees, bushes, as well as having serious undulation issues. Danni had been through on foot; had had no reason to evaluate site with pilot's eye.

Still, one stretch stood out which, though significantly bent in middle, appeared sufficiently free of at least larger boulders to serve. Landing roll-out would be bumpy, plus require turn-bordering-upon-swerve toward conclusion, but overall, plenty of room to put down, get stopped.

Reviewed short-field landing procedure in head: Yanking flaps up just as wheels touched would kill most remaining lift, provide immediate traction for braking. That combined with burst of full power, with prop in reverse pitch, ought to stop plane as if had snagged aircraft carrier arresting-gear cable.

Once shock wave passed, would dump excess fuel, bring weight down to within design specs. Thereafter, Stallion wouldn't need much more than football field to take off again.

Good; so much easier when problems solve themself—

"Candy, I just remembered something," Danni murmured, sotto vocely. "Some models of those older detonator timers have a built-in error: They gain about seven seconds an hour." Mentor's lips almost touching ear; voice inaudible to others. "Which means we can't count on detonation taking place when it was set for."

"And ... ?"

"If the first detonator to go off is one of those with the error, we'll be just about touching down

when the warhead goes off. So I think it probably would be a good idea to set up for a dead-stick landing. As soon as you're sure you can reach the downwind end of whatever landing site you select, kill the engine and shut off all the avionics. Otherwise, if we do have a premature, and depending upon how many warheads go off, there's a fair chance the EMP could fry our electronics, and we'd be stranded here, unable to restart the engine, just waiting for the fallout."

Ooo, EMP: electromagnetic pulse—had forgotten about that. Phenomenon had wrought widespread electronic havoc back home during Bratstvo's original attack. This close to ground zero, any components belonging to nonhardened, active electronic circuitry would indeed burn out: igniter, alternator, engine-monitor sensors, processors, instruments—never mind instrument panel's computerized, "glass cockpit" primary flight-information displays. And had no idea which, or how many, gadgets Lennel had hardened on this ship. If any...

Okay. Well, not as if haven't had dead-stick experience. Forced down once in ultralight when engine died.

Well, sort of. Almost. Point of fact, on that occasion landing not actually, strictly dead-stick. Some power had remained available; just not enough to stay aloft. Truth be known, Intrepid Girl Flying Ace had even benefited from momentary burst of almost full throttle just prior to tricky touchdown on fallen sequoia trunk.

On other hand, subsequently have performed numerous dead-stick drills, both in space-shuttle simulator, plus own nonvirtual ultralight, not to mention other actual planes. Saw no point bothering Danni with minor details, about which could do nothing anyway at this stage.

(And which, in this case, included fact that ultralight in question had been at that time flying well below rated capacity; when engine failed, toy plane floated down like snowflake. As opposed to current situation, with in excess of three and a half tons of Stallion—laboring through sky least ten percent overloaded. And lacking benefit of added lift provided by propwash flowing over wings' inboard sections, could expect significantly higher-than-spec stalling speed, appreciably longer rollout.)

So ... "No problem," assured her confidently. "I'm an old hand at dead-sti—"

Whoa ... Belatedly, noticed arrival of other shoe. In fact, electronics-free, dead-stick approach, touchdown, even getting stopped without reverse thrust, all surely minorest elements of problem: "Danya, are you working up to telling me that I'm going to need to land

us with my eyes closed?”

“Only if you don’t want to be blinded,” came composed reply. Turned to find mentor’s eyes sparkling with mischief. She leaned close again, whispered portentously in ear, “Uuuuuuse the forrrrrce, spooook....”

“How can I possibly—”

“Actually, depending on how many warheads go off simultaneously, at this distance indirect exposure such as we’ll receive down in the bottom of the valley probably won’t blind you. Permanently. With any luck. But the glare is going to last over 30 seconds, at the conclusion of which, at best you’ll probably find yourself trying to see through some really opaque afterimages for quite a while. And if, at the time, you happen to be flying, say, a heavily overloaded, barely controllable airplane, its engine shut down, just approaching touchdown...”

Glanced over shoulder with probably overdone round-eyed sincerity. “Could I short-circuit any of this by just agreeing?”

Danni’s eyes twinkled back; clearly enjoying self more than situation warranted. “So we’ll treat it as a variation on our blindfolded, hand-to-hand-combat exercises. Collate our speed, closing distances, and spatial relationship with the ground into a three-dimensional picture in your head. We’ll open the cockpit side windows, so you’ll have the benefit of the sound of our passage through the air echoing off the terrain as we approach the ground to furnish subliminal rangefinding input.”

Turned again to regard her with unambiguously jaundiced eye. “So in addition to imagining where and how high we are, and how fast we’re going, you want me to land via bat sonar....”

Danni grinned. “How else? Of course I’ll be right here, looking over your shoulder, talking you through the approa—”

Really, Posterity, must learn to stop interrupting elders. (Particularly elders who can kill someone 27 different ways in half second with either pinkie.) Burst out, “Danni—you’ll have your eyes open? You can’t do that ... !”

Momma Spook smiled comfortingly. Reached into backpack, produced what appeared to be oversized, opaque black jeweler's monocle. "This is half of a pair of welder's goggles. I picked it up the moment the possibility of thermonuclear explosions became a factor in this mission. I'll be holding it over my dominant eye—my shooting eye—and using the unprotected one to second-guess your approach if necessary.

"If the bomb goes off early, I'll use the protected eye to monitor you until the flash dims sufficiently; then I'll uncover, as well as tell you when to open your own eyes. The worst that can happen is I'll lose sight from the unprotected eye. Probably, YHWH willing, not for long.

"You have got to have your eyes closed in advance," she continued, much too cheerfully. "A nuclear fireball, never mind one from the combined megatonnage we're dealing with here, hits peak intensity so quickly, your blink reflexes just aren't fast enough to save you."

Cast crooked-brow glance over shoulder at violence guru. "I suppose you'd consider it disrespectful if I told you you're crazy."

Gently cuffing impudent grasshopper up back of head, Danni grinned, "Good! I knew I could count on you."

She turned then to address children: "People..." In mirror, saw heads come up, attention converge. "The bombs will go off any minute now. There will be a terribly bright light, much brighter than the sun. Even down here in the valley, blocked by the mountain, it's going to be so very bright that, if your eyes are not tightly closed, you might suffer vision damage. Until the flash dies away completely, if you open your eyes, even for an instant, you may never, ever see well again. Does everyone understand how important this is?"

Children responded with mixed chorus of das, yeses, synchronized with many bobbing heads. Could even see two littlest kids already displaying just how tightly shut their eyes would be.

Then Katia raised hand. "Tempted youngests might wanting some peek. Eyes should covering olders with hands?"

Unscrambling syntax without a blink, Danni nodded approvingly. "That's a very good idea."

But Katia's concerns only beginning to hit stride: "Knowing eyes how to closing Maggie?" Question followed by chorus, approaching mob-growl tone as closely as non-voice-changed-yet kids' larynxes could achieve; sentiment (loosely edited) generally translating to: "Yeah! What about Maggie ... ?"

Even as elder Foster sister concentrated on descent, easing out of slip, repositioning ship for engine cutoff, found self torn between need to suppress smile over children's fierce loyalty to newfound four-footed friend—plus sudden need to blink rapidly to keep vision clear of personal reaction to selfsame fierce loyalty.

"Maggie's eyes cover I am being," Tasha announced over shoulder, promptly suiting actions to words.

Quickly sent comforting thought to BC: Game—hold still; don't try to pull away; don't look. More importantly, promised freeze-dried liver cookie for successful performance.

Tail, momentarily stilled in uncertainty, gayly swung back into action, acknowledging game's rules, acceptance—but most especially promise.

"All right, people," called Danni; "it's flashy time. Those of you who are going to help the youngest children, cover up their eyes now and close your own. I'll tell you when you can look again."

Announcement followed by chorus of agreement; forest of heads turning to display closed eyes.

Turned own eyes front with smile—just as hand slid across face. Yanked head back, sputtered, "Wait! I'm not ready. Let me do the Zen thing first."

"Do it quickly! If any of the detonators is going to premature, we are within seconds of its going off."

Took deep breath, expanded awareness to encompass plane; our position within/relative to

surrounding airspace; relationship to rocky terrain rising about us; slipstream's hissing...

Then reached out, flipped off ignition, plus avionics bus master switch, feathered prop. Panel went dark; cabin became very quiet as turbine spooled down to stop.

"Okay. Now." Closed eyes as Danni's hand again settled in place over them.

Eyeball lockdown had occurred only moments prior to turn from downwind approach leg to crosswind. Began feeding in aileron, coordinating with rudder.

"Are you certain?" inquired mentor softly, for my ears only. "Even for a really conservative, dead-stick approach, this seems high."

"Positive. It's safer to come in with lots of extra altitude, then cross-control and slip it off if you need to, than try to stretch a glide because you've let yourself get too low, too far out."

"Particularly when the plane is so heavily loaded," agreed Danni after moment's reflection. "Very well. You are our Stallion jockey, as well as pilot-in-command. I will shut up now unless I become certain that you've gotten lost or tumbled your inner ear."

No doubt mentor regarded assurance as comforting, Posterity, calculated to bolster confidence. Actual effect on impromptu Braille-flying Intrepid Girl Aviatrix, however, more on order of reminding her of potential physiological traps.

But now not the time to allow negative thoughts to intrude, distract. Stilled swirling emotions; reached out, felt for airplane, felt airplane—became airplane: Heard, felt, experienced rush of air over wings, aerodynamic control surfaces, past cockpit windows. Barely aware of responding unconsciously to plane's imperceptible motions with preemptive microcorrections, but...

Fingers, toes knew when to make them...

Knew also when in position to begin turn from crosswind leg onto final...

Knew when to roll out of turn, lined up with makeshift runway...

Knew when to cross controls, induce slip to bleed off excess altitude...

Knew, from slight increase in airflow's gentle hissing sounds reflecting back from ground, and from almost imperceptible nose-up trim change with which ship announced settling into ground-effect, that wheels had begun groping for turf...

Knew, from ship's feel, from sounds, from location in picture in head, when moment came to ease back yoke, edge nose up, begin flare-out prior to simultaneous stall/touchdown...

Felt plane slow further...

Felt initial trembly signs of impending stall nibbling at controls...

Held Stallion poised in three-point touchdown attitude, allowed ship to begin gentle mushing downward through final few feet of ground-effect cushion to

—Darkly reddish world beneath eyelids turned intolerably, dazzlingly brilliant!

Could see every backlit capillary in eyelids, as well as actual outlines of bones in Danni's fingers gently resting over eyes, as...

Wheels brushed grass; gently at first, then more firmly as hauled yoke all the way back, inducing full stall. Immediately retracted flaps to kill balance of lift, bring ship's weight firmly down onto wheels.

Fed in rapid aileron corrections to keep wings level as we bounced, skipped awkwardly over uneven terrain, even as awful glare through eyelids seemed slowly to be fading.



Concentrated on maintaining straight rollout with gentle dabs at rudder pedals, clinging to mental orientation, image of our location on ground. Knew turn coming up, but worried about introducing possible destabilizing effects by misjudging rudder application, failing to apply independently toe-operated brakes evenly, until...

Danni lifted hand: "You can look now." Glare may have been fading, but world that greeted eyes still was obscenely, jarringly bright. So intense was glare that light seemed reflected off air molecules, washing out shadows, somehow leaving nothing but almost painfully contrasty, black-and-white images; bright enough, in fact, to trigger momentary spate of blinking before vision cleared.

And then—amazing—physical location, direction, speed corresponded almost precisely with mental picture through which had been navigating: just approaching bend in runway, speed under control. Tapped brakes, added touch of rudder along with aileron for stability, negotiated curve cleanly (i.e., without groundlooping or snagging wingtip—always a plus).

Moments later, just before Stallion eased to halt, kicked rudder one last time, applied single brake, to pivot plane around inside wheel, swinging nose out away from cliff.

Then set parking brake. Because...

Only belatedly, during rollout, had occurred to Intrepid Girl Aviatrix: Fringes of atmospheric shock-wave might well curl down over cliff's edge, descend into valley in form of high-speed, horizontal-axised vortices, generating significant turbulence, which would be better dealt with, if such proved at all possible, head-on.

(Having survived all those load/drag/lift takeoff factors, not to mention potential excess-speed breakup dynamics, would have been embarrassing as well as fatal to get flipped over, "crash" while safely stopped on ground....)

As eased to halt, Danni leaned over, squeezed shoulder, kissed cheek; breathed, "Damn, you're good...."

Sigh of "You're welcome" may have come out sounding more heartfelt than intended. (Darn, another setback on road to Girl Scouting's coveted sang-froidness merit badge.)

Momma Spook's left eye seemed tearier than normal; kept blinking asymmetrically, dabbing at it, but said nothing as turned to passengers. "Did we all manage to keep our eyes closed? Is anyone having trouble seeing now?" Paused for responses. "No? Wonderful."

Tasha released Maggie's eyes. BC turned, kissed girl's nose.

Then head snapped around; The Eye focused on elder sister, drilling home prefireball-cookie-promise reminder.

But at that moment, ground heaved beneath wheels. Stallion bounced, rocked, shuddered for long seconds; then motion tapered off as swaying ground slowed, became still once again.

"Right on time," observed Danni dryly, glancing at watch. "Six seconds for 30 miles. Artificially generated, major-structure-leveling seismic waves have so few redeeming qualities, but they are punctual."

Tried not to react to dry silliness, but between sudden tension-release, then meeting Momma Spook's eyes—all was lost. Giggle born deep inside, ballooned outward; emerged as sputter, then whooping, rib-cracking, almost physically debilitating, convulsive belly-laugh as relief spilled over. For once, Danni's control equally fractured.

Kids had no idea what had come over us; Tasha, Katia, others began to look almost worried as laughing jag continued breathlessly, until—

Ding!

Marble-sized pebble impacting aluminum skin of fuselage's roof after 2,000-foot fall does generate curiously recognizably sound.

Journeyperson assassin, apprentice froze midgasp, -whoop, respectively. Eyes met again.

Went round.

“Go!” snapped Danya—but Intrepid Girl Flying Ace already in motion: flipping switches, hitting starter, releasing brakes, pulling prop-pitch lever to low (i.e., maximum “traction”) to encourage plane to begin taxiing away from cliff very first moment rpms reached useful thrust levels—

Even as first isolated harbingers of rain of stone jarred loose from cliff by aforementioned artificially generated, pseudotectonic event began thudding down all around us.

Fervently hoped none would strike propeller as turbine continued windup toward peak rpms: Doubted unyielding, high-speed, mineral impact would enhance blades’ symmetry, high-speed balance. If that happened, takeoff power setting probably would result in centrifugal imbalance failure: shedding prop blade, as first step in complete, catastrophic propeller disintegration—grounding us to wait for dark, invisibly glowing, ersatz snowfall.

Except for occasional deeper-toned bong!s from larger pebbles, stone shower on aluminum structure faintly reminiscent of rain on tin roof—until first house-sized chunk thundered into ground almost directly in front of us.

Stamped on right-rudder/brake pedal, felt plane rock clumsily as swerved to miss boulder, teetering back, forth on main gear. Left wingtip tank’s underside actually scraped lightly across huge rock’s upper surface; then left brake pivoted us back on course away from escarpment disintegrating astern.

Astonishingly, got clear of avalanche before primary rockfall arrived. Shortly thereafter, found selves stopped just over football field’s length from cliff, staring wide-eyed back at massive jumble in horrified amazement.

At which point detonation’s airborne, audible component arrived. Volume of nearly subsonic roar seemed to turn air solid. Ground trembled once more, Stallion’s structure rattled dramatically in sympathetic vibration. All of us clapped hands over ears—all but Tasha, who attempted without notable success to retract head, hunch shoulders to provide own coverage, while nobly using hands to protect Maggie’s ears.

Moments thereafter, shock wave roared past overhead, and, as guessed might happen, turbulence curled down over edge, swirled into valley, triggering brief flurry of disorganized

wind gusts, which tugged momentarily at wings, control surfaces. Disturbance proved relatively minor: Plane rocked in place again for probably three seconds. No big whoop.

“Well,” sighed Danni as situation stabilized for third time, “that was stimulating.”

Maggie disagreed; multiple excitement doses had in no way distracted BC’s attention from promised cookie. The Eye intensified. Dog jumped down from Tasha’s lap, sat up between seats, put front feet on big sister’s leg, stared.

Okay then; commitments must be honored. Again set parking brake, shut down engine. Unbuckled harness, slid from seat, headed astern.

Retrieved unopened freeze-dried liver canister, broke seals, popped off lid. Had promised her only cookie, singular; however, math skills in general not BCS’ forte, plus had behaved so well under trying circumstances, not to mention payment delayed by avalanche/noise/wind, relented, gave her several.

As closed, set down container, noted children eyeing it with predatory interest—however, within moments, freeze-dried-but-unmistakably-raw-liver whiff reached them; whereupon, interest abated. Had, after all, access to my onboard people-food stores—not to mention nearly 300 pounds of Maggie’s holistic/organic, hypoallergenic dog food, which all had sampled back at campsite, found acceptable.

(Hmm, 300 pounds’ dead weight which could have been discarded during—or perhaps more constructively before—overgross takeoff panic ... Which never occurred to Intrepid Girl Flying Ace. Really is hard to get good help.)

In fact, at that point noted open bag lying on deck in very aftmost starboard corner. Had been half full when Foster sibs departed plane to commence rescue op; likewise upon return. Now visibly empty.

(Sighed: Hoped canine dietary supplementation wouldn’t lead to pack of kids who had to turn around three times before lying down, sniffed new acquaintances with impolitic familiarity, perhaps “marked” trees—or even furniture....)

At which point experienced sudden flash of guilt—followed by jolt of grief: Realized hadn't thought about Daddy even once since battle in woods. Prayed Kazimirov really had put père straight on plane—hoped even more intensely plane had gotten off in time. Wondered where, what Meyrin was—hoped had heard “Meyrin” correctly.

Curiously, at that point realized that, despite fact that thermonukes had killed hundreds, maybe even thousands of Khraniteli within, at, in vicinity of Serdtsevina Rasovyi, which toll surely dwindles into insignificance own recent efforts with bare hands, personal weapons, apparently not going to be wracked with separate overlay of guilt concerning causative role.

Yes, did indeed contribute to bringing on turnabout holocaust. But my people didn't start this. Neither did we choose all-or-nothing stakes: Unsuccessful genocidal aggressors have little standing to complain when plans backfire.

In this case, in most literal sense.

Besides, weapons on that scale simply too vast, too impersonal; connection to own activities too remote—whole monstrous business too cataclysmic to activate sense of personal responsibility.

(Of course, given history, eventually Plucky Savior of Our People no doubt will figure out some way to feel guilty over relief lack of guilt engenders.)

“Outfalling, how long to being here?” Very small boy, whose name had never had occasion to ascertain, looked up from Maggie-tummy-scratching detail. Viewed lad with borderline amazement: Would have thought too young even to grasp concept. Then realized had fallen into trap of using H. sapiens' perspective, among whom mostly had grown up, to judge hominem child. Wondered how many of own prior-to-Doomsday peers had made similar mistakes with regard to self. (Or even current peers...)

More importantly, however, question brought Plucky Girl Aviatrix back to here/now; reminded her might not be worst idea to get on with dumping excess fuel, getting back into air, before further unforeseen complications could arise.

Performed quick weight/balance review in head. Decided to empty Lennel's custom fuselage tank. Dumping 135 gallons it contained would reduce load by 945 pounds, which should restore design-spec performance, and then some.

Exited with Maggie listening, sniffing; Danni guarding backs, freshly reloaded sniper rifle in hand. Mind-directed Maggie to nearby comfort bushes for preemptive relief prior to beginning first leg of flight home.

Glanced back at cliff; experienced momentary shiver as took in massive rockfall now obscuring base. Largest accumulation centered more or less where Stallion had been parked only moments before.

Shook off mood. As favorite violence coach fond of saying, "What doesn't kill you makes you more alert." Or was that revengeful? Or merely paranoid....

Slid under fuselage, opened valve; watched Jet-A gush out onto ground. Managed then to drum up modicum of guilt over nonrenewable fuel waste, local hydrocarbon pollution. Soothed psyche, however, by reminding self that nothing we did here could compare with what had just taken place 30 miles east.

Small comfort: "Yeah—but you should see the mess Vladislav made...."

Presently flow dwindled to trickle. Closed valve. Adjourned back inside.

Tasha joined Katia, Maggie, other children in back. With Danni now serving as copilot, Plucky Girl Flying Ace once again fired up turbine, trimmed for takeoff, aligned ship with openest stretch of ground (i.e., boasting lowest big boulder count), brought power up to maximum, released brakes, conducted textbook short/soft-field takeoff: Kept tail low both to minimize noseover potential as power forced big, soft, main gear tires through open sand traps, bounced us over smaller rocks, as well as to maintain wings at optimum angle-of-attack, to get us airborne just as soon as physicsly possible.

And sure enough, just as manual promised, after little more than hundred yards of wallowing, jolting over fundamentally uncooperative terrain, Stallion shrugged off "surly bonds," etc., pointed nose at blue sky, accelerated to maximum angle-of-climb speed, clawed its way up out of ravine.

As cleared rim, towering mushroom cloud, still roiling inexorably skyward, drew eyes like

magnet. Younger children's excited chatter, begun during scary-fun excitement of bumpy takeoff roll, died instantly. Even very youngest recognized how terrible an event had just taken place—and how close we all had come to being at very heart of it.

Great circle course for home led nearly straight through Khraniteli's pyre, but didn't have to be told to give ghastly column widest possible berth. Wispy fringes drifting out from center revealed which way bulk of fallout drifting; we went very much other way.

Finally, after nearly 75-mile detour, were able to lay in course for home. And found self seized by sudden attack of homesickness. Wanted Daddy, but in enforced absence, craved bosom of family; had accumulated serious hug deficit.

So decided to pass go, not bother with \$200—plus just got out of jail. Decided as well not drop in for visit en route at Father Toys' hominem community. Would be lovely to see him again, but after things settle down, AAs can follow-up, establish contact; let him know new young friend's Quixotic quest had turned out at least partially well.

Planned merely to retrace path (Plucky Girl Aviatrix nothing if not creature of habit), though of course would be stopping more frequently for fuel. For first leg, set GPS to take us straight to Surgut, on River Ob. Even with 135-gallon reduction in useful fuel capacity, range ample to reach destination with roughly two-hour fuel margin.

Switched on autopilot; and finally able to sit back, look around, relax—cautiously speculate whether cautiously speculating whether worst was over might, all by itself, jinx us.

Sighed at own silliness. Glanced over shoulder at passengers; then looked across at Danni, observed, "It's going to be a long ride home. Without the big tank, our cruising range is cut by about a third. But even more importantly, with this mob, we're going to have to stop frequently, for food, water, and ... uh ... comfort. That little potty back there isn't going to accommodate all these kids very long between dumps."

Mentor smiled back cozily. Expression suggested might be enjoying private joke. "It may not take as long as you think," she replied. Smile had acquired feline qualities; got impression of metaphoric feathers tangled in imaginary whiskers.

Mystery not long unraveling, however: Even as speculated about Danni's smug attitude, wondered about enigmatic comment's genesis, noticed favorite violence mentor suddenly

looking past apprentice, slightly behind me, out side windows—just as Tasha’s softly awed tones could be heard from rear: “Whoa...”

And cockpit abruptly darkened.

Volume XV

Tracking Tracker Tracked

Head snapped around...

Few manmade objects loom larger, more impressively than C-17—unexpectedly discovered pulling up close alongside, slowing to maintain formation, huge ship’s wing substantially overlapping own whole airplane.

As spun open-mouthed back to Danni, saw second Globemaster slowing grandly to relative stop on other side, then holding station.

Eyes surely bugged at sight—to this point, Danni had offered no hint AAs here in force. If had thought at all, assumed she had come by herself to retrieve errant apprentice. Paired C-17s triggered instant, hugely guilty realization of just how much effort must have been expended on Idiot Girl Runaway’s behalf.

For briefest moment, wondered how AAs had found us so quickly in air, but once again mentor justified widespread mindreading suspicions: Held up satellite phone, from just above keypad of which green on LED glowed. “You called them?”

“No. I was going to, of course, once I got around to it. But, as you know, actually calling has never been necessary.”

Belatedly, Danni noted apprentice’s uncomprehending expression. Blinked, eyed me with astonishment. “No fooling? You mean you didn’t know these things are GPS-tracking enabled? We thought you shut them off outbound because you were afraid we’d use them to



locate you and reel you back in.”

Didn't quite scuff toe on decking as admitted, “No; I just didn't want anybody calling and making me feel even guiltier about taking the plane and running off on my own.”

“And I so would have,” Danni replied, cocking unconvincingly disapproving brow. “I turned it on as soon as we reached the plane. Except for the few minutes I had it shut off to avoid EMP damage, Teacher's known right where we were.

“Thanks to Terry and Lisa, of course, they've been keeping up-to-date on your progress, so they knew when to put down at an airfield and shut everything off until the EMP had passed. But immediately thereafter, as you see, they came looking for us.”

Sheepishly, tech-challenged Plucky Special-Ops Girl turned back to window. Even with Globemaster's colossal fuselage just under hundred feet away, reflections on portholes not helpful in resolving details behind them; still, pretty sure recognized many beloveds' faces peering out.

Satphone rang.

Flinched; eyed it as if likely to bite. Figuratively, at least, probably was.

Danni hit talk, eyed me smugly as quipped, “Smith-Foster Invasions; castles stormed, dragons slain, innocents rescued...” Mentor listened two seconds; then smile intensified, condensing into downright wicked grin. “It's for you,” she said pointedly, handing over phone.

Hesitancy with which accepted instrument probably would not have increased markedly had phone actually been ticking. Still, music had to be faced. Eventually.

“Hello?”

“You,” breathed Adam testily, “got some ‘splainin’ to do...”

\* \* \* \*

C-17s cruise at 450 knots. In fact, slowing to match Stallion's 188-knot cruise had required fair degree of attention on part of big-tin pilots during brief formation link-up. Unsurprisingly, Globemasters got to agreed-upon Surgut rendezvous nearly an hour before us.

Which meant, of course, by the time we got there, entire rescue-of-rescue expedition complement standing outside on tarmac, waiting, watching for Intrepid Girl Aviatrix to arrive in stolen plane.

Audience included Scott, Kenny, Bill—and Lennel....

Not to imply that mere fact entire population of AAs' top flying aces (including very own flight instructor) would be observing impending landing created any additional layers of self-consciousness in Intrepid Girl Flying Ace...

Okay, okay—stop hounding me! Yes, Posterity, under drug-augmented, torture-based interrogation, might be forced to admit to taking a little extra care in setting up professional-quality, precision approach to perfectly executed three-point landing; nailing greased-on touchdown at point along runway such that, as plane slowed without needing to resort to crude use of brakes, gentlest dab at rudder pedal sufficed to initiate graceful, dignified turnoff from runway onto specific taxiway leading to AAs' parked ships by directestmost route. Taxied up to giant transports parked by fuel island; used differential braking to rotate ship smoothly around inside main-gear wheel.

Though not even pretending to be unaware of apprentice's insecurity-driven motivations, Danni watched with approving smile as eased ship to halt exactly halfway between big planes, prop spinner precisely on line defined by Globemasters' nose radar domes.

All right, mentor could tell. But didn't care. Felt it not unreasonable to anticipate certain amount of criticism lay in immediate future—but damn well would not include Plucky Girl Aviatrix's flying....

\* \* \* \*

Would have loved to have blended invisibly with crowd as kids flooded from Stallion, but not to be. Just as, by unspoken consent, crowd outside inconspicuously parted like Red Sea to let Teacher be first to greet us (more specifically, me), Danya, kids, even Maggie, all held back to let Guilty Party out door first.

Sighed. Swung door open, jumped down. Turned to face Teacher. Expected more-sorrow-than-anger expression, possibly even (considering magnitude of offense) gentle reproof.

Instead (notwithstanding two-week-shower-free personal bouquet), prodigal found self enveloped in beloved leader's arms, hugged until oxygen situation approached critical. Eventually, after drawing back slightly, Teacher looked deeply, soulfully into eyes; then: "Candy, I am so sorry. If only we had gotten here in time, we might have been able to help you get Marshall out." Hugged again, then handed off to next in line—

Adam ... For long moments, favorite only boyfriend in whole wide world held wayward squeeze by shoulders, offering hairy-eyeball glare from beneath thunderous brows. Then gave single token shake—and suddenly he, too, yanked me to him, wrapped arms around me, hugged as if planned never to let go.

Finally, however, did pull back (a little). Deliberately then, very gently, cuffed Intrepid Special-Ops Girl up back of head; murmured, "If you ever do anything as idiotic as this again"—paused for long moments, regarding me with haunted-looking eyes before finally continuing—"without me..."

Then kissed me, firmly if briefly; handed off to mob's next subset, consisting of rest of adopted family: Kim, Gayle, Lisa—and Terry!

Birdbrained sibling positively launched from Lisa's shoulder, leaping to own; began head-diving, cheek-rubbing, doing frustrated best to initiate snuggle amidst chaos, all the while babbling, "Hel-lo, baby! What'cha doo-in'? How 'bout that. You're so icky-poooh bad!", etc.; while nonfeathered family members hugged, sniffled, contributed to chorus of sympathetic murmurs over having Daddy so unfairly, last-secondly plucked from grasp—as object of massed attention promptly dissolved all over them.

\* \* \* \*

With whatever brain cells could spare, had worried occasionally during mission about how to deal with situation if Terry, Maggie failed to hit it off. Concern proved unwarranted.

Upon first meeting, Maggie focused The Eye upon featherheaded baby brother with every evidence of interest, desire to intimidate. Terry's response was to stand very tall, stare down at new, four-legged, Type A-personality sibling from vantage point of eldest sister's shoulder, first with one eye, then other; finally clicked beak firmly, suggestively, just once. Sounded very much like firecracker.

At that point, some sort of communication apparently took place; because as Maggie's tail resumed normal, delighted-at-everything cadence, birdbrain bobbed head cheerfully, said, "How 'bout that."

Which was last anyone worried about them. In fact, an hour later, Terry was dozing one-legged on Maggie's shoulder as BC lay at Lisa's side (being stroked, scritchd), watching with fascination as AAs swirled about all three planes, refueling, servicing, etc.

\* \* \* \*

Volume XVI

Grownups' Table

Okay, Posterity; now that (sigh) Two-Time Plucky Savior of Our People has had modest interval to shower (hot water!—buy stock; it's going to catch on); catch several hours' coma-level sleep in actual (clean!) bed; be duly lionized at Adam-catered fete-together (at which almost got teary again, watching prison camp kids' faces glow upon learning The True Meaning of Food); digest events (i.e., swallow bitter taste of, face responsibility for, almost rescuing Daddy—did hell-bent determination to prosecute solo mission carry seeds of own downfall? [on upside, didn't die this time, not even once]); take first baby steps toward coming to grips with all those killings; wallow in warm-fuzzy satisfaction of having rescued kids; as well as pleasant afterglow from visiting Father Toys en route home after all (with promise of further contact, commerce between settlements)—it's back to business as usual.

Equally as usual, first step: Bringing current journal up-to-date. And very first commentary in own hand (following marvelously complete, detail-rich Terry: Lisa-plus-Kim/Danya sections) simply has to be inaugural entry in your Humble Historiographer's new thesis-in-progress: Life's (Real) Operant Principles. Still mulling whether work should be endnote/addendum to The Journals of the Life & Times of Candy Smith-Foster, Plucky Girl Adventurer, or bud off to form independent monograph. Guess depends upon how many (Real) Operant Principles turn up.

But here's first: One can get away with anything, so long as manage to save world in process.

Remarkably, not one cross word uttered on subject of stealing plane, weapons, tools, supplies; dragging entire Mt. Palomar special-forces group—replete with associated support personnel, two huge aircraft, tons of matériel—more than third the way around world just to save Quixotic Girl Adventurer from consequences of own headstrong folly.

Initially, scale of AAs' operation quite took breath away, nearly smothered Yours Truly in self-inflicted guilt. Of course, that was before Danya got around to updating brash, frequently-more-trouble-than-she's-worth apprentice regarding Teacher's revised threat-elimination schedule: Massive effort wasn't entirely All About Me.

Just mostly.

At least according to Lisa, only member of party willing initially to part with uneditorialized summary of events. Even now, while haven't heard so much as single word of overt criticism, most grownups, to greater/lesser degree, varying by individual, do seem under compulsion to slip in subtle message about wisdom/benefits of Working Together For Common Good, not to mention (just incidentally), My Own Good, when commiserating with would-be Daddy-rescuer over bad luck.

All except—surprise!—Danni, who, after reflection, quietly opined that primary mission's failure not blanket indictment of Plucky Special-Ops Girl's solitariness per se. Even if she had caught up to me the day before, mentor observed, outcome likely would have been the same. Simply too many unfavorable, unpredictable, uncontrollable elements, all converging at wrong place/time. Some problems, she confided, don't have a solution.

Probably this sounded more comforting inside her head....

Adam, however, though has forgiven me for not taking him along, still watching me like Maggie keeping eye on known rogue sheep; clearly worried that, given slightest excuse, will go haring off on another private crusade.

And, to be fair, had every intention of doing just that at earliest opportunity, if AAs failed promptly to follow-up on Meyrin clue. However, since returning to fold, have been invited to every strategy session with Teacher, Wallace, Danni, Peter, other AA special-forces operatives.

And presence not merely palliative, token, cosmetic: Very first time in attendance, asked to present briefing concerning activities, observations, conclusions. Teacher particularly interested in subjective impressions of opposition; details beyond those included in journal.

On occasions when have risen to ask question, contribute observation, suggestion, discussions that follow give every impression of consideration at least as serious as those that attend Danni's, Wallace's, other senior operatives' input.

Mostly, however, been sitting quietly, listening, thinking.

Been doing lots of thinking.

Meyrin, f'rinstance ... Most AAs, original and/or adopted, seem agreed, probably refers to small Swiss village by that name, hardly more than bedroom community, where many CERN personnel lived when off-duty.

Makes ominous sort of sense: Khraniteli perpetually on trail of ever higher-tech Ultimate Solutions to eliminate problem represented by existence of everyone else, but particularly evolutionary successors. Clearly, therefore, one of previous civilization's largest concentrations of scientific research facilities, established in support of world's second-biggest particle-accelerator laboratory, sure to contain resources applicable to numerous lines of inquiry directed toward that end.

Plus, like all things Swiss (publicly, at least), Meyrin thermonuclear-warhead-free zone. Theoretically makes ideal location to put Daddy back to work hunting for/assembling hominem-eating superbugs under close supervision, without raising specter of consequences of allowing sudden-death-in-a-lab-coat (or so Khraniteli now

believe—tee-hee) Doctor Superspook access to Big Bangs.

Regardless, as close as Khraniteli have come to wiping us out in past, seems to me last thing we need is to allow them to spend significant alone-time in facilities with potential to develop yet another doomsday bomb, hominem-physiology-specific bug or death-ray, or some equally armageddonous toy.

In my view, presence of Khraniteli at CERN alone, quite independent of Daddy-retrieval issue, should mandate immediate departure on recovery/housecleaning mission, if for no other reason than to drive ever-scheming, genocidal monsters the hell out of there—or just blow whole thing up after saving Daddy, if conservative pest control deemed impractical. Yet AAs persist in thoughtful approach; only activities evident at this point are information-gathering, review, planning, etc.—i.e., talk.

All of which creates ethical dilemma: On one hand, since clearly being regarded/treated now as adult equal, would seem to have equally clear obligation to behave adultly. Can't just bail, run own op, merely because others' ranking of priorities may not match Berserker Special-Ops Girl's view of situation, not to mention differing opinions on timetable, strategy, tactics.

Regardless how indefensibly wrong their position is.

I mean, if did that, what would Danni say?

On other hand, when exigent circumstances arose, isn't that exactly what mayhem guru did herself ... ?

Hmm. Never anticipated becoming grownup would be so complicated....

