

Section I, “One if by Air....”

In the near future....

Minisoft senior executive Jack Williamson finished his walk-around of his new favorite toy. Dark gray and black, the twin engined carbon-fibre and titanium XB-171 was the newest, state-of-the-art personal jet available to the general public. With a forward swept main wing, two canards flanking the pilot’s canopy, and two 12,000 pound thrust jet engines, she had power to spare, if you had the cash to spare. Williamson finished his pre-flight checklist, inserted the security key into the floor-mounted switch, and pressed the pre-start pushbuttons for the twin General Electric engines. Immediately, the APU came on-line, and the turbines growled up to speed. Thumbing through the various sub-system readouts on the triple full-color cockpit VDU’s, Jack was satisfied that everything was working correctly, and signaled the ground crewman to remove the APU power umbilicals and roll the boarding ladder away. He cinched his restraining harness tighter, then released the brakes. The sleek aircraft rolled forward slowly, and took up its position in the queue of planes awaiting take-off permission. The twin engined Cessna in front of him rolled out, then climbed, and he was next.

“November eight seven niner tango, you are go for launch on runway two fiver west,” the bored voice from the tower informed him. “Seven niner tango, switch on your transponder. We are not painting you on the tower radar.”

“Err, roger tower, seven niner tango to runway two fiver west. Rolling out. Transponder is on now, sorry about that, I need to get that automated interlink connected to the flight control system. I keep forgetting to turn it on. Have a nice day, gentlemen.”

“Ditto, seven niner. Looks like a beautiful day for a hop.”

The XB-171 required a repeating transponder, because it’s carbon fibre frame rendered it nearly invisible to radar. Jack straightened the nose of the plane, then pushed the throttles to the stops. Immediate and brutal acceleration pinned him to the leather-covered seat and the XB-171 soon reached rotational velocity. He eased back on the stick, and a few seconds later, retracted the landing gear. ***What a sweet plane. Can’t believe I got this for a performance bonus. We must be doing really well these days. I should e-mail down to accounting and get the latest financials.*** Jack Williamson never got to submit his request. Just over nineteen minutes later, his brand-new XB-171 suddenly turned erratically, lost altitude, accelerated and then crashed into a scrubby, pine brush covered hill. The lead flight controller, in his late forties and too old for this crap, checked his scope twice, leaned back wearily, removed his glasses and picked up the ‘hot-phone’ to the local FAA office.

Low slung, agile, and extremely fast; the exotic, dark blue two door pulled to a quick halt at the curb. The growl from its 388 cubic inch fuel injected Chevrolet engine reverberated off the surrounding buildings, then slowly faded away. Nicholas ‘Mad Dog’ Pantera, Lieutenant Colonel, United States Air Force, retired, stepped out, looked around, then ran a quick finger through his close cropped, salt-and-pepper hair. He then carefully closed the exotic’s door, and checked that his .44 was riding straight in its underarm

holster. He had purchased the car on a whim, a joke to go with his name. A Pantera for a Pantera. The car was complete, but had no engine and a stripped transmission when he purchased it at auction, and it had taken him years of loving work and plenty of his pension money to get it to the condition it was in now. Nick thought it was funny to tweak the gomers who demanded purity, the people that thought that all the chalk marks and undercoat overspray should be photographed and replaced after a restoration was completed. He had decided to replace the missing Ford 351 with an all-aluminum Chevrolet high deck NASCAR racing block. In its current state of tune, the Pantera put out about 550 romping horses and would vault to 180 in nothing flat. Nick had hand timed it once unofficially through the quarter in about eleven seconds, so he figured it was fast enough already. He had once thought about having a supercharger added, then decided his middle-aged reflexes weren't quite ready for a JATO assisted suicide just yet. Nick did love the cosseting tan leather-lined interior and Recaro seats, but found himself driving his Pontiac Grand Prix GTP more and more every year. ***Guess the age thing is finally catching up to me,*** he mused as his knees cracked. He pulled on a U.S. Air Force issue baseball cap, then took off and pocketed his Serengeti sunglasses. He buttoned his windbreaker on the bottom three buttons, to make the underslung holster less visible.

Nick looked around quickly a second time, then crossed the street to the offices of his new, temporary employer. Six years of combat flying and ten years as a police officer had honed his danger sense to a keen edge, and he seemed to find himself 'checking his six' quite often, even in what appeared to be completely safe and ordinary circumstances. Yet, he still remembered well his recuperation in a hospital after a strung-out crackhead

put a nine-millimeter into him during a bust in Chicago. Nick figured being a little on edge all the time beat the alternative, three aces to a pair.

About an hour later, Nick flipped through the dossier again on his way out the office door. ***An executive of Minisoft turns himself into a greasy spot on a hill, and they want me to go eyeball the situation. What a waste of time.*** The insurance company hadn't even balked at his exorbitant fee, so he decided to take the investigation. Nick had just thrown out a huge figure, run it up the flagpole, and waited to see who saluted. They didn't seem to care, which immediately put him on guard, because insurance companies are notoriously the cheapest corporations on Earth, so when they don't care, something is usually more than it seems. Nick decided that one day, his overdeveloped sense of curiosity was going to get him killed, but so far he was enjoying the P.I. life. Not exactly Magnum, but he was working steadily and making enough to pay the bills and throw some back into his depleted IRA, so he felt pretty good about it. ***Lets go have a real look at this stuff, and see what we've gotten into this time, eh?*** Nick took the folder home, stuck the enclosed CD-ROM into his PC and flipped through all the documentation that had come with the dossier. His danger flag was in the fully raised and red position when he decided to quit for the day. ***Something really is rotten in the state of Denmark,*** he decided pretty quickly. ***Now all I have to do is find out what and not get iced in the process.***

After two weeks of beating the streets, Nick was sure that this was a total waste of time, and told his employer just as much. Jack Williamson's death seemed to be just an unfortunate private aircraft disaster, as many were every year. He wondered about his earlier sense that something was very much off, but just chalked it up to nerves and

maybe too many late night detective movies. His employer did not seem impressed, told him as much and reminded him pointedly of his ridiculously large retainer, and told him to keep looking. Nick spent another week, and went back again. This time they handed him a second case. He read through the CD on the second file, then went back and pulled up the first one again. Nick's second case was Jack's wife, Holly. Incredibly, a claim had been submitted for her death, too, and now Nick really thought something had to be quite fishy. His employer informed him that they wanted him to investigate Holly's employer, the Coral Haven resort. This turned out to be a playground for wealthy socialites, mostly men. He thought this could prove to be interesting.

Jack stepped out of the light blue and white painted floatplane, and was immediately greeted by one of the resort's senior partners, Roberto Silvero. Nick disliked him on sight. He knew of his reputation, and thought that he represented everything slippery and repulsive in the business world. Roberto didn't seem to be losing any love for him either. Dressed impeccably in a hand-made dark Italian suit and four hundred-dollar black leather shoes, Roberto oozed insincerity and greasy, ill-gained money from every pore he owned. He looked Nick over quite quickly, seemingly dismissing him as some lower-life mortal in a collarless shirt and khakis. Nick fumed silently and wished that some large, hungry, man eating shark would pop out of the beautiful, azure water under the floatplane and eat him. ***Fat chance of that, though. The shark would offer him professional courtesy.*** Nick smiled faintly at the poor jest he had just constructed, and this seemed to annoy Mr. Silvero even more.

“Come this way, Mr. Pantera. I hope we can resolve this problem in a minimum of time, and recommence full scale operations soon.”

“What do you mean, ‘recommence’? Are you shut down right now? Totally?”

“You didn’t know? Yes, unfortunately, Mr. Pantera,” Silvero answered in a long-suffering tone of voice. “The local police have shut down everything. Even the casinos are closed. They would brook no arguments until the investigator had finished his digging. That would be you, Mr. Pantera.”

Nick felt almost obliged to turn around and see if Ren and Stimpy were standing behind him. ***Of course I’m the investigator, you eeeeeediot!***

“How nice. Is the delay costing you much?” Nick asked sweetly.

“About a million dollars a day, in salaries and lost revenues. Yes, I would say it will amount to some real money, soon.”

Nick followed Silvero, watching his expensive patent leather shoes leave little spots on the dock, where he had walked through some seawater puddles. ***Bet he polishes ‘em every night,*** Nick thought, just to pass the time.

Silvero led Nick to an impressive, rambling glass and brick compound that seemed to both squat before them and menace over them. Nick felt a bit unsettled by this effect, and decided that it was intended to impress their exclusive clientele, but at the same time keep them somewhat off balance. ***All the better to pick your pockets, my dear.***

Silvero didn’t slow, once inside, but headed directly for the security control center in one of the side wings of the complex. Stopping at a solid oak wood door at least ten

feet high, he pressed a sequence of numbers into a keypad almost as fast as Nick could watch. ***He's done that a few times,*** Nick decided.

After passing through an opulent, blow a million dollars style foyer, Silvero led him through a couple more security doors, repeating the automatic weapon fast keypad code routine, then settled himself into an overstuffed black leather chair in front of a bank of LCD color monitors and motioned Nick to sit in a similar chair next to him.

“Mr. Pantera, the only way that we are going to get back on-line is to co-operate fully with you and the police. For some strange reason, the police think you can handle this yourself, and are ready to accept whatever conclusions you draw. You must have either some highly placed or very powerful friends.” Silvero paused for a second or so, as if only considering the implications of his statement after he had made it, then plowed on. “Therefor, as much as I may like or dislike you personally, consider me to be at your disposal for any and all requests or needs.”

Nick wondered how close to choking Silvero had come, having to spit out that speech, but at least the man was upfront about his personal agenda. Nick also knew that a few phone calls from some well-placed friends had kept the local gendarmes from messing with his investigation. ***Nothing like having a bunch of Columbo wannabe's following you around 24-7.***

“Fair enough. I respect a man who makes his personal likes or dislikes known up front. I don't like the type of business that you represent, but I will be impartial in investigating what did or did not happen here. I owe my employer and your investors at least that much.”

Silvero's opinion of him seemed to have raised fractionally, but Nick didn't really worry much about it. He wasn't here to make friends or influence people. Only to find the truth and collect an absurdly large paycheck.

“Who is going to give me what I need? Will you be taking me on a personally guided tour?”

“Unfortunately, no, Mr. Pantera. Even though we are not officially operating, I still have much to do, my schedule precludes that much involvement, so I am going to turn this over to one of my trusted employees. Angellina will help you with whatever you need. She can get in contact with me if something unsolvable arises. Is this acceptable?”

“That depends. Is this Angellina woman familiar with the operations in question?”

“She has worked for us almost since the beginning. Angellina has worked in the casino, as a greeter at the airport, and in the security operations. Currently she is assigned to our biggest, most expensive and most popular attraction, the ‘Beauties of the Deep’ display. She is familiar with just about everything you should need to see. I will fill in anything else required as it comes up.” His eyebrows arched upward a fraction as if to ask, *** did you get all that, and is it acceptable?***

Silvero pressed a red pushbutton next to one of the monitors, and Nick heard a solenoid door click. He swiveled his chair around and with a slight extra stretch, was able to push the door open and made a ‘come here’ motion to someone out of Nick's line-of-sight. Angellina came in, and presented her hand. Nick's thought processes did a staccato two-step. Dressed in a simple button-down aqua blouse and black skirt, with her buttercup streaked hair twined up and pinned; which perfectly complemented her deep, sun-induced tan and piercing, slightly slanted blue-grey eyes. The stunning figure of a

Norse goddess threatened to escape her purposely severe outfit. Nick tried, and failed, to remember a time when he had seen a woman more exotic and beautiful.

Nick took the proffered hand while Silvero made formal introductions. He then excused himself and left.

“Mr. Pantera, Mr. Silvero asked me to take you around the complex and show you whatever you need to see.”

“That should be fine. Oh, and Angellina.....”

“Yes?”

“Call me Nick, okay? Mr. Pantera was my father.”

Angellina laughed and shook her head.

“Fine, Nick. Come on and sit down, and I’ll show you the computerized systems we have here. We can access everything, and I do mean everything, in the entire place from here, with just a few buttons and a little typing”.

Angellina ran Nick through several screens of information, including maps and operational schedules, but whenever their eyes accidentally met, he found it harder and harder to concentrate on what she was saying.

Several hours later, Nick leaned back and rubbed his eyes tiredly.

“Break time, I think,” he stated. “I do believe I am going cross-eyed, or possibly insane.”

“Hungry? I’ll buy lunch,” she offered.

“Well, I couldn’t let you.....”

“Sure you could let me. It’s free,” she stated, then laughed, a short, tinkling laugh.

Nick found himself wishing that he could hear that laugh more, perhaps somewhere far away from here.

“Come on, the elevator is over here. The cafeteria is on the third floor.”

Nick heaved his 5’10” frame out of his chair, his knees cracking, and followed Angellina’s petite 5’2” physique into the elevator. She flashed him another hundred-watt smile as the doors closed, then stared at the floor.

After a really quick tour of part of the casino on the way to the cafeteria, Nick wondered what he should really be looking for. Everything seemed to be standard corporate issue, from the gaudy machines in the casino to the antiseptic standard tables and stainless steel accessories in the lunchroom. ***Not much to go on, so far,*** he acknowledged.

Lunch finished, Angellina’s and Nick’s footfalls echoed loudly off the gleaming polished white tile floor as they walked to another wing of the complex. The corridor reminded Nick of a hospital or a research lab, the insides of both which he had seen at different times in his careers. ***How strangely life turns***, he idly wondered.

Stopping at an unmarked oak wood door with a bored looking bulldog of a security guard posted outside, Angellina looked up questioningly at Nick.

“How are you going to get us in?” she asked.

“I have a pass.”

“How did you get that?” she asked, eyes widening slightly. “I’ve never even been in here.”

“I’ll tell you inside.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, nodding.

The bulldog seemed to ignore them during the entire conversation, content on some trash novel he currently had his nose buried in. ***Probably pushing his vocabulary level,*** Nick mused. He cleared his throat, and the bulldog looked up.

“Yeah?”

“I need to get in.” Nick showed him his pass, knowing he was going to ask and not giving him the satisfaction of allowing him to beat him to it. Bulldog squinted at it, then pulled a large brass keyring, heavy with assorted keys, off his belt loop, and started sorting through it.

“Some time while I’m still young.” Nick deadpanned under his breath. Bulldog didn’t seem to hear him, but Angellina snickered quietly. The guard opened the door, then stood suspiciously aside to let them pass. He looked around quickly then back up at Nick, who stood a good three inches taller and about six inches narrower.

“That will be all.” Nick summarily dismissed him. If bulldog took any offense at such cavalier treatment, he didn’t display it. He simply closed the door and settled his capacious backside back down outside.

Nick turned to her and asked quietly, not sure if Bulldog or other more invisible and perhaps more sinister ears were awake and listening.

“Why didn’t this door have a keypad too? Rather strange with all the super computer security around here that they rely on good old fashioned brass keys, eh?”

He watched her eyes twitch slightly as she processed this question and arrived at numerous interesting answers.

“Yes, that is highly curious,” she answered, just as he stated “Come on, the lab is down here, if the map you showed me was correct.”

Two doors presented themselves at the end of another hallway. Nick chose the thick oak door on the left. He pushed it open slowly and clicked on the lights. The lab was much bigger than he had been expecting. A huge semi-transparent seawater tank dominated the center of the room, with a gleaming stainless steel catwalk circling the entire upper structure. It appeared to be empty.

“Okay, Angellina, you work with this junk every day. Show me how it works, and maybe we can figure out what went wrong.”

Angellina made her way to a stainless four-leg table covered with objects precisely layed out on black velvet. Nick followed slightly behind while quickly surveying the room. Machinery he had never seen before blinked and hummed in various corners, permeating the air with the slight smell of hot electronics and ozone. It wasn't quite able to cover the sea-salty smell from the tank.

“Okay, these are the tools of the trade.”

First, she picked up a small white box that looked like a contact lens carrier for an elephant.

“You put those in your eyes?” he asked.

“Have to. The salt water will kill you. These cover your entire exposed eye, protect your lenses from damage, and with drops that you put in first, keep the salt out so you can see clearly.”

She opened the container and pulled one out.

“Want to try it?”

“Ha, no thanks. They’re huge. Looks mighty uncomfortable to me. What is that?”

Angellina picked up a heavy gold collar that looked faintly Egyptian in design, or so Nick thought.

“This is our King Tut special, the tie point hub. The air line connects on the back of this, right here,” she said, turning it over and indicating a threaded port inset in the rear.

“The nose plugs connect here and here,” indicating fittings on both sides of the port, “and communications goes here”, pointing out a small gold plated electrical connector.

“The feed umbilical brings pressurized air and electrical communications power to the back of this, which is usually mostly hidden by your hair. The small nose ports come over your ears on both sides and go into the nose plugs here and here. A tiny waterproof speaker goes in your left ear, and allows the customers or the command center to issue instructions or requests. You can’t answer back.”

“Okay, so how does it actually work?” Nick asked, slightly perplexed. “Why go to all this trouble?”

“Well, you have to realize that what you are paying a premium for here is illusion. If a mermaid is wearing a giant bubble helmet, that isn’t too realistic, is it?”

Nick nodded.

“So the clear umbilical comes from the fabricated rock behind you. It is invisible from the front, and mostly so from the side. The nose pieces are invisible underwater at any distance over about 3 feet. That way, you appear to be breathing water. Clever, eh?”

“Isn’t this kinda dangerous? Why not just use animatronics or something?”

“Ya, just wait, I’ll get to that. There is more.” Angellina picked up a small, flat tube that looked like a tooth retainer.

“This is a one way valve. You put it in your mouth, like so. The nose tubes are constant pressure, semi-closed loop pressure adjusted feed. To breath in, you just wait. The air feed is a higher pressure than ambient, so your lungs expand. The system runs on a timer, so you have to get used to breathing in a steady rhythm. You get crossed up, you’ll be in trouble pretty fast. You can change the time delay with a control built into the tail. To exhale, you just pop the valve and the stale air bleeds off, along with fresh supply air. A waste system like this would be unacceptable in a tank fed system, but since this is constant umbilical, we just aerate the ocean a little more.”

“Isn’t that really unnatural?”

“Well, there is a pretty intense training and selection process, before they send you out. Here you really do have to be much more than pretty face, this regimen would give some Navy SEALs a good run for underwater endurance. It wouldn’t be seemly to have the customers watching the mermaids drown on their dime, right?” Angellina stopped after she realized what she had just said, then looked at the floor.

Nick nodded. She continued.

“You have to be careful with getting winded, though. Climbers call it ‘oxygen deficit’. You can’t just breathe faster and harder to catch up, so you must make slow, gently timed motions when you move. No heavy exertions. A computer running Minisoft software monitors the whole system. There are two redundant feed systems to the nosepieces; both are monitored by pressure and flow sensors. Central monitoring also watches your pulse rate and blood oxygen content, via a sensor located in the tail. It picks

up off an artery in your leg. If the primary system somehow fails, the other one comes on-line immediately. There is also a back-up system over here behind the rock.”

Angellina moved around to the backside of the tank, and pointed to a red handle.

“All of this is completely out of view of the customer modules. The red handle is a bail-out button. You yank up on the T-handle and the mouthpiece next to it will turn on. This will also signal central monitoring to send a rescue team. The mouthpiece is a standard issue diving regulator. You just breath normally.”

“You ever had to use that contraption?” Nick asked, looking highly skeptical.

“No, but we had one girl here who panicked her second day out on the floor. She lost it and just barely made it to the panic button. She got to the surface okay, but she quit 45 seconds later.”

Nick tried not to laugh, because it really wasn't humorous in the least, but the way Angellina had just strung the whole story together tickled his funny bone, which most of his friends told him was always a little off-center to begin with.

“You seem to know this stuff inside-out. Did you help design it?”

Angellina glared at him for just a second, then turned away. She had thought for a moment that he was patronizing her.

“Um, no, I didn't. I grew up in a fairly strict Baptist household, but my parents divorced when I was 14, and I got mixed up with some bad people. My high-school grades were still good enough, though, to get me a scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh. I started freshman year in pre-med, I wanted to go into sports medicine after graduation. But some of my 'old friends' kept on dropping in, and I got mixed up in some bad stuff again, most of it illegal. Stupid, stupid, stupid. I got booted from U of Pitt and

ended up here after some further misadventures. Guess you might as well trade on your looks if you can't trade on your brains, eh?"

A single unshed tear glistened in her eye.

Nick spent this entire time intently examining the fine cracks in the top of his left brown patent leather shoe. At this point, he felt just like the little piece on the bottom back of the shoe. Or maybe something you would find sticking TO the heel. He made a silent promise that whether or not he actually solved this case, he was going to get Angellina out of this mess. She really deserved better. He caught himself looking at her, then feeling slightly guilty, he looked away again. He thought about his wife. **Ex-wife**, he corrected. ***She left me, though.*** Couldn't handle the strange hours, the strange people and the abundance of guns. Ah, Margie..... He looked at her again, and knew that even though she had an almost picture-perfect body and face, that wasn't really all of it. She was a smart young lady who just had a run of bad luck, and had made some bad calls. She really did deserve better, and she attracted him like nobody had since his divorce. Three years ago. She deserved to be away from these dangerous working conditions and the leeches that are running them, even if she didn't end up with him. And, he decided in about 200 milliseconds, this place ought to be shut down. High tech exploitation, nothing more. Nick didn't consider himself to be a highly religious man, but this place gave even him the willies.

"I'm sorry, reallyyyyy....." he trailed off uncomfortably.

"Ahhh, it's nothing, forget it. And in any case, it's hardly your fault. Come on, I'll show you the uniform."

She walked over to a set of identical blue storage cabinets and rummaged around some. After a few hard pulls and loud grunts, she managed to extract a large greenish flexible tail.

“Can’t be a mermaid without a tail, right?”

Nick chuckled. He made a ‘go-on’ motion with his hand.

“Okay, the front opens like this, with Velcro,” she said, peeling open a ragged break in the front.

“You step in, and close it up here. It is cut ragged like this so you can’t see the seam when it’s closed. It blends in with the scale pattern, like so. The tail has a buoyancy compensator, so you can float or sink just by pushing the control buttons right here. This one here is the air bleed time delay control.”

She arched one fine, perfectly shaded eyebrow in a 'you-remembered-that-control-from-earlier' look. He nodded, so she continued.

"A thick fishing line type cord attaches you to a concrete anchor on the sea floor, so you won't float away. If you got past the length of your umbilical and pulled it out, you would have to make a fifty-five foot free ascent. Not much fun on a good day. You can go from flat rest on the bottom to about five feet up, and anywhere in between. The winch is buried in the seafloor. Some of the displays have turntables built into them, so you have lateral motion capability, sometimes a full circle, and all the wiring and hoses and the winch are built into and connected through the base. The buttons here send commands by a battery powered remote sonar radio. You can't transmit radio waves through water very well."

Nick nodded. He knew that, but to his credit said nothing.

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