



A MINOR GLITCH

By

MICHEL POULIN

A MINOR GLITCH

A science-fiction novel

By

Michel Poulin

© 2017

WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

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

OTHER NOVELS BY THIS AUTHOR

(All available for free online at Free-Ebooks.net and Goodreads.com)

Nancy Laplante – Time Patrol Series

CODENAME : ATHENA

ADVENTURES THROUGH TIME

CHILDREN OF TIME

TIMELINES

DESTINIES

TIMELINE TWIN

FROM THE FIELDS OF CRIMEA TO THE SANDS OF MARS

Kostroma Series

JOVIAN UPRISING – 2315

THE ERIS PROTOCOL

Sinner Series

SINNER AT WAR
ETERNAL SINNER
AMERICAN SINNER

Stand-alone novels

THE LOST CLIPPER
ODYSSÉE TEMPORELLE (in French)
SPACE-TIME ODYSSEY
FRIENDS AND FOES
THE LONE WOLF

TABLE OF CONTENT

CHAPTER 1 – A MINOR GLITCH.....	6
CHAPTER 2 – ADAPTING TO A NEW CHALLENGE	51
CHAPTER 3 – FIRST STEPS	62
CHAPTER 4 – FIRST REACTIONS	73
CHAPTER 5 – FIRST RACE	106
CHAPTER 6 – THE START OF A GREAT ADVENTURE	126
CHAPTER 7 – NEW YORK OR BUST	133
CHAPTER 8 – IN THE CROSSHAIRS	169
CHAPTER 9 – PICKING UP THE PIECES.....	182
CHAPTER 10 – THE WINDS OF WAR ARE PICKING UP	186
CHAPTER 11 – WORLD WAR.....	191
CHAPTER 12 – CLANDESTINE MISSIONS	218
CHAPTER 13 – SHAKEUP	238
CHAPTER 14 – DEATH FROM ABOVE	244
CHAPTER 15 – GERMAN WITHDRAWAL	258
CHAPTER 16 – AIRPOWER.....	265
CHAPTER 17 – ROUT.....	277
CHAPTER 18 – REMOVING GERMANY’S CLAWS	295
CHAPTER 19 – PEACE AND JEALOUSY	303
CHAPTER 20 – PLAYING DIRTY	315
CHAPTER 21 – THE NOT SO CORDIAL ENTENTE	342
CHAPTER 22 – CLASH OF WILLS.....	362
CHAPTER 23 – TAKING THE ROADS BY STORM.....	379
CHAPTER 24 – A NEW ERA	395
CHAPTER 25 – UNMASKED	403

CHAPTER 26 – THE GAP WIDENS	416
CHAPTER 27 – RECONCILIATION.....	423
CHAPTER 28 – LONG SUFFERING MOTHER RUSSIA	435
CHAPTER 29 – MACHINERY OF WAR.....	468
CHAPTER 30 – A NEW SHIP IN THE FLEET.....	476
CHAPTER 31 – PROFITING FROM THE OTHERS’ MISERY	496
BIBLIOGRAPHY	502

CHAPTER 1 – A MINOR GLITCH

08:25 (New York City Time)

October 06, 2624

Corporation headquarters of ‘Lenoir Industries’

Manhattan, New York City

United States of North America (U.S.N.A.)

“Good morning, Miss Lenoir!”

“Good morning to you too, sir!” Replied politely Tasha Lenoir as she kept walking at an energetic pace and passed by the employee who had just spoken to her. Tasha then discreetly spoke from the corner of her mouth to her young executive secretary, Pham Ti Hien, who was walking beside her.

“Who is that man, Hien? He was quite handsome, I must say.”

The graceful and pretty Vietnamese American smiled at that: Tasha Lenoir’s sexual appetite could be quite ferocious...towards members of both sexes. Hien then mentally searched her files on Lenoir Industries employees, which were part of the extensive databank implanted under her skull along with a powerful micro-computer and a multi-channel communications device. She could have used her own eidetic memory, but the man’s face was a new one for her.

“His name is Greg Gunnarsson. He was hired as a general repairman two weeks ago.”

“Hmm, he could fix me any night of the week: I love strong, Nordic types!”

“How about me?” Said with a smirk Johanna Kruger, Tasha’s most trusted senior engineer and technical troubleshooter, who was accompanying her on this trip to Paris with Hien and with Terry Clarkson, Tasha’s personal bodyguard. Tasha turned her head and smiled at the tall, blond, blue-eyed Aryan woman.

“You know that I don’t touch married people, especially when they have kids. I’m all for some good fun, but not at the cost of ruining someone’s marriage. And how is your son doing, by the way?”

“Michael is now fourteen and growing up like crazy. He is going to be one hulk of a man, probably thanks to Peter’s genes.”

Tasha nodded her head in understanding at that. She had met Peter Kruger many times already and the ex-professional football player's physique was nothing less than impressive, even though he had now been retired from the sport for a few years now, having made his millions before settling down as a family man. All the while, the 185 centimeter-tall Terry Clarkson kept following closely Tasha, her eyes scanning continuously the large hallway they were using for any possible threat to her employer and savior. Three years ago, Terry, then a member of an elite military unit, had been severely wounded in a bomb explosion, losing both arms and legs and one eye in that blast, apart from having much of her skin ripped off and both eardrums pierced. She had survived then, thanks to the miracles that the medical science of the 27th Century could do, but the U.S.N.A.'s Department of Defense had refused to pay for the very expensive treatment that could have returned her to a functional state. Terry was little more than a disfigured head attached to a torso with no limbs when Tasha Lenoir had heard about her and had visited her in her hospital. Tasha had then been deeply moved by Terry's plight and had decided to provide her with the best treatment one could pay for. Being a multi-billionaire, thanks to her genius in both physical sciences and business, Tasha was able to have Terry returned to even better than normal, through extensive grafting of cybernetic limbs and parts, which had then been covered by new body skin grown from stem cells. Now, Terry looked exactly as she had been in her best days as an elite commando soldier, while having fantastic new abilities and capabilities. As a mean to thank Tasha for all that, Terry had offered to become her personal bodyguard, an offer that Tasha had happily accepted. Since then, Terry had had no reasons to regret her decision, Tasha Lenoir having proved to be a good employer and a person who cared about others. Yes, the genius physicist, chemist and electronics expert could be quite arrogant at times and could be ruthless if need be, but that was par for any top, ultra-rich business person in the World right now. In truth, life in the U.S.N.A. was often a dog-eat-dog affair, with wide disparities in living standards between both extremes of the social ladder. The U.S.N.A. had not however sunk to the level many other state entities had fallen to, like the Pan-African Federation, a collection of warlords, kleptomaniac governments and tin-pot dictators who couldn't care less what happened to their own citizens.

The group of four women finally arrived at their destination, the transporter room of the corporate headquarters, situated in a heavily-guarded section of the office tower.

The technician on duty there couldn't help admire discreetly his powerful and rich boss when she entered the room. Tasha Lenoir was a 181 centimeter-tall, 34 year-old Eurasian woman of great beauty with long, silky black hair and piercing gray eyes and with the fit body of a sports person. She wore a long black leather coat over her black female business outfit and held the handle of a large anti-gravity travel suitcase that floated one meter above the floor, while a leather briefcase was suspended on her right side by a leather carrying strap. The three women accompanying her were each similarly towing anti-gravity suitcases and carried briefcases, except for Tasha's bodyguard, a very tall, pretty but also fearsome-looking young black woman with coffee-colored skin and hair dyed bluish silver. In Clarkson's case, on top of towing an anti-gravity travel suitcase, she carried a long rectangular rigid carrying case made of nearly indestructible dark gray composites, which was slung across her back. Rumors were that Tasha Lenoir's bodyguard hid a heavy plasma rifle in that carrying case, a powerful weapon that could melt a whole air car in a single shot, plus other weapons. Since that spectacular but failed attempt at kidnapping Tasha Lenoir less than a year ago, nobody dared go against her cybernetic bodyguard, who had utterly destroyed the seven criminals hired by a rival corporation to capture Tasha and force her to reveal her technological secrets.

"The system is ready and set on the coordinates of our Paris branch's headquarters, Miss Lenoir."

"Excellent! Hopefully, I will have a chance to enjoy Paris a bit after I straighten out the mess created by the idiots over there. I might also use this trip to renew my wardrobe."

Her tone clearly announced what would happen to the 'idiots' in question once she would be in Paris: those at fault would be summarily fired and would find it next to impossible afterwards to find new employment, thanks to the scalding letter of termination Tasha was going to put in their online personal dossiers. The technician already felt somewhat sorry for those Paris executives as the four women climbed the few steps to the large transporter pad and stood on it, loosely grouped together with their suitcases. The technician double-checked again the arrival coordinates out of habit, then punched in quickly his personal code number before pushing the 'Send' button.

"Energizing now, Miss Lenoir!"

Tasha didn't respond to that, staying as immobile as possible for the matter transportation process, which she had personally invented nine years ago. That

invention, of which she still held the exclusive rights and patents, had been the source of much of her present fortune. It also had fuelled a lot of thirst for the secrets of the transporter system among rival corporations around the World, something that had been the cause of the recent failed kidnapping attempt against her. She didn't have time to reflect on that before she and her three followers turned into bright translucent shapes, along with their suitcases, before vanishing in a fraction of a second from the transporter pad. The signal containing their transporter signatures was then beamed up to a dedicated satellite in orbit around the Earth, where it was redirected down towards Paris. However, at the precise moment the transportation beam was sent back down, an extremely powerful burst of cosmic charged particles that had originated centuries ago from a bursting supernova star washed over the beam and interacted with it in ways never imagined before.

At the transporter room in the corporate tower of the Lenoir Industries, Dan Coates waited for the call from Paris that would confirm the safe arrival of Tasha Lenoir's group there, as was the protocol for all transporter transits. After waiting for nearly a minute and still not getting a call, Dan started to feel uneasy and decided to call Paris himself. Punching the Paris transporter room number on his control board, he got a female voice to respond to his call within seconds, speaking in French first, then in Americanish, the official language of the U.S.N.A..

"Transporter room of the Paris offices! You wish to announce an incoming transit?"

The last words from the woman in Paris made blood suddenly rush to Dan's brain.

"What do you mean, 'wish to announce an incoming transit'? Miss Lenoir in person, along with three other persons, just dematerialized from my pad in New York. Didn't they arrive at your location?"

It was the turn of the operator in Paris to be silent for a moment before answering, shock in her voice.

"Miss Lenoir transported out of New York to here? But, I had no transits in or out yet this morning."

"Hell! Check the relay satellite, in case the signal was interrupted and stored there. I will do the same from my end."

Working frantically his controls, Dan sent a diagnostic request to the relay satellite, trying not to think about all the awful things that could be caused by a transporter system

failure, especially one involving Tasha Lenoir herself. His heart sank when the relay satellite master computer answered back with a laconic 'signal sent to Paris' response. Never in the eight years since the first test of the transporter system by Tasha Lenoir had there been a single glitch or mishap. However, it would take only one such serious mishap to destroy any public confidence in using the system, something that would impact very severely Lenoir Industries and possibly cause it to go bankrupt. Calling back Paris, Dan only got a similar verdict from there.

"The satellite gave you a 'signal sent' diagnostic as well? Could Miss Lenoir and her team have rematerialized somewhere else in Paris?"

"I suppose so! I hope so!" Replied the Paris operator, sounding deeply shaken. "What should we do now?"

"Start a full diagnostic of your system right now and record the results! I will do the same here. In the meantime, I will advise the Deputy CEO, Mister Vanderbilt, of this. He will be the one to decide what to do next. However, whatever happens, this incident must be kept confidential, until Mister Vanderbilt decides otherwise. You know what any rumor about a transporter malfunction could do."

"Uh, understood! I will start my system diagnosis now."

Dan initiated first his own system diagnostic, then called the right-hand man of Tasha Lenoir, Samuel Vanderbilt. He had to pass through a secretary before getting the Deputy CEO on the line.

"Samuel Vanderbilt!"

"Sir, this is Dan Coates, presently on duty at the transporter room. Miss Lenoir and three of her assistants just teleported out of the room about six minutes ago. However, they never arrived at our Paris offices, their planned destination. I just checked with both Paris and the signal relay satellite and there are no traces of them."

"WHAT?! Who knows about that?"

"Only me and the Paris transporter room operator, sir. I already told the Paris operator to keep this confidential."

"Good! I'm coming at once!"

Vanderbilt then hung up, leaving a suddenly sweating Dan to wonder what was going to happen next.

03:06 (Paris Time)

Reemergence point

Contrary to the smooth landing typical of transporter transits, where the transporter pad's anti-gravity fields cushioned any fall from a few centimeters up, the four women reemerged in solid state only to fall hard by nearly one meter, screaming with surprise and fright. Tasha's athletic constitution helped her absorb the impact of her fall on a concrete floor, while Terry Clarkson's cybernetic legs easily dampened her fall. However, Pham Ti Hien and Johanna Kruger came down quite harder, shouting with pain while ending on their bums.

"HOW! What the hell?" Said Hien before pausing and looking around her. "Hey, why isn't there any light on? It is as dark as an oven in here." Despite her own excellent vision, Tasha also could not see anything in the darkness surrounding her.

"I can't see a thing either. Terry, what can you see?" Her bodyguard, whose right cybernetic eye contained an array of multi-spectral visual sensors, answered her quickly enough.

"I can see nothing in the normal visual and low light range, while I have weak thermal and infrared signatures around me. However, my Lidar¹ system tells me that we are in a sort of workshop, with numerous machine tools and various tables and benches around us. Johanna actually landed on top of a large work bench. I wouldn't move too quickly if I were you, Johanna: one step and you will fall off you bench."

"Uh, right! I am going to slide on my bum until I can get off that bench. Could you find the controls for the local lighting system, Terry? I can't see dick!"

"Sure! Just give me a moment."

As her bodyguard went off in search of a light switch, Tasha started furiously thinking about what could have happened. It was obvious that their transporter transit had gone somewhat wrong. Fortunately, it had apparently not ended in a tragic way and could still prove to be only a minor glitch in the spatial coordinates programming of the transporter system. Still, this was very worrying to her.

"Are you girls alright? Check yourselves at once!"

Tasha did so as well, patting herself down. To her relief, she found nothing wrong with her body and even found out her travel suitcase, which was floating off the ground and close to her.

¹ Lidar : Laser radar. A radar-like sensor using laser beams instead of radar electro-magnetic waves.

"I'm okay, except for a hurt bum." Said Hien, followed soon by Johanna.

"I am okay as well. I am now off that bench and am standing on a concrete floor."

"All my systems are functional." Announced Terry. "I think that I just found a sort of light switch on a wall, near a wooden door. Hold on!"

To the women's collective relief, a ceiling light suddenly came on, lighting up part of a large room made of wood planks and beams. However, the more Tasha looked at the machine tools and other objects around her, the more unsettled she became.

"What are these things? Everything here looks so...primitive. And that ceiling light: it is an incandescent bulb of the sort I saw only in history books. Am I right about that, Johanna?"

"Quite! Incandescent light bulbs were phased out worldwide centuries ago. Maybe we ended up in some sort of museum. I see what looks like parts of a very primitive plane in a corner over there."

All four women walked to the object noted by Johanna and stared at it with a mix of incredulity and skepticism.

"This is supposed to be an airplane?" Said Hien. "It is made of wood and canvas and I can't see a single electronic or even electrical part! What can you say about it, Johanna?"

Johanna Kruger, the chief design engineer for the aeronautics and astronautics departments of the Lenoir Industries, examined critically the assembly of wood and canvas parts for a long minute before answering the young executive secretary.

"Well, if this is meant to be a historical reproduction for an aeronautical museum, then it is being done the right way, using only ancient tools and methods of fabrication. The welds on this, uh, 'aircraft' steel tube framing are quite sloppy and were obviously done manually, rather than by an industrial robot."

"What epoch of aircraft-making would this replica represent, Johanna?" Asked Tasha, making the engineer think for a moment.

"The very first decades of human flight, I would say, which would mean the early years of the 20th Century. You will excuse me if I can't say more: this is very ancient history for me and I was quite busy dealing with modern technology."

"Which was the job you were being paid for, Johanna." Said Tasha in a soft tone. "Let's explore the rest of this workshop, to see if we find some clue of where we are, then we will go see what is outside. Terry, you go with Hien towards that side of the

workshop while I will go with Johanna in the opposite direction. Call me at once if you find anything of interest. We will leave our suitcases here for the moment.”

Seeing a door that seemed to lead inside an office adjacent to the workshop, Tasha elected to go see what was in that office, hoping to find some computer or notepad that could answer her questions. Finding and activating a light switch next to the internal frame of the door, Tasha saw only more primitive furniture, with not a single computer or electronic device in sight.

“Tasha...”

The strangled tone of Johanna’s voice made Tasha turn around in a flash while adopting a combat stance, ready for anything. She then saw that they were still alone in the office, while Johanna was frozen like a statue while fixing a paper calendar hooked to a wall near a work desk. A poor quality black and white picture on the calendar showed a rather plump woman dressed in what she thought to be ridiculous-looking underwear.

“What is it, Johanna?”

“That calendar: it is showing the month of May...of the year 1912.”

At first, Tasha’s brain refused to register that information. Walking quickly to Johanna and leafing through the calendar’s pages, Tasha found that they were all about the months of the year 1912. Furthermore, there were a number of hand-written annotations with an old-fashioned lead pencil on the pages of the calendar, annotations that she took time to read. Everything was in a dated kind of French that she found laborious to decipher, despite the fact that she was fluent in the French spoken in France.

“These words are in a weird kind of French. They are quite hard to read.”

“Tasha, I think that I know where we are, or rather when we are.”

Tasha snapped her head to stare at Johanna, whose face was now as pale as a sheet.

“When we are? What do you mean, Johanna?”

“That...that we may be in Paris, but in the year 1912, more than seven centuries before our time. It would explain all that we saw to date. All this is too detailed to be just a museum recreation.”

Deeply shocked at first by these words, the quantum physics scientist in her then made her consider the merits of Johanna’s stunning statement.

“Well, my transporter system certainly deals with matter-energy conversion and channelization through sub-space, which has a time component in it. However, I can’t

see anything that could have affected a transporter beam in a way that would send it through the past.”

“What if exactly that just happened to us, Tasha? We...”

Johanna’s eyes then opened wide, horror in them.

“MY SON! MY HUSBAND! THIS COULD MEAN THAT I AM NOW SEPARATED FOR GOOD FROM THEM!”

Tasha hurried to Johanna as the chief engineer broke down in near-hysterical crying, taking her gently in her arms and speaking softly to her to console her.

“Don’t worry, Johanna: we will find soon enough where we are. Then, we will find a way home, I promise you.”

Concentrating her thoughts, Tasha then mentally activated the multi-channel communications device implanted under the base of her skull, sending a radio message to Terry and Hien.

“Girls, I will need you to join me and Johanna in the side office we found, quickly! We found something that could be possibly quite disturbing.”

“On our way, Tasha.” Answered her bodyguard. “We also found something that you should see and will bring it along with us.”

Tasha was still holding a sobbing Johanna when Terry and Hien entered the office a minute later. Tasha hurried to explain to them what had happened, then showed them the wall calendar. Terry’s face was hard when she looked back at Tasha while handing her some kind of thin rectangular cardboard piece full of small holes and with hand-written annotations on it.

“This actually jives with what we found at the other end of this workshop, near the main entrance. We found some kind of primitive mechanical clock linked to a punching machine, while a rack hooked to the wall near the clock was full of cardboard cards like this one, with each card bearing the name of a different man. I believe that the whole thing is meant to be some kind of personnel presence-registering system, used for pay accounting purposes. As you must know, such systems disappeared centuries before our time. You will also note that this card, like the other card, bears writing and name initials, with the names being different for each card. If this is only some kind of setup meant to play with our minds, then it is a very convincing setup.”

Tasha took the card and examined it while her mind went into overdrive. Everything that Terry had said made logical sense, even if she didn’t like what the final conclusion of all

this meant for all four of them. Terry suddenly turned around, tensing up, looking through the glass window in the wall separating the office from the workshop.

"Somebody is coming! A man in his forties or fifties, alone."

"Don't pull out a gun...yet! Let's see what he will say. If he asks, we are American travelers who got lost at night."

All four women then concentrated their attention on the approaching man, who wore well worn clothes of outdated cut and fashion. He also wore a rather large and spectacular moustache that would be found to be rather ridiculous-looking in Manhattan.

"Everybody, stay calm and let me do the talking." Said Tasha just before the man threw open the door of the office and looked at the four women with apparent indignation and outrage. The words that he spoke in a very quaint French were hard to understand as he nearly shouted at the women.

"WHAT ARE YOU WOMEN DOING HERE? THIS IS A PRIVATE PROPERTY!" The man then hesitated as he examined the women and their strange clothes and general appearances. Hien's hair, dyed a varying magenta-pink color, made him frown.

"Who the hell are you? You look like circus people!"

"A what?" Couldn't help ask Tasha in her fluent modern French, confused. Her confusion only made the man look more suspiciously at her and her companions.

"You pretend not to know what circus people are? Where are you from, then?"

"We are American travelers. I am afraid that we got quite lost."

The man, who had all the manners of some night security guard, complete with a short truncheon suspended to his leather belt, crossed his arms, apparently amused by Tasha's answer.

"Americans, hey? I knew that Americans were strange, but not that strange. Your accent is certainly thick enough to cut with a knife. However, you will still have to leave, quickly, before I call the police."

"Could you at least tell us where we are, mister?" Pleaded Tasha.

"I suppose that I can at least do that for you, miss: you are in the aircraft workshop of the famous aviator, Monsieur Louis Blériot, on the Avenue de la Porte de Sèvres, in Issy-les-Moulineaux."

"Louis Blériot? I am afraid that his name doesn't ring a bell to me."

The man somehow appeared offended by her reply and nearly glared at her.

"You never heard about Louis Blériot? But, he was the first man to fly across the English Channel, three years ago! How could you not have heard about him? Well, that's not important now. GET OUT, BEFORE I CALL THE POLICE!"

Tasha was about to try to calm the man down when Hien pulled on the left sleeve of her long coat to attract her attention, then whispered in Americanish in her ear.

"I just made a quick data search for the name Louis Blériot: he is one of the most prominent pioneers of early aviation at the start of the 20th Century and was a rich businessman, on top of being an aviator. Maybe he could help us, if we could get to speak with him."

"Hum, not a bad idea, actually. It certainly beats having to walk around in the dark in an unknown place."

Tasha then looked back at the night guardian, smiling to him and speaking softly in her modern French.

"Maybe there could be something else you could do to help us, mister. I believe that, if we could speak with Monsieur Blériot, we could make a deal that could interest him. As you can see from our clothes and jewels, we are not exactly paupers and we certainly didn't come here to steal anything. If you could call him and inform him that I would like to talk with him, I am sure that we could defuse this situation in a gentlemanly manner."

Allying gesture with word, Tasha briefly searched inside the belt purse she wore at her waist, under her coat, extracting from it a gold coin that was a standard currency in the U.S.N.A. and throwing it to the man, who caught it in midair before examining it with disbelief.

"Gold? But, this must be worth at least fifty francs!"

"If it's not enough, I have plenty more such coins with me, mister. So, could you please go call Mister Blériot and tell him that Miss Tasha Lenoir would like to speak with him?"

"This early in the morning? It is only three thirty! Monsieur Blériot would fire me if I disturbed his sleep at such a hour."

Tasha couldn't help repress a sigh of frustration then. However, the man was right about waking his employer at such an early hour, only to tell him what would surely sound to him like some farfetched story.

"Alright then! You said that this is his aircraft workshop. I suppose that he visits it often?"

"Visit often? He comes here every day, to inspect how the work is progressing and to work himself on his newer plane designs."

"Then, could we wait for him here, mister? Right now, we have nowhere else to go and I don't want to venture into the night through a city I don't know."

Seeing the man hesitate again, Tasha threw him a second gold piece, which he grabbed and pocketed quickly before bowing his head.

"I suppose that he wouldn't object to that, miss, but you will have to wait and stay in this office until his arrival."

"Good enough! Uh, we left our suitcases in a corner of the workshop. Do you mind if two of my friends go get them first?"

"I see no problem with that, but make it quick and don't linger close to the planes."

Tasha nodded her head to that before looking at Terry, speaking to her in Americanish.

"Go with Johanna and bring our suitcases here. And please power off their anti-gravity fields first! Our situation is already difficult enough to explain without adding apparent magic to it."

"Got it!"

Tasha then smiled to the night guardian and switched to French, intent on distracting him and preventing him from following closely Terry and Johanna as they went to get their suitcases.

"Excuse me again, my friend, but my secretary here needs to go to the washroom. Could you please show her the way to the nearest one?"

"Of course! This way, miss!"

Thankfully, all three of Tasha's companions knew modern French, on top of Americanish, modern Spanish and modern English and a few other languages, so Hien took her clue and followed the guard out of the office. Tasha was relieved to see Terry and Johanna return with all their suitcases before the guard and Hien came back.

"Phew! One bullet dodged! By the way, I asked the guard to show to Hien where the washroom was."

"A good idea for a distraction." Agreed Terry, who was on a first name basis with Tasha. "Now, we should get in agreement together on what kind of cover story we want to serve to that Blériot guy, if we don't want to end up looking stupid."

"That will be a tough one, I must say. Thankfully, we should have at least a few hours of peace to discuss that before other people arrive here in the morning."

"Uh, with our general ignorance of recent historical events and even of normal customs and rules concerning this antique time period, sounding credible will be quite a hard sell, Tasha." Objected Johanna, making Tasha nod her head in discouragement.

"I know! Worse, I don't know yet what should be our course of action from here on. We do have lots of gold and other valuables with us, thankfully, but those will not last for eternity. On the other hand, finding our way home will probably involve having to reinvent and manufacture from zero 27th Century technology, something next to impossible in view of the primitiveness of even the best tools of this time period. And even if we ever manage to build a new transporter system in our lifetime, something I strongly doubt, we still won't know what affected our transit and threw us back in time. Without that specific information, even a functioning transporter system will not help us to get back home. To be frank, our best chance of being rescued and returned to the future would be for someone from our own time to figure out what happened to us and then send a rescue team to 1912. However, we can't afford to simply hope and wait for such a rescue mission while sitting and doing nothing ourselves. I want your ideas, any ideas, in the next couple of hours, so start thinking, my friends!"

Hien was back five minutes later, escorted by the night guard. However, the night guard didn't enter the office, instead letting Hien in before closing the door behind her and going to sit on a nearby chair in the workshop. That was good enough to Tasha, who smiled to Hien.

"Hien, I want you to do like Johanna and Terry and to start thinking about what we should do next and how we would do it. First, though, what does your databank have on the history of this century, particularly on its first half? Do you have more as well on that Louis Blériot?"

"Let me search both my embedded databank and the historical files contained in my laptop. You will then be able to copy the relevant files I will find and add them to your own embedded databanks."

"A good plan! Go ahead! We will be better able to take informed decisions then."

"True! By the way, if you have to use the local toilet, pinch your nose: the stench in there is horrible."

The three other women briefly laughed at that before falling silent, waiting for the historical data that Hien would be able to find.

08:31 (Paris Time)

Friday, May 10, 1912

'Recherches Aéronautiques Louis Blériot' manufacturing plant

Issy-les-Moulineaux, Paris

France

As soon as Louis Blériot got out of his car, his workshop manager came to him at a near run, looking a bit disturbed. Blériot, a man of medium size who was close to forty and sported a long moustache, looked with surprise as the man stopped in front of him.

"My god, my good Louis, what got you this excited this morning?"

"Four young American women are waiting for you in the planning office, Louis. The night guard told me that they arrived at around three thirty this morning, with suitcases, saying that they got lost after arriving in Paris at night. I spoke with them and they told me that they have a business proposition they would like to discuss with you. By the way, they look really weird and speak heavily accented French, but they are no paupers. In fact, their leader, a Miss Tasha Lenoir, wears quite a few very expensive jewels."

That last detail made Louis Blériot raise an eyebrow at once.

"Hum, a possible new financial patron for my aviation work: this certainly interests me. I really could use some financial help at this time. Are they pretty?"

"Oh, they all are, but that Miss Lenoir really stands out: I would lick her boots any time of the day."

"That good, hey?" Said Blériot, smiling at the choice of words used by his workshop manager. "Very well, I will go see these women right away. How are things going in the workshop?"

"Work is going well, Louis. We should finish one of the planes by next Friday."

"Excellent! Well, let's see what these women have to say."

Blériot took the time to think about this unusual event as he walked calmly towards the main door of his workshop and entered it, to then walk to the planning office. It was quite unusual to see women being directly interested in aviation, except as mere spectators. In fact, it was unusual, not to say controversial, to have women getting involved in anything concerning the mechanical arts, science or business, the norm

being that women generally stayed home and took care of children. Louis took the time to have a quick look through the window of the office before entering it. What he saw truly surprised him, despite the warning from his workshop manager: this had to be the strangest-looking group of young women he had ever seen, by far. One had brown skin, silver-blue hair and was surprisingly tall and strong-looking for a woman. Another was a very pretty and graceful Asian young woman whose looks were somewhat marred in his opinion by her hair, dyed an improbable magenta-pink, and by her frankly weird black coat with wide green lapels. The third woman, a mature and pretty blonde with blue eyes, actually looked the most normal of the lot despite her unusual height and strange-looking spectacles with transparent frames, being dressed in a fairly conventional and simple white ensemble. The fourth woman however was deserving of more than a passing look: also of unusual height for a woman and looking physically fit, she appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties and was an Eurasian woman of stunning beauty with long, silky black hair and piercing gray eyes. She wore a strangely-cut black dress with a wide and deep cleavage and a shockingly short hemline that was partly compensated by the wearing of knee-high black shiny boots. She also wore very expensive-looking jewels, tagging her as the 'Miss Tasha Lenoir' mentioned by Louis Peyret. A collection of large suitcases and briefcases lay in one corner, all looking quite futuristic. In fact, 'futuristic' would have been the term Louis would have used to better describe this strange group. Gathering his thoughts and painting a smile on his face, Louis then opened the door of the office and entered.

The man who entered the office after looking through the window that gave a view of the workshop made a fair impression to Tasha: he had a friendly expression on his face and his eyes sparkled with intelligence. However, she wanted something deeper than a first impression, as this man may be the key to their immediate future in this time period. Two things had quickly become painfully obvious to Tasha and her companions as they reviewed together the meager historical data available about this decade in Hien's otherwise extensive databank. First was how awfully limited that available historical data was: in it, Louis Blériot was mentioned by name only once, as the first man to fly across the English Channel. The short biographical blurb that had accompanied that entry had also given the dates of birth and death of Louis Blériot and had described him as a wealthy businessman and one of the most important early pioneers of an aviation still in its birth throes. As for general information about this time

period, the databank had been mostly silent, emphasizing what was going to be the biggest problem for her group: their utter and too obvious lack of knowledge about recent popular events, customs and regulations and about what was considered socially acceptable behavior and appearances. The one thing that had been mentioned was the fact that, in most countries at this time, women had few or no legal and political rights and couldn't even vote, something that had deeply riled Tasha, a proud and ambitious woman. The second thing of importance that they now knew was that their overall long term plans would be heavily dependent on one major historical event that would happen in about two years, an event clearly marked as a traumatic one in Hien's database. All this had convinced Tasha that hiding the fact that they did not belong in this time period would be next to impossible, unless they could gain the confidence of at least one influential person who would be able to keep their secrets. There was also the business of this World war coming up in two years. To do nothing and let over 25 million people die while doing and saying nothing that could cut the carnage was too revolting an option to both Tasha and her companions. As for the possible repercussions of their future acts on history as they knew it, a review of the few main events of this century mentioned in Hien's database had already given them a strong belief that things could and should be made better for the decades to come. Tasha thus got up, like her companions, to greet the newcomer, who presented his opened right hand for a shake.

"Good morning, ladies! I am Louis Blériot, owner of this workshop."

"And I am Tasha Lenoir." Replied Tasha while shaking Blériot's hand, surprising the aviator with her strength. "With me are my executive secretary, Pham Ti Hien, my personal bodyguard, Terry Clarkson, and my top aeronautical engineer and expert, Johanna Kruger."

While the mention of Johanna Kruger being an aeronautical engineer struck Louis the most, the naming of the tall black woman as a bodyguard made Louis look at Terry with circumspection.

"Your personal bodyguard? Are you such at risk in life, Miss Lenoir? And why not use a man as a bodyguard, no offense meant to your tall friend?"

"First, I am a very rich businesswoman where I come from and hold many important technological and scientific secrets that many would kill to get from me. There was in fact one attempt at kidnapping me a year ago, an attempt that my bodyguard thwarted by killing all seven of our assailants. Second, why not a man? Simply because my friend Terry is the best in the business. She could easily break in two any thug you

could think of. But let's talk about something a bit more cheerful, like the future of aviation."

"You're right, Miss Lenoir. Let's sit down and talk!"

Grabbing the last chair that was free, Louis sat down facing Tasha from three paces away. He then had a good look at her necklace, bracelet and rings, which would have been worthy of royalties.

"You are obviously a woman with very comfortable means, Miss Lenoir, but I must say that the notion of 'businesswoman' is not a common one in France."

"And neither is it in the United States, Monsieur Blériot. I also happen to hold a doctorate in particle physics and master's degrees in both chemistry and electronics, something that is probably even more unusual here."

Her claim frankly surprised Louis, who however hid as best he could his skepticism about that.

"Indeed! In fact, I know of only one other female physicist: Marie Curie, who won the Nobel Prize for physics nine years ago."

"Oh?! Then I will certainly have to go visit her to talk shop in the near future. But let's get back to aviation. Miss Kruger is a top aeronautical engineer in her own right and I would be ready to loan her expertise to you if we could conclude a deal concerning the future of your aeronautical enterprise."

Louis Blériot seemed to somehow take umbrage at those words and threw a dubious look at Tasha, while his tone of voice hardened a bit.

"No offense meant to Miss Kruger, but I am myself an accomplished engineer with years of experience in aviation work, including in piloting planes. I don't see what she could teach me that I don't know already."

Tasha sighed then with resignation: she had hoped against all common sense that hiding her future origin to Blériot would be still possible, but reality was now catching up with her, quickly. She however could not afford to lose his potential support: the little that she now knew about this time period had convinced her that, as a woman, she would not be allowed to accomplish anything or to be taken seriously, unless she had the support of an influential man. This hurt her female pride, deeply, but it was a fact that she could not change. She thus turned her head to look at Johanna, sitting next to her on her right.

"Johanna, could you please demonstrate to Monsieur Blériot what you could bring to his enterprise? Terry, please close the shades on the inner window."

Now both suspicious and curious, Louis watched with incomprehension as Johanna took out of its leather carrying case her widescreen laptop and opened it, then put it on top of a nearby table, orienting its screen to face Louis. The latter's suspicion then turned to utter amazement when the screen lit up and came alive with a video film, while the voice of an announcer speaking in Americanish came out of the speakers integrated to the laptop. As a stunned Blériot watched the video, completely mesmerized by it, Tasha commented the video for his benefit.

"What you see is a promotional film made to both celebrate and advertize the official launching of one of the latest realizations from the astronautics division of my corporation, the 'Lenoir Industries'. You will see me at the launching, along with my friend Johanna, who was the chief designer of the 'Silver Arrow', a spacecraft able to lift up to Earth orbit over 200 passengers or to fly non-stop from Paris to Hong Kong in less than thirty minutes."

An open-mouthed Louis watched on as a plainly recognizable Tasha eagerly broke the classic Champagne bottle against the shiny hull of the huge, egg-shaped ship, with Johanna standing by her side and applauding.

"But...but...how?" Could only stutter Louis, completely overwhelmed by what he was seeing. Tasha's expression sobered up then, becoming dead serious.

"Because we just came accidentally from the 27th Century, from the year 2624 to be more exact, with no way for us to get back to our proper time period. I am now offering you the opportunity to share our technological knowledge with us...as long as we get a fair and equal deal from you. So, are you interested or should we pack up and leave to try finding another sponsor in Paris? I understand that many other aviation pioneers are presently operating from Paris."

Seeing that Louis was now pale, with cold sweat on his forehead, Tasha got up and went to fill a glass from a pitcher of water standing on one table of the office, then brought the glass to Louis.

"Here, drink a bit of water: you will feel better afterward."

"Thank you, Miss Lenoir." Said weakly Louis before drinking down the whole glass in seconds. Tasha took out as well a paper tissue that she then used to delicately sponge the sweat on Louis' forehead, attracting a weak smile from the aviator.

"Thank you again, miss: you are too kind."

"Well, this brings me to another crucial point we have to discuss. I am indeed too kind to not do something about an awful historical event that future history will record

for eternity: in two years, a horrible war will sweep over all of Europe and will cause the deaths of tens of millions of people. France and its allies will eventually win that war, but not before suffering atrocious losses and untold horrors.”

Tasha then sat back down on her chair and let time for Louis to get over his emotions. To his credit, the aviator regained some composure quite quickly and eyed her somberly.

“A war in Europe? Let me guess: the Germans will start it. They are very good at starting wars.”

“Close! Germany will actually follow closely its ally, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, whatever that is, in declaring war to Russia, then to France and Great Britain. From there, things will go south quickly and will end up engulfing the whole of Europe.”

Louis had to listen very carefully to understand her: her French was really strange and heavily accented, as different to modern French as the French spoken during the Middle Ages.

“Then, we must warn the government about this future war. We have to do something to prevent it.”

While Tasha was please to hear Louis use the word ‘we’, she had to shake firmly her head in response.

“No, we can’t, at least not officially. First off, unless I openly present myself as a woman from the far future and prove it with a demonstration of my technology, nobody will listen to me or take me seriously. Chances are that I will instead end up in an insane asylum or, at best, be laughed out of the room. Second, if I reveal myself publicly as a time traveler, me and my friends will then become the instant targets of dozens of state governments and big corporations who will want to either assassinate us to shut us up or kidnap us to force us to reveal our secrets to them. I am sorry, but we will have to act in a more subtle way, Monsieur Blériot. That is if we can get at a mutually fair and profitable deal first.”

Tasha then shut up, giving a chance to the poor Louis Blériot to think and process all that she had said and that he had seen. While obviously deeply shaken, the aviator seemed to believe her now, something that was a first victory for Tasha. Louis finally looked back at Tasha with what appeared to be a conciliating expression on his face.

“What kind of deal are you proposing? I must warn you that you will have to front yourself the costs of any venture you have in mind, as I already spent a fortune in my

aviation company and my bank account is nearly dry. Also, how could we either prevent or counter that war to come while you keep secret your true origin?"

"About your second question first: I know too little about the history of that war to even try to guess what exactly triggered it. It would thus be next to impossible to prevent its start. What we could do instead is to help the French government win it more quickly by manufacturing better weapons for it, starting with new planes that would give control of the sky to France and its allies. Imagine planes produced by your plants making reconnaissance flights over enemy lines, attacking and shooting up the enemy on the ground from the air and shooting down enemy planes."

That vision brought up a wave of strong patriotic fervor in Louis, who nodded his head at her words.

"That certainly would be to my taste, Miss Lenoir. But how much of your fantastic technology could you make us able to reproduce?"

"Very little, actually, but even that little would make a huge difference. Please understand that much of the technology of my time is produced by machines with very exacting tolerances, machines that are many generations ahead of what exist today, if I can judge from the machine tools I saw in your workshop. However, just in terms of pure aeronautical science, Johanna could teach you and your engineers basic knowledge, concepts and technical principles that would allow the building of aircraft superior to anything that exists right now, and this while using the same machine tools you already have in your workshop. She could also design herself new aircraft models that your workers could then build right here. Please don't take offence to what I will now say. You are obviously a brave and competent man, judging from what you accomplished already by yourself, but what we saw in your workshop was not impressive at all...by our standards. I will however let Johanna herself tell you more about new possible aircraft models, as that is not my specialty. On my part, as both a chemist and an expert in electronics, I could produce new materials, including new and more powerful explosives, and would also like to start working on the present radio technology, to eventually produce smaller, lighter and better radios that could then be used aboard your future planes."

"Radios, on my planes? But, these things weigh a ton!"

"Exactly! I am convinced that I could design something light and compact enough to put in your airplanes, given a proper laboratory and tools. However, you have no chemical or electronic laboratories or production facilities and I don't want you to be

distracted away from building new planes. If you could recommend me to a patron that could help me establish a proper research lab, then it would facilitate many things indeed.”

“I believe that I know such a patron, Miss Lenoir. A rich oil magnate, Henri Deutsch de la Meurthe, is a big supporter of aviation and of petrol engine technology and in fact has been supporting me for years already. I am sure that he will be happy to speak with you about your chemical and electronic projects. I can thus contact him later on to arrange a meeting between you and him. Now, to return to the subject of new planes. What kind of business deal are you proposing to me? Please understand that I have already sunk nearly all my fortune in developing and experimenting new plane designs. My successful crossing of the English Channel three years ago has resulted in many orders for my Blériot planes, but I am only now recouping my past expenses and bringing in some profits. The planes you talk about will take both time and money to become reality. What can you bring to the table in financial terms to make your projects a reality?”

“Depends! From the little we know of this time period, it seems that women have very little legal and political rights presently. Can a woman in France today do business deals, sign legally binding contracts, submit technical and scientific patents and direct and manage a company?”

“Uh, I am not sure, but I believe that the answer to your questions would be mostly ‘yes’, as long as that woman is not married. However, that concerns French women. I wouldn’t know what foreign women are allowed to do legally in France. I thus may have to ask my notary about that. I was told that you are Americans, is that correct?”

“Uh, partly.” Answered Tasha, a bit embarrassed. “While all four of us were born in locations that are presently part of the United States you know, we are citizens of the United States of North America, formed in 2216 and comprised of the old United States, Canada, Mexico, the old states of Central America and a few old Caribbean states). We are thus legally stateless and certainly don’t have any identity papers or passports with us that would be considered legal today.”

“Hum, that is something that will definitely need to be taken care of before you could conduct any legal business. I may know a way to get you valid papers later on. Now, again, what can you bring to the table, Miss Lenoir?”

Tasha didn't say a word then and fished out from a coat pocket a small box that she opened to show its content to Blériot.

"I can start with this, Mister Blériot. I have more with me if this isn't enough. Please understand that, in my time period, I was the equivalent of a billionaire in 1912. I may now be cut off from most of my money but I always travel with ample funds on me. It also happens that, for reasons that would be too long to list, gold, silver and precious gems are the preferred types of currency in the U.S.N.A., rather than paper money or bank drafts."

Louis Blériot's eyes and mouth opened wide as he admired the dozens of magnificent cut diamonds contained in Tasha's box.

"My god! These diamonds must be worth at least half a million francs."

"I personally wouldn't know, as I know nothing about the actual value of the French franc. Do you know how much gold is worth in francs these days? That would give me a good starting point to calculate my buying power."

"I think that I may have the answer right here, in this office." Said Louis while getting up from his chair and going to a table littered with piles of various papers. Searching quickly through them, he triumphantly grabbed and showed to Tasha a newspaper.

"Yesterday's edition of the newspaper 'Le Matin'. It should list the current price of gold in its financial section."

Louis then leafed through the newspaper's pages and stopped at a specific page, pointing an index at one entry.

"Ha ha! Here we are! Yesterday, pure gold was valued at 107.0965 French francs per troy ounce. Pure silver was valued at 3.18499 French francs per troy ounce. As for the American dollar, it was worth 5.18645 French francs, while a troy ounce of pure gold was worth 20.6493 American dollars."

"Excellent! Would you mind if I kept that newspaper, Mister Blériot? It would help me greatly with a number of things."

"No problems! Here you are, miss!"

"Thank you!"

Taking the newspaper from Blériot, Tasha then handed it to Hien, who started immediately leafing and reading through it. What Louis couldn't know was that Hien was doing a lot more than just reading the newspaper: she actually was recording into her implanted database system the information in the newspaper that she deemed of

interest to her and Tasha, which included much of the content of the business section and of the political and World news' pages. Sitting back down on his chair, Blériot listened carefully as Tasha spoke again.

"What I have in mind, Mister Blériot, is an active business partnership with your aeronautical company. I will invest in your company and will loan you the services and knowledge of my chief engineer in exchange for a split in the profits, which we could discuss in more detail at a later date. I will however insist that the technical advice of my chief engineer must be listened to, be taken seriously and be acted upon. Without wanting to insult your own competence as a designer and engineer, please understand that the present state of knowledge in aerodynamics, aircraft propulsion and construction is nothing short of abysmal by the standards of the 27th Century. If you listen to Johanna and follow her advice, then I promise you that your next airplanes will be record-beaters. More importantly for France, those future planes will also be war-winners."

Louis was pensive for a long moment, twisting the tip of his moustache while weighing Tasha's offer in his mind. He finally straightened up in his chair and spoke in a firm voice.

"I do like your offer, which holds many fascinating possibilities, Miss Lenoir. I however would like to take a couple of days to think over it and, also, to check with my notary what your legal business status in France is, so that we avoid any surprises or disappointments when the time comes to sign any understanding or contract. In the meantime, I would like to offer you and your assistants the hospitality of my house in Neuilly, a few kilometers from here. It would also give me time to arrange something about your lack of proper papers and to arrange a meeting between you and Henri Deutsch."

"That all sounds very reasonable to me, Mister Blériot." Replied Tasha, quite satisfied. "That will also give me some time to change some of my diamonds into local cash and to open a bank account in Paris."

"Uh, about opening a bank account, please wait until you have proper identity papers made for you, miss: the government has some pretty severe regulations and laws about financial matters and banking practices."

"Point taken, sir! I will thus limit myself to changing a few gold coins at a time at local currency exchange offices and jewelry stores."

"That should be no problem, actually. Well, what would you say to coming with me for a proper tour of my workshop, all four of you?"

"We would be delighted, Mister Blériot. Let's go, girls!"

With Hien stuffing first the newspaper in her laptop carrying case while Johanna stored back her laptop, the group then left the planning office and walked into the workshop, which now reverberated with the loud noise of machine tools and hammers hitting metal. Seven men were at work at various stations, all of whom stopped their work for a short instant, time to look at the four women, before being ordered to continue their work by the workshop manager. The group's first stop was beside a nearly completed airplane made of wood, steel tube framing and canvas, which Louis proudly showed to the women.

"Ladies, this is the Blériot XI, the same model that I used to fly across the English Channel. It is propelled by a three-cylinder, 25 horsepower Anzani engine and can reach a maximum speed of 110 kilometers per hour."

Louis, who had already realized that his plane must look quite primitive to these women, was still hurt a bit by the skeptical looks they threw at his realization. Johanna Kruger in particular got closer to better examine a few details on the plane, ending up with a pinched smile at Louis. She however kept her voice low, so that the nearest employees couldn't hear her well.

"We definitely will need to either find or produce a much more powerful engine than the one on this plane, Mister Blériot. Are there a few engine manufacturers in or around Paris that we could eventually visit?"

"Certainly! Alessandro Anzani, who produced the engine you see here, has his workshop here in Paris and produces a wide range of engines. You also have Mister Émile Salmson, whose workshop is also in Paris. He produces water-cooled engines with an excellent reputation for reliability."

"I like reliability! I will definitely have to visit this Mister Salmson soon. Do you know about the concept of the cantilever wing, Mister Blériot?"

"I do know what the term 'cantilever' means, but on a wing, no!"

"Then we will have to have a chat together about that and other aerodynamic concepts. All those strings holding the wings of your plane create a lot of aerodynamic drag, which cuts drastically both the speed and the range of your plane. Do you have machine tools here that can work, cut, form and weld or rivet aluminum alloy sheets and parts?"

"I am afraid not, Miss Kruger. While the price of aluminum has dropped sharply in the last few years, it is still quite pricey and there are few metal workers trained to produce aluminum parts."

At that point, Tasha felt obliged to bend and whisper into Johanna's ear, using Americanish.

"Don't piss too much on his parade, Johanna. I realize that his plane may be a disappointment, but he is a proud man and we need his support. Cut him some slack for the moment and reserve your critiques to a time when you will be able to discuss shop in private."

"Understood!"

This time, it was Tasha who spoke next to Blériot.

"As I said before, I am ready to cover the costs of any improvement to your workshop, including the acquisition of new machine tools."

"That would be much appreciated, Miss Lenoir. Be advised that I have a new aeronautical complex under construction that will soon be completed in Buc, near Versailles. It should be ready to open by this December and will have much better and larger facilities than this workshop. I had another, bigger plant than this workshop next to here until six years ago, but it was bought by the Voisin brothers after I broke up our partnership."

"There is another aircraft manufacturer here, in Issy-les-Moulineaux?"

"Yes! You could in fact easily walk to it if you would go out of my workshop. Uh, you are not thinking about including them in our deal, I hope?"

"Of course not! I just wanted to play friendly neighbor, that's all. To go back to money matters, could you give me an idea about the actual buying power of the French franc?"

"Too easy!" Replied Louis, smiling, before going to his nearest employee and passing an arm around his shoulders while looking at Tasha.

"I pay an experienced mechanic like Ferdinand here 250 francs per month, which I consider a fair salary despite his constant requests for a raise."

"Gee, boss, does that mean that this is not a good time to ask again for a raise?"

"Exactly!" Replied Louis, still smiling, making the four women laugh.

With the atmosphere between Louis and the women lightened up, the rest of the tour went much better, although Tasha and Johanna were still not impressed one bit but

couldn't honestly hold Blériot for showing a seven centuries' technological handicap in his designs. Both Tasha and Johanna had memorized a rather long list of things to do or find by the time Louis concluded the tour by walking outside of the workshop, so that they could see the fully assembled and operational plane parked in front of the hangar housing the workshop. To his surprise, all four women's attention instead went at once towards the Eiffel Tower, visible a few kilometers away.

"What? You never saw the Eiffel Tower before?"

Tasha slowly shook her head as she kept eyeing what was a true historical artifact for her.

"We couldn't: the Eiffel Tower was demolished sometimes in the 23rd Century, when it became too structurally weak and dangerous to be left up. I will definitely have to go visit it someday."

"Then, I would be most happy to invite you to have a cup of wine with me in the restaurant near the top of the tower. The view of Paris we have from there is superb."

"I would love that very much, Mister Blériot. Thank you in advance for your invitation."

"You're welcome, but please, call me simply 'Louis' from now on. Would you mind if I called you 'Tasha' in turn?"

"Not at all, Louis! Well, let's look at your plane."

As they approached it, a thought suddenly went through Louis' mind and he looked with curiosity at his four new guests.

"Uh, with all of the fantastic things you four are, would any of you be a qualified pilot, by chance?"

His mind nearly blew up when all four women raised one hand each. Seeing his dumbfounded expression, Tasha reassured him with a wide smile.

"I would have to qualify the term 'qualified pilot' in our cases, Louis: we did all pilot flying craft in our time, but those craft were heavily automated and didn't use the same kind of aerodynamic controls as your planes do, nor were they subject to the laws of aerodynamics to the degree your own planes are. We still would need to learn to various degrees how to pilot your aircraft before being able to operate it safely, except maybe for me and Terry. I personally enjoy a sport called 'paragliding', which involves jumping off cliffs or hills while hooked to a flexible, lightweight triangular wing. That is quite similar to flying a glider and is a centuries-old sport still very popular with many people, including me."

"And...Miss Clarkson, what are her qualifications as a pilot?"

The tall African-American grinned at that question.

"Me? As an ex-elite commando soldier, I was trained extensively in combat jumping with directed gravity harnesses and was also a qualified assault craft pilot. Part of my training also involved the use of paragliders, which have no radar or infrared signatures that could be detected. I actually used twice a paraglider in combat in order to insert myself at night in the middle of an extremists' compound where hostages were being held."

That left Louis speechless for a moment as he stared with new respect at the tall woman.

"Wow! You will have to tell me more later on about your combat missions, Miss Clarkson. By the way, what do you have in that large rectangular case that you are constantly carrying across your back. You did actually leave behind in the planning office all your luggage, except for that case."

Terry's smile became somewhat guarded as she answered the aviator.

"I have a rifle hidden in that case, which I keep with me at all times when escorting Tasha as her personal bodyguard. I won't go into details about that rifle, except to say that it is an extremely powerful and destructive weapon."

Louis was still digesting those words when the noise of a car approaching the group made him and the women turn their heads, in time to see an antique, petrol engine-powered car roll and stop besides the group, with the male driver and female passenger throwing smiles and waving at Louis.

"Hello, Louis!" Shouted the woman. "Who are your new friends?"

"Uh, they are American visitors who arrived last night, Élisabeth. I just gave them a quick tour of my workshop."

"American visitors? Could you present them to us? They are wearing some very interesting fashion items."

"Why not?" Said Louis before looking at Tasha.

"These are Miss Élisabeth Deroche, a qualified pilot and air meetings veteran, with her boyfriend Charles Voisin, the brother of Gabriel Voisin and co-founder of the 'Entreprise Voisin Frères', whose aircraft manufacture you can see about 200 meters away to our right. Would you mind if they talked with you?"

"Of course not! I am all for social interaction and friendship-building."

Tasha, imitated by her three companions and by Louis, then approached the immobile car in order to shake hands with its occupants.

“Good morning, Miss Deroche! I am Tasha Lenoir, from New York. These are respectively my executive secretary, Pham Ti Hien, and my aides, Terry Clarkson and Johanna Kruger. Pleased to meet you and Mister Voisin.”

“Thank you! May I ask what is the brand of your clothes? Your dress looks positively fantastic...and rather risqué I must say.”

“They were custom-made according to my specifications, and so are the clothes of my employees. I am sorry but I am afraid that you won’t find anything similar here, or even in New York.”

“A pity! You are certainly going to create a sensation if you go stroll along the Champs Élysées, especially your friend with pink hair. Uh, she should be careful, though: here in France, the wearing of trousers by women is still technically against the law, unless you are holding the reins of a horse or the handles of a bicycle, although that rule has been somewhat relaxed since it was passed in 1892.”

“Oh?! I didn’t know that! Thanks for the warning.”

“Well, I am afraid that me and Charles have to go now: he invited me for a flight this morning.”

“Then, I wish you a good and safe flight, Miss Deroche.”

Charles Voisin then put his car back into gear and rolled away, leaving behind a small cloud of burnt gasoline smoke. Tasha watched them for a moment before looking at Louis.

“They seem good people indeed. I just may find it easier than I expected to adapt to this time period.”

“Well, people will always be people.” Replied Louis philosophically. “The Voisin brothers are actually still good friends of mine, even if we had past technical and business disagreements. This said, let me show you my plane in detail, then I will drive you to my home, so that you can unpack and rest a bit before lunch.”

11:12 (Paris Time)

Louis Blériot’s house, Boulevard Maillot

Neuilly-sur-Seine, Paris

Louis parked his car in the private entrance of a detached house sandwiched between two large, four-storey residential buildings along the Boulevard Maillot, then hurried to gallantly open Tasha's door.

"Welcome to my home in Paris, Tasha. Watch your step!"

"Thank you, Louis! You have a nice place, in a nice district."

"Well, let's say that I sold a lot of car and truck headlamps before concentrating on making airplanes. Let me help you take your suitcases off the roof of my car."

"No need to, Louis: I like taking care myself of my things. But thank you anyway."

Louis did not insist and waited patiently while Tasha and her three assistants took their collection of suitcases off the car roof and out of the trunk, piling them near the car before grabbing them and following Louis inside the house. The latter shouted out as soon as he had opened the door and stepped in the vestibule.

"ALICIA! I HAVE ARRIVED WITH OUR GUESTS!"

His shout attracted nearly at once a woman in her late twenties and a young maid. Louis' wife smiled to the four women following her husband and waved them in.

"Please come in! I will guide you right away to your rooms, so that you can drop off your suitcases at once."

"You are too kind, madam." Replied Tasha. As the women filed in, Alicia Blériot couldn't help stare at the tall Terry Clarkson.

"My god! Here goes a really tall girl! Well, follow me, please."

With Louis tagging along and the maid preceding them up a wide staircase, the whole group quickly arrived in a first storey hallway where Alicia showed one bedroom to Tasha.

"You will excuse me if I don't have one room for each of you, as we have only two guest rooms. All the other bedrooms are occupied by our six children."

"That's quite alright, Madame Blériot: we Americans tend to be quite populist. My executive secretary will share my room, while my two other assistants will share your other guest room. We won't be long."

"Take all the time you need to unpack, miss. There is a guests' bathroom on the other side of the hallway, with all the amenities."

"Thank you! By the way, I am Tasha Lenoir and my friends are Pham Ti Hien, Johanna Kruger and Terry Clarkson."

"Happy to meet you all, misses. We have six children, five of which are presently attending school, but they will be here at around five."

"I will be happy to meet them then, madam."

"Well, I will now let you unpack and refresh yourselves before lunch. Come down whenever you will feel ready."

Alicia and Louis then went back down the stairs with their maid, leaving Tasha alone with her three companions. That gave her a chance to speak to them in a low voice.

"Remember: we are simple but rich American visitors from New York, not time travelers with weapons and computers. Don't mention as well our tentative deal with Louis, unless he talks about it first, and don't talk at all about this war to come. Once we will have washed up and changed, repack your things and set the anti-gravity generators of your suitcases to 100 kilos of felt weight, then lock them. I don't want their maid to accidentally see something that she shouldn't see or touch."

"Understood, Tasha!" Replied Johanna, answering for the others. They then split up to their respective rooms, putting their suitcases on their beds and grabbing a set of fresh clothes, along with their hygiene kits. Of a common accord, and also to save on hot water, Tasha and Hien went together under the shower and soaped each other up, but kept things relatively chaste. They then stepped out of the bathtub and dried themselves while Johanna and Terry went under the shower. Less than half a hour after arriving, the four women were coming down the main staircase. The maid who was waiting for them then led them to a large, comfortable lounge with fireplace, where Louis and Alicia were waiting for them. Louis smiled on seeing the fine royal blue Chinese dress made of embroidered silk that Hien now wore instead of her previous pants suit.

"Now, THAT will attract only compliments on you, Miss Pham!"

"Thank you, Mister Blériot."

Louis then looked at Tasha, who had changed into a beautiful long purple dress with a wide shiny black belt supporting two belt purses. While certainly futuristic-looking, it also was very acceptable by contemporary decency standards and he could see that his own wife was admiring herself Tasha's dress.

"You look splendid as well, my dear Tasha. By the way, I took the time to make a few phone calls while you were refreshing up. If you will have a seat, I will tell you about those calls."

"With pleasure." Replied Tasha before sitting down with Hien and Johanna on a sofa facing the Blériot, while Terry took place in an easy chair. Once they had sat down, Louis spoke again with a satisfied smile.

"My first call was to my notary, whom I asked about the legal status of foreign women wanting to do business here in France. His short answer was that, if you are an unmarried woman, you can basically make deals and sign contracts the same way a French man would. In essence, only French laws and regulations apply to deals made in France. If there are any American laws contradicting this, then they would still have no legal force here. Since commercial and business relations between France and the United States are presently cordial, he thus sees no problems for you to conduct business in France."

"That is quite reassuring indeed! Thank you for asking him."

"Just being a friendly host to a visiting American lady, my dear. My other two calls were respectively to Henri Deutsch de la Meurthe, the possible sponsor I told you about earlier, and to Ernest Archdeacon, another rich benefactor and supporter of aviation in France. Both of them happen to be good friends of mine and showed keen interest when I told them that you wanted to invest in advanced research in aeronautics, chemistry and physics. I then proposed to them a group meeting with you and your associates and they readily agreed to that idea. We thus have an appointment with both Mister Archdeacon and Mister Henri Deutsch at the latter's house outside Paris this afternoon, at four."

That left Tasha stunned for a short moment before smiling widely at Louis.

"My! You do conduct business at a brisk pace, Louis."

"Like my flying!" He replied in a pun, making Tasha giggle.

"I see that I couldn't have hoped for a better person to meet on arrival in Paris. Thank you so much for all that you are doing to help us."

Alicia Blériot, to whom her husband had said little about the details of his deal with Tasha, and also being a bit fearful that this very beautiful stranger could possibly take advantage of her husband, then spoke in turn to Tasha, trying to indirectly get some answers to her questions about her.

"And how did you arrive in Paris, Miss Lenoir? By train, from Le Havre?"

"By boat, actually. I rented the services of a motor boat after disembarking at Le Havre and sailed up the Seine up to Paris. Unfortunately, the driver of the boat seemingly got lost in the darkness and let us out on the quay near the aerodrome where

your husband has his workshop. By the time that we realized that we were in the wrong place, he was gone, along with his boat. I should be mad at him, but his mistake actually turned out to be a providential gift for me, by accidentally making possible my meeting with your husband.”

“I see!” Said Alicia, while Louis savored how deftly Tasha had invented a plausible story. “And you came to France to invest in scientific and technical research? Why not invest in the United States?”

“Let’s say that the business and political climates in the United States are not very favorable to women entrepreneurs, Madam Blériot.”

“Indeed! They do seem to have quite a few questionable social policies as well in America, starting with their awful racial segregation laws, which are so unjust and despicable.”

Alicia was then surprised to see her four guests suddenly stiffen and look sharply at her, with Tasha Lenoir asking her in turn a question in a controlled tone.

“Racial segregation laws?”

Louis understood at once that Tasha probably knew little to nothing about the actual social and racial climate in the United States and jumped in quickly, in order to prevent Tasha from inadvertently blowing away her cover story.

“Miss Lenoir and her associates are from New York, part of one of the northern states of the U.S.A., Alicia. Those states don’t practice the racial segregation laws the southern states, like Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia, enforce. In New York, black people are not forced to use separate washrooms, lineups, cinemas, restaurants and hotels and can go to public pools with the white citizens. They also don’t have lynching mobs of white people murdering black men with impunity or Ku Klux Klan white supremacists going around in their white hooded robes, burning crosses at night and killing black people on the flimsiest pretexts.”

As he spoke, Louis made a discreet gesture to Tasha to make her understand that the northern states also practiced racial segregation. It took Tasha all of her self-control not to explode in indignation then. As for Terry, she got up from her chair and bowed to the Blériots.

“Uh, I have to go quickly to the bathroom upstairs. If you will excuse me.”

“No need to excuse yourself, my dear.” Replied Alicia, unaware of the bomb she had just thrown in the conversation. Terry then ran up the stair to the first floor but, instead of going to the guests’ bathroom, went to the bedroom assigned to her and

Johanna. There, she mentally reset the strength of her cybernetic limbs to normal human level before slamming her fist on the thick mattress of her bed, in order to spend out her rage at what she had just learned. She then sat down on her bed and did her best to contain her anger and disgust at what her country of birth was proving to be in this time period. After many frustrating minutes, she got an idea and, opening mentally the meager historical files pertinent to this century that had been found by Hien and then retransmitted to the databanks implanted in all of them, searched quickly the entries, looking for anything concerning racial discrimination. Unfortunately for her morale, she found quite a few such entries, many of them infuriating to her. Blowing slowly air out to calm herself, Terry then went back down to the lounge, where Alicia greeted her with a concerned look.

"I hope that you haven't caught some nasty stomach bug during your trip across the Atlantic, my dear?"

"No, I don't think so, Madame Blériot. It will pass quickly enough."

Tasha gave her a concerned look as Terry sat back, but didn't speak about what was now preoccupying her greatly, instead continuing her conversation with Alicia.

"As I was saying, I intend to open a small chemistry research lab here in Paris, where I hope to develop new, better lightweight materials that Louis could then use in his airplanes. I also intend to work on radio technology, to make radio sets smaller, lighter and more dependable."

"That would certainly prove very useful, miss. If you can do that, then maritime shipping lines would buy your radios in bulk, especially after the way the radio set of the TITANIC helped prevent more deaths by calling for help from nearby ships."

Again, Tasha had to hide her ignorance, having no idea what that 'Titanic' was or what had happened to it.

"I am certainly counting on that, Madame Blériot."

Thankfully, the maid announced that lunch was served a couple of minutes later, giving Tasha a good diversion to let fade away the business of racial segregation in the United States. As Alicia Blériot hurried into her kitchen to supervise the serving of the meal, Tasha took that opportunity to corner Louis Blériot and speak to him in a near whisper.

"How bad and widespread is that business of racial segregation, really?"

"According to a few of my friends, including one who recently came back from New York, it is an absolute disgrace. Black people have to ride in the back of buses and are excluded from many public places and private shops. One friend of mine told me how white policemen would harass black people and find any excuse to either arrest them or beat them up. Apparently, this abomination runs through the whole United States, although it is at its worse in the southern states that had been part of the old Confederacy during the American Civil War. I am afraid that your friend Terry would face a lot of abuse if she ever returns to the United States."

Tasha lowered her head in discouragement then, prompting Louis in gently patting her shoulder.

"Please don't worry too much about this now, my friend: such things are not allowed in France, as we are a lot more tolerant socially and racially than those Americans. Come, let's have lunch together and forget this segregation business."

"Thanks! You are a good man indeed, Louis."

"I try my best!" Replied the aviator, smiling, before accompanying her to the dining room.

The meal proved excellent, helping the four women to change their minds a bit from what they had just learned, while Alicia Blériot proved to be a perfect host. As the maid was picking up the empty plates, Louis looked at Tasha with an inviting smile.

"Well, it is now a bit past one o'clock. While it is still early to go to Henri Deutsch's house, how about going out to a currency exchange office, so you could get some good old francs?"

"That sounds like a good idea, Louis. I accept!"

As they were filing out of the dining room, with Alicia staying behind to help the maid clean up after the meal, Louis whispered to Tasha.

"Bring your movie boxes, or whatever you call them, with you: you will need them when we will see Henri and Ernest."

"But, that would mark us as time travelers, Louis!"

"I know, but we will talk further about this once out of the house and in my car."

While surprised and confused, Tasha nonetheless nodded her head.

"Very well, Louis. I have confidence in your good judgment."

"Thank you, my dear."

Whispering in turn to her three companions, Tasha then went upstairs with them, to come down minutes later, carrying their briefcases and laptop cases with them.

“We are ready, Louis.”

“Good! Let’s go to my car!”

The five of them, with Louis in the driver’s seat and the big Terry in the front passenger seat, were soon rolling down the Boulevard Maillot, going east towards the center of Paris. However, after covering maybe half a kilometer, Louis slowed down and stopped his car in a parking spot in front of a residential building, then turned around in his seat to speak to Tasha, a sober expression on his face.

“Please excuse me if what I am going to say may sound blunt, but we need to be on the same page before we meet my two benefactors at four. Henri Deutsch and Ernest Archdeacon are not only very rich and influential men with a passion for aviation and technology: they are also very intelligent, well educated and well traveled men who know much about the World. I also happen to have a deep respect for both of them and I consider them as very good friends. What I am saying actually is that, with your obvious ignorance about the most basic things concerning this time period, they will see through your cover story quickly enough. Having lied to them then won’t play in your favor when it will come time for them to decide if they want to support your research work.”

“But, you know how traumatic it could be for them if I reveal ourselves as time travelers and tell them about the incoming war, Louis. Will they be able to keep those secrets to themselves? You realize what would happen if French government officials learn about us and the war? It would create a horrible mess!”

“True! However, I know my friends well and I can guarantee you that, if the reasons you give them to keep your secrets are good enough, then they will stay mum. They, like me, know too well how impulsive or stupid too many French politicians, government officials and military officers are. If we have a good long term game plan to propose to them, I am sure that they will keep your confidences to themselves while lending support to you and your projects. However, now is the time to discuss such a game plan together. Once we are in agreement, then we will visit that currency exchange shop and go see my friends.”

Tasha was silent for a moment while weighing Louis’ words in her mind. She finally nodded her head slowly once after exchanging glances with her three companions.

"Very well, Louis: let's talk!"

Their conversation, made with the windows of the car rolled up, went on for over half a hour before they came to a mutual agreement about how to proceed in the months and years to come. With a long term plan now firmly set up, Louis started again his car and rolled out of his parking spot, driving for another 300 meters before turning right at a corner and parking again, this time in front of a small boutique that advertised a list of currency exchange rates. That list also claimed that gold was accepted as well. Louis got out of his car and gallantly opened Tasha's door to help her out.

"Time to exchange some of your gold now, my rich friend."

Getting into his game, Tasha got out of the car and walked in a prim fashion to the boutique, accompanied by Louis, while Terry got out of the car and stood near it, ready for anything, as was her habit. Entering the narrow boutique, which had a long counter closed up by a thick wood and glass partition with two service wickets along one wall, Tasha and Louis went to the first wicket, where an overweight man in his thirties greeted them from behind a reinforced glass partition.

"Good day, miss! How may I help you?"

"I would like to exchange some gold coins for French francs, mister."

"We do accept gold here, miss. Could you show me one of your gold coins, so that I can weigh it and test it for purity?"

"No problem, mister. Here you are." Replied Tasha while slipping a half-troy ounce U.S.N.A. gold coin through the narrow slit made at the base of the glass partition. The store clerk grabbed it and examined the coin with interest for a few seconds.

"This is an interesting gold coin indeed, miss. I never saw the likes of it before. I also can't read what is written on it and the date of coinage is strange."

"They are from a small kingdom in Asia which uses a different calendar system than us. Due to British influence, they also use a type of pidgin English on their coins."

"I see! Let me test it for purity and then I will weigh it and give you an equivalent value in French francs."

Using a sharp blade to scrape a tiny amount of gold slivers from the coin, the clerk then dropped a bit of acid on the slivers, watching the color the acid turned and comparing it with a color chart. The result made him nod his head in appreciation.

"This is pure bullion quality gold, miss. I don't see that kind of purity very often."

The clerk then weighed the coin on a precision scale, noting the result and then making a quick calculation by hand on a piece of paper before smiling to Tasha.

"I am ready to give you 51 French francs for this coin, miss."

Louis was about to protest that the clerk was keeping a bit too much of a profit margin for himself, but a discreet knock on his ribs from Tasha's elbow shut him up as Tasha smiled back at the clerk and took out more similar gold coins from her belt purse.

"That rate is most acceptable to me, mister. I will thus exchange a total of 32 gold coins."

She then slipped the gold coins through the slot, with the clerk then giving her in exchange 1,632 French francs in colorful paper banknotes. Tasha took the money and pocketed it, then gave a big smile to the clerk.

"Thank you, sir! It was a pleasure to do business with you."

"The pleasure was mine, miss." Replied the clerk, who then dreamily watched her walk out, concentrating his vision on her well-shaped bum. Once outside on the sidewalk, Louis gave an amused look at Tasha.

"A small Asian kingdom influenced by the British? That was a nice story you made up there, Tasha."

"I can bullshit with the best of them, Louis." Replied a grinning Tasha. Sitting back in the car, she then took out her new French money and gave to each of her three female companions 150 francs.

"Here you are, girls: your pocket money for the next couple of weeks. If you ever need more, just ask. After all, we are all in this together, for the better and for the worse."

The three women gratefully took the banknotes and pocketed them, with Louis Blériot smiling with amusement at the scene.

"Like the Three Musketeers, hey? All for one and one for all!"

When the women gave him blank looks of ignorance, Louis painted fake indignation on his face.

"What? Don't tell me that none of you ever read books by Alexandre Dumas?"

"Uh, no!" Answered Tasha, a bit embarrassed actually by that admission. "I am afraid that many classics of literature didn't survive the centuries up to our own time."

Hien then looked questioningly at Louis as the latter was shaking his head at Tasha's words.

"Uh, what kind of things could I buy with 150 francs, Mister Blériot?"

"Quite a lot actually, my dear Hien. This represents three months of salary for my maid, or six weeks of salary for a manual worker, or three one-way trips in first class by train and boat between Paris and London. In terms of daily items, a kilo of meat of good quality will cost you a bit less than three francs, while a good meal at a restaurant will set you back by about five francs or less."

"Hum, not bad at all!" Said Hien, who then watched with new interest the façades and advertising signs of the various shops and boutiques they passed by as Louis reversed course and retraced his steps along the Boulevard Maillot, heading west towards the small communities lying outside Paris.

15:49 (Paris Time)

Château de Romainville, Commune of Ecquevilly

Thirty kilometers northwest of Versailles

"The Castle of Romainville, the family residence of the Deutsche de la Meurthe." Announced Louis as their car approached the large four-storey, Anglo-Normand style mansion made of stone, brick and half-timbering and set in the middle of a large property planted with many trees. "Mind you, I would call it a mansion rather than a castle, but it is still an impressive building."

"It is a nice residence indeed." Said Tasha, looking over Terry's shoulders and through the windshield of the car. "You said that Mister Deutsche de la Meurthe did his money in the oil industry?"

"That's correct! His father Alexandre started the family business, quickly becoming the biggest oil industrialist in France and even associating himself with the Rothschild family to refine oil in Spain. Henri Deutsch co-founded the Automobile Club de France in 1895 and created the famous Deutsch Cup prize in 1906. He owns oil refineries in Rouen, Saint-Loubès, Pantin and Spain, plus holds shares of many big car manufacturers, like Peugeot and Renault. Ah, I see Ernest Archdeacon's car already parked in front of the manor: we will thus be able to start our discussion right away."

"Uh, what exactly did you tell the two of them about me and my companions on the telephone, Louis?"

"Just that you are a rich American woman who wants to invest in advanced research work in aeronautics, chemistry and physics. I also told them that I have entered in a business agreement with me. That's it!"

"Thus, the ball is now firmly in my court."

"Correct! However, I am sure that your killer charm will do them in."

Tasha giggled at that as Louis parked his car besides Archdeacon's car in front of the main entrance of the manor. The group got out of the car and, after Terry took the time to sling her ubiquitous plasma rifle case, climbed the few steps of the main entrance, where Louis knocked on the massive wooden door. A majordomo answered within seconds, opening the door wide and bowing to Louis.

"Monsieur Blériot! Monsieur Deutsch de la Meurthe is already waiting for you and your friends with Monsieur Archdeacon in his private study. I will guide you to it."

"Thank you, Albert!"

While discreet about it, the majordomo couldn't help glance briefly at the four women, struck by their size and appearances. He however didn't say a word and led the group across a large entrance hall, then up a wide marble staircase, stepping on the first floor and going down a well decorated hallway before knocking on a set of varnished wood double doors, getting a muffled response in French.

"Come in!"

Opening wide the doors, the majordomo then bowed to one of the two men sitting in padded chairs in a corner of a private study whose walls were lined with bookshelves.

"Monsieur Blériot and his friends are here, monsieur."

"Let them in, Albert!" Said one of the two men, a man in his sixties with white hair and a carefully trimmed beard and moustache, while getting up from his chair like the other man, who was a bit younger and sported a large moustache. Both men looked a bit surprised by the size and dress of the four women, who were all taller than Louis Blériot except for Hien, whose magenta-pink dyed hair attracted their share of attention. Tasha bowed politely her head in salute to the two aging men.

"Good afternoon, sir! I am Tasha Lenoir and my friends here are Terry Clarkson, Johanna Kruger and Pham Ti Hien. Thank you for receiving us on such a short notice."

"When Louis tells me that friends need to speak with me about important matters, I am only happy to make the time for them, Miss Lenoir. I am Henri Deutsch de la Meurthe and my friend beside me is Ernest Archdeacon. But please, take place in those sofas, so that we can talk more comfortably. Would you like some tea or coffee first?"

"Tea would be very appreciated, Mister Deutsch."

Deutsch nodded his head, then looked at his majordomo.

"Albert, have a tea service for seven persons brought up."

"Right away, monsieur!" Replied the majordomo, bowing low before leaving and closing the doors behind him. Encouraged by Deutsch, Louis and Tasha's group sat down on two large, well-padded sofas facing the chairs occupied by Deutsch and Archdeacon, then waited for their host to speak again as he detailed with interest the women.

"So, I hear that you are looking for some support in order to do advanced scientific and technical research, Miss Lenoir. Am I right?"

"You are, sir! I am myself a physicist, chemist and electronics expert, while my friend Johanna is a talented aeronautical engineer. We arrived early this morning from New York and, getting lost in the dark, accidentally ended up at Louis' aircraft workshop in Issy-les-Moulineaux. That is how we met and then made some business deals together. Since those deals involved starting research programs, he counseled us to get in touch with you in order to obtain your support. He also counseled that we speak with Mister Archdeacon for the same reasons."

"I see! And may I ask why you could not conduct your research projects in New York, miss?"

Tasha took in a breath before answering: now was the critical moment.

"Because all that I knew and owned in New York is now out of reach for me and my companions. Be reassured, though: that is not because I am some kind of criminal fleeing justice, far from it. Rather, it is because everything I knew is now gone. Since my explanation may sound too fantastic to be true, I will thus use pictures rather than words to explain my situation. Hien, could you play for Mister Deutsch the video file we showed to Mister Blériot this morning? Add also to it the early part of the video showing my last business visit to Titan Prime."

Playing the ever helpful secretary, Hien got up from her sofa and positioned herself between the chairs occupied by Deutsch and Archdeacon, then took out her laptop from its carrying case and put it down on the low coffee table, opening its flip up screen and orienting it so that the two men could clearly look at it. The intrigued men watched her with curiosity at first, but that curiosity changed quickly into shock and disbelief when she powered up her laptop and when the screen came alive with high quality color pictures. Deutsch and Archdeacon were however too stunned at first to speak, merely throwing brief, stunned looks at Tasha as they watched the first video. As that video was nearing

its end, Tasha spoke in a calm and sober tone while looking somberly at the two old men.

“What you saw was me, attending the launch of the latest realization from the astronautics division of my corporation, the Lenoir Industries, in the year 2624. The next video that you will see is about my latest business visit to the local branch of my corporation on Titan, the largest moon of the planet Saturn. Louis, you may want to move so that you can watch that video, as I haven’t shown it to you yet. Please keep your questions for after the second video, Mister Deutsch: I will then explain myself some more.”

Already shaken to the core and pale, Deutsch and Archdeacon didn’t say a word then and let Hien start the second video. At the end of that one, Archdeacon looked hesitantly at Tasha while speaking in a half-strangled voice, while Louis Blériot tried to recover his cool from watching the video.

“You...you traveled in space up to Saturn’s moons, Miss Lenoir?”

“Actually, space travel within the Solar System is quite routine in the 27th Century. I have visited for various reasons Mars, the Moon, the Asteroid Belt, the Jupiter, Saturn and Neptune Systems, plus Pluto, all places housing Human colonies or research stations. You see, me and my three friends arrived from the future this morning, but in a most involuntary way. In fact, I still don’t know how we ended up traveling back in time, rather than just through space, while jumping from New York to Paris by using one of my inventions, the matter transporter. I will not go into the details of that invention of mine but, suffice it to say that it involves the transmutation of a solid object or person into energy, which is then beamed to the desired location far away, where it rematerializes. Somehow, something affected the transporter beam during what was supposed to be a routine transit trip to Paris and brought us to the year 1912. Unfortunately, replicating my transporter technology in this time period is next to impossible, due to the lack of proper tools and materials, while I have no clue what caused our time displacement. This is all to say that me and my friends are now trapped in the past and condemned to stay here.”

A knock on the door then cut off Henri Deutsch as he was about to ask her a question. Hien hurried to close her laptop before a maid could enter, pushing a wheeled cart carrying a full tea service. That tea actually helped the two old men to partly recover from their shock from the stunning revelations given by Tasha. Wiping some sweat on

his forehead first, Henri Deutsch waited for the maid to be gone and the doors of the study to be closed again before speaking to Tasha in a weak voice.

“But, if you possess such fantastic technology, why do you need my help, miss?”

“Why? Because my first hours in this time period has convinced me of two things: first, that my general ignorance about the most basic things concerning life in this decade would quickly blow away any cover story I could invent, unless backed up by someone influential who could support me and my friends. In that, we were lucky to meet Louis Blériot so early. Second, I also realized quickly that women are generally not taken seriously here when dealing with things deemed to be the domain of men, like science, technology and business. I am thus seeking your support and that of Mister Archdeacon as patrons in order to start a scientific research facility where I could start importing some new knowledge from the future, at least in the case where the present technology would allow me to replicate future items, like better planes and radios. There is also another factor of crucial importance to consider, a factor that you must first swear that you will keep to yourself, along with the fact that we are from the future. Blowing open our secrets to government officials or to the public could bring catastrophic consequences that would be hard to predict accurately. I thus need your solemn promise that what I tell you today will not be repeated to others, including even your family members. If not, then I will leave and do my best with Louis Blériot’s help alone.” Deutsch and Archdeacon exchanged a somber glance before Deutsch spoke.

“You have my word, Miss Lenoir. Your secrets will be safe with me.”

“With me too, Miss Lenoir.” Added Ernest Archdeacon, making Tasha nod in satisfaction.

“Thank you both, gentlemen. You will not regret it. Now, here is probably the most shocking, consequential thing that I may tell you today. While the few historical files in our possession contain only very meager information about this century, it being considered like Antiquity in the 27th Century, there was one, or rather two historical events of Earth-shattering importance that will brutally shake the first half of this century: the first such event is a big and horrible war that will sweep through Europe and parts of the Middle East in two years, starting at the end of July of 1914, and will only end four years later, in November of 1918, after causing millions of deaths and immense material destruction and misery. France and its allies will eventually prevail and win that war, which was started by the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Germany, but France will suffer greatly in that war, something we want to mitigate as much as possible by providing in

advance to French forces better planes, better technological equipment and better weapons, including advanced high power explosives that I can replicate here if given a proper lab.”

“And...that second traumatic event, what is it, miss?” Asked Archdeacon.

“Another and even bigger and more destructive war, to be called ‘World War Two’. That war, if history is not changed, will start in 1939 and will again be initiated by Germany, which will look towards avenging its defeat in 1918 and towards conquering the whole of Europe. That war will in turn end in 1945, after over 55 million deaths and countless, unspeakable atrocities will have been committed. Please understand that telling your government about those two wars, especially about the first one, could only result in possibly creating an even bigger mess, especially if some genius decides to try to preempt the Germans by attacking them first. Then, some of the potential allies France could have gained in the war could use that as an excuse to desist themselves. Besides, the little historical data I possess is not detailed enough to tell me how or why exactly the First World War started in 1914.”

Henri Deutsch, a Jew of Alsatian origin, mentally chewed on that information for a long moment, like his friend Ernest, before speaking up.

“I certainly understand your wish for us not to speak to officials about those incoming wars, miss: they certainly are stupid and impulsive enough to react the wrong way to your information. As for your wish to help France by producing better planes, equipment and weapons, I can only commend you as a proud French citizen and will certainly do my best to support and help you. You can thus count on me totally.”

“You also can count on my total support, Miss Lenoir.” Said Ernest Archdeacon in a firm voice, making Tasha nod and smile. “What do you see as being your priority projects right now?”

“Here is what I believe to be both our top priorities and the most easy things to achieve quickly, gentlemen. While I could go all out and try to introduce really advanced technology, I believe that we would be wise to follow progressive steps. First in my mind would be to design and produce the prototype of an improved aircraft that could quickly be demonstrated in air shows and air competitions within a year, so that we could attract the attention and interest of French military officials. That prototype, while being officially a civilian sports plane and racer, will also be able to be converted quickly into a fast, armed aircraft that could then ensure that France gains control of the skies above the battlefields right from the start, something that should have a huge positive effect in the

war. Second, I would want to open at the same time a research lab where I will be able to start working on producing new materials, radios and explosives, thanks to my advanced knowledge in chemistry and electronics. Louis told me that his new air park in Buc should open by the end of this year and already includes many facilities. Maybe that would be a good place to establish my research lab, away from public attention.”

“I certainly could convert one of my annexes there for your use, my dear.” Cut in Blériot.

“Thank you, Louis! Now, to turn these project into reality, especially our prototype fast plane, me and Johanna will need to find a motorist that could provide a more powerful engine than what I saw to date, if we wish our future plane to have significant performance advantages on other planes. I was told by Louis that there are an Alessandro Anzani and an Émile Salmson, who are both producing or testing interesting aircraft engines with good promises.”

“Then, I would counsel that you go see Mister Salmson, Miss Lenoir.” Said Archdeacon nearly at once. “He showed in static display at the last Paris Air Salon a model of radial engine with eighteen cylinders that could develop up to 300 horsepower. To my knowledge, that engine would be the most powerful aircraft engine existing right now anywhere. Mister Salmson has his engine shop in Paris. I am ready to help you get in contact with him, so that you and your engineer friend could inspect his realizations.”

“That would be very helpful, Mister Archdeacon.” Replied Tasha, pleased with the progress they were making. “Johanna may in turn help him by giving him a few tricks from the future. When is the next important air competition where our future plane could make its name and attract the correct attention?”

“Well, there is the British Aerial Derby in Hendon, but it is to be held next month, way too soon before you and Louis could realistically design and build a new plane. Then, there is the Gordon Bennett Cup, to be disputed near Chicago, in the United States, in September. Again, that competition is probably too soon for your projects. However, if you want to start attracting attention on your new plane, you could always expose in static display either a miniature model or a full scale mockup of your new plane at the next Paris Air Salon, in October of this year. Your best first occasion would probably thus be next April, eleven months from now, when they will hold a new air race in Monaco dedicated to seaplanes, called the Schneider Trophy. You would then simply have to add floats to your prototype plane.”

“Or make it an amphibian from the start.” Cut in Johanna Kruger, her mind already working at full speed. “In view of the lack of dedicated airport facilities around the World at this time, it may be wise to produce an amphibian plane that could land about anywhere, including on water, and could thus use any port facilities.”

“That is a great idea, miss. I like it!” Said Blériot. “But, wouldn’t the requirements for being an amphibian plane impact on the overall performance of our prototype?”

“That could be, Louis. Adapting a boat hull or floats to a plane design will always increase its empty mass, but we could always minimize that with good design. Maybe we could simply make the landing gear easily exchangeable with a pair of lightweight floats.”

“In which case I could help you by making it possible to form large items like floats with fiberglass.” Added Tasha. “What else is there, Mister Archdeacon?”

“Then, after the Schneider Trophy, the next significant event will be the 1913 edition of the Gordon Bennett Cup, to be held in September of 1913 in the country of the winner of the earlier competition.”

“Well, if we aren’t ready by then with a credible new plane, then we will deserve a good kick in the butt!” Pronounced Tasha, making Johann, Blériot, Deutsch and Archdeacon nod in agreement. Henri Deutsch then spoke in turn.

“Well, if you are to work in a lab in nearby Buc, then I propose that you lodge here at my manor with your friends for the next few months: you will thus be much nearer to your lab than if you would have to commute every day from Neuilly. I can arrange for a private chauffeur to be put at your disposition, so that you and your friends could go around as needed.”

“Thank you for your generous offer, Mister Deutsch. I will certainly accept to lodge here, with my friends. However, about that private chauffeur, understand that I do have some gold and valuables with me: I never travel with empty pockets. I can easily pay for that private chauffeur.”

“Then, feel free to tip him to your content while I pay the basic costs of renting a car, Miss Lenoir.” Countered a smiling Henri Deutsch.

CHAPTER 2 – ADAPTING TO A NEW CHALLENGE

20:45 (Paris Time)

Monday, May 13, 1912

Bistro ‘Au bon vivant’, Rue des Halles

First Arrondissement, Paris

France

Tasha made a smirk on reading the sign over the entrance of the seedy-looking tavern as the car driven by her newly assigned chauffeur, Marc Lebrun, parked in front of it.

“Au bon vivant, at the good living... Somehow I believe that one can count himself lucky if he gets out of that place alive. Just the average look of the men lingering around that tavern would scare away most honest people.”

Marc Lebrun, a small man in his thirties whom had been hired by Henri Deutsch to act as the dedicated driver for Tasha and her group, gave a nervous look at the entrance of the drinking establishment.

“Are you sure that you want to go in there, Miss Lenoir? This doesn’t look like a safe place for a proper lady.”

“You are correct, Marc, but that is where I am supposed to find a certain ‘Armand’, in order to ask him a service. But don’t worry about me: Terry is coming with me.”

The driver, a man with a reputation for honesty, competence and discretion, glanced at the big brown-colored young woman sitting in the front passenger seat.

“Still, be careful, Miss Lenoir.”

“I will be. Thanks for your concern, Marc. Let’s go find that Armand, Terry.”

Terry, who had dyed her hair back to their natural brown color yesterday, in order to attract less attention in public, stepped out of their car with Tasha and walked towards the entrance of the tavern, immediately attracting the attention of the rough-looking men around, some of whom were groping a couple of local prostitutes.

“You ever entered a place like this before, Terry?” Asked Tasha casually in Americanish.

"Of course! It reminds me of a club I once went to in Tijuana, Mexico."

"Was that club still intact when you left it?"

"Nope!" Replied Terry, a grin on her face, making Tasha giggle.

With the tavern actually occupying the basement of a wine store, with only low windows sticking out at sidewalk level, the two women had to go down a set of narrow stairs whose well was surrounded on three sides by a forged iron railing. Once down at the foot of the steps, they encountered a solid-looking wooden door with a small window in it and a hand-written sign nailed to it saying 'No credit! Cash only!'

"Hum! Something tells me that much of the customers' cash here doesn't come from honest work."

"You're probably right, Terry. Let's just hope that we find the said 'Armand' here: we really need to have some identity papers done for us, and quickly."

"Okay! Let me take the lead here, Tasha, but stay right behind me and don't get separated from me. You have your own light stun pistol handy, just in case?"

"I do!"

The moment that Terry opened the door, the noise of a loud, rowdy crowd greeted them. However, the inside of the tavern suddenly fell silent as Terry and Tasha walked in, with all the eyes inside now following them. The place was crowded, mostly by men wearing worn or dirty clothes, but there were also a few women present, none of whom could be called 'ladies'. The tavern also stank of cheap tobacco smoke, making Tasha's eyes sting.

"Damn that tobacco smoking! It was a good thing that this unhealthy habit was banned centuries before our time. I don't think that I will ever get used to tobacco smoke."

"Do you prefer the smell of unwashed men, Tasha? Oh, I forgot: we have both here right now."

Somehow, that joke didn't make Tasha laugh as she looked around to see if she could spot someone that could be the 'Armand' they were looking for. On her part, Terry went straight to the bar, where a barman standing behind the service counter was watching them approach with some misgivings showing on his face. Terry took out two ten centimes coins and put them on the counter before speaking to the barman.

"Two glasses of your best red wine, please."

Terry then waited until she and Tasha had been served before speaking again to the barman in her heavily accented French.

“We are looking for someone who is good at writing stories. Would Armand be here tonight, by chance?”

The barman understood at once the sense of her cryptic statement and, after a critical look up and down both women, discretely pointed a bearded man drinking alone at a table set in a dark corner, near what had to be the rear exit.

“That’s Armand, the man in the dark brown vest at the rear corner table.”

“Thank you! Follow me, Tasha.”

Carrying their glasses of wine, the two women made their way towards the said ‘Armand’, squeezing past a number of busy tables. Tasha did her best to ignore the hand that ‘accidentally’ brushed against her bum as she squeezed past one table where four burly men were drinking, two of whom had prostitutes sitting in their lap. However, the business they were here for was too important to play the offended virgin now. The man they wanted to see watched them approach with growing curiosity, which changed to surprise when Tasha and Terry stopped one pace in front of his table. Tasha then took the lead, smiling to the man, who was smoking a pipe on top of drinking wine.

“Good evening, mister! We are looking for a man named ‘Armand’, who is said to be good at writing stories.”

“You are in luck, miss: I am Armand. Please, have a seat!”

The man waited for both to be seated on rickety wooden chairs before speaking again.

“So, what can I do for two nice-looking ladies like you?”

Tasha bent forward and lowered her voice to a near whisper.

“Can you produce authentic-looking American passports, as well as French residency permits? I would need such papers quickly for me, my friend here and two other female friends waiting outside. I can pay well.”

“Uh, may I ask first who recommended me to you, miss?” Asked the man, still suspicious. Tasha shook her head at that question.

“Sorry, but no! Let’s just say that it was a man who is too publicly well known to risk coming here and attract attention on himself. So, can you make American passports and French residency permits for four women, and if yes, how fast?”

“Well, the residency permits are easy enough to make and I could do all four in about two days, but the American passports will be trickier: I need to get the right kind of paper, ink and stamps for them.”

In response, Tasha took out 200 French francs in banknotes and slide them on the table towards Armand, who quickly made them disappear.

“Would this help you in getting the stuff you need for our passports, mister?”

“It certainly is a good incentive, miss. I believe that I can do your passports and residency permits in a few days. However, those kind of papers don’t come cheap. I want 800 francs for the job...in advance!”

“No! You will get 200 more francs now, plus another 400 francs when you will deliver the papers to us, as long as they are of adequate quality.”

“Miss, I can assure you that I am the best in the business here in Paris. Your new passports will be impossible to differentiate from the real things. Now, I will need you to go get two passport-size pictures of each of you, along with details on which names you want the papers made for, your chosen date and place of birth and, if I can judge from your accent, the entry date in France you want your passports to show. Only then will I be able to start working on your papers.”

With her face staying impassive, Tasha took out of a coat pocket a fairly large envelope and gave it discreetly to the man.

“We already thought about that. Inside that envelope, you will find four smaller, separate envelopes, each containing the pictures and desired biographical information to be put in our passports and residency permits. Please don’t mix up the pictures and information!”

The man took an offended air at her last remark.

“Miss, I am a pro at my work, not some beginner.”

“I hope so. Here is another 200 francs, to complete a half payment on our deal. When could we hope to get our new papers?”

“They will be ready by next Monday, I promise. Come back here at the same time Monday and I will have your papers for you.”

“Good! One thing, though: I would appreciate if you could wait for us outside, on the sidewalk, instead of in here. This place is definitely not to my liking: too much tobacco smoke.”

Armand seemed amused by that but nodded his head still.

“Very well! I will be waiting outside, by the entrance of the wine store.”

“Then, let’s drink to our deal!” Said Tasha before raising her glass of wine. Terry and Armand also raised their glasses, clicking them together before taking a sip and then putting them down on the table. Next, Tasha and Terry got up from their chairs

and turned to start going towards the entrance. They however had to freeze at once, as an angry shout in French was followed by the noise of a bottle breaking on top of a man's head. Pandemonium followed, with the respective friends of the two men brawling getting into the fight. Their way to the exit now blocked, Terry stood firmly in front of Tasha, to protect her from flying projectiles. A big man knocked hard on the plexus by an expertly delivered 'Savate²' kick then flew backward and smashed into Terry. Normally, a strong man of medium built would have staggered and recoiled from the impact, but Terry stood her ground like a concrete wall, with the knocked man letting out an audible 'oooff!' on hitting Terry. She smiled to the man from over his left shoulder and spoke in French to him.

"Go pay him back, tiger!"

Terry then pushed the man hard with both of her cybernetic arms, literally making him fly across the room towards his opponent. Even though he was already half knocked out and wondering how Terry could be so strong, the man used that opportunity to deliver a devastating punch to the chin to his opponent just before crashing into him and projecting him back against the bar's counter. Terry used the general surprise and disbelief caused by that scene to grab Tasha's arm and drag her quickly towards the exit while using her other arm to violently push out of the way a drunken man.

"Time to go, Tasha!"

Delivering hard elbow or shoulder hits to clear the way, Terry managed to get out with Tasha without getting hit herself once. Now at the bottom of the staircase well of the tavern's entrance, she dragged Tasha up the stairs, relaxing only once they were on the sidewalk and walking towards their car.

"Well, that was quite fun, I must say."

"If you say so, Terry. My corporate boardroom meetings sometimes got rowdy, but not as bad as this. Let's just hope that Armand will come out of there intact, with his envelope."

"Yeah! That would be ironic to get through all that trouble and money for nothing."

Marc Lebrun, who had been about to get out of his car to go check on them, blew air out in relief when he saw that both women looked alright.

² Savate : Old French martial art fighting style that favored the use of both fists and feet.

"Thank God, you're okay, Miss Lenoir! That place just erupted and I was getting worried about you and your friend."

"No need to worry, Marc: Terry was just having some fun in there."

The chauffeur gave a bewildered look at Terry, who was sitting back in the front seat beside him, a grin on her face, but didn't say more and started the engine of his Renault, then engaged gears before rolling out of his parking spot.

11:09 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, May 21, 1912

Jewelry store 'Cartier'

13, Rue de la Paix, 1st Arrondissement

Paris

The jeweler looked up from the last diamond belonging to Tasha that she had brought to be evaluated for sale and smiled to her, his eyes glinting.

"I must say that all of your diamonds are magnificent and of top quality, Miss Lenoir. Where did you say that you got them?"

"In India! Let's say that a very rich Rajah liked me very much."

That explanation genuinely amused the man and he put aside with the other diamonds the stone he had just examined and weighed.

"If you don't mind, miss, I would need to speak with my boss now about the price Cartier would be ready to offer you for your diamonds, as their total value is quite large."

"I understand fully, mister. Take all the time needed."

The man nodded his head and left his counter for a moment, asking a colleague to keep an eye on the diamonds before going to knock at the door of a nearby office. Entering it and closing the door, he spoke with someone inside for a good two minutes before coming out with a man in his thirties. The jeweler came back to the counter with the man, who bowed politely to Tasha.

"Good morning, miss! I am Louis Cartier, owner of this jewelry store. Do you mind if I examine myself your diamonds? They may come just at the right time to help me produce some custom jewels for a European royalty."

"That would be a true honor for me, Monsieur Cartier. Be my guest."

Taking place on the opposite side of the counter, Louis Cartier used a magnifying lens to examine carefully six of Tasha's diamonds that he picked at random from her pile laid on

top of a cloth on the counter. He finally straightened up and put down with near religious reverence the last diamond he had examined before looking soberly at Tasha.

“Those diamonds must truly be among the most beautiful ones I saw in a long time, Miss Lenoir. I am ready to give you 890,000 French francs for them.”

While she had hoped for a little bit more, knowing the price they cost her in the future and applying the proper exchange rate, inflation included, Tasha still hesitated only a very short moment before nodding her head: taking into account the legitimate need for Cartier to make a profit with those diamonds, his offer was very reasonable.

“I accept, Monsieur Cartier! How do you plan to pay me? In banknotes?”

“Oh no! Going around with such a huge sum in cash on you would put you at great risk, miss. I will have instead a certified check prepared in your name right away. With which bank do you have a bank account?”

“With the counter of the Bank of France on Croix des Petits Champs.”

“Ah, excellent! I know well the manager there. I will advise him by telephone that you will be coming, so that you don’t hit an overzealous bank clerk, if you see what I mean.”

“I do! Thank you very much for your consideration, Monsieur Cartier.”

“It is my pleasure, miss. Would you like to have some tea or coffee served while you wait for your certified check?”

“A cup of tea will be fine, Monsieur Cartier.” Replied softly Tasha, who was starting to really appreciate this business of gentlemanly good manners that most French men seemed to have towards women in 1912. This contrasted with the often falsely suave attitude she had to deal most of the time back in the 27th Century. A clerk nearly immediately led her to a small table set by a window of the upper floor of the jewelry store, where the administrative offices and jewelry workshops were situated. The same young clerk served her a cup of hot tea within a minute, then left her as she sipped on her cup while looking down the Rue de la Paix, towards the nearby Place Vendôme and its large column. Louis Cartier in person came to her ten minutes later to bring her the promised certified check.

“Here you are, Miss Lenoir: a certified check for 890,000 francs, as agreed upon. My friend at the Bank of France, Monsieur Claude Poupart, will be waiting for you.”

“You are too kind, Monsieur Cartier. It was a pleasure to do business with you.”

"The pleasure was all mine, Miss Lenoir." Said Cartier before gallantly kissing her right hand. In response, Tasha did a curtsy, the way the wife of Henri Deutsch had shown her how to do.

"And I hope one day to be able to invite you out to a fine supper, Monsieur Cartier. Have a good day."

As Tasha walked away and started climbing down the stairs to the ground floor, Louis Cartier, all of 37 years old, sighed to himself.

"God, what a woman!"

Going out of the jewelry store and getting back in her car, where Marc Lebrun and Terry Clarkson had been waiting, Tasha had Marc drive her next to the branch of the Bank of France on Rue Croix des Petits Champs, a mere kilometer or so away. On entering the bank there, she was met as promised by Louis Cartier by the branch manager, who personally took care of crediting her account for 860,000 francs, with the remaining 30,000 taken out in cash money by Tasha. With her purse now bulging with folded large blue and pink French banknotes in denominations of 1,000, 500, 100 and 50 francs, Tasha returned to her car and smiled to both Marc and Tasha.

"Well, business was good this morning. How about going for lunch together at some fine restaurant? Which place would you counsel us to go, Marc?"

"Well, good restaurants are definitely not lacking here around the 2nd Arrondissement, miss. However, if you truly want the best, then I would suggest that we go eat at the Brasserie Gallopin, a fine pub near here. The décor is magnificent and its specialties include duck liver pâté, sole meunière and tartar steak, with a great choice of wines to wash everything down."

Tasha, whose stomach was starting to growl, opened her eyes wide on hearing the chauffeur describe the menu.

"You sold me on it, Marc: let's go!"

"We will be there in a second, miss." Promised Marc as he started his engine.

Tasha's driver was true to his word, parking their car in front of the pub mere minutes later. Marc Lebrun was however shocked when Tasha invited him to come eat with her and Terry: servants were rarely invited to go eat at the same table as their rich employers in the Paris of 1912, or in any other large European city, as a matter of fact.

"You...you want me to come with you and eat at your table, Miss Lenoir?"

"And why not? Do I look like some dried up aristocrat who pinches her nose at the lower classes?"

"Uh, definitely not, Miss Lenoir."

Stepping out of the car, Tasha took the time to admire for a moment the exterior of the traditional-looking pub before entering it, followed by Terry and Marc. She was at once conquered by the interior decoration, with its mahogany wood paneling, glass canopy and shiny zinc bar counter. A waiter came to her at once and led her and her two companions to one of the few tables that were still available, then gave them each a menu and a wine card. Tasha hesitated at first after opening her wine card: the variety of wines available in the 27th Century had nothing in common with the variety available in 1912 France. However, the list she was now looking at would probably have crushed its 2624 successor, with many great winery names present that she could still recognize, even after seven centuries. She ended up choosing one of the most expensive bottles on the list, one that would have cost over one month of salary for Louis Blériot's maid. She was still looking at the menu when the waiter came back to take her order for drinks.

"Madame will want something from our cellar?"

"I certainly do, my good man." Replied Tasha, whose French was slowly but gradually adapting to the contemporary variant of 1912. "Bring us a bottle of Chateau Lafitte 1893 and three cups, please."

"Right away, madame!"

As the waiter walked away, Marc discretely looked at the listed price of the wine named by Tasha and nearly felt his hair rise on his head: it was listed at 58 francs a bottle, more than one week of his salary! He however did not comment on that, as it would have been bad manners to do so. The waiter came back with a smile on his face and a bottle of wine in his hands. Presenting first the bottle to Tasha, who read the sticker before nodding her head, the waiter then removed the cork lid with a 'plop', then poured a bit of wine in Tasha's cup, so that she could taste it. Her eyes closed with ecstasy after taking a first sip, as the vapors of the old wine went up her nostrils and as the taste of the wine registered in her mouth.

"A real nectar, sir! You may fill our cups."

"Thank you, madam. Are you ready to order?"

"I am! First, I would like a platter of pâtés and cold cuts, to serve as a group appetizer. Then, I will have the steak tartar, with a side dish of escargots."

"I will try your sturgeon's caviar, followed by the filet of sole meunière." Said Terry next, leaving the poor Marc uncertain what he could dare to order. Tasha understood his dilemma and gave him a wide friendly smile.

"Order whatever you like, Marc, even if you think that it costs too much. To me, you are as much a friend as an employee."

The waiter, who could tell what Marc was from his chauffeur's livery, did his best to hide his surprise then: such a pro-proletariat attitude from an obviously rich woman was definitely not common in Paris. Marc then finally dared to announce his choice of menu.

"I will have the sturgeon's caviar and the steak tartar, please."

Once the waiter had walked away with their orders, Tasha grabbed her cup of wine and raised it high, to knock it against her companions' cups.

"To our health and success in Paris!"

"To our health and success in Paris!"

Terry then took a sip of her wine and inhaled deeply as she sat back in her chair.

"Damn, this wine is good! It is the best I ever tasted."

"A Château Lafitte 1893? It better be good, Miss Clarkson." Replied Marc, amused, who then looked at Tasha.

"Will you want to go somewhere else in Paris after lunch, Miss Lenoir?"

"We certainly will, my good Marc. I have to find and buy a few laboratory precision instruments, to equip my lab in Buc. Mister Deutsch provided me with a list of names and addresses, but we could still be crisscrossing Paris until closing hours today."

Marc simply nodded at that, keeping to himself the many questions his curiosity had about the kind of research Tasha intended to conduct. The latter took another sip of her wine and then looked slowly around her, admiring the décor and the view of the outside.

"I am starting to fall in love with this Paris, especially when I compare it with the hectic pace of life I knew in New York. There are also so many old monuments, buildings and works of art to look at and admire in Paris. One day, I will have to take the time to visit at least the nicest spots in this city."

"Then, I counsel that you start with the Notre-Dame Cathedral, Miss Lenoir." Said Marc. "Going inside it is like being projected back to the Middle Ages. The stained glass windows are particularly beautiful. Then, there is the Louvre Museum, among many other places."

Tasha then sighed, seemingly discouraged.

“But there is so much to do, and so little time to do it. I may not have time to take a single break during the next two years. Then, things will probably become even more hectic.”

Marc refrained from speaking up then or from asking about the meanings of her words. After all, he was only a simple chauffeur. However, the last few days had shown him that he could have ended with a much worse employer indeed than Tasha Lenoir.

CHAPTER 3 – FIRST STEPS

09:48 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, September 11, 1912

Prototype workshop, Aéro-Parc Blériot

Buc, eight kilometers southwest of Paris

“Gentlemen, I present you the Blériot-Kruger Mark I sports racer aircraft!”

Henri Deutsch and Ernest Archdeacon, entering the workshop behind a proud Louis Blériot and followed closely by Tasha Lenoir and Terry Clarkson, opened their eyes wide on seeing the aircraft sitting in the middle of the converted hangar, surrounded by a variety of tools and work benches. The only person present inside when they entered was Johanna Kruger, wearing a loose work coverall. As the two aviation sponsors approached the plane, Louis spoke again in a firm voice, so that they could hear him well.

“I must warn you that, while it looks complete, this aircraft still needs a few finishing touches, especially concerning its flight instrumentation and its electrical circuitry. It is thus not ready to fly, but the first test flight should occur next week.”

“It really does look like nothing I saw before, I must say.” Said Ernest Archdeacon as he started slowly turning around the aircraft to examine it from multiple angles.

“That is because its design follows aerodynamic rules and concepts that no other aircraft designer follows today, sir.” Said Johanna Kruger. “All other planes in existence today have canvas-covered wings that are kept rigid only by numerous strings, resulting in a lot of unnecessary aerodynamic drag. On top of that, those curved, single canvas skin wings provide only minimal aerodynamic lift for their given surface, because the previous designers didn’t understand properly or even didn’t know about the most basic aerodynamic rules concerning wing designs and factors, like the various forms of drag, lift coefficients and wing profiles. Well, they will pay for their lack of knowledge by losing every air competition once this plane is finished, tested and certified.”

“Talking of air competition,” said Archdeacon, “it was announced yesterday that Jules Védrines has won the Gordon Bennett Cup in Chicago on the new Monocoque

Deperdussin, which attained a record speed of 174.1 kilometers per hour. What kind of top speed are you hoping to attain with your Blériot-Kruger Mark I, Miss Kruger?"

"Around 300 kilometers per hour." Replied at once Johanna, making Deutsch and Archdeacon exchange stunned glances. "Our plane is not only a lot more aerodynamic than the Deperdussin plane, it is also about twice as powerful, with a Salmson 2A9, eighteen-cylinder, two-row radial engine developing a bit over 300 horsepower. And that engine is only the first of the high power engines Mister Salmson is now developing under a confidential contract for us, with my assistance. He is already building the prototype of a new, larger engine called the 2C9, an eighteen-cylinder, two-row radial capable of more than 600 horsepower."

"SIX HUNDRED HORSEPOWER! But, that's unheard of!" Exclaimed Henri Deutsch, making Johanna smile.

"Then, the competition better hold on to their boot straps, Mister Deutsch, because the next step will be the 3C9, a triple-row, 27-cylinder radial developing over 900 horsepower. You may ask: why so much power? Well, I believe that we will need all of that power to propel the French military planes that will fight the Prussians in less than two years from now. Speed, range and payload all require power and the more we can have, the better."

"I certainly can understand and agree with that logic, Miss Kruger. What about the new materials that Miss Lenoir was working on?"

"Unfortunately, properly equipping my materials research lab has proved more difficult than expected, Mister Deutsch." Answered Tasha, taking over temporarily from Johanna. "I even had to order a few new tools and instruments that didn't exist at all and which I had to have made to my specifications. Seeing that there would be delays there, I told Johanna to build our new plane with aluminum alloys, following construction techniques well known to her. The one area where I did very good progress is in designing and building prototypes of new flight instruments for aircraft. With those new instruments, our planes will be much safer and easier to fly, something that should attract many future customers. You will be able to examine those new instruments right after inspecting our Blériot-Kruger Mark I. Johanna?"

"Gentlemen, the Blériot-Kruger Mark I is a two-seat, cantilever monoplane with high-mounted wings, a single 313 horsepower radial engine installed behind the cabin and powering a four-blade constant speed pusher propeller."

"A constant-speed propeller?" Asked Ernest Archdeacon, confused.

“Yes! Aircraft propellers is another domain that is poorly understood by today’s aeronautical designers around the World. The fixed pitch, laminated wood propellers they all use, including Mister Blériot until now, are quite inefficient and are designed to be at their best in only a limited speed range. In contrast, a constant pitch propeller’s blades vary their pitch automatically according to the airspeed they encounter, which makes them hugely more efficient over a wide range of speeds compared to old fixed pitch wooden propellers. Designing those new constant pitch propellers actually proved easier than I expected, so I am now working on even more advanced propellers, which will be able to reverse their pitch on command, in order to cut the landing length of an aircraft by using the engines as brakes.”

“Wow! And what other surprises does the Blériot-Kruger Mark I have for us, Miss Kruger?” Asked Henri Deutsch.

“Well, it benefits from a myriad of secondary systems that are new to aircraft of this time and should make it even more popular, like electric windshield wipers and defoggers, external navigation lights and high-power headlamps for night landings. However, the main novelty has to be the hyper sustentation flaps system. Please understand that the other planes in existence cannot have such flaps, because their wings are not of the cantilever type. Those flaps, which will be manually actuated on our prototype for the sake of simplicity, create extra lift by modifying the wing profile and augmenting its camber and surface. That way, the planned take-off and landing speeds for our plane, which were already low, were further lowered by fifteen kilometers per hour, to a bit over seventy kilometers per hour. This will make our plane much easier to fly, something quite desirable if used for pilot training or sports racing by amateur pilots. Well, with this said, I will let you look around and inside it to your content, gentlemen. Don’t hesitate to ask questions about anything: I am here to answer them. Then, Tasha will show you her range of new flight instruments.”

With Louis Blériot also inspecting the plane with them, Deutsch and Archdeacon took a good half hour to look over the prototype in detail, even sitting in the two padded seats installed in tandem in the front section of the fuselage and marveling at their comfort compared to the primitive wood and canvas seats found on other planes. At the end of it, the two impressed sponsors were led by Tasha to a long work bench on which a number of instruments were laid. Smiling with pride, she patted first a kind of box the

size of a shoe box, which had a sort of glass spherical ball embedded in it, with one half of it made visible by a transparent cover.

"This, gentlemen, is the prototype of my new gyro-stabilized aircraft attitude display ball unit. It is combined with a gyroscopic compass unit to provide in one compact instrument package information about the true orientation and attitude of its plane, even when the pilot gets disoriented in bad weather or at night. This package should actually save a lot of lives in the future, something that makes me particularly proud."

"It certainly looks quite impressive, Miss Lenoir, and also futuristic as well." Said Archdeacon while bending down to examine the unit from up close. "You should have this design patented at once."

"That is already in my books, along with many other things, Mister Archdeacon." Replied Tasha, smiling weakly. Ernest then noticed how tired she seemed to be.

"Are you okay, Miss Lenoir? Did you sleep well last night?"

"I am alright, Mister Archdeacon. Nothing that a little extra sleep can't fix."

"Then, you should take that extra sleep before you keel over from exhaustion, miss. You must have been working long hours in your lab."

"I have indeed, but I needed to, to catch up for the time taken to equip my lab properly."

"You should really take a few days of rest, Miss Lenoir." Added Henri Deutsch, now looking concerned. "Your projects can wait a few days. As they say: Rome wasn't built in a day."

Tasha hesitated for a moment before giving in to their counsels and nodding her head.

"Very well! I will take the rest of the week off. That will finally give me a chance to properly visit Paris."

Louis Blériot patted gently her shoulder at those words.

"A wise decision, Tasha. I saw too often what overwork did to some friends of mine. You are too precious to burn yourself up. We need you too much to prepare ourselves for the war."

"The war... I just wish that we could find a way to simply prevent it. However, our only realistic option is still to win it as fast as we can and to limit the damage and losses on our side. Damn, I wish that we had come with more detailed historical data files! But we couldn't imagine that a minor glitch would put us off track by seven centuries, right?"

07:50 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, September 17, 1912

Aéro-Parc Blériot, Buc

There was a small crowd assembled in the early morning in front of the prototype workshop, looking at the Blériot-Kruger Mark I, which had just been pushed out in the open. Looking on were Henri Deutsch, his wife Marguerite and daughter Suzanne, Ernest Archdeacon, Alicia Blériot and her five oldest children, Tasha Lenoir, Pham Ti Hien, Marc Lebrun and the sixteen technicians and specialists who had been working on the prototype or in Tasha's lab. A mix of expectation and anxiety floated around as Louis Blériot and Terry Clarkson prepared themselves for the first test flight of the new plane. As Louis took place in the front seat, in the nose of the plane, Terry bent forward in her rear seat to speak in his left ear.

"I know that you have already piloted planes hundreds of times, Louis, but please listen to my advice during this flight. This aircraft is loaded with features that you never saw or used before. Landing it will be quite different from what you are accustomed to do and we certainly can't afford to break this prototype on its first flight."

What Terry didn't mention out of politeness was that Louis Blériot had the reputation of often breaking his planes on landing, his landing technique being a bit rough, to say the least. Thankfully, Louis seemed to take her request in stride, possibly because he had been seriously injured in an aircraft accident in Istanbul two years ago and had then spent three weeks in a hospital.

"Alright, Terry. I will take off and do the first air maneuvers, then I will let you land while watching your procedure."

"Thank you, Louis. You want to start the check list with me?"

"Of course!" Said Louis, who never had done a formal check list procedure before, for the good reason that his previous aircraft, like those of his competitors, had next to no instruments to check. The Blériot XI that he had flown for the first time across the English Channel in 1909 didn't even have a compass then. In comparison, the instrument dash facing him seemed positively crammed with instruments, gauges and switches, with the big transparent semi-spherical cover of the gyro-ball sitting high on the dash in front of him, near the lower edge of the wide windscreen made of Durex, an incredibly tough transparent polymer 'invented' by Tasha Lenoir.

"Master electrical switch?" Said Terry, starting the list.

"On!" Replied Louis after throwing the relevant toggle switch.

"Battery charge?"

"In the green zone."

"Gyros power switch?"

"On! Gyros spinning up! Gyros aligned and running!"

"Fuel levels?"

"Main fuel tank full and selected! Secondary fuel tanks empty, as planned."

"Barometric altimeter setting set?"

Louis first looked outside the cockpit at a mechanic holding a small chalkboard on which the present local barometric pressure and the wind speed and direction had been written, then looked at his altimeter and turned the knob to adjust the ground pressure setting.

"Altimeter set!"

"Fuel mixture set on 'rich'?"

"Set!"

"Set flaps down to forty degrees."

Louis used his left hand to turn rapidly the hand wheel mechanism activating the flaps, making them come out and down in a position that would nearly double the lift provided by the wings. This innovation in particular, combined with the cantilever construction of the wings, had impressed Louis to no small end when he had been able to see in the small aerodynamic test tunnel set up in Buc by Johanna Kruger how those two features dramatically increased the lift generated by her new wing. In comparison, the lift coefficient of the traditional wings made of a single canvas surface stretched on a wood or steel frame and held rigid by steel or piano wires was downright anemic.

"Flaps down by forty degrees!"

"Start the engine!"

"Starting the engine now!" Said Louis, pushing on the large, red ignition button. The eighteen-cylinder, two-row radial coughed to life at once, an electrical starter powered by the onboard battery doing the job traditionally done before by a mechanic turning a hand crank or the propeller. Louis felt exhilaration as the engine, the most powerful he had ever used, smoothly went up in power as he pushed slightly forward the engine throttle lever with his left hand. As powerful as the Salmson 2A9 was already with its 313 horsepower, Johanna had promised an important improvement to come

soon to all the new Salmson engines being developed right now: a turbo-supercharger unit which would dramatically boost engine performance at high altitude, on top of raising the overall power of the engine and making it more economical in its fuel consumption per horsepower produced. All that promised to raise the maximum operational ceiling of the plane, extend its autonomy and improve its climb rate, all things that could prove critical in future military aircraft. In fact, the Blériot-Kruger Mark I had been designed from the start so that a militarized version armed with machine guns and bomb racks could be very quickly produced when needed. Right now, though, the prototype already felt to him like a racing purebred horse.

“Oil pressure and engine temperature nominal! I Am going to start rolling.”

Smiling first to his wife and his children while giving a thumbs up signal, Louis then pushed the engine throttle forward and started his plane rolling across the open grass expanse of his still unfinished aero park. Once clear of the hangar lines, he used the brake pedals connected to the wheels of the prototype to line it up nose to the wind, helped in this by the large red and white conical sock floating from a tall mast near the hangars, which gave him the present wind direction.

“Applying full power now!” He announced in the plane’s intercom. The rate of acceleration he felt as the prototype jumped forward nearly made him scream with delight. Terry, who was discreetly ready to take over the controls if Louis made a serious piloting error, announced out loud their air speed as they raced across the grass expanse.

“Forty kilometers per hour... Fifty... Sixty... Seventy... Eighty... Start rotating the aircraft!”

Louis, who already felt his plane ready to leave the ground, then progressively pulled the control stick towards him. The prototype flew cleanly off the ground at once and started soaring up at an exhilarating climb rate.

“My God! This plane feels fantastic!”

“A hundred kilometers per hour air speed: I am starting to retract the flaps now.”

Announced Terry, who then quickly turned the hand wheel of the flaps mechanism. Louis helped then by flying level for a moment, to give a chance to his plane to pick up additional speed while the flaps retracted in and up.

“Flaps up! You may start shaking the plane up, Louis...gently at first.”

“Of course! We need to walk before we could run, don’t we?”

“Exactly!”

On the ground, in front of the prototype workshop, Alicia Blériot was anxiously looking up with her children, following the rapidly receding aircraft with her eyes. Tasha, feeling her nervousness, approached her and patted gently her shoulder.

"Don't worry about Louis, Alicia: the plane is sound of design and Terry is also an experienced pilot."

"But he crashed so many times in the past. Since his accident in Istanbul two years ago, I can't help feel dread every time he goes up flying again."

"A perfectly understandable reaction on your part, Alicia: Louis is a truly good man and it would be a tragedy to lose him. However, I am confident that this flight will go smoothly. By the way, thank you for having encouraged and supported him all these years: by doing so, you indirectly helped tremendously the cause of French aviation." Alicia nodded her head at those words but, inside, she still felt nervousness. The plane soon flew out of sight at a rate that made Ernest Archdeacon nod his head in appreciation.

"Your prototype is certainly a very fast plane, Miss Kruger, and its takeoff was quite nimble. I am dying to see what kind of top low level speed it will show on the timed speed run."

"It should actually surpass 300 kilometers per hour, since there is no baggage or cargo onboard today and since it was loaded with only half its maximum capacity in fuel. I am betting that we will get a timed speed of over 310 kilometers per hour. You have your own precision chronometer with you, Mister Archdeacon?"

"Of course I do! I couldn't leave it behind on such an important occasion."

"I brought mine too." Added Henri Deutsch. "We will thus be able to compare and confirm the time of the speed run between us three."

They then waited for the plane to reappear within sighting distance of the air park.

The wait proved to be longer than what they had expected, rising significantly the level of anxiety among the spectators, with Alicia Blériot in particular feeling increased dread as the minutes passed.

"They flew away over forty minutes ago! Are you sure that your airplane design is sound, Miss Kruger?"

“Quite sure, Madam Blériot, although about anything could happen in flying. However, this could simply mean that the plane proved safe and stable enough to test some extra maneuvers with it.”

“I wish that I had the time to finish designing a compact enough radio transceiver that could fit in our airplanes.” Said softly Tasha. “Unfortunately, that is still a few weeks away.”

“THERE IT IS, APPROACHING FROM THE EAST!” Suddenly shouted a mechanic, pointing at a dot in the sky.

“Thank God, at last!” Said Alicia Blériot, letting out a sigh of relief. All eyes followed the rapidly growing dot as it approached the expanse of the aero park.

“They are lining up for the timed speed run.” Announced Blériot’s workshop manager, Louis Peyret, who then raised a large green flag and waved it to alert the mechanics that had been posted under the tall poles with tops painted red that would serve as the markers for the speed run. Henri Deutsch, Ernest Archdeacon and Johanna Kruger prepared their chronometers as the Blériot-Kruger Mark I was about to overfly directly the first marker pole. The mechanic posted at the base of the pole quickly raised his red panel when the plane overflew him, making the chronometers start clocking the run. The mechanic posted at the foot of the second pole, 500 meters distant, then raised his own red panel a few seconds later, as the prototype overflew him. Deutsch and Archdeacon both looked at their chronometers with disbelief after clicking them a second time to stop the count.

“FIVE POINT 68 SECONDS!” Exclaimed Archdeacon, making the workshop manager look quickly at a chart in his hands. The result he saw also made him shout in excitement.

“THAT TRANSLATES INTO A SPEED OF 317 KILOMETERS PER HOUR! WE HAVE A NEW UNOFFICIAL WORLD SPEED RECORD!”

As the crowd cheered loudly, Alicia Blériot spoke up, concern in her voice.

“Hey, where are they going now? They are flying away!”

Looking up sharply, Johanna simply nodded her head, showing no worry at all.

“That is probably Terry concluding the test flight with a few maneuvers I asked her to try. She however is taking on some extra altitude first, as a safety measure.”

“Oh!”

The already enthusiastic Deutsch and Archdeacon soon opened their mouth wide in disbelief when the prototype, now flying at an altitude of about 1,500 meters, did a maneuver then never witnessed before.

“They...they just completed a full vertical loop! I never heard of such a thing done before.”

“That’s called a looping and it is a very basic aerobatic maneuver indeed, Mister Archdeacon.” Replied Johanna while still following the plane with her eyes. “There they go for another one! One... Two! They just performed a double looping... Now they are doing what is called a barrel roll...followed by a classic Immelmann³.”

“Your plane is proving to be incredibly agile, on top of being very fast, Miss Kruger. You designed a real winner. Congratulation!”

“Thank you, Mister Archdeacon! Well, it seems that they are now done with the test flying: they are now on approach for landing.”

“Thank God! At last!” Said Alicia Blériot, relieved.

The plane landed smoothly under the applause of the spectators, using less than 200 meters to do so with its flaps down, then rolled towards the hangar line, pivoting on the spot and stopping once in front of the design workshop. The workshop manager at once warned the others to stay away until the propeller stopped turning, which took only a few seconds more. Alicia Blériot and her children then ran towards the plane as Louis and Terry got out of the cabin and stepped on the grass. She nearly jumped into the waiting arms of Louis and kissed him repeatedly.

“I was so scared for you when you flew away for nearly one hour, Louis.”

“You had no needs to worry, my dear Alicia: this plane is a pure dream to fly and Terry has proved to me that she could show me a new trick or two in aerobatics. Soon, I just may take you and the kids up on a flight over Paris.”

“Uh, not so fast, Louis!” Cut in Johanna. “We still have to do more test flying, followed by careful inspections of the plane for possible cracks or damage, before it can be ready to be certified for carrying passengers. Mister Archdeacon, what do you think

³ Immelmann : Name of the German aviator who invented that maneuver, consisting in a half looping followed at the top of the loop by a half roll, which allows an aircraft to quickly turn 180 degrees in heading.

will be the verdict of the Aéro-Club de France on our new plane? Should we publicize this first test flight right away?"

"I am not sure that we should make its top speed public yet, Miss Kruger: I am a bit leery about the unhealthy interest that it could bring from some rather unfriendly governments. I will however have this test flight unofficially catalogued by the Aéro-Club, with the top speed kept in confidential records. By the way, between me and Henri here, I am sure that we can as well convince the Aéro-Club to deliver an official pilot's license certificate to Miss Clarkson, especially if she did those loops and barrel rolls."

Louis Blériot nodded his head soberly once, glancing at Terry.

"She effectively did all those maneuvers after our speed run. Her expertise and piloting finesse truly impressed me. She richly deserves an official pilot's license from the Aéro-Club de France."

"Then I will take care of that, on top of having your flight discretely recorded in its logs."

That made Terry smile with genuine pride.

"Do you think that the French Army would eventually accept women as military pilots, Mister Archdeacon?"

"Uh, that would be asking quite a lot yet, miss. Maybe in a few decades."

"Well, how about all going out together for lunch once the plane has been inspected and put back in its hangar? And this includes your mechanics and technicians, Louis. I am paying!" Announced Henri Deutsch, making them all cheer.

CHAPTER 4 – FIRST REACTIONS

13:51 (Paris Time)

Saturday, October 26, 1912

Paris Air Salon exposition, Grand Palais

Avenue des Champs Élysées, 8^{ème} Arrondissement

Paris, France

Colonel Hans Von Vittingen, wearing like his aide-de-camp, Hauptmann Erich Langefeld, a civilian suit in order to be less conspicuous, looked for a moment at the floor plan of the exposition, set at the main entrance of the Grand Palais, before lining up with other visitors at the admission office. Once inside, he all but ignored the German section of the exposition and went straight to the French section, which was his prime interest here as the German Military Attaché in Paris. His first stop was at the Deperdussin stand, where he admired for a moment the Monocoque model that had won the Gordon Bennett Cup last month in Chicago.

“What do you think of this model, Erich?” Asked the old soldier to his aide, a qualified mechanical engineer and a member of the German Army’s intelligence branch. The much younger man eyed the wood and canvas plane with obvious professional interest.

“That this ‘monocoque’ construction technique is certainly of high interest, as it apparently allows much greater speeds than previous construction methods. Maybe we should adopt it ourselves.”

“I agree, but the hard part will be to convince our own designers to...”

Two young French couples passing by the two Germans then caused von Vittingen to pause, as one of the young men, obviously a rich dandy judging by his fine suit, made an enthusiastic remark to his companions.

“Wow! That new Blériot plane sure looked fantastic. I hope that we will have a chance to see it fly at the next local air rally.”

The two Germans exchanged a glance on hearing that, with Vittingen pointing in the direction the two couples had come from.

“Let’s go check the Blériot stand, my dear Erich.”

“With pleasure, sir.”

Making their way along the crowded alleys bordered by various aircraft and engine manufacturers' stands, they soon approached the Blériot stand, made highly visible by a large sign suspended over it. To the Germans' surprise, two other adjacent stands proved about as popular as the Blériot stand, all three being surrounded by a thick crowd of curious visitors. Erich Langefeld, being a tall man measuring a good 184 centimeters, suddenly had a look of disbelief on seeing the center of the visitors' attention in the Blériot stand.

"Sir, we better get in the front ranks of the visitors: you want to see this new Blériot plane."

"Very well! How about playing some elbow grease here...in a polite way, so that I could approach that plane?"

"Right away, sir!"

Pushing his way through as politely as he could, the young engineer and military intelligence officer managed to gain a place in the front ranks for him and his superior, who eyed the plane at the center of the stand with some surprise.

"Himmel! This is definitely something different. It certainly looks good, but does it fly well?"

"A good question, sir. Unfortunately, the specifications and performances listed on that chart over there for this 'Blériot-Kruger Mark I are rather, uh, vague."

Looking at the said chart, von Vittingen had to agree with his aide.

"Top speed above 170 kilometers per hour... Hum, it looks like Louis Blériot is being a bit secretive here. And who is this Kruger?"

"That is probably the name of the engineer who designed this new plane for Blériot. It certainly doesn't look like the other Blériot planes I saw before. I will try to ask a few discrete questions to that stand attendant to our left."

Elbowing again his way through the crowd, Langefeld soon arrived within touching distance of the young man standing in front of the Blériot-Kruger Mark I, but had to wait his turn to ask him a few questions in his nearly accent-free French.

"Excuse me, sir, but do you have some kind of publicity pamphlets about this aircraft?"

"Unfortunately no, monsieur. The Blériot-Kruger Mark I is still waiting to be officially certified for public flying display and, until then, Monsieur Blériot prefers to keep its specifications confidential."

"But it has flown at least once already, no?"

"It has been test-flown a number of times already, monsieur, and has shown no design vices up to now. Monsieur Blériot is hoping to be able to officially fly it in public for the first time at the incoming Schneider Trophy competition in Monaco, next April, where it will be equipped with floats."

"I see! Could you at least tell me something about the engine mounted on it?"

"Certainly, monsieur! It is the new Salmson 2A9, eighteen-cylinder radial, developing 313 horsepower. If you want to see that engine in detail, you can actually look at it at the Salmson stand, next to this one."

"Thank you very much, sir." Said Langefeld before dragging again his superior behind him, this time to the Salmson stand. There, his eyes sparkled as he was able to examine from up close an actual Salmson 2A9 engine, mounted vertically on a supporting frame.

"Now, THAT is some beautiful piece of mechanical engineering!"

However, something about the engine quickly attracted his attention and he signaled it to von Vittingen.

"That's weird! The metal of the engine bloc doesn't seem to be steel or iron, if I go by its color. Let me ask the attendant, sir."

Going to the man running the stand, he spoke with him for a few seconds before returning to his superior.

"According to the attendant, the engine block is made of aluminum alloy, while the cylinder sleeves and pistons are made of steel. He told me that Salmson copied that concept from the Wright Brothers and that it significantly lightens the whole engine."

"Interesting! That is certainly another point worthy of note. Let's see that next stand to our left: it seems to attract a lot of visitors as well."

Langefeld, like von Vittingen, smiled with delight when they saw the attendant at that stand, a tall and very beautiful Eurasian woman.

"Well, I can see now why so many people gather around this stand, Erich. Let's see what she is pushing."

Both Germans were then surprised to see what was being exposed on a long folding table in the middle of the small stand.

"Aircraft flight instruments?" Exclaimed von Vittingen. "Lenoir Industries? Have you heard of this company before, Erich?"

"Never! However, the instruments on display seem to be of very high quality and of advanced design. I see an air speed indicator, a barometric altimeter with a vertical column display, a gyroscopic compass and an accelerometer. There is also that box in the middle with a big sphere embedded in it that I can't identify. I am going to ask the attendant about it."

Before he could go to speak with the female attendant, his superior shook his head, making him stop.

"These instruments may be well made and the attendant is undoubtedly beautiful, but my true interest is on that new Blériot plane. Let's go back to the Blériot stand."

Erich Langefeld was tempted to protest that they could be ignoring something significant here, but his sense of discipline won over and he meekly followed Vittingen towards the Blériot stand. As the two men walked away from her stand, Tasha, who had heard them speak thanks to the cybernetic implants inside her ears and had understood their German words, followed them with her eyes for a moment, registering their faces in her mind. She had elected to play attendant at her instruments' stand today, the opening day of the air salon, mostly to get out of her research lab, get some fresh air and change her mind a bit. While not ready yet to produce in quantities her new instruments, she was hoping that the interest raised in them at this exposition would attract some investors, who could then help fund the building of a proper factory. She could of course finance that factory herself, but that would eat up a significant portion of her large but still limited monetary resources. The other goal of her stand was to link it to the Blériot stand, as the Salmson stand did, to boost public interest in the new Blériot aircraft and thus mutually benefit from future orders for the Blériot-Kruger Mark I, which was being advertised at this exposition in the pilot training, sports racing and private plane roles. A few French military officers had already looked at the new plane and shown great interest in it, as well as marveling at Tasha's gyro-ball attitude display unit, something quite encouraging. A man wearing a well-trimmed beard and moustache then approached her, making her shift her attention away from the two Germans.

"Excuse me, miss, but I would have a few questions to ask about the flight instruments on display at your stand. I just came from the Blériot stand, where I was told that the instruments equipping their fantastic new plane were designed and built by the Lenoir Industries. I am interested especially in your attitude display unit: it has the potential to make flying in bad weather or in fog conditions much safer."

"I will be most happy to answer your questions, sir. First, let me show you what my attitude display unit can do. I actually call it a gyroscopic ball attitude display unit and it uses a set of electrically-powered gyroscopes to keep its display sphere stable in three axis, despite any change of attitude or move by the aircraft equipped with it. If you will please step next to the display table."

The man did so, with Tasha then picking up and handing the gyro-ball unit to him. The man saw then that the unit was actually plugged through a long electrical wire to an electrical outlet and was switched on. The next thing that he noticed was that the display sphere, with graduations of 360 degrees for all three rotation axis and an aircraft symbol in the zero position, stayed in the same position spatially, despite the slight angle at which he was now holding the box, which also proved to be surprisingly light for its size. Turning the box around and upside down, the man saw that the aircraft symbol stayed rock solid in its original position.

"Wow! This is incredible! A pilot flying through clouds or fog could keep his plane level and on a chosen heading with this instrument, even if he could see nothing outside his plane. This gyro-ball of yours could potentially save the life of many aviators, miss."

"That is actually my main motivation in developing my line of flight instruments, mister: to make flying safer and help save lives."

The man then gave her a stunned look at those words.

"You designed these instruments, miss?"

"I did, mister!" Replied Tasha, smiling and presenting her right hand for a shake. "Tasha Lenoir, founder and owner of the still fledgling 'Lenoir Industries'."

Going over his surprise, the man smiled back to her and shook her hand.

"Henri Farman, pilot and co-owner of 'Avions Farman' with my two brothers, Maurice and Richard. I suppose that you must hold a technical diploma, to have designed such an advanced instrument?"

"Of course! I in fact have diplomas in electronics, chemistry and physics."

"Impressive! And are you ready and able to produce your instruments in large numbers?"

"Not yet, unfortunately. All I have right now is a small research laboratory on the grounds of Monsieur Blériot's Aero Park in Buc. I am still looking for investors willing to support the building of a proper factory able to produce my line of instruments."

"Well, I will of course have to talk with my brothers first about this, but I personally would be very interested in investing in your flight instruments. I believe that they will revolutionize flying on long distance over the sea and in bad weather. I also happen to be a good friend of a number of well known British aircraft designers, like Geoffrey de Havilland and Armstrong Whitworth. I am sure that they will show interest in your flight instruments once I tell them about them."

That sounded like music to Tasha's ears: that was exactly the kind of interest she had hoped to create by opening a stand at the air salon.

"Really? Then you may take a few copies of my pamphlet describing my line of instruments. I made them in both French and English, to widen the interest in my products."

"But not in German? There are a number of German aircraft designers who could show interest in your flight instruments and that have access to vast funds."

Tasha's smile faded somewhat and she replied in as polite a way as she could to Henri Farman.

"Most probably so, but I am not planning to sell my products in Germany or Austria."

"May I ask why, Miss Lenoir? After all, you speak French with a very heavy accent that I can't place. You are not a French citizen, right?"

"No! I am American, but I hope one day soon to gain French citizenship. As for not dealing with potential German customers, let's just say that I have sentimental reasons not to encourage or help German might...of any kind."

"Uh, I see! I must say that I can understand your point of view on that. Individually, Germans can be fine persons, but their Kaiser's policies tend to irk me at times."

"The same here, Mister Farman. You will find my actual mailing and residential addresses at the bottom of my pamphlets. I presently reside at the residence of Monsieur Henri Deutsch de la Meurthe, in Ecquevilly."

Those words lit up Farman's face, who became even more friendly then.

"I know well Monsieur Henri Deutsch and visited the Castle of Romainville a number of times before, as he supported my own aviation work many times in the past. If my brothers and my British friends do show interest in your flight instruments, then we will certainly come visit you, either in Buc or in Ecquevilly."

"I would be most happy indeed to meet them, Monsieur Farman."

Tasha then gave to Henri Farman ten copies of her publicity pamphlet before they parted with a last handshake. She felt good afterwards as she continued to field questions from other visitors at her stand: things were definitely on a roll and future business prospects looked quite encouraging, something that she had always enjoyed as a businesswoman. She then resolved to open an official business office soon in Paris, to start handling future customers and sales orders for her inventions. Thinking of it, that sounded like the perfect job for Pham Ti Hien, who was a bit underemployed at this time, in contrast to Johanna and herself, both of whom worked long hours at the research lab and prototype workshop in Buc.

10:43 (Paris Time)

Thursday, November 21, 1912

Research laboratory, Aéro-Parc Blériot

Buc, eight kilometers southwest of Paris

Tasha, wearing a pair of 27th Century magnifying lenses in front of her eyes and a white lab coverall over her street clothes, was building an electronic circuit board on a work bench of her research lab when a concert of approaching voices made her turn her head and raise the pair of lenses over her forehead. What she saw was Louis Blériot, leading inside her lab a group of French Army officers and one small man dressed in a civilian suit, coming from the direction of the prototype aircraft workshop. Putting down on the bench her modern precision tools, which she had packed in her suitcase for her fateful trip to Paris, she got up from her high stool to greet her visitors. In turn, those visitors stopped cold as a group on seeing her and the futuristic-looking, at least to them, lab's surrounding. There were also more than one look of admiration at her from her male visitors. Louis then made his guests come forward to present them to Tasha.

"Colonel Giffard, Monsieur Ducharme, I present you Miss Tasha Lenoir, who opened this research laboratory and already produced a number of new materials and electronic instruments, including the new explosive I told you about. Tasha, this is Colonel Georges Giffard, head of the French Army's Weapons Procurement Bureau, and Mister Martin Ducharme, a senior engineer and ordnance expert employed by the French Army."

"Pleased to meet you, gentlemen." Said Tasha while shaking hands with the two men. Louis then presented to Tasha the two other officers in the group of visitors.

“And these are Captain Robert Durant, an artillery and ordnance expert, and Captain Édouard Barès, one of the most senior pilots in the French Army.”

“Pleased to meet you as well. And what may I do for you today, gentlemen?” Giffard, a tall man in his late forties with a large moustache and a bit of a paunch, took on him to answer her in an affable tone of voice.

“We came here to see the work done in Buc by Monsieur Blériot and your team, Miss Lenoir. The enthusiastic reports I got from officers who visited your respective stands at the Paris Air Salon prompted me to come and see for myself what could interest the Army Department here. To be frank, what we have already seen up to now was very impressive, but I am told that you have even more to show us. Am I right?”

“You are certainly correct, Colonel. What have you been shown up to now by Monsieur Blériot?”

“We toured his prototype aircraft workshop, where we talked with Miss Kruger and inspected the Blériot-Kruger Mark I parked outside of the workshop. That was already quite impressive, but Monsieur Blériot said that we absolutely had to visit your lab and see what you are working on.”

“I will be more than happy to show you what I developed up to now, Colonel. First, my research lab has been created and funded by me and is part of my nascent new company, the ‘Lenoir Industries’, which has a formal business partnership with ‘Blériot Aviation’. This lab is actually comprised of three distinct sections: one chemical research section where I am developing new materials; another section devoted to explosives and propellants and a third section where I develop new electronic instruments, radios and parts. You are presently in the electronics section, where I employ two clock-makers, an electrical engineer and a radio technician.”

“Clock-makers, miss?” Asked Martin Ducharme, surprised, making Tasha smile gently.

“Yes! I quickly found out that clock-makers have just the right kind of expertise and experience in producing tiny, high-precision mechanisms, something I use a lot in my line of flight instruments.”

“I see! And may I ask what scientific diplomas you hold yourself, Miss Lenoir? I was told that you are an American citizen.”

“That’s correct, Monsieur Ducharme. To answer you, I studied at Boston University and hold a doctorate in Physics, along with master’s degrees in chemistry and electronics. I must add that much that I know, I learned on my own, being an autodidact.

I also happen to have a certified I.Q. of 179. That, however, was seemingly not enough for people in the United States to take my research seriously, which is why I came to France with my three female friends. Apparently, women can't invent anything of consequence or know anything about business, or so they said in the United States. There was also the matter of how Terry Clarkson, a very close friend of mine who happens to be a black woman, was being treated by the bigots and racists over there. All that pushed me to come to France, where I hope to eventually gain French citizenship. But enough about me! Let me show you what I have been working on since opening this lab. Please follow me."

Leading her group of visitors to a long table on which sat a number of radio sets, Tasha spoke up to describe them and explain her work.

"Here are the line of radio transceivers that I recently developed and which are presently being field-tested aboard our Blériot-Kruger Mark I aircraft. First off, about the present state of radio technology as you may know it. Much of it was invented and developed separately during the last decade or so by Mister Guglielmo Marconi and Mister Nikola Tesla, with some significant new improvements done recently by Mister Edwin Armstrong, in the United States. However, their radio technology is based on crystal sets using spark-gap transmission and can only transmit telegraphic signals, not human voice. That is the technology that was used in the radio station of the doomed British transatlantic liner TITANIC. While that technology certainly proved most useful, it is however deficient in many ways, in my opinion. I thus made my goal to develop a better radio technology and produce more compact, more powerful and more reliable radio transceivers that could be put aboard an aircraft without seriously cutting on its payload. This is what I have managed to come up with in the last four months of work. What you see here is first a lightweight, short to medium range VHF band, twin mode selective amplitude-modulated/frequency-modulated radio transceiver set working in the seventy to 200 megahertz band, developed specifically for small aircraft's air-to-ground and air-to-air communications. Next to it, you have a longer range HF band, single-sideband modulation radio transceiver working in the five to thirty megahertz band, meant to be used in larger aircraft and on ships and in ground stations. Third in line is a very long-range LF/MF band, single-sideband modulation transceiver set functioning in the frequency range between 153 kilohertz and 3,000 kilohertz, meant for ships and for intercontinental communications. Finally, you have a HF/VHF band radio direction finder system, or RDF in short, which uses signal phase comparison via two separate solenoid

antennas. I am presently working on a LF/MF band version of my RDF set. That LF/MF RDF set will be very important in my opinion to help aircraft navigate safely over long distances, over the sea and in bad weather.”

There was a moment of silence as the French officials stared at the impossibly small and compact radio sets lined up on the table. Martin Ducharme was the first in the group to recover his voice.

“But...but, these radio transceivers are much smaller than what I have seen anywhere before, miss. The standard Marconi ship radio set would occupy this whole table by itself and is comprised of half a dozen separate components. These radios are really functional as they are now?”

“Perfectly functional, mister! We have started early this month to test them, both on the ground and in the air, and they work perfectly fine within their designed working parameters.”

“And what kind of ranges are we talking about, Miss Lenoir?” Asked Giffard, whose mind was in overdrive while thinking about the huge new communications capabilities these radios could bring to the French Army.

“The smaller set, the VHF-AM/FM transceiver, basically works within line-of-sight to the horizon, thus has a maximum range of about fifty to sixty kilometers when used from a flying plane, or from further if flying at high altitude. The range on the ground is however much shorter and can be cut by the presence of hills or mountains. The HF, single-sideband modulated transceiver has a much longer working range, since short-wave signals can be reflected by the high altitude ionosphere layer of the atmosphere. From a ship or a plane flying over the ocean, ranges could attain hundreds of kilometers or more. When used on the ground in the middle of a mountainous terrain, the range however becomes much shorter and could go down to a few dozen kilometers. As for the short-wave set, its range is basically intercontinental and is in the thousands of kilometers.”

“And...how did you manage such technological feats, miss? How were you able to make your radios so compact?” Asked Ducharme, still having problems believing her. Tasha gave him a benevolent smile and went to pick a circuit board destined for a half-built radio transceiver, showing it to her visitors.

“By putting aside the standard spark-gap radio technology and exploring completely new routes, Mister Ducharme. I could have used the road of the recently invented thermionic triode, or electronic vacuum tube, but I found that such vacuum

tubes were both fragile and unreliable, something I would call less than satisfactory for use in aircraft. I thus developed a completely new technology to replace the spark gap emitter by semiconductor amplifiers made of gallium arsenide alloy. The biggest challenge there was actually to find a way to produce such alloys with the sufficient level of purity needed. Fortunately, being both a chemist and an electronics expert on top of being a physicist, I succeeded where others would have failed due to a lack of expertise in one of those fields. You may examine this circuit board if you wish so. There are already multiple patents pending under my name covering this new radio technology and the other inventions I produced here in Buc.”

Ducharme, with the three army officers around him also looking at the circuit board, examined it for a good minute before giving it back to Tasha, his head nearly turning.

“The level of your radio technology is just...amazing, Miss Lenoir. Will we be able to see a working demonstration of these radios today?”

In response, Tasha looked at Louis Blériot, who had been patiently standing behind the visitors.

“Could we arrange a demonstration from the air with the VHF set installed in your plane, Louis? I bet that Captain Barès would also love to use that occasion to try his hands at piloting a bit the Blériot-Kruger Mark I. Terry could act as his instructor and coach.”

“That sounds like a good idea, Tasha.” Said Louis, as Édouard Barès’ eyes lit up and a big grin appeared on his face. “I will go tell Terry to get ready for a flight.”

“No need to: I will call her from here.” Replied Tasha, smiling maliciously. Her visitors, expecting her to go to a telephone, were surprised to see her go to the VHF radio set on display and switch it on before grabbing its microphone and speaking in it. What they couldn’t know was Tasha was cheating a bit now, having just used the radio set implanted in her skull to warn mentally Terry to be ready to listen on the VHF radio in the workshop.

“Terry, this is Tasha, over!”

After a delay of a couple of seconds, a female voice came out of the radio’s loudspeaker.

“This is Terry! Go ahead, Tasha!”

“Could you get ready for a short flight in the Blériot-Kruger Mark I in about one hour, Terry? You will have a French Army pilot who would love to try it in the air. Also,

make sure that the plane's VHF radio set is functional: we will do some air-to-ground communications demonstration at the same time, over."

"Will do! Over and out!"

Tasha put down the microphone and switched off the radio before looking back at her visitors, who were now all staring with disbelief at the VHF set.

"The quality of transmission was so good!" Wondered Giffard. "And it seemed so easy to use, contrary to the few spark-gap radios we have, which need lots of frequency fine-tuning all the time."

"That's transistors to you, Colonel!" Replied Tasha, smiling widely. "Now, let's show you my line of flight instruments."

"Uh, me and Captain Barès already saw them at the Paris Air Salon, miss. Somebody else than you was manning your stand at the time, probably because you were having lunch or were on a short break. Do they use the same kind of technology you used in your radios?"

"Actually, no, Colonel! They only use materials and basic components that you could all find around Paris. I just used my expertise in physics to improve on existing designs or do something outright new."

"All this here will certainly highly interest my superiors once I report to them about my visit here, miss. One question they may ask is about the selling price asked for your radios and instruments."

"Then, I have something just for you and them, Colonel." Said Tasha before going to a desk drawer and opening it, then taking out of them half a dozen copies of what looked like commercial product advertizing pamphlets. She then handed them to Giffard, with one going to Ducharme.

"I just had those pamphlets made, so that visitors and prospective buyers would see what the Lenoir Industries could offer them. You will find in there short descriptions and pictures of all of my inventions to date, save for one of them, along with their list prices. Unfortunately, I still don't have a mass production line for my products, but that should come in a few months."

Her choice of words made Giffard and Ducharme look up sharply from their pamphlets.

"Why didn't you advertise all of your inventions and products in there, Miss Lenoir?"

"Because one of them could only have the French Army as a legitimate buyer, Colonel Giffard. I am talking about a new and powerful type of explosive I synthesized

only a few days ago. I test-detonated a tiny quantity of it here in Buc, but I lack a proper location to safely test a larger quantity. I do however have some more of that explosive, which I call 'Metallex', already produced and ready for testing. Could I abuse you and ask for French Army assistance in testing my new explosive, Colonel?"

"Miss, I would be delighted to lend you the help of the Army for this. I can arrange for an official test of your explosive on the grounds of the Fort of Mont Valérien on, say, next Monday morning."

"That would be great, Colonel. I accept!"

"Then, I will have a car pick you up in Buc on Monday at nine in the morning. Will that do?"

"It will be perfect, Colonel. Thank you so much! Well, I believe that it is now time for us to go to my chemical lab section, where I have a couple of things to show you. Follow me, please."

Tasha went to a door at the end of her electronics lab and opened it, revealing a long and relatively narrow hallway lined with multiple windows giving on the outside. She then turned towards her visitors to give them an explanation.

"I have for safety reasons physically separated my three labs, so that a fire wouldn't destroy them all. However, they are linked together via passages made of brick and with corrugated steel roofs, which are fireproof. My explosives lab section itself is surrounded by a blast deflection concrete wall and the extra-long passage linking it makes a right-angle turn after going through that blast wall."

Her words made both Colonel Giffard and Captain Durant nod their heads in approval, with Durant commenting on them.

"You definitely follow the right safety protocols, Miss Lenoir. I have seen some army ammunition providers who were much less diligent in their security measures than you, with a couple of them ending up having their factory blow up by accident."

"Thank you, Captain Durant. We will visit my explosives lab after my chemical lab."

The group then followed Tasha down the hallway for a good twenty meters, then entered a lab of a size about similar to that of the electronics lab, but with vastly different equipment. Going first to four heavy vertical support legs equipped with vise grips, on which a flat pane of transparent material rested at the horizontal, Tasha assembled her

visitors around the apparatus, then grabbed a transparent pane similar to the one fixed to the support legs and handed it to Giffard.

“Colonel, you are now holding a sample pane of a new polymer material I call ‘Armorplast’ in English and ‘Durex’ in French. I first synthesized it last August and it was used to make the canopy and windows on the Blériot-Kruger Mark I. All Blériot-produced aircraft will have such Durex windows and canopies, as it is both extremely resistant to shock and much lighter than glass, with a density of 1.25 grams per cubic centimeter.”

“It certainly is light, Miss Lenoir.” Said Giffard while trying to bend the pane of Durex in his hands. “It also seems fairly flexible. I am curious to see how tough it really is, though.”

Tasha grinned and grabbed a heavy hammer on a nearby work bench, then gave it to Giffard.

“Then, hammer at that fixed pane to your content, Colonel. Once you will give up, your two young and vigorous captains could also try their luck at it.”

Giffard gave the Durex pane in his hands to Martin Ducharme and took the hammer, smiling as he took position next to the horizontally-fixed pane.

“I may not be young anymore, but I still pack a good punch, miss. Your Durex better hold on tight.”

First raising high his heavy hammer, Giffard then slammed it down on the Durex pane with all his strength while shouting his effort. To his dismay and that of his three companions, the impact of the hammer simply made the Durex bend temporarily before it retook its original shape, with barely a scratch visible on it. The dumbfounded army colonel bent over to examine the top surface of the pane, then tried a second time, slamming down the hammer with both hands. The Durex pane however refused to break or crack, leaving Giffard to look at it with total incredulity.

“Damn! How could that be? This is about as strong as a steel plate.”

“Durex actually has a better resistance to traction and a better elasticity module than most steel alloys. While it is not as resistant to heat as steel, it can easily be molded by thermal process into soft, curved shapes, making it perfect for the manufacture of things like aircraft windows and canopies, observation domes, ship portholes, shock-resistant casings and helmets. Its possible applications are actually nearly endless and I hope to eventually produce a vast array of products made with Durex.”

"Did you say 'shock-resistant helmets', Miss Lenoir?"

"I did! In fact, if made of sufficient thickness and molded in a proper ballistic shape, a Durex helmet could actually stop a pistol bullet at short range, or a rifle bullet fired from a few hundred meters away. However, since it is a polymer and not steel, such a helmet would not be appropriate to cook a meal in it. What is the shape of the present French Army helmet, Colonel?"

"Uh, we don't have a helmet in the Army, Miss Lenoir, except the parade ones used by the Republican Guard." Replied Giffard, making Tasha look incredulously at him.

"You have no protective helmets for your soldiers, Colonel? But, what about protection against things like shell fragments or debris thrown up by an exploding bomb or shell?"

"We have none, miss. In fact, there is no existing regulation or directive that would mandate the wearing of such individual protection."

"Then, what do your soldiers wear in combat?" Asked Tasha, still having a hard time to believe her ears, especially comparing that to the kind of protective armor and helmet she had seen soldiers like Terry Clarkson wear in 2624. Giffard shrugged at her question, not getting the reason why she appeared incensed about this.

"They simply wear their uniforms and kepis, miss. However, I will concede that, if you could develop a kind of army helmet that would offer significant protection on the battlefield, then I would be more than ready to push the idea up the War Ministry's ladder."

"Very well: I will start thinking about such a helmet design. So, anybody else wants to volunteer to try breaking my pane of Durex?"

"I certainly will try, miss." Said at once Captain Durant, closely followed by Captain Barès. Both young officers however had no more success than Giffard had, leaving them staring with wonderment at the pane of Durex, now sporting only a few more scratches.

"Hell! This Durex of yours is incredible, Miss Lenoir."

"Thank you, Captain Durant. Now, gentlemen, I will show you another new material that I developed that, while not as tough as my Durex, is lightweight and could prove very useful in the construction of planes. It is based on glass fibers, which are already known today, but I combined it with a new resin I call epoxy to produce either flat sheets or objects that can be shaped over a mold by applying alternate layers of

fiberglass mats or wire and epoxy resin before being cured inside an oven. With the right kind of mold or mandrel, one could produce about any kind of shape, including spheres, cylinders and cones. Typical applications in real life would be the production of ultra-light portable boats or canoes, airplane floats or large reservoirs and tanks for various liquids or gases. Here is a sample cylinder made of fiberglass.”

Martin Ducharme was the first to handle the large cylinder handed over by Tasha, marveling at once at its light weight.

“My God! This is even lighter than your Durex, miss. Yet, it is surprisingly rigid and resistant. Planes made with your fiberglass should end up being much lighter than even the wood and canvas models of other aircraft designers.”

“And that is why the series-production model of the Blériot-Kruger Mark I will be partly made of fiberglass parts, Monsieur Ducharme. Just that will save about 300 kilos compared to the all-aluminum prototype. Fiberglass also has the advantage of being cheaper than aluminum, another big plus.”

Ducharme looked at her as if she had just proved to be a witch.

“And you invented all this in a mere four months, Miss Lenoir?”

“Yes, but to be fair I must say that the ideas and concepts for all my inventions had been floating in my head for over a decade now. It is just that I was never given an opportunity to work on them before in the United States, until I inherited the fortune of my parents and moved to France.”

Ducharme slowly nodded his head at that, apparently buying her just made-up explanation to his question.

“I see! I have to say that the United States is not the only country around where women are not taken seriously. We Frenchmen are just more romantic and gentlemanly.”

He and the others, including Tasha, laughed briefly at his joke. The atmosphere now more relaxed, Tasha led her visitors down the long hallway with elbow corner leading to her explosives lab, which was a much smaller building than the two previous labs they had visited. There, she went to a steel safe and opened it, taking out of it a small steel box with a lock. Opening the box with a key taken out of a pocket of her coverall, Tasha showed to her visitors six metallic objects of cylindrical form and varied sizes, none larger than a poultry egg.

“These are the produced samples of Metallex I recently synthesized and that are left after my sample test detonations. Metallex is a mix of metals and oxidizers with a

density of 7.6, close to that of iron, and with the hardness of aluminum. It is insensitive to shock and, if thrown in a fire, will simply burn fiercely instead of exploding. It thus needs a standard detonator to set it off. It will be safe to use as a filler in artillery shells and aircraft bombs and will also make excellent hand grenades.”

“And how powerful is it compared to, say, standard dynamite or TNT explosive, miss?” Asked Captain Durant, already hoping for some striking answer. In that he was not disappointed.

“Weight for weight, my Metallex is 3.6 times more powerful than TNT, while being a lot more compact in volume. This is why Metallex would be ideal for the production of compact hand grenades with still devastating blast effects. An artillery shell made of Metallex with a thin brass or steel outer jacket could actually be substituted weight for weight with a conventional shell made of a thick steel shell containing some powdered explosive. The new shell would be as stable in flight, while having more than twenty times the blast power of the old shell, because the body itself of the new shell will be the explosive charge.”

“My God! If your claims are true, then the French Army cannot not buy your Metallex explosives to produce new munitions, miss.”

“All my claims are true, I assure you, Captain Durant. Since I do not wish to become a manufacturer of military munitions or explosives, and since I also want to help protect France from its present and future enemies, I am ready to sell the production license of my Metallex explosive to the French Government, for production in French state arsenals but with the explicit conditions that I will retain the patent and design license for it and that no Metallex munitions will be sold to actual or potential enemies of France.”

That declaration left both Ducharme and Giffard speechless for a moment before Giffard spoke up.

“But, Miss Lenoir, the mass production of your Metallex could bring you millions of francs in future profits. Your offer to the French government is extremely generous, but you would stand to lose a potential fortune because of it.”

Tasha, her expression somber, simply nodded once at Giffard’s protest.

“I fully realize that, Colonel, but protecting France is more important to me than to make a fortune with my Metallex. Besides, I stand to make even more money from my radios, Durex polymer, fiberglass products and flight instruments in the months and years to come. I will only ask to be allowed to continue researching new explosives and

propellants, along with testing specific applications for them and my Metallex. I already have in mind the idea of developing and producing within a year a series of fin-stabilized rockets with solid propellant motors that could be fired either from ground launchers or from flying aircraft, rockets that would of course be armed with Metallex warheads. With such rockets, the military variant of our Blériot-Kruger Mark I and of our future aircraft models will become even more hard-hitting.”

“The military variant of the Blériot-Kruger Mark I?” Repeated Captain Barès, stunned like his companions by her last sentence. In turn, Tasha gave a surprised look at Louis Blériot.

“You didn’t tell them that you are going to produce an armed, military variant of each model of Blériot-Kruger aircraft we will build, Louis?”

“Uh, not yet, Tasha! I was reserving that surprise until the end of this tour.” Georges Giffard, his interest now higher than ever, looked expectantly at Louis.

“And what will be the differences between the civilian and military variants of your plane, Monsieur Blériot?”

“Well, the military variant, which will be called the Blériot-Kruger Mark I(B), will have a more powerful engine with a turbocharger unit for better high altitude performance and a water-methanol injection system for emergency combat boost. Under boost, the engine will produce for short periods a maximum of 460 horsepower, compared to a normal maximum of 313 horsepower in the civilian version and 380 horsepower in the turbocharged version. Maximum speed under boost will rise to over 380 kilometers per hour, versus less than 320 kilometers per hour for the civilian Mark I(A) variant, while the service ceiling will rise from 8,000 meters to 9,000 meters. The planned fixed armament of the Mark I(B) will be six fixed forward-facing medium machine guns installed inside the wing leading edge on each side of the central fuselage, plus four under-wing pylons for rockets and three belly pylons for bombs of various sizes. There will also be a space and mount reserved inside the cabin for a camera, to be operated by the observer in the rear seat, who will also have a radio transceiver set at his disposition.”

“Hell! Let me write all this down, Mister Blériot!” Said Giffard, suddenly searching frantically for a pen and a piece of paper. Louis stopped him with a reassuring sign of the hand.

"Don't worry about that now, Colonel Giffard. Like Tasha, I had a quantity of publicity pamphlets produced about my aircraft...with a confidential version printed about its military variant. I can give you dozens of those pamphlets before you leave Buc."

"That will be much appreciated, Mister Blériot. So, what's next now?"

Louis rubbed his hands together and smiled in response to that question.

"Now is the time for your Captain Barès to test fly my plane and also conduct a radio communication test from the air. Are you ready for that, Captain?"

"Hell yes!" Replied Barès at once with a big grin.

The group went as one to the grassy surface in front of the prototype workshop, where Terry Clarkson was waiting by the side of the Blériot-Kruger Mark I(A), dressed in a flight coverall and a flying helmet made of Durex, complete with sliding visor, integrated radio headset and oxygen mask. Édouard Barès couldn't help stare at the tall, young black woman, attracting an amused question from Terry.

"You are staring at my body or at my helmet, mister?"

"Uh, both!" Could only manage to reply the military aviator, making Terry and Tasha giggle. Terry then opened the access door of the pilot's section and took a helmet similar to hers that was resting on the pilot's seat, giving it to Barès.

"You can wear this helmet for this flight, mister, but consider it as a temporary loan. Hopefully, your government won't be cheap to the point of not buying flying helmets to go with our planes."

That remark prompted Colonel Giffard in sifting through one of the products publicity pamphlets given to him by Tasha, who gently patted his shoulder then.

"My Durex aviator helmet is on page three, top item, Colonel. For the brave aviators of the French Army, I will let my helmets go at their production cost."

"Miss Lenoir, you will decidedly make a very patriotic French citizen." Replied a smiling Giffard.

"Becoming a French citizen will be a true honor for me, Colonel."

In the meantime, a happy Barès had put on his helmet and was about to climb into the pilot's seat when he noticed the elaborate emblem painted on the front of Terry's helmet, which was painted a fiery red and also sported her name.

"The 74th S.O.C. – The Hell Raisers'? Is that the blazon of some military unit, Miss Clarkson?"

“Yes, it is, Captain. I always admired that unit.” Simply said Terry, hiding as best she could the avalanche of souvenirs about her service time in the 74th Special Operations Commando that Barès’ question had brought forth in her memory. Letting Barès sit first inside the cockpit, she then described quickly to him the various displays and controls around his seat and helped him buckle his harness and plug in his radio headset and oxygen mask. She also gave him a few directives, telling him what he could and couldn’t do during the flight. Once that was done, Terry went to sit in the rear seat, which was slightly higher than the pilot’s seat so one could look to the front over the head of the pilot. The rear seat having a complete set of controls and instruments, she would thus be able to assist Barès if he got into difficulty, or could take over from him if needed. After running the check list for him, she started the engine and spoke on the intercom.

“The plane is now yours, Captain. You may roll up to a position facing the wind and take off. I will take care of the flaps. Just be careful about your airspeed. Once in the air, we will climb to 2,000 meters, where it will be safer to maneuver the plane around.”

“Got it!” Said the excited Barès, whose two types of planes he had flown to date were completely outclassed by the aircraft he was in now.

On the ground, the group of spectators was joined by Johanna Kruger and Pham Ti Hien as the Blériot-Kruger Mark I was taking off after a short roll and was climbing in the air with gusto. Tasha quickly presented Johanna and Hien to the visitors, then went inside the workshop for a minute, coming back with a portable VHF transceiver radio worn from a strap passed across her chest. Switching her radio on, Tasha waited until the aircraft was high in the sky before talking into it while standing next to Giffard, so that the senior officer could listen on to the radio conversation.

“Buc Control to Terry! How is your student doing, over?”

“He is not doing too badly for a beginner, Buc Control.” Said Terry before giggling a bit as Barès could be heard protesting her naming him a ‘beginner’. Tasha then passed her handset to Giffard, so that he could speak with his pilot.

“Barès, this is Colonel Giffard. How is the plane performing up to now?”

“Very well, Colonel. The controls are smooth and precise and the engine has plenty of power. How is the radio reception on the ground?”

"The reception is excellent. You may take your time shaking your plane a bit to test it. If you have any comments, just call on the radio."

"Understood, Colonel. I will now climb to the maximum service ceiling, to verify how high the plane can go. I will call back with a report within half a hour."

"That is fine with me, Captain. I will be waiting for your report."

Giffard then gave back the headset to Tasha and looked firmly at Martin Ducharme.

"Monsieur Ducharme, it is my firm opinion that the Army HAS to acquire Miss Lenoir's radios, and in serious quantities. These radios will make our planes that much more effective for patrols and war missions and will also significantly raise the level of flight safety for our aviators."

"I concur with you a hundred percent, Colonel. In fact, those radios will give us a huge operational advantage in the air over other countries. I will warmly recommend that formal acquisition talks be started soon with both Miss Lenoir and Mister Blériot, with the view of buying their products in significant quantities."

"Well, we certainly need more planes and equipment for our air units: what we have right now is nearly risible and have limited performances, compared to Monsieur Blériot's aircraft."

"If I may," politely cut in Tasha, "you may want to pass the word to someone in the French Navy about my radios and my Metallex explosive: French warships could also benefit greatly from them, especially from my long range radios."

"You are right, miss. Normally, I don't interact with the Navy Department, but I do know a rear admiral who is a friend of mine. I will slip him a couple of your marvelous pamphlets."

"Thank you, Colonel. It is not that I raised this in order to attract more sales. Rather, I believe that the French Navy must be as well prepared as the French Army to defend the country. Warships at sea with effective long-range communications have a big advantage over warships who don't."

"Again, I agree with you and understand your motives, miss."

The group then waited mostly in silence for the next fifteen minutes or so, until a radio call came from Barès.

"Buc Control, this is Barès. We are now as high as we could climb and are at an altitude of 7,970 meters, over."

"That is fantastic, Captain!" Replied Giffard, who had again been given the radio's headset by Tasha. "What do you intend to do next?"

"We will go back down to medium altitude, in order not to strain too much our engine and will take some distance, to test the operational range of this VHF radio set, over."

"I concur! Go ahead, Captain! Giffard, out!"

On his part Martin Ducharme quickly wrote down the maximum altitude attained by Barès on the civilian version of the Blériot plane, which still constituted an unofficial World record for altitude. The French officials then took the time to read in detail the pamphlets given to them by either Tasha or Louis, asking a few questions to clarify some details and also discussing between them about the merits of the various items offered for sale, this after walking away in order to speak privately out of earshot of Tasha and Louis. They would have been shocked to learn that Tasha still was able to hear what they said then, thanks to her ear implants.

With the group back together in front of the workshop, they waited for Barès to send another radio report. Giffard was growing nervous by the time that call came, but he noted at once that the signal was much weaker than before.

"That's about time you called, Barès. I get you clear but weak. Where are you right now?"

"We are over the port of Le Havre, Colonel, flying at an altitude of 3,000 meters, over!"

"Le Havre?! But, that's about 160 kilometers away! And you still can hear me well?"

"I get you weak but clear, Colonel. Miss Clarkson just told me that we still have reception because of our altitude. If we would to go down, we would then probably lose contact with you."

"Well, if you are satisfied with your test of the aircraft, you may turn back and return to Buc, Captain. I will be waiting for your impressions once you will have landed, out!"

Giffard was nearly ecstatic as he gave back the radio headset to Tasha.

"We had clear communications at a distance of up to 160 kilometers. Your radios will be a godsend to our aviators."

Tasha acknowledged his compliment with a simple nod and a smile.

When he landed back in Buc after making a speed run from Le Havre at an average speed of 300 kilometers per hour, beating by a wide margin the official World speed record, Barès was as excited as a young child and had to take a minute to calm down before giving a detailed report to Giffard, with Ducharme listening carefully and taking notes. At the end of it, Giffard shook hands with both Tasha, Louis, Johanna and Terry before leaving with his three aides and after promising to send a car to take Tasha on Monday morning, to go make tests of her Metallex explosive at the Fort of Mont Valérien. As they both watched their visitors leave in their staff car, Tasha looked sideways at Louis.

“Well, this could be the start of a thunderous entry into business...or of a huge disappointment if those stingy politicians refuse to make available the budgets that will be needed to buy all that we can offer them, Louis.”

“Be positive, Tasha. With the kind of glowing report that Colonel Giffard will undoubtedly give to his superiors and to the Minister of War, I expect that at least a few preliminary contracts for initial batches of planes and products will soon follow. After all, just the fact that Colonel Giffard came here on his own initiative, without any urging from us, is an encouraging thing by itself.”

“True! Let’s hope that the test explosions for my Metallex on Monday will go well. Talking of tests, I will need to go speak with Terry for a moment.”

Terry, who was expecting Tasha to ask her about her flight with Barès, was more than a little surprised by her request from her when her friend spoke to her in private.

“You want me to help design a military helmet made of Durex, plus a set of body armor? Why?”

“Because YOU are the true expert here about such stuff, being a combat-experienced previous user, and because these things could save tens of thousands of French soldiers’ lives in the war to come. So, let’s get to work: we don’t have much time to produce prototype sets.”

09:42 (Paris Time)

Monday, November 25, 1912

Fort of Mont Valérien, Suresnes

Two kilometers west of Paris

When the military driver sent by Colonel Giffard dropped Tasha and Terry off on the side of the large parade square in the center of the old 19th Century fortress of Mont Valérien, they found that Giffard was waiting for them with a French Army major general, a French Navy rear-admiral and an Army lieutenant colonel, on top of Martin Ducharme, Captain Robert Durant and Captain Barès. Giffard hurried at once to do the presentations as they exchanged handshakes.

"Miss Tasha Lenoir, Miss Terry Clarkson, may I present you Major General Fernand de Laroche, head of the Army's Artillery Corps, Rear-Admiral Albert de Jumonville, who commands our naval infantry, and Lieutenant Colonel Jean Laliberté, the commander of the Fort du Mont Valérien. You know already Monsieur Ducharme and Captains Durant and Barès, of course."

"Of course! Pleased to meet you, General de Laroche and Admiral de Jumonville, as well as you, Colonel Laliberté. So, where are we suppose to make some noise this morning, Colonel Giffard?"

"Colonel Laliberté has suggested to me that we conduct our explosives testing at the bottom of one of the fort's counterscarp trenches, where we will have a wide and long deep space lined with stone walls. It should be perfectly safe there to do our tests."

"That sounds most satisfactory to me, Colonel. Would that place be also appropriate to conduct some rifle firing from a distance of a hundred meters or more?"

"Uh, yes, if the shooter aims correctly and doesn't fire high in the air." Answered Lieutenant Colonel Laliberté. "But why talk about shooting a rifle, miss? I thought that you came simply to test your new explosive?"

"Because something that was mentioned in Buc last Thursday, during Colonel Giffard's visit, gave me an idea, which I hurried to materialize during the weekend. Terry, please show to our hosts what we brought."

Putting down the large kit bag she was carrying, Terry opened it and took out in succession a small steel box, two helmets, six medium-sized square plates and what looked like a kind of thick vest that would cover most of a human torso. Next, Tasha bent down and picked up first the steel box, opening it and showing its content to the French officials.

"These are the samples of Metallex I brought with me for the tests this morning. I have multiple individual charges with respective weights of a hundred grams, 200 grams, and 500 grams, so that you could compare their explosive power to those of the explosives you presently use."

"Why not bring bigger charges of a kilo or more, miss?" Asked Laliberté, making Tasha cringe.

"Uh, I don't think that would have been wise, Colonel. One kilo of my Metallex has the equivalent power of 3.6 kilos of TNT, something not to trifle with. However, if you really insist, and if you can set up the test site at a reasonable distance from us, I can always screw together multiple charges, since they were designed to be easily assembled together according to needs."

Laliberté looked in turn at Giffard and de Laroche.

"I have a team of sappers ready with plenty of initiation wire, enough to make multiple test firings at up to 200 meters. As for the walls of the trench, they were built to withstand heavy cannon fire."

"We will see as the tests will go, Colonel." Decided General de Laroche after a short hesitation before looking at Tasha and Terry. "Well, what else did you bring with you, Miss Lenoir?"

"I brought samples of my Durex polymer that could possibly interest the French Army, General. You have here two combat helmets, each made in a different thickness of Durex, six Durex plates of a thickness varying from five to ten millimeters and, finally, a soldier's armored vest made of canvas lined with twelve millimeter-thick Durex plates fitted with foam cushions for better wearer comfort. If possible, I would like to test their resistance to bullet impacts at various distances."

"We have 8mm Lebel rifles and a variety of revolvers here in the fort, miss." Then said Laliberty. "I am going to go get my best rifle marksman, as well as my own service revolver and some ammunition."

As Laliberty left at a run, shouting orders to a passing warrant officer, Tasha presented the two helmets to Giffard and de Laroche.

"If you would like to try them on in turn, gentlemen. The helmet in my left hand is made of five millimeter-thick Durex and weighs one kilo. The one in my right hand is made of seven millimeter-thick Durex and weighs 1.4 kilos."

Before putting on the heavier helmet, de Laroche examined it closely, noting its construction and shape. He smiled on seeing the small tricolor French flag painted on the front of the helmet, which was painted an overall khaki green color, except for the front hood and visor, which had been left as transparent Durex.

"This helmet certainly looks good and martial, miss. French soldiers should be proud to wear it."

"More importantly, General, they should feel much safer on the battlefield with those helmets, which would encourage them into being even more aggressive. However, Durex, while extremely hard and light, does not have the thermal resistance of steel, so the soldiers using these helmets should be warned not to use them as cooking pots."

"I see your point, miss. I have known many lowly soldiers who needed someone else to think for them."

De Laroche then put on his helmet and secured its chin strap, then shook his head a bit, trying to get a feel for it.

"The weight of this helmet is reasonable, especially if it proves to provide some vital protection to the head against bullets and fragments. I like this curved neck guard and front visor: they will help deflect shrapnel from artillery shells exploding above our soldiers."

"I have to caution you that my helmets are meant mostly to stop shrapnel fragments and low to medium velocity bullets, General. Expecting them to resist a rifle bullet fired from up close would be too optimistic, in my opinion. However, since I don't know how your rifle bullets are made, I will wait to see the results from live firings against them."

De Laroche nodded his head in approval, then took off his helmet and exchanged it with Giffard, who gave him the five millimeter-thick helmet.

"Now, this one feels much less tiring to wear! However, as you said, we will wait to see the results of the ballistic impact tests to decide which one could prove the best helmet. Here, Admiral de Jumonville! Maybe your naval infantry would like to have such a helmet. After all, they are supposed to be our spearhead overseas and in coastal raids."

"True, even though it is the Metallex explosive of Miss Lenoir that mainly interests me. Imagine if I could replace the high-explosive fragmentation shells fired by our warships' medium and large caliber guns with shells full of this Metallex."

Tasha cringed on thinking about that and made a quick calculation in her head before looking soberly at de Jumonville.

"Admiral, the result could be even more devastating than even I expected until now: since Metallex would replace much of the steel casings of your naval shells, on top of replacing the explosive charge inside them, you would end up with possibly up to hundreds of kilos of Metallex, instead of only a few dozen kilos. When taking into

account the superior blast power of Metallex, you could end up with explosive shells with blast power unheard of before, equivalent to close to a ton of TNT. How much explosive filling and what type is there in your larger naval shells, Admiral?"

Both de Jumonville and de Laroche opened their eyes and mouth wide when they fully understood what Tasha meant.

"My God! Our main 305 millimeter guns on our battleships fire shells weighing 440 kilos, with only a maximum of 55 kilos out of that being a picric acid explosive bursting charge. Our armor-piercing shells have even less, with only thirteen kilos of picric acid inside them."

Tasha concentrated for a couple of seconds, mentally calculating the explosive power equivalencies involved.

"Hum, thirteen kilos out of 440 kilos represents three percent of shell mass in picric acid filling, which has a RE of 1.2 and a detonation velocity of 7,350 meters per second. My Metallex has a RE of 3.6, three times that of your picric acid, and has a detonation velocity of 9,430 meters per second. Leaving enough steel for the outer casing's sidewalls and nose cap, so that the shell could still pierce armor, this would leave a margin of about 300 kilos to be filled with Metallex. Such an amount of Metallex would in turn have the explosive power of 900 kilos of picric acid and would have the extra benefit of being much more stable, while having none of its corrosive effect or toxicity."

Everybody, except for Terry, looked at her with stunned surprise, with Admiral de Jumonville asking her a question after a few seconds of delay.

"How could you do those calculations so quickly in your head, Miss Lenoir? You took less than three seconds to come out with all that data."

"How? By being a certified genius with an I.Q. of 179, Admiral. Unfortunately for me, I was not taken seriously back in the United States, which is why I came to France."

"An I.Q. of 179? Wow! I should kneel to that and kiss both of your feet, Miss Lenoir!"

"No need to kiss both of my feet, my dear Admiral de Jumonville: one will do."

The group broke out in spontaneous laughter at her joke. Once they had quieted down, General de Laroche picked up one of the Durex plates and examined it, knocking on it with his knuckles and then trying to bend it in his hands. His efforts made Colonel Giffard smile.

"No need to tire yourself for nothing, General: I tried to smash a plate of this Durex with a three-kilo hammer on Thursday, without results."

"Damn! This material is incredible. Let me try on this vest."

Terry had to help him then, by showing how the front and rear halves of the vest were fixed together once in place. De Laroche jumped on the spot a few times with the vest on, getting a feel for it.

"Hey, I barely feel the weight of this vest, even though it weighed about three kilos when in my hands."

"That's because its weight is fairly evenly distributed over your whole torso, General." Said Terry. "The vest as is actually weighs 2.9 kilos. You will see that there are a number of small pouches for ammunition distributed on the front plates, where they are within easy hand reach. This vest could also be modified with extra attachment points for things like water bottles, knives, grenades, first aid kits, compasses and other things."

"Could the vest be dyed a regular army light blue, instead of this khaki green color?"

Terry had to check her tongue and facial expression, as she was tempted to ask who the hell would be dumb enough to run around a battlefield in a light blue uniform. However, this time period still had much to learn about modern warfare.

"It could be dyed the color that its buyer would want, General. However, the idea of this vest is to protect the soldier wearing it. Making him as inconspicuous as possible to enemy snipers would be another aim of this vest."

"A logical enough reason, miss."

Terry was tempted to ask him why then he and the other French Army officers present were wearing flashy red uniform trousers. Again, she kept her sarcasm to herself, not wanting to alienate them and ruin Tasha's demonstration.

Lieutenant Colonel Laliberté finally returned with his pistol belt on him and with a soldier armed with a rifle in tow, stopping and saluting in front of General de Laroche.

"I have the best rifleman in my unit with me, General. We can now go proceed with the explosives and firing tests. If you will please all follow me."

"We are with you, Colonel."

The group, with the armed soldier last, then started walking, coming off the parade square and following a paved trail for a moment before going down a staircase barred by

a solid door. Then following a tunnel illuminated by electrical lamps, the group finally went through a steel and wood door that Laliberté unlocked with a key, emerging in the open air of a deep, wide trench lined on both sides with vertical stone walls. A group of seven soldiers was already waiting in the trench, standing around a folding table supporting a number of small boxes and crates, plus spools of electrical wire dispensers and a few detonator plungers units. The senior officers' group walked to the table, prompting the soldiers present there to come to rigid attention and salute the officers. One warrant officer with gray hair nearly shouted as he presented himself to de Laroche.

"Warrant Officer Mélançon, at your service with six soldiers, General!"

"At ease, Warrant! You have everything ready, along with the test charges?"

"Yes, General! We have test charges of 200 grams in black powder, dynamite and TNT, General."

"Then, we will start with comparison firings of black powder, dynamite, TNT and Metallex in nominal weights of 200 grams. Miss Lenoir, if you could hand over one of your 200 grams charge to Warrant Mélançon, so that he could go set it up."

"With pleasure, General!" Replied Tasha before opening her box of explosives and picking the smallest sized charge in it, then giving it to the senior N.C.O., who looked at it in a dubious way while weighing it in his hand. The man was however too disciplined to pass a remark in front of a general, so he simply went with four men to the four sand-bagged pits lined up and well separated that were positioned 150 meters away. The soldiers took a few minutes to connect the initiating wires to their respective charges before coming back quickly to the table, where the warrant connected one by one the wires to the plunger units.

"The charges are ready, General."

"Then, detonate the black powder charge, Warrant."

"Yes, General!"

The warrant pushed down the plunger of the first explosive pit on the left, making a loud but otherwise unimpressive 'BANG' resonate while a cloud of white smoke rose up from the pit. That prompted de Laroche in smiling to Tasha.

"This is why black powder is now mostly relegated to fireworks and petards, miss. We will now detonate the TNT charge."

That explosion, while much louder, didn't shake things much, being barely twice as powerful as black powder. The dynamite charge, being third in line, blew up next, and proved quite more powerful than TNT, with a RE of 1.25. As the Metallex charge was

about to be detonated, the French officers unconsciously bent forward, their attention to the maximum. The explosion that followed nearly dismantled the sandbags of the test pit and made the officers and soldiers jump back.

“Woah! That was something.” Said de Laroche, impressed. “And you are sure that this was only a 200-gram charge, Miss Lenoir?”

“Of course I am, General. You want to see what a 300 gram-charge of Metallex can do? It is the weight I was planning to use for my future hand grenades.”

“Very well! Let’s test your 300 grams. Warrant, go place the 300-gram Metallex sample in the right side pit.”

“Yes, General!”

Handling the Metallex charge with newfound respect, the NCO went forward with it, placing it in the pit previously used for the dynamite charge and inserting in it a detonator attached to a command wire. Returning to the table and connecting the wire to a plunger, the warrant looked at de Laroche.

“Ready, General!”

“Then, fire the charge.”

The warrant nodded, then pushed down the plunger. This time, the firing pit was completely obliterated, leaving only a small crater in its place. De Laroche, now enthusiastic about these tests, grinned widely to Tasha.

“Your Metallex is simply fantastic, miss! What is its composition?”

“I would need to list quite a long chemical formula for that, General. Suffice to say that it is a mixed alloy of metals and polymers.”

“What do you have left with you in terms of test charges, miss?”

“I have three 200 grams charges left with me, plus a 500 gram charge, General.”

“Could we try all four together then?”

Tasha gave him a somber look.

“If we do, I would suggest that we go set this table back by another hundred meters at the least, General. Metallex causes a very strong blast wave, as you were able to see.”

“I still would like to try such a charge, miss.”

“As you wish, General, but you better move this table first.”

“Fair enough! Men, let’s move everything back by another hundred meters.”

The soldiers dully moved the table and their equipment back by a hundred meters before the warrant went to set the 1.1-kilo charge of Metallex in the remaining intact pit. All the Frenchmen were expectant as the warrant connected the wire between the charge and the plunger, then fired the charge on command from de Laroche. This time, the shock wave from the explosion, equivalent to nearly four kilos of TNT and travelling at a much higher velocity than TNT, was still strong enough after 250 meters to blow the hats of the officers off their heads, leaving General de Laroche and Admiral de Jumonville wide-eyed.

“Merde⁴! This little charge was way more powerful than a 75mm gun shell! I would hate to see what one of your battleship shells made of this Metallex would do, Admiral.”

“Hate? I would love to see that.” Replied the ecstatic naval officer, who then looked soberly at Tasha.

“Miss Lenoir, Colonel Giffard told me that you would be ready to sell the production license of your Metallex explosive to the French government, so that it could then be produced in French state arsenals. Is that correct?”

“It is, Admiral. My only conditions would be that I shall retain the patent and design license to it, so that I could continue to develop applications for my Metallex. I also want written assurances that production licenses for Metallex will not be sold to non-French users without my express consent and that no Metallex will be sold on the open market. I developed it to help protect France against its enemies, actual and potential, not to propagate more wars around the World.”

“I have no problems personally with your conditions, miss. Do you have any on your side, General de Laroche?”

“None! Miss Lenoir, be assured that this demonstration will have consequences and that you can expect a high-power delegation from the War Ministry to come visit you soon.”

“I will be happy to greet it when it comes, General. Now, how about doing some practice firing against my Durex plates and helmets?”

“By all means, miss.” Replied enthusiastically de Laroche.

⁴ Merde : Shit, in French. A very common and popular expletive in France.

With the soldiers going forward to lean the six plates of Durex against a distant stone wall and resting the two helmets on top of stones, the marksman brought by Lieutenant Colonel Laliberté took a prone position at a distance of 200 meters from the Durex plates. Waiting for the other soldiers to return first, the rifleman then fired carefully aimed shots in succession at the plates and helmets. Not knowing anything about the ballistic properties of such antique weapons and being accustomed to modern military weapons with much higher muzzle velocities, both Tasha and Terry fully expected that at least one Durex plate would be penetrated at such a relatively short distance for a rifle. Their surprise was as big as that of the French officers and soldiers when, on inspection, none of the plates and helmets showed a single clean penetration. Only the five millimeter-thick plate and helmet showed a deep crater from a bullet impact that still had not pierced fully through the Durex. That result left the Frenchmen open-mouthed for long seconds, while both Tasha and Martin Ducharme quickly noted down the results of the first salvo of bullets. De Laroche then had the marksman move up closer, to a distance of 150 meters from the plates and helmets. This time, the five millimeter plate and helmet were penetrated through and through, while the six millimeter plate barely stopped the 8mm bullet fired at it. After more notes were frantically taken, the shooter switched to a position a mere hundred meters from the targets. To de Laroche's disbelief, the ten, nine and eight millimeter plates still defeated the 8mm rifle bullets, while the helmet made of 7mm Durex managed to deflect the bullet fired at it, its curves adding to its resistance, with only a deep, long scratch created in it. It took point blank firing by the 8mm rifle to finally defeat convincingly the ten millimeter plate. However, the twelve millimeter plate inserts of the armored vest stopped all the bullets fired at them from point blank. Laliberté also fired his 8mm revolver repeatedly from point blank range at the vest and both helmets, with none of his bullets penetrating. A heavy silence fell in the trench as the Frenchmen contemplated with mouths gaping the bullet-riddled Durex plates, helmets and vest, with the French soldier who had shot at the plates and helmets best resuming the general thoughts in a crude way.

"Merde! J'en crois pas mes yeux!"⁵

On her part, a jubilant Tasha could already see some juicy contracts coming her way from the French War Ministry, unless their minister proved to be a complete idiot. That was when she chose to speak up.

⁵ Merde, j'en crois pas mes yeux! In French : 'Shit, I can't believe my own eyes!'.

"General, Admiral, if I may. Irrespective of what may follow this test trial of my Durex and of my Metallex, could I impress on you to have these results and even the existence itself of my products kept absolutely confidential, with all the participants here sworn to secrecy. You could imagine what could happen if some enemy spies heard rumors of what happened here today and reported back those rumors to their superiors in, say, Berlin or Vienna?"

That brought at once sober looks on the faces of the officers, with de Laroche nodding his head once at Tasha.

"I certainly can see your point, Miss Lenoir. While we presently enjoy relatively civil relations with Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, I shudder at the thought that the secrets of your Metallex and Durex could fall into their hands. The consequences could be downright terrible."

The general then turned towards the soldiers present and their warrant officer, making them come to rigid attention.

"Men, you are to forget about everything you saw here this morning. You are not to speak about this to anybody, ever! The ones who will be caught breaking the secret of these new products will be court-martialed at once for treason. Is that clear?"

"YES, GENERAL!"

"Then, you are dismissed! Warrant, have this table and the rest of the materiel returned to the quartermaster and erase all the traces of this test, including the spent cartridge casings."

"Yes, General!"

Then turning to face Tasha, Major General de Laroche smiled gently to her.

"Miss Lenoir, I believe that you just entered in a very good and close relationship with the French Army."

"You can add the French Navy to that too, Miss Lenoir." Said emphatically Rear-Admiral de Jumonville.

CHAPTER 5 – FIRST RACE

14:11 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, April 15, 1913

Pub ‘Le Bistro du Port’, seafront

Port of Monaco, Principality of Monaco

Mediterranean coast of France

The thin young man in his mid twenties who entered the pub ‘Le Bistro du Port’ found it nearly full of mostly male customers discussing between themselves, sometimes passionately, while drinking wine and with many of them smoking cigarettes, filling the pub with a haze of tobacco smoke. That had prompted the owner of the pub to open wide his windows, in order to better ventilate his establishment. Thankfully, the wind was fresh but not cold in Monaco at this time of the year and the breeze did a lot to evacuate the excess smoke. Seeing two men he knew well sitting together at a table, Maurice Prévost made his way to that table. Jules Védrines and Louis Béchereau saw him approach and invited him at once to sit down with them. Maurice noted at once the long face Louis Béchereau was making and looked at him with concern.

“Is everything alright, Louis? You look depressed.”

“I am depressed, Maurice.” Replied the aeronautical engineer and aircraft designer. “Business has been bad lately for Deperdussin and the company could fold in the months to come if new orders don’t come in.”

Maurice Prévost, who was himself piloting a Deperdussin Monoplane equipped with floats for the incoming air race, was frankly surprised to hear that.

“But, wasn’t Deperdussin expecting a big military contract for at least twenty of his planes? After all, the Deperdussin Monoplane and Monocoque are about the fastest planes around. How could the military aviation department not buy some Deperdussin aircraft?”

Béchereau gave him a disillusioned look as he answered Maurice.

“You mean ‘were the fastest planes around’. The Blériot-Kruger BOURDON is now officially the fastest plane around, with an officially recorded top speed of 317 kilometers per hour that was certified by the Aéro-Club de France last month. Rumors

are that Blériot got a big military contract in the place of Deperdussin, on top of landing many private orders from around Europe. When I think that a woman designed that plane!”

“Yeah! Women are really starting to put their noses where they don’t belong.” Pronounced Jules Védrines, a man widely known for his rough manners and profane language but who was also acknowledged to be a brilliant pilot. “Three of those women have even registered for this race, all in Blériot-Kruger BOURDON. Someone ought to put these fucking cunts back in their proper place and I firmly hope to be the one who will do it.”

Maurice Prévost gave a cautioning look at Védrines then.

“Jules, those women, at least the ones I know, are both competent flyers and brave women with a lot of talent. Both Héléne Dutrieu and Marie Marvingt are accomplished athletes and experienced pilots whom I admire a lot. While doing maintenance on my own Deperdussin Monoplane, which is moored next to Marvingt’s plane at quayside, I was able to talk with Marie, who showed me her brand new plane. She had ordered her Blériot-Kruger SUPER BOURDON in the air ambulance version and that plane is downright fantastic! Contrary to the basic two-seat BOURDON, her SUPER BOURDON SANITAIRE has a wider fuselage that accommodates two forward seats with dual flight controls and two spaces for stretchers in the back. It also has a more powerful engine, a Salmson producing 380 horsepower, and is superbly equipped for its air ambulance role. She told me as well that all Blériot-Kruger BOURDON variants are now built from the start as amphibians, with a pair of long floats with wheels underneath. In view of the lack of adequate ground landing surfaces in many places, to have an amphibian is certainly a big advantage. Marie is positively in love with her new plane.”

The aeronautical engineer in Louis Béchereau woke up at those words and he looked at Maurice with unmitigated curiosity.

“What else did Marvingt tell you about her plane? What about this ‘cantilever wing’ concept and its so-called ‘flaps’?”

“She actually showed me how those flaps operate and I must say that the concept is brilliant. The series-built BOURDONs have electrically-actuated trailing edge surfaces running along much of the wing’s span. Those surfaces, or flaps if you prefer, can be extended down by up to forty degrees and thus augment greatly the lift provided

by the wings, lowering the stalling speed significantly and cutting on the takeoff and landing runs, or so Marie says.”

“If that plane is so fantastic, then how could a woman have designed it?” Cut in Védrières. “Nobody heard of that Kruger woman before she associated herself with Louis Blériot.”

“Maybe, but the results are plain to see: that Blériot-Kruger BOURDON is now truly king of the air and I am afraid that it is going to administer a beating to all of us flying other makes of aircraft.”

“Well, if that happens, then many aircraft builders, and not only Deperdussin, may fold and disappear in the months to come.” Said Béchereau in a resigned tone. “Have you noticed the number of foreign military officers and diplomats that have come to Monaco to watch the race? A lot of juicy foreign contracts could end up in the pocket of the winning aircraft’s designer.”

“Don’t tell me that there are a few of those dirty Germans in town, Maurice?” Asked Védrières, tensing up. Maurice nodded his head in response.

“I was told that there are effectively a few of them around, along with more exotic ones. I even saw a trio of Japanese men as they walked along the quay where the competition aircraft are moored, asking many questions and taking notes and even photographs.”

“Japanese? What are these slant-eyed yellow bugs doing here?” This time, Maurice felt obliged to chastise Jules Védrières’ foul language and he stared hard at him.

“Those slant-eyed yellow bugs, as you call them, beat the shit out of the Russians at sea eight years ago, Jules, so cut the racist rant, please! The potential market for airplanes, especially seaplanes and hydroplanes, in Japan and around Asia could be huge, considering the amount of islands around the Pacific and the China Sea. I am sure that...”

The rapidly growing noise of an aircraft engine approaching then made him pause while he listened to it. To his surprise, a second aircraft, sounding similar to the first, quickly followed, flying low over the town. Maurice was starting to rise from his chair, so that he could go look through one of the windows and see the types of the arriving planes, when the whole pub and its neighborhood started vibrating under the rapidly growing roar of extremely powerful engines.

“What the hell?...” Said Maurice before running outside of the pub, like nearly all the people in the pub. He was just in time to witness the passage overhead at an altitude of 400 meters of the biggest aircraft he had ever seen, a monster-sized seaplane with no less than four engines attached to its wings. Along with the other customers of the pub, including Louis Béchereau and Jules Védrine, Maurice saw that the giant plane was actually flying in formation behind two Blériot-Kruger BOURDON sports racers equipped with floats. It thus was not too difficult to guess who had built that giant, a guess that Louis Béchereau made at once.

“This thing must be a new Blériot-Kruger aircraft, but how could such a behemoth fly? The most powerful known engine, the Salmson 2A9, only develops 380 horsepower. Even with four such engines, this thing shouldn’t be able to take off.”

“Maybe Monsieur Salmson has produced a yet more powerful engine, Louis.” Proposed Maurice. “Anyway, I am going to get down to the main quay to watch the landing and arrival of those three planes.”

“I’m coming with you.” Quickly said Béchereau. Even though he didn’t say a word then, Jules Védrines also followed Maurice and the engineer, the trio nearly running towards the nearby quay reserved for the race’s participants. A growing crowd of excited people did the same and the quay was soon packed with curious onlookers as the three planes made a wide turn over the Bay of Monaco. The two smaller Blériot-Kruger landed first, one after the other, on the calm waters of the Bay of Monaco, with the bigger plane doing another additional circle before landing itself. Press photographers squeezed among the crowd of onlookers started taking multiple pictures as the three newcomers sailed into the enclosed port basin under engine power. As more details could be distinguished about the big seaplane transport, Jules Védrines flew into a rage and violently threw his beret on the ground.

“HOW THE HELL ARE WE SUPPOSED TO COMPETE AGAINST **THAT?**” Louis Béchereau, his eyes fixed on the big four-engine seaplane, understood too well Védrines’ reaction then, as he himself was overwhelmed by what he was seeing now: compared with most of the planes already moored at quayside in the port basin, the giant seaplane made for a truly violent contrast. Not only was it big and powerful, but it also was of clearly superior design and technology. Louis had in fact expected such a kind of plane to appear in maybe two or three decades in the future, at the earliest. However, here it was, at a time when most airplanes were still made of wood and

canvas. If that female engineer, Kruger, came to Monaco for the competition, then he would definitely need to have a serious professional chat with her.

Also part of the crowd of onlookers, but slightly away from others, were two men dressed in civilian suits and who were exchanging words in German while keeping their voices low.

"Mein Gott! What a fantastic beast. It seems like Mister Louis Blériot was in fact hiding a lot of things from us, Herr Oberst⁶. This is nothing short of a nasty surprise for Germany, especially if this big monster is ever turned into a bomber aircraft."

"You are right, my dear Erich." Replied Colonel Hans von Vittingen. "The Blériot-Kruger BOURDON, with its huge speed advantage over all the planes we have in Germany, was already very bad news for us. If that four-engine seaplane proves anywhere as fast, then it would be able to bomb our country with impunity, if we ever go to war with France. We must gain as much information as we can on it in the days to come. In the meantime, take plenty of pictures, preferably close-in, detailed ones that could reveal the secrets of that giant."

"Understood, Herr Oberst." Answered Hauptmann Erich Langefeld.

The local policemen guarding the quay reserved for the participants of the Schneider Trophy competition had a hard time pushing away the crowd of excited onlookers, press photographers and reporters and free enough of the quay's length to allow the three Blériot aircraft to come alongside and tie themselves to the quay with thick ropes thrown to them by port employees. The first to come out on the quay from the three arriving planes were two men and two women who got out of the two BOURDON twin-seaters. The reporters and photographers started shouting questions at once when they recognized the two men to be Louis Blériot and the well-known philanthropist Ernest Archdeacon.

"MISTER BLÉRIOT, IS THAT BIG, FOUR-ENGINE PLANE YOUR ENTRY IN THE COMPETITION?"

Blériot smiled in amusement at that question.

"No, of course not! The BOURDON I just piloted will be my plane for the competition. The second BOURDON that arrived with me belongs to Miss Terry

⁶ Oberst : 'Colonel' in German.

Clarkson, who will also compete in the race. She gave a ride today to Miss Suzanne Deutsch de la Meurthe, daughter of the oil magnate Henri Deutsch. As for the Blériot-Kruger CIGOGNE⁷ that you see there, it simply carries my ground maintenance crew and a stock of spare parts, plus my family and a few friends of mine who wanted to watch the race.”

“CAN YOU GIVE US A FEW DETAILS ABOUT YOUR NEW TRANSPORT PLANE, MISTER BLÉRIOT?”

“I will do that tomorrow, when guided tours of my new CIGOGNE will be conducted. In the meantime, I would like to get my family and friends to a hotel in town, so that we could rest and prepare for tomorrow.”

“MISTER BLÉRIOT, THREE WOMEN HAVE PUT THEIR NAMES DOWN FOR THE RACE AND ALL OF THEM FLY BLÉRIOT PLANES. WHY SO?”

Blériot gave a dubious look at the reporter who had shouted the last question, while Terry Clarkson and Suzanne Deutsch gave the man a hard stare.

“Why? Because my planes are the best and because these women bought the best. It is as simple as that.”

Thankfully for Louis, the attention of the crowd then shifted to the moored seaplane transport, from which persons were now stepping out on its port side float and climbing the gangway just put in place between the quay and the seaplane’s float. The collective disbelief grew as more and more people came out of the big transport. Jules Védrines was part of those counting and nearly exploded as seemingly the last person left the seaplane.

“NINETEEN! That’s unheard of! How could this be possible, Louis?”
Instead of answering him directly, Béchereau pointed at the windows of the cockpit.

“There are more people inside, Jules: I see movement in the cockpit. How could such a feat be possible? Simple: big engines and a general design that crushes anything I could produce myself. The fabrication techniques themselves are top notch, if I can judge from the exterior finish of this seaplane. Look how smooth the outer surfaces are everywhere. Also, I see a number of features that I can’t even identify, even though I pride myself in being a competent aeronautical engineer. I definitely want to have a serious professional chat with that Kruger woman.”

“And what is stopping you, mister?”

⁷ Cigogne : Stork in French.

Louis Béchereau nearly jumped out of his skin when the female voice spoke from very close to him. Turning abruptly around, he faced a tall, blond woman who appeared to be in her mid thirties and who was a true Aryan beauty.

“Uh, are you the one who designed that seaplane, miss?”

“I am!” She replied with aplomb, smiling, before presenting her right hand.

“Johanna Kruger, at your service, mister...”

“Louis Béchereau! I design planes for the Société Deperdussin. Look, Miss Kruger, I find your plane completely fascinating and I have tons of questions about it that I would love to ask you.”

“I have no doubt about that, Mister Béchereau. I will be most happy to answer your questions while you visit our planes tomorrow, after we have a chance to get hotel rooms for our stay. I was told that most of the hotels in Monaco are quite full, because of the incoming Schneider Trophy race.”

“That they are, Miss Kruger. Uh, you really wouldn’t have any problems with showing us your planes and answering my questions? I was expecting that Blériot would be more secretive about his new planes.”

Johanna gave him a sober, most serious look then and she replied in a soft tone of voice, trying to convince him that she was sincere.

“Look, Mister Béchereau. Me and Louis Blériot, along with my actual employer, Miss Tasha Lenoir, are in agreement on many things, one of which is that science is meant to be shared, not hidden. What I am ready to share is some basic fundamentals of aeronautical engineering, so that all French aircraft designers can apply them to their own designs.”

Louis felt some irritation rising in him at those words.

“Miss, I am a qualified aeronautical engineer and I know the fundamentals of my trade, believe me.”

In response, she shook her head slowly, looking at him as if he was a young student who had problems understanding the matter.

“You and the other aeronautical engineers and designers in France think that you know the fundamentals, yet you know nothing about supersonic flight and don’t even understand correctly the various factors that create both lift and drag in a wing. Believe me, Mister Béchereau: the days of aircraft made of wood, canvas and string are numbered, at least in France, and I will happily contribute to that. With this said, I will see you again tomorrow. Have a good evening, Mister Béchereau.”

Johanna then picked up her suitcases and walked away to join back the group that had come from inside the seaplane, prompting a caustic remark from Jules Védrines.

“Quite an arrogant bitch, isn’t she? She seems to think that she knows everything and that we don’t.”

Louis gave Jules a cautious look.

“Jules, just look first at your plane, then at that big seaplane, and tell me who knows more about aircraft design here. It certainly isn’t me.”

08:14 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, April 15, 1913

Aircraft mooring quay, port basin

Monaco

There were already plenty of curious onlookers around when Johanna returned in the morning with Tasha, Louis Blériot and his five mechanics to the quay along which the competitors’ airplanes were moored. However, she was not worried about how safe their planes were: local policemen had been guarding the quay all night, while all the Blériot planes present at quay had been locked before they had left for the hotel yesterday. Stopping briefly near the edge of the quay, Johanna took some time to admire the smooth lines of the big Blériot-Kruger CIGOGNE, which contrasted so much with the collection of often crudely-assembled wood and canvas aircraft of the other competitors. While it would have been considered primitive by the standards of the 27th Century, she was sincerely proud of her design, which was about as good as one could make with the materials and tools available in this time period. She had designed it in record time, using the powerful computer-aided-design program loaded into her laptop computer, while the first BOURDON was still being built under her supervision. Then, still while the BOURDON prototype was being built out of standard aluminum alloy parts, she had other workers prepare the series of big molds in which the major structural parts of the future CIGOGNE would be produced by injecting under pressure hot Durex in those molds, which were reusable. All that meant that the Buc prototype workshop had been ready to start producing parts and structural elements as soon as Louis Blériot and Tasha gave the go to build the first CIGOGNE. The Blériot workers had been mystified at first by this method of aircraft building but had soon marveled instead at how fast the prototype got built. With a sizeable portion of the plane’s parts and skin made out of

fiberglass and Durex, both of which had less than half the density of aluminum, and with the remaining being made of aluminum alloy, the big seaplane had ended being lighter than even a wood and canvas plane of the same size would have been, while being much stronger structurally than even an all-aluminum plane would be. Right now, while Johanna was in Monaco with Louis, Tasha and Terry, workers at the Buc prototype workshop, including a night shift to supplement the day shift, were already assembling a second seaplane. However, that plane, to be designated the Blériot-Kruger PÉLICAN, was going to be the prototype of the military variant of the civilian CIGOGNE. To build the PÉLICAN as quickly as possible had become early on an obvious imperative to Tasha and Johanna, who had then convinced Louis of it. The fact was that, even though there was no lack of enthusiasm about airplanes among French military officials, there was a near complete lack of French aviators experienced and qualified to pilot aircraft with more than one engine, while none had experience with a four-engine plane. Added to that was the often rudimentary flying training of most pilots, many of whom got their pilot's license after only a few hours in the air, while technical training was almost non-existent. This was tantamount to eventually giving a heavy truck to a student driver, a sure recipe for disaster in the long run. Johanna and Tasha had finally managed after some frustrating talks at first with a few obtuse military senior officers to convince senior army and navy commanders that starting an early and comprehensive training program for the future aircrews and ground crews of Blériot-Kruger French military planes was both necessary and urgent. As a result, a large group of army and navy aviators and ground technicians had arrived less than a month ago in Buc to get acquainted with the new planes, Johanna's construction techniques and Tasha's materials. That had added to the tasks Terry Clarkson was already doing, with her now helping direct the training of these French military men, in a program Terry was calling 'Train the trainers'. She was also busy training another group of trainees, civilian ones, to be employed by Louis and Tasha to crew and maintain all the planes to be built and then flight-tested for Blériot. On that, Tasha had put some gentle pressure on Louis to open the ranks of this civilian group to female trainee volunteers. Louis, now accustomed by Tasha, Johanna and Terry to see women around him do unusual things, had given little opposition to that and, as a result, many women aviators and mechanics, some fledglings, some experienced ones, were now following an intensive training program alongside military and civilian men in Buc.

She was still reminiscing about all that when someone approached her, taking her back to the reality of the moment. Turning her head, she smiled on seeing that it was Louis Béchereau, who had a conciliatory expression on his face.

“Good morning, Mister Béchereau.”

“And good morning to you as well, Miss Kruger. Are you still ready to let me see your fantastic seaplane?”

“Of course I am! I spoke to Louis Blériot about that and he has approved in advance your tour of our CIGOGNE.”

“CIGOGNE? That is the name of your four-engine seaplane?”

“Yes! It is certainly a more colorful name for it than just ‘Blériot-Kruger Mark II’. Come with me, Mister Béchereau.”

The engineer didn’t need to be told twice and followed her closely down the quay, then across the gangway put in place between the quay and the port side hull float of the seaplane. The first detail he noted on entering the seaplane was how wide and solidly built the door was, something he remarked to Johanna, who smiled slightly then.

“That is because that door is meant to let in and out cargo as well as passengers, Mister Béchereau. You are in fact presently standing on the cargo lift of the main cargo compartment, situated under the passenger cabin. Let me show you.”

Extending an arm to touch a small control box next to the cargo door, she pressed a large red button, then withdrew her arm as an electric buzz could be heard, while the rectangular floor section on which she and Béchereau stood started going down slowly.

“This cargo lift is actuated by electric motors, like all the controls, flaps and rudders of this plane. You will see that the cargo hold, while quite voluminous, has a head clearance of only 165 centimeters. That was an intentional design choice by me, as such a height is enough to accommodate most types of cargo crates or boxes, while raising it would have meant a higher metacentric height, something detrimental to stability on the water.”

Louis nodded his head in understanding while giving an appreciative look around the cargo compartment, now that the lift was completely down.

“This cargo hold is indeed huge, Miss Kruger. It is at least two meters in width and six meters deep. What kind of cargo do you expect to carry in this plane?”

“About anything that will fit in and be worth the cost of carrying it. Priority will however go to bags of mail and diplomatic pouches. I expect that various governments

will want to use our planes to make their diplomats and officials travel faster over long distances than by using ships.”

“And what kind of range does this big beast has, if I may ask?”

“That is actually a question I prefer not to answer yet, Mister Béchereau. Please understand that this trip from Paris to Monaco was only the fourth flight of this plane. We still have to run extensive fuel consumption test flights before I can confidently say how far it will fly non-stop, but I will say that its range will be in the thousands of kilometers.”

Louis gave her a stunned look on hearing that.

“Thousands of kilometers?! But, such a plane is bound to completely change the scope of air travel.”

“Indeed! Let’s go back up and I will show you in which conditions the passengers of this plane will travel.”

Once back up to the main deck level, Johanna swept her arm around the mostly empty space between the two large side cargo doors.

“The curtains along the forward and aft bulkheads of this section actually hide luggage racks used to store the larger suitcases and other luggage belonging to the passengers. The smaller suitcases and handbags are stored in overhead racks above the passenger seats. During the flight, this section is used as a smoking lounge, which is why you see oversized air ventilation grills in the floor and ceiling, plus ashtrays in the corners. The idea is to prevent smokers from possibly disturbing other passengers, especially young children and old people with sick lungs. Have you ever had to share a lift cabin in a hotel with someone smoking a cigar, Mister Béchereau?”

“Yes, and I agree with your wish to minimize tobacco smoke discomfort to non-smoking passengers. One apparently rich man once blew his cigar smoke in my face when I asked him to turn away, thinking that his money meant that he didn’t owe any courtesies to working class people. I punched his lights out in response.”

“Good for you! I was tempted to do the same yesterday, at the hotel my group uses, but Terry took care of that.”

“Terry?”

“Terry Clarkson, a good friend of mine and of Miss Lenoir. She is piloting one of the Blériot-Kruger BOURDON that will participate in the race tomorrow. You must have seen her: she is very tall and has coffee-colored skin.”

"Ah yes! I place her now! Quite a big girl, effectively."

"And one not to trifle with. But let's get back to this plane. Let's go inside the aft passenger cabin."

As soon as he stepped into the aft passenger cabin, Louis was struck by the luxury and comfort in evidence, with well padded leather seats with tall backrests and headrests. He was also struck by the sheer number of seats in the cabin.

"Thirty seats! And they look really comfortable."

"Sit in one of them and try it." Offered Johanna, with Louis taking her offer and sitting in the nearest seat, next to a round window. Resting his head against the headrest of the seat, he closed his eyes for a moment.

"Damn, I could easily fall asleep in this seat."

"Then let me recline your seat." Replied Johanna, making Louis look with curiosity as she pushed a button under the tip of one armrest. He then felt the back of his seat pivot down smoothly, while a padded cushion under the forward edge of his seat pivoted upward, raising his feet as his whole back went down.

"Your seat is now at its maximum inclination, Mister Béchereau. During long flights, these seats will permit the passengers to go to sleep if they wish to. Now, if you could push your seat back up with your feet, I will show you other items of creature comfort."

After Louis did as told and was back in normal sitting position, Johanna pointed at a small, fixed lamp and at a sort of empty knob overhead.

"If you want to read at night in your seat, you can switch this overhead lamp on, while you can unscrew this valve if you need some extra ventilation air. You also have a call button when you need something from the stewardess, plus have a glass holder cavity molded just under your window. There is as well a tablet used to hold your meal tray, with the tablet folding away inside your left armrest. In front of you, on the back of the seat ahead of yours, are two large pockets. One pocket is meant to hold books, magazines and newspapers, while the other pocket holds an emergency inflatable vest in case of a crash at sea. Above you, that trap contains an emergency oxygen mask in case of sudden cabin decompression."

Johanna's last words made Louis look up sharply at her, utterly surprised.

"...sudden cabin decompression? You mean that this plane is pressurized in flight?"

"Yes, it is, but I must caution you at once that this necessitates some very specific design features and rules. If you don't respect those rules, then your plane may be liable to break up in pieces due to cabin structure fatigue caused by internal pressure changes at high altitude."

"Wow! The more I see of your aircraft, the more it impresses me."

"Well, you better hang on: there are a few more things I need to show you still. By the way, there are two lavatory stalls with chemical toilets and sinks in the back, plus another lavatory in the front, as well as a kitchenette where the stewardesses warm up the food trays for the passengers' meals during the flight. If you will follow me forward to the cockpit."

Louis got up from his seat at once and retraced his steps, crossing the luggage/smoking lounge section and entering the forward passenger cabin. The latter struck Louis at once with its twelve extra-wide, deeply cushioned seats and its rare wood paneling, while Johanna commented on it all.

"This is the first-class cabin. The seats here will of course cost more than those in the tourist-class cabin, but you get free drinks at will, up to a reasonable degree, and much more comfortable reclining seats."

"Hell! And I thought that the aft cabin was the first-class one. I now feel ashamed for putting simple wicker chairs in my Deperdussin planes."

"Well, at least you put chairs in them." Replied Johanna, amused. "Louis Blériot showed me other planes where the pilot has to sit directly on a wooden structural frame or on a simple canvas seat."

"Uh, I'm starting to see your point of view about your technology being way superior to the rest of us, Miss Kruger. Please accept my apologies for getting fired up at you yesterday."

"Mister Béchereau," said Johanna, her expression now sober, "you don't need to apologize for this: what I said yesterday could easily have passed for condescending words. Here is another confession for you: part of the reasons for me to invite you to tour this plane was to see if you would be interested to eventually work for Louis Blériot. He could use a talented engineer like you, while there are widespread rumors that Deperdussin is in bad financial shape and may fold sometimes this year. If that happens, be assured that there will be a place for you in Buc."

"Thank you for the thought, miss. It is true that things are not rosy for Deperdussin right now, but I wish to be loyal to him until his firm is no longer viable."

"I understand and admire loyalty, Mister Béchereau. This only proves to me that we would benefit one day from your talents. Just keep my offer in mind."

"I will, miss."

"And please call me simply 'Johanna' from now on. Can I call you 'Louis'?"

"You can, Johanna. Now, what is left for me to see?"

"The cockpit! As an engineer, you may appreciate how much advanced technology is crammed into that small space."

Going past the first-class section, the duo followed a very short and relatively narrow passage, along which Louis saw the door of a lavatory stall, to then emerge in an open space between two bulkheads. Two side exit doors were visible, while two seats facing aft were situated on one side of what had to be the entrance to the cockpit. Johanna then pointed at a small kitchen corner just aft of the two seats.

"This is where the stewardesses will warm up the meals for the passengers and prepare their drinks. They will use small carts to go deliver the food and drinks and will be seated in those two seats for the takeoffs and landings. Now, for the cockpit..."

Pushing the door of the cockpit open, she entered with Béchereau in a rather cramped space filled with four seats and what looked to Louis like tons of instruments and electronic equipment. Both mesmerized and overwhelmed by the sight of so much advanced technology compared to what he was accustomed to see in other planes, Louis took long minutes to examine in turn each instrument panel. He had already seen at the Paris Air Salon the precision flight instruments made by Tasha Lenoir, but he was crushed by what he saw at the position of the aircraft's radio operator.

"Five radio sets?!"

"Actually, you are looking at three radio transceivers: one VHF transceiver, one HF transceiver and one LF/MF transceiver. The other two units that you see are actually twin-channel receivers with radio direction-finding antennas covering the HF and LF/MF bands. By pinpointing the reception azimuths of various fixed radio beacon stations, the radio operator will then be able to triangulate the precise location of the aircraft, even when flying at night over the ocean, far from any coast."

"But, what radio beacon stations will you use for your triangulation? No such station exists right now, to my knowledge."

Johanna gave him a malicious grin in response while shaking her right index.

“You are actually wrong on that. My friend Hien did some digging at public libraries and newspapers archives about a number of subjects, one of which was the present state of radio direction finding, in order to avoid infringing on existing legal patents. The German company Telefunken put in operation in 1907 a system called ‘Kompass Sender’. That system is comprised of two emitting stations, one of which was built in Kleve, near the Dutch border, and the other at the Zeppelin base in Tonder, Denmark. The system’s purpose is to provide navigational aid to German Zeppelin dirigibles flying over the North Sea and English Channel area. It can also as well guide Zeppelin dirigibles intent on bombing French and British cities, if war ever breaks out.” Louis’ expression hardened at the mention of war with the Germans.

“Those Boche⁸ bastards! They love too much war to my taste. In fact, the newspapers are full of stories these days about continuing German military expansion and massive production of weapons.”

“I know, and that is partly why we can’t afford to waste time and resources by competing simply for sales of a few primitive aircraft to rich dandies. To return to the subject of radio beacon stations, Miss Lenoir, who designed all these radios and their new technologies, has already started a project to open a number of such beacon stations around France, Spain, Haiti and Senegal. The first stations should come on line in the weeks to come, at the most. Now, for the pilots’ instruments panels. You said that you saw Tasha’s new instruments at the Paris Air Salon, right?”

“Correct! Her gyroscopic attitude display unit in particular struck me then.”

“Well, she has since added to her line of flight instruments. If you look to the top left of the pilot’s instrument panel, next to the barometric altimeter, you will see another type of altimeter, as well as a new type of speed indicator. One uses timed radio waves echoes emitted downward instead of ambient air pressure to calculate accurately the true altitude of the aircraft over the surface, while the other measures the Doppler shift of radio waves emitted at a forward and down angle to measure the actual speed of the aircraft relative to the ground. While our aircrews will still use the barometric altimeter and true airspeed indicator as a supplementary way to check their navigation, these new instruments will tell them at all times how high and fast they really are flying.”

That explanation attracted to her a puzzled look from Béchereau.

⁸ Boche : Derogatory term used by French people to designate Germans. Used a lot during World War 1 and World War 2.

"Decidedly, you and your friend, Miss Lenoir, are becoming more and more of a mystery to me, Johanna. You reportedly arrived in France less than a year ago and, since then, Blériot has started to produce completely revolutionary planes, like this CIGOGNE, and other new technologies, like these radios. Where did you get the knowledge and the ideas for all that? As far as I know, the Americans are not that advanced technologically."

"True! However, I can't tell you more about me or my friends, Louis: too many important things are in the balance right now and the less others, especially the Germans, know about us, the better. I will just ask you to trust us and to believe me when I say that the goal of me, my friends and Louis Blériot is not to get rich, but to prepare France to better defend itself from its enemies."

Béchereau pondered that point for a moment before nodding his head.

"Very well! I will not ask further questions about this and will give you and your friends the benefit of the doubt. Thank you again for the tour. I better go now: I have a couple of planes to check before the race tomorrow."

"Then let me accompany you back to the quay."

A number of men who were examining the Blériot-Kruger CIGOGNE from the quay eyed her with intense curiosity as she bid goodbye to Louis Béchereau. The way those men gathered in small groups of two or three persons that kept their distances from the other onlookers signaled them in Johanna's mind as probable foreign military attachés...or as plain spies. Thinking about it, she decided to talk to Terry about this, to see if she would think appropriate to reinforce the security around her planes tonight.

When Johanna saw Terry, it was to find her having an apparently very friendly conversation with an aviator with the same kind of coffee-colored skin as her. When the engineer approached the two of them, Terry grinned widely and spoke to her while putting a hand on one shoulder of the man.

"Johanna, I must present to you Mister Charles Weymann. He holds a dual French and American citizenship and was born in Haiti but actually resides in France. He is participating in the race tomorrow in his Nieuport Monoplane."

"Pleased to meet you, Mister Weymann." Said Johanna while shaking the man's hand. "I am Johanna Kruger."

"So, you are the one who designed those new, fantastic Blériot planes? I must say that your CIGOGNE in particular looks incredible. Terry just told me that only your Blériot BOURDON will participate in the race."

"That is correct, Mister Weymann. Uh, do you mind if I borrow Terry for a few seconds?"

"Go right ahead, miss."

"Thank you!"

Leading Terry some distance away from Weymann and from other onlookers, Johanna then spoke in a low voice.

"Just pretend that we are looking at the outer port engine and discussing some problem with it. Now, did this Charles Weymann discuss with you about this racial discrimination business in the United States?"

"Yes, he did, and the portrait he painted was not flattering at all, nor was it encouraging in the least."

"Knowing that, are you still ready to be copilot for Louis Blériot for his incoming long distance raid?"

Terry's face sobered up quickly before she answered.

"Yes, I still am! However, I can't promise that I won't kill, discretely, any of those fucking bigots I may meet in the United States, especially if they starts to insult or demean me."

Johanna couldn't help give her a cautious look on hearing that.

"Be careful about that, Terry. You may be able to easily break in two any of those racist morons but, over there, the law will be on their side and they will be too happy to have you arrested on some trumped up charges and jailed."

Terry let out a repressed shout of anger and frustration in response.

"DAMMIT! I can't just take that sort of abuse like a sheep."

After a moment of reflection and some deep breathing to calm down, Terry finally faced back Johanna, her eyes fixing her resolutely.

"Then, I will not win the race tomorrow: I will let Louis Blériot or one of the other girls win instead. I will fake engine trouble if need be."

"But, why?" Asked Johanna, thunderstruck.

"Why? Because the announced nationality of the winner of the race will be that of the winning pilot, rather than that of the winning plane's builder, and I will be damned if I bring honor to a country where I was born but where it is presently legal to abuse and

discriminate against people like me. I don't want the present United States to win that race tomorrow. It doesn't deserve the honor or prestige of this trophy.”

Terry then walked away , still full of contained rage, as a stunned Johanna watched her go.

16:39 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, April 16, 1913

Seafront promenade, port basin

Monaco

A modern visitor from the future would probably have found the Schneider Trophy competition rather dull as a spectacle, as the race consisted in timed laps around a circuit by competitors who departed at measured intervals of fifteen minutes. The race thus missed the element and excitement of tight competition one would see at most car races, where drivers fought until the last moment to get first to the finish line. Despite that, the crowd of spectators watching the race from the shore that day was both large and enthusiastic, with people waving their hats at the pilots flying across the Monaco seafront. Even though Terry had warned her in advance, Johanna still felt sad when Terry finished fourth overall after giving an apparently very creditable performance that had raised many cheers among the spectators. To the shock and dismay of many, a woman won the race, with H el ene Dutrieu, a 35 year-old Belgian woman and accomplished athlete, winning by a thin margin over a Louis Bl eriot in fine shape. The third place went to another woman, Marie Marvingt, piloting a Bl eriot-Kruger SUPER BOURDON four-seat air ambulance. All four participating Bl eriot-Kruger aircraft pulverized the previous speed records by wide margins, with H el ene Dutrieu's average speed being nearly double that of the fastest non-Bl eriot competitor, the Deperdussin Monoplane of Maurice Pr evost. As one reporter announced in bold letters in the next edition of his newspaper, Bl eriot literally crushed the competition in Monaco.

After the official announcement of the winner and the giving away of the trophy, with its 5,000 French francs prize, the female pilots and Louis Bl eriot, along with the latter's family and technical team, decided to go celebrate Dutrieu's victory in one of the pubs of the city known to be frequented by many aviators. However, the moment that the happy group stepped inside that pub, a frigid silence fell in it and many customers

looked at the newcomers with evident hostility. While Tasha and Johanna had expected some reactions like this, Louis Blériot, who was with his wife and children, was genuinely confused and hurt by the reception he got and he looked slowly around at the hard faces looking at him and his group..

“Ben quoi? Qu’est-ce qui ne vas pas?⁹”

Doing honor to his reputation of foul-mouthed bully, Jules Védrines was the first to answer Blériot, shooting up from his chair and pointing an accusing finger at him.

“What is wrong? You basically just dug the graves of most of the other aircraft designers and manufacturers in France today and you are asking what is wrong? It is us, pilots, mechanics and engineers who will pay as a result of your one-sided victory today.”

Louis Blériot, who considered many of the men present in the pub as good friends, saw most of them either averting his eyes or staring hard at him, something that truly hurt him. He went from happy to depressed in seconds and looked at his wife Alicia, speaking softly to her.

“Let’s go find another place, Alicia. I don’t want the kids to be exposed to this.”

The Blériot family was about to turn around and leave when Tasha stopped Louis by an arm, then shouted angrily at Jules Védrines and the other aviators and engineers present.

“YOU ALL LOST BECAUSE YOU STILL PRODUCE PLANES WITHOUT BOTHERING TO LEARN ABOUT THE PROPER LAWS OF AERODYNAMICS, WHILE HIDING YOUR SO-CALLED ‘PROFESSIONAL SECRETS’ FROM EACH OTHER IN THE HOPE OF SELLING MORE PLANES TO RICH DANDIES AND ARISTOCRATS. AND YOUR REACTION NOW IS TO OSTRACIZE THE WINNER, WHO LISTENED TO NEW IDEAS AND KNOWLEDGE? IF YOU CAN’T COME UP WITH SUCH NEW IDEAS, THEN WE ARE READY TO SHARE THEM WITH YOU, BECAUSE WE BELIEVE THAT THE CAUSE OF AVIATION IS BIGGER THAN JUST SELLING PLANES AND BECAUSE WE ARE WORKING TO HELP FRANCE INCREASE ITS PRESTIGE AND REINFORCE ITS DEFENSES. YOU CAN EITHER JOIN US TO FURTHER THOSE GOALS OR YOU CAN STAY IN YOUR LITTLE CORNERS AND DEPERISH IN THE COMING YEARS.”

⁹ Ben quoi? Qu’est-ce qui ne vas pas?: ‘Well, what? What’s wrong?’ in French.

"AND WHO THE HELL ARE YOU, WOMAN, TO SHOUT AT ME LIKE THIS?"

Replied a furious Jules Védrines.

"WHO AM I? I AM TASHA LENOIR AND I AM THE ONE WHO INVENTED MOST OF THE THINGS YOU WILL FIND IN THE BLÉRIOT-KRUGER PLANES THAT ARE HERE IN MONACO. I INVESTED MUCH OF MY FORTUNE IN DEVELOPPING THOSE NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND I DON'T CARE IF I DON'T RECOUP MY EXPENSES: I DID IT TO MAKE FRENCH AIRCRAF BETTER, NOT TO GET RICHER. THAT IS WHO I AM, VÉDRINES. AS FOR BEING A WOMAN, IT DOESN'T MAKE ME OR ANY OTHER WOMAN INFERIOR IN ANY WAY TO YOU, ON THE CONTRARY. THE WOMEN WHO GOT ON THE PODIUM TODAY ARE SIMPLY BETTER PILOTS THAN YOU, BUT WITHOUT THE LOUD MOUTH. SO, YOU CAN SIT DOWN AND CONTINUE DRINKING YOUR WINE. THOSE WHO ARE TRULY INTERESTED IN HELPING TO DEVELOP AVIATION IN FRANCE CAN COME AND TALK WITH ME AND LOUIS BLÉRIOT AFTERWARDS. OUR DOOR WILL ALWAYS BE OPEN. ON THIS, HAVE A NICE EVENING, ALL OF YOU!"

Tasha then led her group and the Blériot family out of the pub, leaving inside dozens of men either too stunned or too furious to reply to her. Louis Béchereau then got up from his chair and, leaving behind some money to pay for his beer, walked out quietly. Only seconds later, Charles Weymann also got up and walked out, watched by the others. Deeply disturbed by all this, Maurice Prévost sat back in his chair, his eyes fixed on the entrance door of the pub.

"Merde! What do we do now?"

CHAPTER 6 – THE START OF A GREAT ADVENTURE

09:03 (Paris Time)

Monday, April 21, 1913

Offices of the ‘Lenoir Industries’

32 Avenue de Wagram, 8th Arrondissement

Paris, France

Trung Ti Hoa was doing her best not to look nervous as she waited, sitting in a sofa inside a reception and waiting room along with seven other young women. Taking out of her purse the advertisement that she had cut out of a newspaper, she reread it again, trying to calm herself a bit: she desperately needed a job, any job that would prove at least half decent and that would not involve some sleazy conditions.

WANTED: YOUNG WOMEN AGED BETWEEN 18 AND 25, INTELLIGENT, PRETTY AND FLUENT IN FRENCH AND IN AT LEAST ONE OTHER LANGUAGE. WORK RELATED TO AVIATION, WITH FREQUENT TRAVELING INVOLVED. TRAINING PROVIDED. GOOD BENEFITS.

‘Hopefully, this will not be some kind of racket to attract young girls into prostitution.’ Thought Hoa. At the age of 21, she was more than pretty and had a very graceful body, while she was reasonably well educated. She would have continued her studies further if not for the fact that her mother had fallen sick two months ago and necessitated constant and costly care and medications, the cost of which her father was struggling to cover. He had even started to sell some of the family furniture to get by but he was approaching breaking point financially. If Hoa could not find a job in order to help her father care for her mother, then the family could well end up in the street in the coming months, a prospect that terrified Hoa. The girl who had been called in the manager’s office about fifteen minutes ago then came out of it, taking Hoa out of her morose thoughts. Hoa was somewhat encouraged by the fact that the girl harbored a smile and looked happy as she left. The young receptionist consulted her waiting list and called up a name.

“Miss Trung Ti Hoa, you may go see the manager now.”

Getting up from her sofa and quickly rearranging her jacket first, Hoa then went to the door of the manager's office, near the reception desk, and knocked on it, getting an answer at once.

"Come in!"

The fact that a female voice answered her knock somewhat reassured Hoa: at least she wouldn't have to endure a 'casting couch' style job interview given by a man. Pushing open the door and entering, she found herself in an office of relatively modest size furnished comfortably but without outright luxury. The young woman sitting behind a large work desk smiled to Hoa while getting up from her chair and going around her desk to come shake her hand. Hoa found her surprisingly tall, especially for an Asian woman, which the manager obviously was.

"Good morning and welcome, Miss Trung. I am Pham Ti Hien, representative of the 'Lenoir Industries' in Paris. Please, have a seat."

Hoa took the padded chair offered by the manager before speaking.

"You are Vietnamese, Miss Pham?"

"Vietnamese-American, actually." Corrected Hien. "Can I conclude that you are of Vietnamese origin yourself?"

"Yes, Miss Pham. My father is Vietnamese and my mother Chinese, from Hong Kong. However, I was born here in Paris, not long after my parents had arrived from Saigon, and I am a French citizen."

Hien wrote down a few notes, then looked back up at Hoa.

"And how old are you, Miss Trung?"

"I am 21 years old and was born on June 29 of 1891."

"And what languages can you speak, read or write fluently, miss?"

"I speak, read and write fluently in French, Vietnamese and Cantonese. I have also started learning English at school here in Paris."

Hien nodded her head in approval as she underlined that information on her notepad.

"Have you any experience in serving other people, in a restaurant, boutique or other kind of commerce?"

"I have been working part-time as a waitress in my uncle's restaurant in Paris, to help my parents and pay for my studies."

"Are you married or single?"

"Single, Miss Pham."

"Do you presently have any health problems, Miss Trung?"

"None! I stay fit, mostly by doing a lot of bicycling and walking."

"Do you know how to swim? If yes, how well?"

"I consider myself a good swimmer, miss."

"Excellent!" Said Hien before putting down her pen and looking soberly at Hoa.

"You seem to have all the qualities that we are looking for, Miss Trung, so here is the deal: we are looking for young women that we would then train to become stewardesses aboard the planes of our airline, which will be officially created in about two months."

Hoa couldn't help open her eyes wide on hearing that.

"You mean...I would fly on planes?"

"Yes, you will...if you pass successfully through our training program. Please understand that, while appearing at first to be a rather menial job, being a stewardess aboard one of our passenger aircraft will actually be a prestige job, as you will represent directly both our company and France in the eyes of our customers and of the public. Like they say, perception is everything, and this job is the epitome of it. Your functions as a stewardess will be to greet the passengers aboard the aircraft, lead them to their seats, explain to them the safety measures before departure, then serve their meals and drinks while on the way. You will also get basic training in first aid, so that you could help a passenger who would fall sick or get hurt. If your plane ever experiences mechanical trouble or hits very bad weather, it will be your job to reassure as best as possible the passengers and to prepare them for an emergency landing. As you can see, this calls for intelligent, tactful, patient and resourceful girls. However, that won't mean that the passengers will have the right to abuse you in any way, be it verbal, physical or sexual. The founder and owner of the Lenoir Industries, Miss Tasha Lenoir, will not stand for that kind of abuse and will protect her employees to the hilt, as long as they are not at fault and followed the company guidelines."

"I understand, Miss Pham, and am still very much interested in the job. May I ask what are the salary and benefits involved?"

In response, Hien took a small pamphlet from a pile on a corner of her desk and gave it to Hoa.

"This will give you a detailed description of the position, along with the pay, benefits and training that goes with it. You will get initially a salary of ninety francs per month while under training, plus will get free lodging and food at the Aéro-Parc Blériot, in Buc, where our base of operation is situated. Once you graduate successfully as a

qualified stewardess, your salary will go up to 150 francs per month, plus you will get a flying bonus whenever you are on a company trip, whether serving in the air or waiting in transit on the ground. By the way, the company will pay for your food and lodging during trips and will arrange for the hotel room accommodations for you and your coworkers while on overnight stays overseas.”

“Overseas?! How far can your planes go, Miss Pham?”

“Very far.” Replied Hien, smiling. “Did you read newspaper articles concerning the recent Monaco air race?”

“Of course, miss. Who hasn’t?”

“Exactly! Well, if you complete your stewardess’ training, you will be flying aboard one of our four-engine Blériot-Kruger CIGOGNE seaplanes, which can transport up to 42 passengers between continents. Now, the company will fit you out for free with four complete sets of stewardesses uniforms, tailor-made to your size so that you look your best in it, and that as soon as you complete your training. From then on, you will get a regular salary of 150 francs per month, whether our planes are ready to fly or not, so you won’t be penalized for some delay that will be through no fault of yours. As for the benefits, the company will cover your health costs if you fall ill or get injured on the job and it will also contribute to a pension fund in your name, to rival the contributions you will make through deductions to your salary. Finally, in case of death or invalidity caused while you are at work for us as a stewardess, you will be covered by a life insurance paid by the company. So, what do you say, Miss Trung?”

“I say: take me!” Replied Hoa, overjoyed and not believing her luck. “When will I start my training and how will I get to Buc?”

“You will leave by bus from here to go to Buc next Sunday afternoon. Be here for no later than three o’clock next Sunday, April 27. Bring clothes and personal effects for a stay of a few weeks in Buc. Your training will start on Monday, April 28. By the way, you will find quite a few French military members also training on our planes in Buc. They will probably try to win dates with you and the other girls on your training program, but be advised that any pregnancy will be cause for immediate termination of employment. Later in your career, after a few years of service in the air, you will have the possibility of transferring to a ground job, most often as an instructor for new stewardesses, in which case you will be able to marry if you wish and have children, while still keeping your job. However, that is still quite far up in the future, for both you, me and the company, so we will take things as they go. Well, I believe that we are now

done here, Miss Truong. A formal enrollment contract will be ready for your signature on Sunday afternoon, when you show up to go to Buc. One last thing..."

Hien then opened a drawer of her desk and took out some money in banknotes and coins, giving fifty francs to the surprised Hoa.

"There is also an enrollment bonus of fifty francs that comes with the job. You may go celebrate this afterwards if you wish so, Miss Truong."

Hoa looked at the money with her mouth open, then grinned to Hien, bowing to her.

"Thank you, Miss Pham! Thank you so much!"

"It was my pleasure, Miss Trung. And don't forget your information pamphlet."

"I sure won't, miss." Replied Hoa, putting both the pamphlet and the money in her purse. They then exchanged a final handshake before Hoa walked out of the office, feeling like a brand new person.

10:26 (Paris Time)

Thursday, June 5, 1913

Aéro-Parc Blériot, Buc

Trung Ti Hoa happily pressed against her heart the rolled certificate she had just received, along with 31 other young women, attesting her to be a qualified aircraft cabin attendant. Those last six weeks of training had been intense and often hard, with some parts of the curriculum having surprised her, like personal defense training and basic aircraft flying concepts. Others, like World geography and foreign cultures, while unexpected, had made a lot of sense to Hoa, who could see the necessity for a stewardess not to look like a complete ignoramus in front of foreign passengers. However, the part of the training that she had appreciated the most had easily been the actual training in the air aboard Blériot-Kruger CIGOGNE seaplanes, when one of the giant aircraft was completed and went for a certification test flight, or when the civilian pilots following intensive flight training in Buc took off for a practice flight. With a large group of French military aviators and technicians also training on the new Blériot-Kruger aircraft in Buc, that made for a very busy place. Hoa and the other trainees had however been cautioned right from the start and in no uncertain terms not to talk about what was happening in Buc to their friends and families. When a girl had asked why, Terry Clarkson, who was overseeing the training in Buc, had answered by pointing out all the military activity within Buc and the seemingly infernal rate at which the new

Blériot-Kruger planes were being built in two separate complexes of parts manufacturing and assembly lines recently built along one edge of the aéro-parc. A third assembly line complex was being built right now, with the help of French Army engineer units. It had quickly become evident to all the trainees that Louis Blériot was working closely with the French military and had earned large production contracts from the French government. The level of secrecy and operational security in Buc had been further demonstrated to the trainee stewardesses by the fact that armed French Army soldiers were now guarding the perimeter of the aéro-parc, under the excuse that Buc was a temporary military training ground, which it effectively was.

Following the other graduates to the hotel of the aéro-parc, where they had been lodging during those six weeks, Hoa entered the lobby of the hotel, where Tasha Lenoir was apparently waiting for them, along with two women whom Hoa had not seen before. Assembling first the group around her, Tasha then presented the two women to the graduates.

"Ladies, this is Miss Jeannette Longchamp, a tailor and dress fitter who works at a famous fashion boutique in Paris, and her assistant, Misses Marie Beaupré. They are here to take your measurements, so that your new uniforms could be custom-fitted for each of you."

A concert of cheers greeted that announcement, but died down quickly as Tasha spoke again.

"You probably were dying during all those weeks of training to know how your future uniforms would look like. Well, here is how you will look like in uniform. Hien, you may come out now!"

Collective gasps and exclamations of admiration went out as Hien walked into the lobby from a side room, wearing a blue, white and red ensemble with a definite 'avant-garde' look to it. She wore a flared royal blue skirt with a hemline barely below the knees and with an adjusted waist that molded her hips. She wore as well a royal blue jacket with long sleeves and a wide 'V' front lapel opening that showed the white shirt underneath. A fire red silk scarf was loosely tied around her throat, while a royal blue 'Robin Hood' style hat with a white band around it and red embroidered borderlines topped her head. Over her left breast was a pair of embroidered golden wings topped with the words 'Air France'. The heels of her black female shoes were barely elevated, obviously making them much easier to walk into them than in the usual female high-heel shoes. Jeanne

Bertrand, one of the graduates with whom Hoa had become good friends, exclaimed herself out loud then.

“Oooh! This is absolutely gorgeous. We will be the fashion sensation of the year.”

That made both Tasha and Hien smile, with Tasha nodding her head once.

“You are right, Miss Bertrand, and I am in fact counting on that to gain some free extra publicity for what will be the first operational commercial airline in the World. You will be the image of France abroad, thus have to look as good as you can when on the job. If you will now take seats around the lobby, Miss Longchamp will be calling you in one at a time in alphabetical order, so that she can take your measurements. In the meantime, I would like to speak in private with Miss Bertrand and Miss Trung.”

Hoa felt instant panic on hearing that, wondering at once if she had committed some mistake that was going to cause her to be booted out. Jeanne Bertrand, apparently similarly worried, followed Tasha inside an adjacent lounge, with Hoa following them closely. Once in the lounge, with the door closed behind her, Tasha gave a reassuring smile to the two nervous young women.

“Don’t worry girls: you are not in shit, on the contrary.”

Jeanne Bertrand blew air out in relief at those words, like Hoa.

“My God, you really scared me there for a moment, Miss Lenoir.”

“Sorry about that. The reason why I called you aside is that, with things generally going better and faster than expected in Buc, including the series production of our planes, me and Louis Blériot decided to go ahead much earlier than expected with a major project that we have been planning for months, a project in which I would like to include the two of you. You were the graduates who achieved the two best overall scores during your training. As a consequence, I would like to employ you on the first public trip abroad of our GIGOGNE seaplane, complete with passengers. Before you jump up and down and scream that you want to go, please understand that this trip may be a risky one, with minimal but realistic chances that the plane may crash into the sea.”

“Uh, what will that trip be exactly, Miss Lenoir?” Asked Hoa, her enthusiasm a bit doused. Tasha looked at the two women with a sober expression.

“One that will bring enormous prestige to us and France if we succeed: the first non-stop transatlantic air crossing between Paris and New York.”

CHAPTER 7 – NEW YORK OR BUST

19:10 (Paris Time)

Saturday, June 14, 1913

Tarmac of the Air France hangar

Aéro-Parc Blériot, Buc

Paris region, France

“Good God! This really has quite a look to it.” Exclaimed the head of the French military aviation branch, Brigadier General Auguste Édouard Hirschauer, his eyes gleaming with pride as he looked at the Blériot-Kruger CIGOGNE ‘Île-de-France’, parked in front of its hangar. The plane had been painted sky blue, with a wide white horizontal band running from the nose to the tail and with ‘AIR FRANCE’ painted in bold red letters within the white band. The name of the plane, ‘Île-de-France’, was painted in red in smaller letters on each side under the cockpit, while the whole vertical tail rudder was painted the colors of the French flag, red, white and blue. Louis Blériot, standing next to him with Tasha Lenoir and a number of other passengers, grinned on hearing that.

“Well, if that doesn’t make the Americans jealous, nothing will. Ready for a great adventure, General?”

“Me? Always, Monsieur Blériot.” Replied the tall army officer, who wore his best uniform. Louis then looked at the French Navy senior officer who was also going to be part of the trip.

“And you, Commandant Dupuis?”

“Oh, I have been waiting for that moment for a long time, Monsieur Blériot. This plane holds so many promises for the Navy and we are truly impatient to put in active service our first heavy seaplanes.”

“Well, that shouldn’t take long now, Commandant: two PÉLICAN, the military variant of the CIGOGNE, that were reserved for the French Navy have been completed to date, with a third to follow at the end of this month. With the way the training of the naval aviators you sent us is going, you should have three PÉLICAN in operational service by the time of our next national day on July fourteen.”

“Yes! I must say that the embarked sea trials aboard our cruisers of your MOUETTE¹⁰ four-seat amphibian reconnaissance planes are also going very well indeed. With their long range and their radio sets, they will be priceless as the eyes of the fleet.”

“Glad to hear that, Commandant. In truth, the new radios designed by Miss Lenoir are by themselves a big part of the value of my new planes. Without those radios, for example, this flight would hardly be possible and would certainly be a lot more risky. We will also be using for the first time in operational mode the beacon signals from our two first radio beacon stations, established respectively in Paris and in Dakar, Senegal, transmitting in the low frequency band. The third radio beacon station, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, should start operating continuously by the end of this month. More stations will follow, notably in Saigon and New York. With that beacon network, your naval aviators will be able to navigate with precision at night and in bad weather over most of the oceans of the World.”

Dupuis, a small and thin man, but one full of energy, nodded his head and smiled to Tasha.

“The French Navy and the government of France will indeed have a great debt towards you, Miss Lenoir. Your Metallex explosive has also proved to be a godsend to us. The firing tests of the new, Metallex-loaded naval shells in the 240mm and 194mm calibers have greatly impressed the Minister of the Navy, who has ordered the production of Metallex shells to be accelerated and expanded to our other naval gun calibers. To return to the subject of your radio beacon stations, when are you planning to install one in England? Such a station in, say, Glasgow or Liverpool, should add nicely to the coverage of your network.”

Tasha let out a sigh of frustration at that question, but one that was not directed at the French naval officer.

“I would have installed such a station a while ago already, Commandant Dupuis, if it was not for the petty lobbying of the British Marconi Company, which has convinced the British government not to let me open any radio or beacon station on British soil, so that it could keep its radio monopoly there. One reason that Monsieur Blériot has not sold planes yet to the British government is that Marconi will not let planes equipped with my radios be bought by the British military. On my side, I am keeping an eye on Marconi

¹⁰ Mouette : ‘Seagull’ in French.

and the British, in order to make sure that Marconi doesn't infringe on my radio patents by copying them."

Dupuis shook his head in response while muttering a mild swear word.

"Those arrogant idiots! We are supposed to be good allies, yet they keep acting as if their empire is the only thing that counts in this world. I will talk again with the Minister of the Navy on that subject, once we return from New York. Talking of the Americans, have they approached you or Mister Blériot yet to buy your planes and radios?"

This time, Tasha made a smirk, while Louis Blériot rolled his eyes, making Dupuis look at them with confusion.

"What? What did I say that was wrong?"

"Please don't be offended by our reactions, Commandant." Said Tasha, now looking sober. "It was directed at the Americans, not at you. In truth, while the first true aircraft was flown in the United States by the Wright brothers years ago, they are now lagging quite far behind what we have achieved here in Buc. The problem is that American officials, particularly their military officers, know very little about aircraft and still mostly think that a few hours of hands on training is enough to teach a neophyte how to fly a plane. Some American officials visited us in Buc and showed interest in Monsieur Blériot's planes, but their ideas about pilots and mechanics training programs were nothing short of a bad joke. Rather than selling planes that would only end up crashing and killing their pilots, we politely refused to sell to them. To be frank, most of those visiting American officers gave me the strong impression that they were incompetents who rose through the ranks strictly through seniority. There was also the matter of how they reacted to my good friend, Terry Clarkson. I nearly booted one of those racist bigots out of my office when he called my friend a 'nigger' and raised his nose at her."

"Ah yes, that racial segregation thing. I can't blame you for reacting to them the way you did, Miss Lenoir. On the other hand, I can see that Miss Clarkson is going to be part of the flight crew on this trip. Aren't you afraid of how she could be treated once in New York?"

"That is actually one of the reasons why I am travelling on this trip, Commandant Dupuis: to gauge by myself how bad and how widespread this racial attitude is in the United States. Be assured that the Americans will hear me if any one of them will show disrespect to my friend."

"Good for you, miss. Now, when are we supposed to board the plane?"

"How about right now, Commandant?" Replied Tasha, amused, who then pointed at Jeanne Bertrand and Trung Ti Hoa, who had just climbed down the aft access ladder of the CIGOGNE. "Our two cabin stewardesses, Miss Bertrand and Miss Trung, will guide you to your seat and will make sure that you are comfortable."

Dupuis, like nearly all the male passengers due to board the plane, opened his eyes wide as he looked at the two beautiful young women in their avant-garde royal blue uniforms, while the six reporters that would fly with them immediately started taking pictures of the stewardesses.

"My God! We will be in the hands of true angels. These uniforms also look fantastic: they should make the American fashion designers jealous."

"I am fully counting on that, Commandant. Well, General Hirschauer, the honor of boarding first belongs to you, I believe."

"Thank you, Miss Lenoir."

Followed by his military driver, who was carrying his luggage, Hirschauer walked to the foot of the aft access ramp, where he shook hands with the two stewardesses before climbing the steps and entering the aircraft behind Jeanne Bertrand and Truong Ti Hoa. The other scheduled passengers, which included the six reporters, three Blériot mechanics, Ernest Archdeacon and wife, Suzanne Deutsch de la Meurthe, Émile Deutsch de la Meurthe, Raymonde de Laroche, Martin Ducharme, the engineer from the French Army and Commandant Dupuis, followed one after the other. Right behind them came Tasha and the flight crew of six men and two women. General Hirschauer's driver however left the aircraft before the aft ramp was retracted up and inside the tail of the seaplane.

Inside, the passengers who had never visited the seaplane before marveled at the level of comfort and quiet luxury they saw, with the six reporters again taking pictures of the cabin. General Hirschauer ended up being assigned a seat in the forward cabin reserved for the first class, along with Commandant Dupuis, Martin Ducharme, the de la Meurthe and the Archdeacons, plus Tasha and Raymonde de Laroche. That left three first class seats still empty, which prompted Tasha in going aft to the tourist class cabin and organizing a draw there between the six reporters to select three of them to go to the forward cabin, with the understanding that those three reporters would switch place with the other reporters in the morning, while they were still in flight. Sidonie-Gabrielle

Colette, of the French newspaper 'Le Matin' ended up winning the draw, along with James Collins of the British Newspaper 'Daily Telegraph' and John McLeary, of the American New York Herald Tribune. Once all in their seats, they were treated to the standard pre-departure safety briefing that Jeanne Bertrand and Trung Ti Hoa had learned by heart during their training, complete with a demonstration of how to put on the individual emergency flotation vests and how to use the oxygen masks. That last point prompted a worried question from John McLeary, which Jeanne Bertrand answered with a disarming smile.

"Uh, what is this business of cabin pressurization, miss?"

"The cabin and cockpit of this plane is pressurized in flight because its normal cruising altitude is 7,000 meters, at which height the ambient air pressure and available oxygen are too low for human beings to survive more than a few minutes. To counter that and allow the passengers to travel in complete safety, the plane uses a pressurization system to keep cabin pressure and oxygen content within safe levels, sir."

"Then, why not fly lower, where there is enough oxygen, miss?"

"For two reasons, sir. First, at altitudes below 3,000 meters, the upper limit where humans can breathe safely without a mask, aerodynamic drag is much stronger than at 7,000 meters, which would force the engines to work at higher power to counter the drag, thus cutting our autonomy by a lot. Secondly, by flying high, we will overfly most of the bad weather that can be encountered on the way, thus making your flight both safer and more comfortable. Do you have other questions, sir?"

The American reporter, impressed, nodded meekly his head.

"Uh, no! I believe that you told me all that I needed to know."

"Thank you, sir." Said Jeanne Bertrand before continuing her pre-departure briefing. At the end of it, she checked that every occupant of the forward cabin had buckled his or her seat belt as the voice of Louis Blériot came out of an overhead loudspeaker.

"You attention please, ladies and gentlemen. This is your pilot speaking. We are about to start the engines. Once we are off the ground, I will ask you to stay in your seats during our climb to our cruising altitude. Once up and level, our stewardesses will be available to serve you food and drinks at your convenience. Thank you for your attention."

The outer port engine then coughed to life, followed at short intervals by the other three engines. The passengers who had never flown in a CIGOGNE looked excitedly outside

through their individual windows as the big plane started rolling to take a position facing the wind. The noise from the engines then gradually rose, making the whole aircraft vibrate as it fought to roll against the brakes applied by the pilot. The brakes were then released and the aircraft started rolling forward, accelerating at a rate that impressed General Hirschauer.

“Wow! This plane has a lot of power, especially compared to the quasi toys that I had been buying from other designers in the past years.”

“That is one of the reasons why the crossing of the Atlantic by air was not attempted before, General: lack of engine power.” Replied Tasha, listened to carefully by the reporters present in the first class section. “Without enough power, you could not climb high enough or carry enough fuel to make it across safely. Another big reason is the aerodynamic cleanliness of this plane compared to older plane designs. All these strings, open box structures and uncovered engines created a lot of aerodynamic drag, which in turn made the planes burn more fuel and also limited their speed. Without the new technologies present in this aircraft, a transatlantic crossing by air would be near-suicide, with failure being most likely.”

“And how come that those technologies were not used before, Miss Lenoir?” Asked James Collins, from the Daily Telegraph. Tasha debated mentally for a moment if she should answer that question, then decided that this information would come out one day anyway.

“Because I and a friend of mine, Johanna Kruger, who designed this plane, invented or developed most of those technologies. The engines, however, are the products of Mister Salmson, who developed by himself the earlier variants of our engines. We asked him to add a few things to his original designs and we got the Salmson 3C9-TFI engines powering this plane, each of which produce up to 1,100 horsepower.”

The three reporters present opened their mouths in unison on hearing that number, with Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette then following with a question of her own.

“Then, if other aircraft designers would use the engines produced by Mister Salmson, they could build planes like this one?”

“That would only be a starting point, Miss Colette.” Retorted Tasha. “Some of the competitors at the Schneider Trophy race in Monaco were equipped with Salmson engines, but they mounted them on planes that were still little more than assemblies of string, wood and canvas, with little or no regards to proper aerodynamic laws. Now, if

you look outside at the wings of our plane, which just took off by the way, you will soon see their trailing edge flaps, which had been lowered and extended to augment lift at low speeds, retract back in place once close to cruising speed.”

Looking quickly outside through her seat window, Colette saw that Tasha had been right about their plane having taken off.

“My God! The takeoff was so smooth that I didn’t really notice it.”

“And that’s the way we want it for the paying passengers who will travel aboard this type of aircraft, miss. Air France wants its passengers to feel safe and cared for, especially during long trips over the ocean.”

The three reporters were then silent for a moment as they digested all that information, until John McLeary pointed excitedly at the wing visible through his window, while the noise of mechanical actuators could be heard in the cabin.

“I see those flaps of yours moving.”

The American then hurried to take a few pictures through his window, imitated by Colette and Collins. Soon afterwards, the voice of Louis Blériot came back on the loudspeaker as the plane started a slow turn to the left.

“This is the pilot speaking. We are now at an altitude of 2,600 meters and still climbing towards our cruising altitude of 7,000 meters while turning on our heading to New York. We will soon start pressurizing the cabin. You may experience some difficulty to hear, in which case you simply need to pinch your nose and blow air inside of your mouth. That will equilibrate the pressure inside your ears with the cabin pressure. If you continue to feel discomfort, ask for the assistance of one of our stewardesses. Thank you for your attention.”

It was not long before the passengers started feeling pressure on their eardrums, but using the trick provided by Louis Blériot worked well on all of them. Some sixteen minutes later, their plane leveled up at 7,000 meters and the engines throttled down to 55% of maximum power, the normal cruise setting. That was when Jeanne Bertrand and Trung Ti Hoa became active and distributed menus and lists of drinks to the passengers. Jeanne Bertrand explained them with a smile to General Hirschauer as the officer read them.

“According to your present appetite, you may either elect to eat later, have only appetizers or have a full meal. You can also order drinks from our list, free.”

“Those drinks, are they free for all the passengers, miss?”

"On this flight, they are, as you were all invited by Air France on this trip. On the regular liaison runs we will soon start, drinks are free and unlimited for first class passengers, while the tourist class passengers will have up to two free alcoholic drinks per meal time, plus one extra free drink per day during the rest of the flight. However, even for first class passengers, a person that is becoming drunk may be refused service by the stewardess, in order to prevent disorderly conduct by that passenger. That is a policy that comes directly from the founder and owner of Air France, Miss Lenoir, and that will be backed up by the pilot if necessary. Would you like to order something now, General?"

"Uh, I will certainly have a drink first, followed by a light meal: I ate only a small supper, expecting to be shaken up a lot during this flight and not wanting to risk throwing up. Let me look at the wine and beverage list first."

Reviewing quickly the list, Hirschauer saw something that made him look up with surprise on his face.

"You have Champagne aboard, miss?"

"We do, General. Our selection of wines come in both full bottle and half-bottles. Before you order Champagne, be advised that Miss Lenoir was planning to offer Champagne to all the passengers, on the house."

"Well, that is mighty generous of her. Thank you very much, Miss Lenoir."

"My pleasure, General." Said Tasha before looking up at Jeanne Bertrand.

"You may break out the Champagne and serve it to the passengers now, Jeanne. Serve as well platters of appetizers."

"Right away, Miss Lenoir."

As the stewardess went back forward, Hirschauer looked at Tasha, who was sitting facing him, as the first class seats were arranged in pairs of rows facing each other.

"I didn't know that you were the owner of this new airline, Miss Lenoir. Creating and financing such an enterprise must have cost millions of francs."

"Oh, it certainly did, General. Most of the money came either from my personal fortune or from the sales of my inventions, but I also gained the support of the oil magnate, Henri Deutsch de la Meurthe and of Mister Ernest Archdeacon, who is traveling with us, along with his wife. Mister Deutsch couldn't come on this trip but he sent instead his brother, Émile Deutsch, and his daughter Suzanne."

Hirschauer, who had an opportunity earlier on at Buc to talk with the other passengers, simply nodded politely his head in salute at the persons mentioned by Tasha. He

however didn't pursue further the subject of the financing of Air France, as the French government had indirectly contributed to it, by buying for three million francs the production license of Tasha's Metallex explosive, with additional monthly payments to follow based on a percentage of each ton of Metallex produced in state arsenals. With the French Navy also going the Metallex route and manufacturing new shells for its naval guns, those monthly payments already represented large sums of money, even though the percentage asked by Tasha and gladly accepted by the French government had been ludicrously low by usual standards. The return of Jeanne Bertrand, pushing a small cart in front of her and with Trung Ti Hoa preceding her and continuing aft to the tourist class cabin with her own cart, then put that conversation to rest for the time being. Showing first to the passengers, except Tasha of course, how to deploy the swiveling tablets integrated inside one armrest of their seats, she then distributed platters of luxury appetizers that included caviar, pâtés, cheese and cold cuts. Next, she distributed flute glasses and poured some Moet et Chandon Champagne in them. Once everybody's glass was filled, Tasha raised her glass and spoke out loud.

"TO THE SUCCESS OF AIR FRANCE AND TRANSATLANTIC AIR TRAVEL!"

"TO AIR FRANCE!" Replied happily the others present.

07:03 (Paris Time) / 01:03 (New York Time)

Sunday, June 15, 1913

Blériot-Kruger CIGOGNE 'Île-de-France'

Over the North Atlantic

Having just shaved and freshened up in the forward lavatory and having put back on his uniform's vest, Brigadier General Auguste Édouard Hirschauer decided to go pay a short visit to the pilots before having breakfast. Trung Ti Hoa, who was sitting in one of the two seats next to the door of the cockpit, gave him a warm smile when he approached her.

"Good morning, General. Did you sleep well?"

"Like a baby, miss. Those first class reclining seats are really comfortable and the muted roar from the engines helped put me to sleep. Do you mind if I go pay a visit to the pilots?"

"Go right ahead, General. Miss Clarkson is presently at the commands with Mister Pégoud."

"Oh? Monsieur Blériot is not piloting right now?"

"He went to sleep, along with the rest of the first flight crew and with Jeanne Bertrand, about three hours ago, after handing over the plane to the second flight crew."

"Uh, I didn't see them in the cabin, miss."

Hoa smiled again and pointed at the floor.

"That's because they are in the crew's sleeping compartment, situated under the cabin and forward of the cargo hold. There are six bunk beds in there."

"I see! Thank you for the information. When will you serve breakfast, miss?"

"When you will feel like eating, General. With those long overseas flights, especially those heading West, when the clocks are turning back as we fly, many people will find their stomachs disoriented by the changes in time zones, so the policy of Air France is to serve whatever type of meal, be it breakfast, dinner or supper, at the time each traveler will wish to, except when everybody else is sleeping and all the seats are reclined. If you want, I can start heating something for you while you visit the cockpit, General."

"That is a fine idea, miss. What do you have in terms of breakfast menus?"

"We have a choice of ham and cheese omelet, onion and peppers omelet, cereals with milk, or hard-boiled eggs with bread and butter, General."

"Hum... The ham and cheese omelet sounds fine to me. If you could have some coffee made with that, it would be much appreciated."

"I'm on it, General."

With that said, Hirschauer knocked lightly on the door of the cockpit and opened it on being invited in. Since this was his second visit to the cockpit during this trip, the view of all the electronic systems inside didn't faze him the way it had done the first time, but he still felt some awe as he stepped inside the semi-dark compartment and closed the door behind him. Terry Clarkson, occupying the left seat, twisted her head around to smile at the French officer.

"Good morning, General! What can we do for you this morning...or tonight, take your pick?"

Looking briefly outside, Hirschauer saw that the sky was still pitch black, while the top of clouds well below were lightly illuminated by a three-quarter Moon.

"Uh, I see what you mean by either morning or night, Miss Clarkson. Where are we now?"

"We are presently 2,300 kilometers to the West-Northwest of New York, General." Answered Captain Jean Lafleur, the navigator-radio operator on the second flight crew. "I just made a radio triangulation ten minutes ago, which confirmed our estimated position. I have our location marked on this map, General."

Hirschauer took a brief look at the map, then eyed the battery of radio equipment half-surrounding the seat of the navigator.

"Decidedly, this new radio technology is plain incredible. How well did you receive the signals from the radio beacon stations, Captain Lafleur?"

"The beacon signals in the HF band from Paris and Dakar were weak and intermittent, sir, but the LF band signals were strong and clear. My feeling is that those LF radio beacon signals can probably be heard around half the globe or more. Miss Lenoir told us that beacon stations will open soon in Rome, Port-au-Prince, New York, Cairo, New Delhi, Saigon and Los Angeles. With such a network, the AIR FRANCE seaplanes will be able to navigate at night with precision anywhere around the World, General."

"And so will our own Army planes. That factor alone will have tremendous military benefits for us."

"It sure will, General."

Next, Hirschauer turned around to face the flight engineer, Raymond Saulnier, a Blériot employee.

"And how is our plane doing, Mister Saulnier?"

"Running like a fine clock, General! Those Salmson engines always had a solid reputation for reliability and they are proving it yet again."

"Uh, I know that this may be considered a professional secret by Blériot and Salmson, but I have been wondering for a while already about how Salmson managed to make such a powerful engine, while the other engine designers can produce engines with no more than 200 horsepower."

Raymond Saulnier glanced at Terry Clarkson, who nodded her head once, before answering Hirschauer.

"Well, you may be surprised to hear that Mister Salmson had already produced by December 1911 the prototype of the 2A9, a 300 horsepower, 18-cylinder engine that was the basis of the engine we now have in our military Blériot-Kruger FRELON. He even had on his test bench a prototype of his C9 engine, which also produced 300 horsepower, but with only nine cylinders. So, Mister Salmson was already on the right

path when Miss Lenoir and Miss Kruger arrived in May of last year from the United States with Miss Clarkson and Miss Pham. Miss Kruger then helped Mister Salmson in designing even more powerful engines. The engines that power our CIGOGNE actually consist of three rows of C9 engines, with a total of 27 cylinders, stacked like pancakes one behind the other and linked together by a common crankshaft. That is however only part of the recipe. That triple row engine, named 3C9, already developed a total of 900 horsepower, but Miss Kruger wanted even more power, less weight, better high altitude performance and, especially, a lower fuel consumption. She managed that by, first, making Mister Salmson produce his engine blocks out of aluminum, instead of iron or steel, with special alloy steels for the pistons heads and jackets. That made the Salmson engines much lighter and also much more resistant to stress and wear. Next, she added two inventions of hers that I never heard of before: engine turbo-charging and direct fuel injection.”

Hirschauer, who prided himself in knowing a lot about mechanical engineering, frowned on hearing those unfamiliar terms.

“Engine turbo-charging? Direct fuel injection?”

“Yes, General! With turbo-charging, you compress fresh outside air via a compressor spun either via a mechanical link to the engine’s crankshaft, or via a turbine set inside the engine exhaust pipes. That compressed air, now fairly hot because of the compression process, is first cooled down by relative wind before being injected inside the pistons. Turbo-charging alone greatly augmented the original power outputs of the 3C9 and 2A9 engines, boosting them respectively to 1,100 and 380 horsepower, from their original 900 and 313 horsepower. However, Miss Kruger added to that her direct fuel injection system, which replaces entirely the original carburetor. In that new system, both fuel and compressed fresh air are mixed directly inside the piston cylinders, instead of being mixed inside a carburetor before being injected into the cylinders. This makes for a better distribution of the fuel-air mix, without the leakage involved in carburetors. In conjunction with turbo-charging, which already improved fuel consumption through more powerful air intake, direct fuel injection further lowers the specific fuel consumption, with the final result being a saving of about twenty percent in fuel for a given basic power. This gives us the Salmson 3C9-TCFI, which develops 1,100 horsepower. However, Miss Kruger did not stop there. Anticipating that there would be rare but critical moments when even more power could be needed for very short periods of time, like when a seaplane tries to take off in overload condition and in a strong sea after rescuing

the crew of a sinking ship, she added yet another invention of hers: emergency boost by the injection of a mix of water and methanol in the cylinders. With that, a 3C9-TCFI(WM)'s power will rise to 1,400 horsepower, but only for a minute or two before the engine starts overheating and while reducing engine life as well."

"One thousand and four hundred horsepower? But that's positively incredible." Raymond Saulnier nodded his head soberly, remembering his own stunned reaction when he had first learned that.

"It definitely is, General, but it is true. Miss Johanna Kruger is a true engineering genius, while Miss Tasha Lenoir is also a true genius, but in chemistry, electronics and physics. Together, they make a team that truly made this plane possible." Hirschauer digested all that in silence for a few seconds before shaking hands with Saulnier.

"Thank you very much, Mister Saulnier. You may have just given me enough extra arguments to convince the War Minister to finally abandon the construction of military dirigibles, which are now clearly obsolete, to buy instead supplementary batches of Blériot-Kruger planes. Besides, if this aircraft makes the return trip Paris - New York - Paris without a hitch, then the minister's arguments against buying more Blériot-Kruger planes for the Army and the Navy will become quite empty."

Hirschauer didn't see the wide grin that had just appeared on Terry Clarkson's face as he exited the cockpit to go have breakfast.

07:29 (New York Time) / 13:29 (Paris Time)

Pier 25, Manhattan, New York harbor

New York, U.S.A.

"Do we have any news yet about that French plane? Could it have crashed in the Atlantic?" Asked William J. Gaynor, Mayor of New York City, while looking up and around at the gray, cloud-covered sky. He and a number of his city counselors, the city police superintendent, officials of the Aero Club of America, the French Consul and a mixed crowd of reporters, photographers and curious onlookers were all assembled at dockside around the Pier 25's basin, with the V.I.P.s standing on the lower wharf of Pier 25 that was used by small private boats to load and unload. They had been waiting and hoping for over half a hour now. One of his aides took care of answering his questions.

"We did get by telegraph from Paris confirmation that the Blériot seaplane departed Paris at around 13:30 yesterday, New York time, Mister Mayor. Unfortunately, while the Blériot seaplane has radios, we don't, so it was impossible for us to contact it to verify its status and position."

"It left Paris eighteen hours ago? Can a plane really stay up in the air that long?"

"Uh, our local aviation experts say that this is very unlikely, Mister Mayor. In fact, they say that the claims by Blériot about the performances of his seaplane are most probably wildly exaggerated. Even Mister Orville Wright, which is present here this morning, agrees with those experts and he was the first man with his brother Wilbur to fly off the ground in a plane, sir."

"So, chances are that the French plane crashed into the sea hours ago. Have a telegram sent at once to Paris, asking them if they can confirm where their plane is."

"Right away, Mister Mayor!"

As the aide hurried away to a telephone, Gaynor thought about the possible consequences of either a success or failure of the French attempt at an air crossing of the Atlantic, a feat that frankly sounded too incredible to believe in view of what he knew about airplanes. If it did succeed against all expectations, then it would easily become the event of the decade, with lots of publicity centered on New York at first. That meant to Gaynor that it was in his obvious interest as mayor of the city to make the best of this occasion and make sure that his city looked good during that event. Signaling to the city's Police Commissioner to approach him, he then spoke in a low volume in his ear.

"Make sure that your officers know that the incoming French occupants of the aircraft we are expecting are to be treated on the same status as foreign diplomats. All the eyes of the national press will be on them and it won't be a good time for your cops to harass these Frenchmen, even if they break some local laws through simple ignorance."

Rhinelanders Waldo gave a bit of a jaundiced look at Gaynor then: he was not accustomed to have the mayor, any mayor, tell him how to run his police department. The only one he really took orders from was Charles Murphy, the powerful boss of Tammany Hall¹¹. However, Gaynor's directive did make a lot of sense, in view of the

¹¹ Tammany Hall: Name of the headquarters of the Tammany Society, a pro-worker, pro-immigrant, pro-catholic organization that controlled much of New York City in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, through patronage, corruption and nepotism. New York City mayors were

massive public and media coverage of the expected arrival of the French plane...if it ever showed up. He thus did not object and nodded his head.

"I will pass the word around right away, Mister Mayor."

"Thank you!" Replied Gaynor before looking at the French Consul, standing not far from him.

"Mister de la Colombière, do you know how many persons there are aboard that plane we are expecting?"

"Yes, Mister Mayor: I got a telegram on that subject, giving me a list of the occupants, so that I could reserve hotel rooms in advance for them. There is a total of 28 persons aboard the Blériot-Kruger CIGOGNE."

Having expected maybe three or four aviators to be on that very risky flight, Gaynor abruptly turned around to face the consul with a shocked expression.

"THERE ARE 28 PERSONS ON THAT PLANE?"

"Yes, Mister Mayor! There are a few reporters and French officials aboard, along with the crew."

Gaynor had to shake his head at that, truly astounded. That was when one young aide with excellent hearing suddenly shouted out.

"I HEAR AN ENGINE NOISE COMING FROM THE EAST! IT IS A PLANE."

Everybody around the basin looked skyward at once. The first one to see something was a reporter.

"THERE! A PLANE AT MEDIUM ALTITUDE."

Looking up as well, Gaynor saw only a small shape high in the sky. However, it was definitely an aircraft. That French plane had made it after all.

In the waiting crowd, a tall, thin and balding 42 year-old man wearing a dark suit didn't know if he should celebrate the exploit of these Frenchmen or weep, as this meant that over a decade of hard work was probably going to crumble into dust with the arrival of that plane. The customers for his planes, including the United States Army, were liable to dump him en masse after seeing what was now available in France. That trend had in fact already started with the news from the Schneider Trophy race, held two months ago, which had resulted in a number of order cancellations for him. Like the rest

mostly controlled by Tammany Hall, with the notable exception of William J. Gaynor, who did his best to eradicate corruption, nepotism and police brutality during his three years in office.

of the crowd, Orville Wright followed with his eyes the French airplane as it made a wide turn to the left while losing altitude. It then flew away down the Hudson River for maybe two kilometers before doing a second, tighter turn to come back up the Hudson River, obviously preparing to land. The crowd watched, fascinated, as the huge four-engine aircraft slowed down to a very low speed while rounding up its descent, to finally touch down smoothly in the waters of the river and slide on the surface. From touchdown to the point where it basically floated on its hull and side floats, with its engines only working to make it approach the basin, the plane took less than 250 meters to land, a performance that Orville would have not believed possible for such a big aircraft. As the French plane got nearer and nearer, with its tricolor livery and 'AIR FRANCE' painted in bold red letters on its side, Orville felt his heart sink: he would never be able to build something even approaching that: he had neither the tools, the workshop space nor the knowledge for that. Realizing that his days as an aircraft designer and manufacturer were about over, he bowed his head low and turned away from the approaching French aircraft, to walk slowly away from Pier 25.

The press photographers present took dozens of pictures as the seaplane finally stopped alongside the pier, with two men coming out of the plane and stepping on the hull side floats in order to catch mooring cables thrown to them by port workers standing on the wooden lower wharf. The nose of the seaplane soon gently bumped against the wharf, with the old rubber tires lining the edge of the wharf acting as shock dampeners. A gangway was then put in place and secured with more ropes to both the seaplane and the wharf. Only then did more people start to come out of the plane. The cheers from the crowd on seeing a man who had to be the pilot suddenly stopped, to be replaced by shocked gasps and exclamations when a second aviator stepped out on the port side float: it was a tall black woman. The first aviator out didn't seem to appreciate at all the sudden change of mood and, after speaking briefly with the black woman, started crossing with her the gangway, with press photographers taking multiple pictures of them. More people came out of the seaplane behind them, but more slowly and while carrying suitcases. Mayor Gaynor was near the top of the gangway when the two aviators stepped on the wharf. Ignoring the fact that one of the two was a black woman, Gaynor put on his best smile and shook hands with the male aviator, who sported a moustache.

"Welcome to New York, sir. I am William J. Gaynor, Mayor of the city."

"And I am Louis Blériot. My friend and second pilot is Miss Terry Clarkson."

"She piloted your seaplane, Mister Blériot?"

"She just landed it, sir, while I was the one who took it off in Paris. Due to the eighteen hour trip, we had to use a double crew in relay."

"I see! Welcome to New York as well, Miss Clarkson." Said Gaynor, shaking hands with Terry. The next ones he greeted were Brigadier General Hirschauer, Commandant René Dupuis, Ernest and Cécile Archdeacon and Émile and Suzanne Deutsch de la Meurthe, with Tasha Lenoir following behind them, leading the reporters that had made the trip. Gaynor raised an eyebrow in interest at Tasha when he was told by Louis Blériot that she was the founder and owner of Air France. Taken in by her exotic beauty, the mayor gallantly kissed her hand before smiling to her.

"And what kind of plans does the owner of Air France has concerning my city, if I may ask?"

"You certainly may ask, Mister Mayor. I intend to make New York my first transatlantic permanent destination point from Paris. However, to do that, I will need first to find a suitable piece of undeveloped real estate large enough to allow my planes to land in safety, with hangar spaces to conduct maintenance and repair work. That piece of land will also need to be as close to Manhattan as possible. I still can land my seaplanes in the Hudson or East River if need be, but that won't give me space to maintain and service them, or dedicated facilities to handle passengers and cargo. I was hoping to ask for the help of your City Hall in order to find such a piece of real estate."

"Well, we certainly can see what we can do for you about that later on, after the reception ceremony I have prepared at City Hall. But first, let's get you to your hotel, so that you can drop your luggage and freshen up."

Gaynor, like the rest of the crowd, then caught on the two beautiful young women in royal blue uniforms who had just stepped on the wharf, each one pulling a large suitcase with a long handle and two wheels. Tasha smiled on seeing on whom the mayor's attention had suddenly shifted.

"These are two of my Air France stewardesses, Miss Jeanne Bertrand and Miss Trung Ti Hoa. Their job is to serve the passengers during flights and make sure that they are as comfortable and safe as possible."

"I love their uniforms, even though the Archbishop may object to their high hemline."

'Screw the Archbishop!' Thought Tasha while still smiling. That was when a man in a good quality suit came forward and spoke in French to her and Louis Blériot.

"Miss Lenoir, Monsieur Blériot, General Hirschauer, I am Pierre de la Colombière, Consul General of France in New York City. I have already booked rooms for all of you at the Hotel Astor, near Times Square, in Midtown Manhattan. I also have arranged for a bus and car to transport you there."

"That was most considerate and helpful on your part, Monsieur de la Colombière." Replied Tasha. "Be aware that four of us will stay with the seaplane for a few hours, time to check it and service it. Were you able to secure thirteen tons of high quality gasoline and the tanker trucks and fuel pumps to refill my airplane?"

"Yes, I did, Miss Lenoir. The trucks should be here soon."

Gaynor, like the other American officials and reporters close enough to hear that, opened his eyes and mouth wide.

"Your plane carries up to thirteen tons of fuel? How many passengers can it carry?"

"On the Paris – New York run, the Blériot-Kruger CIGOGNE can carry a total of 42 passengers, twelve in first class and thirty in tourist class, plus up to a metric ton of cargo and ten crewmembers. As I said earlier, my goal is to establish a regular, non-stop air link between Paris and New York, hopefully on a daily basis. I believe that many big businessmen and diplomats in particular will want to use such an air service, rather than spend up to a week or more to cross the Atlantic by ship. I also plan to carry mailbags across."

"And...how much would such a trip cost for one person, Miss Lenoir?" Asked one of the city officials, appearing very interested at once.

"I am still doing profitability studies about that, and still have to figure out how much it will cost me to build an airport near Manhattan, in order to be able to calculate accurate prices, but a first class one-way ticket will probably be around seventy U.S. dollars, while a tourist class one-way ticket should be around fourteen U.S. dollars or less. I still hope to be able to lower these prices a bit, particularly for the tourist class seats."

That made the reporters around her scribble down notes frantically, while others shouted questions at her.

"Will we be able to visit your seaplane, Miss Lenoir?" Shouted one reporter who caught her attention. Taking a quick decision, she looked at Louis Blériot and General Hirschauer.

"Go ahead to the hotel with the rest of our people, but leave the consulate car behind for my use: I will stay behind with my two stewardesses for a couple of hours in order to allow those who are interested to visit our plane. Mister Mayor, at what time were you planning to hold your reception at City Hall?"

"At about ten this morning, but I can always delay it by a hour or two: I myself would love to visit your plane."

"Then, that's decided. Miss Bertrand and Trung, please hand your suitcases to one of the other flight crewmembers and return inside the plane: you and I will be guiding visitors around it for a while."

Jeanne and Hoa took that in stride and gave their suitcases to H  l  ne Dutrieu and Adolphe P  goud. On her part, Terry Clarkson, chose on her own to stay behind as well: as her personal bodyguard, where Tasha went, she went.

Soon, a long line of excited would-be visitors formed up on the wharf, with Terry, Jeanne and Hoa taking fixed positions inside at strategic points and Tasha leading the visitors in by groups of fifteen people. The reporters who made the visit took lots of pictures inside, while most visitors sat down briefly in passenger seats, trying to gauge how comfortable they were. While she was growing a bit tired and her voice was starting to break by the time the tours were over, these nearly three hours proved in her mind to be time very well spent, as it had given her newly born airline some priceless publicity at no extra cost. Using the car and chauffeur rented by the consulate, she then went to the Hotel Astor with Terry, Jeanne and Hoa to wash and change for the reception at City Hall, but gave some money to Raymond Saulnier before leaving the Pier, so that he and the mechanics doing a careful post-flight maintenance of their plane could hire taxis to get to the hotel. The Hotel Astor turned out to be an eleven-storey building that occupied a whole city block near Times Square, with that block bounded by Broadway Avenue, West 44th Street, West 45th Street and Astor Plaza. The four women, and particularly the two stewardesses, made a distinct impression when they entered the luxurious lobby of the hotel and went to the reception desk. There, Tasha caught the attention of one of the two reception clerks.

"Excuse me, sir. My name is Tasha Lenoir and I arrived from Paris by plane three hours ago. The rest of my group came here ahead of me and we have rooms already reserved for us by the French consulate."

"Ah, yes, I remember them, miss. Let me just check quickly which room was reserved for you."

"Could you check as well which rooms were reserved for my friends here? Their names are Terry Clarkson, Jeanne Bertrand and Trung Ti Hoa."

Tasha thought that she saw a slight hesitation in the receptionist when he glanced at Terry. However, he didn't say anything then and looked through his reservations list.

"Miss Lenoir, you have Room 910, a suite, while Miss Clarkson will occupy Room 914 with Miss Dutrieu. Miss Bertrand and Miss Trung have Room 915. All of these rooms have private bathrooms. Here are your room keys."

"Excellent! Thank you very much."

As her group walked to the nearest elevator cabin, Tasha pointed an index at Jeanne Bertrand and Trung Ti Hoa.

"Once you have taken your shower, change into a fresh Air France uniform: we want to be the portrait of 'avant-gardism' at this City Hall reception."

"What about us?" Asked Terry at once, making Tasha smile.

"We will also be the portrait of avant-gardism, Terry: break out your suit with trousers."

"Yay! I was really getting sick of wearing skirts."

"Well, we are not in France today, so we shouldn't get arrested for wearing pants...I hope."

As she had somewhat expected, their entrance into City Hall, situated at the corner of Broadway Avenue and Brooklyn Street in the Lower Manhattan District, caused a bit of a stir. Was it because of her and Terry's unusual height for women, them wearing trousers, their modern suits that clashed with the antiquated fashion of the time or the fact that Terry was black? Tasha's bet was on a mix of all of these factors. Ignoring the stares, she led her group towards Mayor William Gaynor, who was conversing with Louis Blériot and General Hirschauer near the buffet table set up in one corner of the reception lounge. The mayor saw her approach and beamed a big smile.

"Aaah, Miss Lenoir. We were starting to miss you and your stewardesses. By the way, I never saw a costume like yours or that of Miss Clarkson."

"That's because they were custom-designed according to my directives, Mister Mayor. You will not see similar suits, anywhere."

"I see! Well, what are your plans for after this reception?"

"My first and biggest priority is to start searching for a suitable piece of land near Manhattan where I could build an airport for my planes."

"And how big do you need that land to be, Miss Lenoir?"

"I would need something that would be at a minimum 1,000 yards across, preferably more, so that my planes could land safely without the risk of crashing into some houses. Do you have such a piece of unoccupied real estate around Manhattan, Mister Mayor?"

Gaynor was thoughtful for a moment, then nodded slowly his head once.

"Right now, I can think of one such piece of land, if you ignore what you could find on the other shore of the Hudson River, in New Jersey. There is a large piece of undeveloped land in the borough of Queens, close to the east bank of the East River, near the Gala Amusement Park. I however see a problem with that piece of land."

"Oh? Which one? Is it made of swamplands?"

"No, not that part: it was drained years ago. The problem is that this corner of Queens belongs to 'Big Tim' Sullivan, the local Tammany Hall boss for the Lower East Side and much of Queens. Sullivan was committed to a sanitarium last year and was declared mentally incompetent. Unfortunately for you, his family is still fighting each other for the control of his estate, which means that you really won't have anyone ready or legally able to sell you that property. On second thought, and as much as I hate to say this, the one person who could help you in this would be Charles Murphy, the present boss of Tammany Hall."

"And what exactly is this 'Tammany Hall' you refer to, Mister Mayor?" Asked Tasha.

"Tammany Hall is the name of the headquarters of the Tammany Society, a pro-worker, pro-immigrant and pro-catholic organization which is in essence the Democratic Party machine for New York. It has enormous political influence and power around my city, a power too often built out of corruption and nepotism. I have been trying to curb its power over the city administration and courts since taking office nearly three years ago, but most of the city's Irish-American citizens vote according to the edicts of Tammany Hall."

"And is there a good side to this 'Tammany Hall', Mister Mayor?"

"Not really, in my opinion, but it does often engage in charity work to help the poor and many businessmen deal with it when they want to cut through city red tape in order to expedite a deal."

"Then, no offense to you, Mister Mayor, but it does sound like I could use its services in order to secure some land for my future airport. And where could I find this Charles Murphy?"

"Oh, he is not far, believe me. Follow me!"

As the two of them walked towards a group of men and women talking between themselves in a corner of the reception lounge, Gaynor added a couple of sentences while keeping his voice low.

"I must say that Charles Murphy is a lot less reprehensible than past leaders of the Tammany Society: he is by himself a fairly respectable man with progressive views and is trying to shun the old bad ways. He also happens to be a teetotaler."

"Hum, interesting."

"There he is, in the middle of that group. He is the slightly pudgy one wearing small glasses."

"I see him."

The man in question, who looked to be in his fifties and wore a dark, conservative suit with a high-collared white shirt, watched them approach, showing some surprise at seeing Gaynor come to him. When the mayor and Tasha, with Terry close behind, stopped in front of him, it became quickly evident that Charles Murphy and William Gaynor didn't exactly see eye to eye. Gaynor however kept a polite tone while presenting Tasha.

"Mister Murphy, may I present you Miss Tasha Lenoir, founder and owner of the Air France company, whose seaplane arrived from Paris this morning. Miss Lenoir, this is Mister Charles Murphy, leader of the Tammany Society."

"I am honored to meet you, miss." Said Murphy while shaking hands with Tasha. The strength of her grip surprised him to no small degree, but he didn't remark on it, instead presenting a small woman by his side. "This is my wife, Margaret."

"Pleased to meet you, Madam Murphy."

"Well, I believe that I have other guests to attend to." Said Gaynor with false regret. "I will thus leave you free to talk together."

Murphy waited for Gaynor to walk away, then looked at Tasha, who was at least as tall as he was.

"And what would you like to talk about, Miss Lenoir?"

"Business!" Replied Tasha with a big grin. "More precisely, land acquisition. I am looking for a suitable piece of undeveloped land near Manhattan that would be big enough to land safely my planes arriving from Paris. Mayor Gaynor just told me that he knew of one such piece of land in Queens, near the Gala Amusement Park. However, even if I find that piece of real estate adequate, it happens to belong to one of your followers, Mister Timothy Sullivan, who is unfortunately interned presently in a sanatorium and has been declared mentally incompetent. With his family fighting for his estate, I have thus no legal way to make a deal and buy that land. So, I came to get your help, Mister Murphy."

"I see! And how big a piece of land do you need, Miss Lenoir?"

"A minimum of a square mile, Mister Murphy. Please understand that, while my seaplane can take off and land in a relatively short distance, I need to have a wide space kept free of buildings, to allow my aircraft to approach the airport without endangering the people living around it. There is also the question of the noise. Over 4,000 horsepower makes a lot of noise, especially when the plane is low and on approach to land or just taking off. During the landing and takeoff phases, a plane cannot abruptly turn away to avoid overflying the nearest houses without risking to crash. Thus, to minimize noise on the ground, sufficient space is needed to allow the plane to take some speed and altitude."

"Hum, I see your point: having trains pass by your house is annoying enough, especially at night. I must commend you, Miss Lenoir: the industrialists who worry about not disturbing the working class people are too rare these days. By the way, I went to have a look in passing at your seaplane at Pier 25: a truly impressive machine."

"Why, thank you, sir. So, do you think that you could help me in this?"

"I think that I can see a possible way to bypass that problem of mental incompetence and disputed estate, yes. Now, about your airline: will it cater solely to rich passengers? I was made to understand that aircraft don't come cheap and burn a lot of gasoline."

"Well, the Blériot-Kruger CIGOGNE, the type I flew in this morning, is certainly not cheap, and it does burn through thirteen tons of fuel in order to fly non-stop from Paris to New York. However, I am not like those millionaires who own the various transatlantic shipping lines: my goal is to promote air travel and to make it accessible to all. Our CIGOGNE can seat twelve persons in first class and thirty more persons in

tourist class during an eighteen-hour trip. All of those passengers eat the same quality of food and are treated with equal respect by my stewardesses. The only extras the first class passengers get are wider seats and free alcoholic drinks. For those privileges, I will make them pay about 68 dollars for a one-way ticket between Paris and New York. As for the tourist class passengers, I intend to charge fourteen dollars or less for a one-way ticket.”

“Only fourteen dollars!” Nearly shouted Murphy, while his wife opened her mouth wide. “But, that’s less than the cheapest steerage class tickets for a transatlantic crossing on a big liner.”

“Yes, and the owners of these maritime lines are all millionaires.” Replied Tasha on a sardonic tone. “I tell you what: if you help me buy a suitable piece of land to build an airport on it, then I will set the price of a tourist class, one-way ticket at no more than twelve American dollars for the trip Paris – New York. I may have to fleece a bit more my richer passengers to compensate for that, but they can afford it.”

A friendly smile came on Murphy’s face and he shook hands vigorously with her.

“Miss, you definitely are the kind of person I like. How about if we go see that tract of land together this afternoon, so that you can see if it would fit your needs?”

“That would be very helpful indeed, sir. Would you mind if two of my travel companions come with me as well? The first is my friend Terry Clarkson, who is presently standing behind me. The other is Brigadier General Hirschauer, the head of the French military aviation. He is a military engineer and is accustomed to have airports built for his air units, so he knows the drill quite well.”

“I see no objections to that, miss. How about if I go pick you and your friends up at the lobby of the Hotel Astor at, say, two o’clock this afternoon?”

“That would be perfect, sir. We will be waiting. Thank you for your help, Mister Murphy.”

Tasha and Terry then left after a last handshake, to return to the rest of their Air France group and the mayor. Margaret Murphy couldn’t help stare at their female suits with trousers as they walked away.

“Those suits of theirs felt a bit improper to me, Charles. Women are not supposed to wear trousers.”

“Normally, no! However, those two women are certainly not your run of the mill women. If I can believe somebody else with whom I talked with a few minutes ago, that Miss Lenoir is a scientific genius, while that tall black woman actually landed their plane

on the Hudson River this morning. Also, the cut of their 'suits' is unlike any I saw before and they cover everything that needs to be covered, so you can't really qualify them as indecent. They certainly can't pass as men's suits but they appear to be of very high quality and have quite a look to it. They may just start a new fashion trend with them here."

13:46 (New York Time)

Lobby of the Hotel Astor

Tasha, having just bought a map of New York City at a kiosk in the lobby of her hotel, was about to sit down in a sofa with Terry and General Hirschauer, who had changed to a civilian suit, when she saw Jeanne Bertrand and Trung Ti Hoa about to head out in civilian dresses. While smiling to them, she signaled them to come to her and searched for a moment in her belt purse as the two young women approached her.

"Do you need us for something, Miss Lenoir?" Asked Jeanne Bertrand, making Tasha shake her head.

"No, not at all. Don't worry about having your free time being cut today. I suppose that you were heading out to explore a bit the town?"

"We were, Miss Lenoir. We were going to explore Chinatown, which is right next to this hotel. Since Hoa speaks Cantonese and I speak fluent English, we should be able to go around without difficulty."

"Well, you two certainly deserved some good free time. Just be careful, though: not everybody in this city is nice, the same way Paris is. Before you go, here is something that should help your tour of Chinatown."

Tasha then gave ten American dollars in small bills to each woman, a not inconsiderate sum for the time for the average American worker. The two overjoyed women exchanged hugs and kisses with Tasha before walking out of the lobby with renewed eagerness. Hirschauer watched all that with a smile and a nod of the head.

"You are decidedly a kind and considerate boss for your employees, Miss Lenoir, especially when compared to other industrial magnates."

"Me, an industrial magnate? Come on, General! Aren't you blowing up my status a bit?"

Hirschauer's smile faded then and he lowered his voice, so he could not be heard by passing people in the lobby.

"It is you who should not underestimate your worth, miss. In the short space of a year spent in France, you have revolutionized electronics in general and radio technology in particular, have sold to the government the production license for the most powerful explosive in the World, have opened an electronics production plant in Buc, a chemical plant in Suresnes, near Buc, that now produces in bulk your Durex polymer, along with glass fiber and epoxy resin, plus a fiberglass factory that is producing fiberglass items, like portable rowboats and modular shelters, that sell like crazy. Finally, you opened a separate plant in Suresnes that has just started mass production of solid rocket propellant and rocket motors for the French Army. All of those plants are working at maximum capacity, with your electronics plant even working a night shift in order to satisfy the orders for radios from the army and the navy. On top of that, you have opened a technical school to form and train your employees and are now starting the first commercial airline in the World. As a result, you are now easily a multi-millionaire, yet you treat your employees with respect and kindness."

In return, Tasha gave Hirschauer a sober look.

"General, I did not do this just to become rich: I did it to make France stronger and, hopefully, better. As for treating my employees with respect and kindness, I simply treat them the way all employers should do, instead of exploiting them while pocketing big profits. While I am mostly apolitical, you could say that my point of view about labor relations is definitely on the socialist side, which is something I will never apologize for. Right now, creating a ground network for Air France around the World will take most of my free time and available money in the months to come, but it will eventually promote France worldwide in a way nothing else can. To make France the best country in the World is my ultimate goal and becoming a French citizen will be my ultimate reward."

Hirschauer was silent for a moment while staring at her, more than a little moved by her proclamation. When he spoke again, it was in a solemn tone.

"Miss Lenoir, be assured that France will not forget all that you did for it. As for me, be assured of my deepest respect towards you."

"General, just your gallantry will suffice." Replied Tasha with a smile, bringing a smile back on Hirschauer's face. The arrival in the lobby of Charles Murphy, accompanied by a big man that had to be his bodyguard, interrupted their exchange.

"So, ready for a ride into Queens?"

"We certainly are, Mister Murphy." Replied Tasha.

“Then, let’s go to my car. By the way, I brought a real estate expert with me, so that we could evaluate properly the cost of buying that piece of land you want to buy. My lawyer is already looking into the state of the Sullivan estate. You were right about it, miss: it is presently a legal mess. However, as I told you earlier, there may be a way to go around that mess.”

“I am anxious to hear all about that, Mister Murphy.” Said Tasha while walking with him towards the exit.

She found that two cars were waiting at the entrance, with two men occupying the second car. At Murphy’s request, Terry reluctantly went into the second car, leaving Tasha and General Hirschauer ride with Charles Murphy in the first car. The two cars then started rolling, turning north of Broadway and following it until it connected with Park Avenue. From there, they continued north on Park Avenue until they approached Central Park. They then turned right, then left, to get on the recently built Queensborough Bridge and cross the East River to Queens. Once off the bridge, they went left and followed for a while the Northern Boulevard towards the East, then turned left on 68th Street to join the 31st Avenue, where they turned right. Charles Murphy then pointed at a vast, empty expanse of land they were passing along on their left.

“There is the piece of land property that is interesting you, Miss Lenoir. It is bordered to the South by the 31st Avenue, which we are rolling on right now, by Booty Street to the West, which separates that tract of land from the St-Michael’s Cemetery, which we just passed by, by the Astoria Boulevard to the North and by the 79th Street to the East. As you can see, the lands surrounding that plot, which by the way covers 220 acres, or 89 hectares for you Europeans, are also mostly undeveloped. That should make it possible for you to buy or lease an even larger plot of land for your airport. We are now going to drive down to the 79th Street, on which we will turn left, so that we can roll into your coveted plot of real estate to better inspect it.”

Tasha, like Hirschauer, examined with intense interest the empty land as Murphy spoke but refrained from talking until they actually stopped and parked, once at the end of a short, unfinished road that ended near the eastern edge of the land plot. Coming out of the car and looking around her, Tasha pointed at the big amusement park visible about a kilometer away to the North, situated on the shores of Bowery Bay.

“Overall, I would say that this piece of land would do the trick for me. The only thing that I will have to take into account when building my airport will be that

amusement park. That big Ferris wheel and rollercoaster ride are quite high and my planes will have to stand well clear of them. On the other hand, the western glide approach path is well clear, with that large cemetery immediately bordering this plot. I suppose that the dead won't mind some aircraft engine noise from time to time."

Charles Murphy giggled briefly at her attempt at humor.

"I should be offended by your lack of reverence to the dead but you're right, miss: they are not about to complain and, if this can render the operations of your airport safer for the surrounding population of Queens, then I am all for it. Now, will this piece of land be big enough for your needs, Miss Lenoir?"

"Initially, yes! However, as the years will go by, planes will get progressively bigger and will need more and more distance to land and take off. Please understand that my seaplane has unusually good short takeoff and landing performances for its size. However, I already have plans for much faster planes, which may need close to a mile or more of hard runway to safely take off or land. Terry, can you give me an estimate of the size of this land plot we are on?"

Terry looked at once down the western edge of the perimeter, using the laser rangefinder integrated into her cybernetic right eye to measure the distance to the line formed by the Astoria Boulevard, then turned around to look at the line formed by the 31st Avenue.

"This plot measures about 700 meters along its eastern perimeter edge."

She then turned successively three times to make more range finding measurements.

"I count a distance of 850 meters along the southern perimeter edge, a thousand meters from the 31st Avenue to the Astoria Boulevard along the western edge and 350 meters along its northern edge. I strongly suspect that we will need to buy some extra plots of land on top of this lot, if we want to be able to build runways that are long enough."

As Tasha noted down those measurements while making a rough sketch of the shape and orientation of the land plot, the real estate expert brought by Charles Murphy looked at his borough-produced map of Queens, then looked up with a stunned expression after a few seconds.

"My God! She was spot on in all her distance evaluations."

As Murphy and the real estate expert eyed Terry with befuddlement, Tasha tried to explain away Terry's performance in a plausible way.

"I should have told you that Terry is an accomplished marksman and is trained to evaluate distances with precision. She also happens to be my personal bodyguard, on top of being an expert pilot and being one of my best friends."

"Uh, I see." Could only say Murphy while still eyeing the tall young black woman. "Is she armed?"

"In France she would be, but here she doesn't have a weapons carrying permit, so she has only knives on her right now."

"I can arrange for a concealed weapons carrying permit for her quite quickly for her, if you wish to, Miss Lenoir. The police permit fee is only three dollars."

"Actually, that could be useful for her...and me by extension. I think that I will take you up on your offer. Starting arrangements to build an airport may take me a few days here in New York, so we should have enough time for her to get a weapons permit."

"Oh, she will have her permit today, miss." Replied Murphy, smiling. "We will stop at the central police station on our return, then at a gun shop my bodyguard frequents. How good is she with a pistol?"

"Good enough to probably outshoot your bodyguard, Mister Murphy." Replied Terry Clarkson, making the said bodyguard snicker with amusement and disbelief. Seeing that, Charles Murphy grinned and looked at Tasha again.

"How about we have a friendly shooting match between your bodyguard and my bodyguard, Miss Lenoir? The gun shop that we will visit has an indoor shooting range in the basement."

"Why not? Terry needs a little practice anyway."

In that, Tasha was making a pious lie, as Terry practiced her pistol firing at least twice a week when in France, where she had a valid weapons carrying permit, thanks to Tasha's government connections. However, this could be a good occasion to impress into Charles Murphy and others that she and Terry meant business.

"So? What does your real estate expert says about the value of this plot of land?"

Murphy looked at the expert, who was consulting a document while looking at the land around them.

"Mister MacAllister?"

"According to the latest Queens Borough tax evaluations and the present state of the land here, I can say that this terrain is presently valued at about 880,000 dollars for

tax purposes. However, it would be valued much higher once fully developed. Are you sure that you want to buy this land and pay for building a private airport, miss? Air transportation, like maritime and ground transportation, could be considered a public service, with the government responsible for it. I don't know how they do it in France, but the city of New York should be the one building an airport for you, as it will serve the needs of the people of New York."

"You are quite right, Mister MacAllister, but I don't have the time to wait for local politicians to debate ad nauseam about the utility or non-utility of having an airport. Yes, in France the government subsidizes air transport by paying for the ground infrastructure, but I doubt that the various government levels here will be willing to spend millions on an airport. The one thing in which they may be interested in is the fact that I intend to carry mail across the Atlantic, as well as passengers and other cargo. Your U.S. Postal Services may get involved at one point in this."

"A very significant point, I believe, Miss Lenoir. If you succeed in getting a contract with the federal postal services for the transportation of mail by air, then you will have some support and legal protection from the federal government. It could also help lower the taxes assessed by the city on this lot of land. So, would you like to lease or buy this lot of land, miss?"

"I want to buy, and quickly, mister! I would also like to buy some of the adjacent lots that are available, so that I could make the runways long enough for heavy planes. The faster I can start building my airport, the faster I can start my Paris to New York route."

"Uh, you would spend 880,000 dollars, plus maybe a million dollars to build your airport, and this just to open one air route, miss?"

"Who said that this would be only for one air route, mister? I intend for New York to be eventually the hub for at least four other routes. I have projects to open a westward route from New York to Denver, Los Angeles and Honolulu, plus a route to Washington, Atlanta, Miami and Cuba and another one to Detroit, Chicago, Minneapolis, Seattle and Anchorage. If things go well, I may add another route going north to Montreal, Québec City and Halifax. And this is only for North America. Give me a few more years and Air France routes will circle the World."

That left the expert and Charles Murphy speechless for a moment, until Murphy nodded slowly his head.

"You certainly qualify as a visionary, Miss Lenoir, but I believe that you are most serious and are capable of turning your ideas into reality. Mister MacAllister, start at once the procedures to buy this portion of land and adjacent lots at the most advantageous price possible for Miss Lenoir. I will put myself as guarantor of this deal until Miss Lenoir can produce the needed sums for the deal."

"Thank you very much, Mister Murphy." Said Tasha, most satisfied. "You will not regret this. In turn, I renew my promise that a one-way tourist class ticket from Paris to New York will cost no more than twelve dollars and I will also add a stop in Dublin to accommodate Irish passengers."

"Miss, just with that you will have earned the undying friendship of the little people of New York." Replied Charles Murphy, genuinely moved by her declaration.

16:18 (New York Time)

Gun store, Spring Street

Lower East Side District, Manhattan

Terry Clarkson was genuinely enjoying herself as she was browsing through the display counters full of handguns and wall racks full of rifles. Obtaining a carrying permit for concealed weapons from the city police department had been both insanely easy and quick, especially with Charles Murphy breathing down the neck of the police department clerk who was delivering weapons permits. She already had a couple of contemporary handguns in Paris, where she also had left her heavy plasma rifle and a heavy kinetic pistol, but she had come to New York without any weapons...officially. In reality, she had enough weapons hidden or integrated inside her cybernetic arms and legs to lay waste to a small army, including a plasma rifle hidden in her left forearm, a 7mm kinetic rifle hidden in her right forearm, a stun unit inside her right index finger and retractable needle blades inside eight of her fingers, plus a plasma cutting torch in her left index finger. She finally pointed at a pistol in a display, touching the glass surface with her right index.

"Could I see this one, please?"

"Aah, a Bergmann-Bayard Model 1910 pistol in 9X23mm Bergmann caliber. A rather rare piece here in New York, miss." Said the gun store owner while retrieving the pistol and its display case from under the glass top of his counter. Putting the case and

pistol down on the counter, he pointed at a few features of the weapon while Terry eyed the pistol with interest.

“Contrary to the C96 Mauser pistol from which it evolved, the Bergmann-Bayard Model 1910 has a detachable ten-round box magazine in front of the trigger and handle, instead of the classic ‘broom handle’ fixed magazine fed from the top via ten-round clips. It also uses a larger, more powerful round than the usual 7.63X25mm Mauser round, while I find its handle much better shaped and agreeable to hold. It comes with a full cleaning kit and a spare box magazine.”

“Do you have more spare box magazines, sir? Two magazines sounds rather limited as a combat load.”

“Uh, unfortunately, this is my only Bergmann-Bayard Model 1910 pistol, miss.” Looking quickly at the other pistols visible under the counter, Terry pointed at another gun.

“Would the magazines for this Mauser C96 Model 1906 in 9mm Bergmann fit in the Bergmann-Bayard?”

“Uh, I’m not sure, miss. Let me try!”

Taking out that pistol and putting it on the counter, beside the other weapon, the store owner took its spare magazine and tried to fit it in the magazine well of the Bergmann-Bayard. It did, to Terry’s satisfaction.

“Excellent! The width and length of the feeding lips also seem to be identical. If you have spare magazines for this one, I will take them.”

“I in fact do, miss, as this Model 1906 comes with a choice of magazines with various capacities. It even has fifteen-round magazines, of which I have a few.”

“If they work well and won’t jam in the Bergmann-Bayard, I will take them, sir. I am told that you have an indoor firing range in your basement. Could I test fire this pistol and these magazines there? I also have a little shooting competition in mind against the gentleman over there. I will pay for the ammunition.”

The gun store owner gave a quick glance at Murphy’s bodyguard, whom he knew well, and nodded his head before going to fetch a box of 9X23mm Bergmann ammunition.

“If you will follow me, please. HARRIS, TAKE CARE OF THE SHOP WHILE I AM IN THE BASEMENT RANGE WITH THESE CUSTOMERS.”

“GOT IT, BOSS!”

Using an old staircase besides the shop's entrance, the group went down to a brick and concrete basement where they entered a four position shooting range with sand backstops about 25 meters away and wooden tables set at the firing line. The store owner distributed first cotton balls as rudimentary ear defenders, then let Terry and Charles Murphy's bodyguard, an Italian-American named Tony Morano, set up their weapons on the tables and fill up spare magazines, with Morano using his Colt 1911 .45 caliber pistol. Terry gave him a big smile once ready.

"Do you mind if I try a couple of five-round groupings, to find where the sights on this gun aim?"

"Go right ahead, miss."

Loading a box magazine with five rounds in her Bergmann-Bayard Model 1910 pistol, Terry then chambered a round and took a two-hand firing stance that appeared a bit bizarre to Morano, who was used to the classic one-hand stance widely practiced by about every pistol shooter in this time period. However, Morano didn't remark out loud on it and let Terry fire her five shots in slow, aimed fire. Once Terry had unloaded and put down her handgun, everybody went forward to check her target. Charles Murphy's mouth and that of the gun store owner opened wide on seeing her tight, three centimeter grouping, which was a bit to the left and down from the target's bull's-eye, while Tony Morano let out a long whistle.

"Now, that is one nice grouping, miss."

"Thank you! Just let me shoot another test grouping, to confirm my point of aim."

"Take your time, miss."

Once everybody was back at the firing line and after having patched up her target, Terry fired another five-round grouping, this time dead center and still as tight as the first. Morano sucked air in on seeing that.

"Hell, it is a good thing that I didn't take a bet against you, miss."

"Come on, Tony! I am sure that a pro like you can do as well as me. How about if we start with five rounds in ten seconds, followed by five rounds in five seconds?"

"Sounds fine with me, miss. Mister Glenn, could you call the timing on this?"

"No problem, son... Are you ready?... On my count, five rounds in ten seconds... Fire!... Cease fire!"

Many in the group nearly ran to the targets after both guns had been declared safe. What they saw impressed Charles Murphy.

"Miss Clarkson, you just managed to best one of the top pistol shooters in the whole of New York. Maybe you should compete for a living."

"Naaah! I would find that dull compared to the life I am having now. I have to say that Tony gave me a run for my money here: you nearly did as well as me."

"Well, the old gunslingers from the Far West did have a saying: there is no second place winner in a shootout. Let's go try the fast shootout."

Terry had to refrain from asking what the hell was this 'Far West', sensing that she would look stupid if she did. Returning to the firing line and loading a fresh magazine in her pistol, she took one deep breath and concentrated on the target at her front.

"Are you ready?... Five rounds in five seconds, on my command... Fire!... Cease fire!"

This time, Terry's superiority was even more evident, with Morano's grouping having markedly suffered from the rapid shooting, while Terry's grouping was barely wider.

"Sweet Mother Mary!" Exclaimed the gun store owner on seeing her target. "This is without a doubt the best shooting I ever saw."

Morano had to agree with him and he shook hands with Terry with genuine admiration in his eyes.

"Miss, you beat me fair and square: the beer is on me tonight."

"Well, I certainly can't say no to such an invitation, can I?"

"Certainly not, miss. Uh, how fast could you shoot all your rounds and still be in the bull's-eye?"

"I think that the best way is still to demonstrate it. Let's patch our targets and go back to the firing line."

There was a general air of expectation as they returned to the firing line and as Terry loaded a magazine with twelve rounds and inserted the magazine in place. She then looked at the gun store owner.

"I am going to fire a total of twelve rounds, with three rounds per target, as fast as I can accurately do. I will aim one shot each at the heart, throat and head of each target. Start your timing when I will raise my pistol from the table and stop it when I say 'end'."

"Understood, miss."

Even though this was liable to attract some attention on her and Terry, Tasha let all of that go: Terry truly deserved her moment in the limelight. After a couple of long, deep

breaths, Terry quickly raised her gun to eye level, making the gun store owner start his chronometer.

BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG...”END!”

The store owner opened his eyes wide on reading his chrono.

“She fired her twelve shots in seven and a half seconds! Let’s go see the targets!”

It was a near collective run to the targets then, with only Terry and Tasha walking at a normal pace. On inspecting the four targets, Tony Morano made the sign of the cross, completely overwhelmed.

“She...she plugged all four targets as she said: one in the heart, one in the throat and one in the head. If I wouldn’t have seen it by myself, I would never have believed this possible.”

Charles Murphy gave an incredulous look at Terry as she was calmly approaching the targets and the group.

“How? How could you be so good at this? Are you a professional hitman?”

The term ‘hitman’ made Terry smile, but she didn’t correct Murphy on that. Instead, she calmly looked him in the eyes.

“I did kill men in the past and, yes, you could call me a sort of professional killer, but I was doing it for the government.”

“You, a government assassin? Are you still one?”

“No! I now work solely for Miss Lenoir.”

“Why did the government train you to kill, miss?” Asked the poor Tony Morano, completely overwhelmed. Terry made a wide grin at that question.

“Why? Who would suspect a black woman of being a government agent, Tony?”

18:35 (Paris Time)

Friday, June 20, 1913

Aéro-Parc Blériot, Buc

Paris area, France

“Aaah, home at last.” Said Brigadier General Hirschauer while getting up from his seat after the CIGOGNE had come to a full stop in front of its hangar in Buc. “These

seats are really comfortable and the service and food were great, Tasha, but eighteen hours in a plane is still long.”

“That is the price to pay to get somewhere faster than by ship, my dear General.” Replied Tasha. “At least, now everything is in motion to start building my airport in Queens. Many more like it will follow in the months to come, so I expect to be quite busy for the foreseeable future.”

The passengers then grabbed their suitcases and bags from either the overhead bins or from the spaces behind the reclining seats of the first class section, which were facing each other, then proceeded aft to exit via the retractable rear access ramp. They found a number of people waiting for them, including an apparently excited Johanna Kruger, who intercepted at once Tasha, General Hirschauer and Commandant Dupuis.

“Could I bother you three to follow me to the prototype workshop hangar? It won’t be long.”

“Gee, Johanna, can’t it wait even ten minutes?”

“No, and I am sure that you will agree with me after seeing what I have to show you.”

Now downright mystified, the trio followed Johanna to the prototype workshop, dragging or carrying their suitcases with them and entering the hangar behind Johanna. What they saw inside made Hirschauer nearly go down on his knees and pray.

“The first CONDOR, it is completed.”

“Nearly, General. There are however only a few minor touch-ups to do on it before it can start its flight trials. Contrary to all the previous models of Blériot-Kruger planes I designed to date, this one will be a purely military design, with no civilian variant of it. It was optimized to fill the role of fast medium bomber, torpedo-bomber and dive bomber. With two 3C9-TCF(WM), 1,100 horsepower engines to propel it, this two-seater attack aircraft should reach top speeds at altitude of over 540 kilometers per hour, with enough combat radius to hit Berlin with two tons of bombs. It will also be armed with multiple machine guns and rockets and will be able to attack ships with torpedoes. If given enough time to enter service in significant numbers, it could then give a bitter lesson to whoever will attack France in the future.”

CHAPTER 8 – IN THE CROSSHAIRS

15:03 (Berlin Time)

Wednesday, June 25, 1913

German Imperial Army headquarters

Berlin, Germany

Oberst Siegfried von Kamp came to rigid attention and clicked his heels together when he stopped in front of the work desk of General von Hoepfner, Commander of the Aviation Corps of the Imperial Army.

“You wanted to see me, Herr General?” Asked the Intelligence Section chief, getting a unhappy look from Hoepfner.

“I certainly did, Her Oberst. I just finished reading your report on the Blériot-Kruger planes entering service in the French Army and Navy. However, your report raises more questions than it gives answers. What the hell is happening exactly in Buc and what could I face in the air if we go to war with France tomorrow?”

Von Kamp suddenly felt uncomfortable under the glare of his superior: what he knew was mostly bad news.

“Herr General, please understand that the security around the Aéro-Parc Blériot in Buc is quite tight and that Blériot has been very discreet about the fact that he is building military planes for the French Army. As a consequence, little details on his planes have filtered out. The one exception is that trip last week across the Atlantic, where reporters and visitors were allowed to fly on or visit on the ground his Blériot-Kruger CIGOGNE heavy seaplane.”

Those last words seemed to enrage von Hoepfner, who slapped his hand down on his desk and raised his voice.

“Yes! A trip that showed us that the French now have a seaplane able to cross the Atlantic non-stop while carrying five tons of payload. How many tons of bombs could that seaplane carry on the much shorter distance between Paris and Berlin, in your opinion? The stories about that transatlantic trip, while fascinating the Kaiser, has also worried him a lot and he came to me with questions...questions I could not answer. One

of these questions was 'why can the French build such planes but not us?' Would you care trying to answer that one, Herr Oberst?"

Guessing that his position was very possibly at risk right now, von Kamp did his best to expose his arguments.

"Herr General, I believe that the answer to that would be two women named Johanna Kruger and Tasha Lenoir. The first woman has been the chief aircraft designer at Blériot for about a year now, while the second has produced a complete line of new and revolutionary radios and flight instruments that were first displayed at the Paris Air Salon in October of last year. Another reason would involve the Salmson engines used in the recent Blériot planes. However, even in the case of the Salmson engines, the names of those two women keep coming back in the reports sent by our agents in France. One of those agents was able to befriend a customer of Blériot who had bought one of his Blériot-Kruger SUPER BOURDON four-seat monoplane and had access to that plane, which he was able to examine from up close. My report includes an annex with the performances and characteristics of that SUPER BOURDON listed in it, which makes it evident that we have nothing even approaching it. Unfortunately, Mister Blériot is very choosy about to whom he is selling his civilian planes and will not sell to any German, Austrian or Hungarian customer. That is why we still haven't been able to acquire one of those planes."

"THEN, STEAL ONE, DAMMIT! I AM FRANKLY GETTING TIRED OF THIS PUSSYFOOTING AROUND."

"Herr General, I believe that this would be a bad idea. The French secret services, which are unfortunately a bit too good at their jobs to my taste, would quickly find what happened to a stolen plane, something that could trigger a number of nasty scenarios. I thus strongly counsel that we don't try that route, Herr General."

"Humph! Very well! What else do you know about those two women?"

"Not enough, unfortunately. However, they are clearly at the center of the new Blériot-Kruger planes. Everybody who met those two women agreed that they were geniuses in their own rights. One, Johanna Kruger, is an aeronautical engineer, while Tasha Lenoir is described as a physicist, chemist and electronics expert. That is however only the start of the mystery surrounding those two women. They were said to have arrived in Paris in May of last year with two other women, supposedly from the United States. Every story about those four women emphasized that they all looked rather strange and spoke a heavily accented French and an equally accented English

that was unlike that spoken in the United States. The two other women are an Asian young woman who is reputed to be the executive secretary of Tasha Lenoir and a tall black woman who is said to be her personal bodyguard. That last part could sound ludicrous but a story that is propagating around New York these days says that she showed incredible pistol shooting skills, on top of piloting the visiting Blériot-Kruger CIGOGNE. All this makes for a rather enigmatic group of four women, so I tried to dig more info on them, notably via our agents in the United States. Those agents came up with a blank: there is no trace of those women having been in the United States in 1912 and no records of their supposed lives there. Miss Tasha Lenoir, in particular, who claims to have studied physics, chemistry and electrical engineering in Boston, drew a blank there. God knows how much a woman studying such subjects at doctorate or masters levels would have attracted attention in Boston. So, to resume what we know of those women, it is that they claim to be American but may very well not be and are the ones who made possible all the new Blériot planes, new radios and fiberglass materials. They would hold the answers to our questions, but they are unfortunately well protected most of the time when in Buc.”

“Can our agents in Paris kidnap those two women, Kruger and Lenoir, and bring them to Germany?”

“I think so, Herr General, but...”

“Then, do it! That’s an order!”

02:01 (Paris Time)

Thursday, July 3, 1913

Château de Romainville, Ecquevilly

Yvelines Department, west of Paris

Erich Langefeld, dressed in informal dark clothing like the six armed men accompanying him, addressed them in a near whisper after they had entered the big mansion by an unlocked window on the ground floor.

“Remember: we only want Kruger and Lenoir. We won’t hurt anyone unless absolutely necessary or if somebody shoots at us. We will withdraw as soon as we have our two targets. Now, our information tells us that the guest rooms are on the top floor, so we will start there. Now, follow me...quietly.”

Moving away from the window and crossing the large lounge they were in, the seven Germans went out in the darkened main hallway and followed it until they got to the main central staircase. There, Langefeld started cautiously climbing the stairs, doing his best not to make noise on the wooden steps. The obscurity was nearly total, thanks to a moonless night, but a few isolated lit candleholders dispersed around the floors and rooms, meant to give some illumination to occupants who would wake up at night to go to the various bathrooms, made the use of the flashlights carried by the Germans unnecessary for the moment. The seven men didn't meet anyone on their way and they were able to step on the top floor undetected, where they split into two groups as they had previously planned to do. Each of the two groups then started exploring the rooms on one of the two sides of the main hallway of that floor, with one man entering quietly a room to see who, if anyone, slept in it. The first room explored by the group led by Langefeld proved empty, but the second was occupied by a young woman sleeping in a large bed. However, Langefeld identified her as being Lenoir's executive secretary and withdrew from her room, leaving her undisturbed.

The next room checked out by Langefeld proved to be one of interest to him, with a blonde woman sleeping in it. Signaling to his men to quietly enter the room and surround the bed, Langefeld then took out of a pocket a small bottle wrapped around with a thick cloth. Opening the bottle and pouring some of the chloroform in it on the cloth, he then closed back the bottle and returned it into one pocket before approaching the sleeping blonde. As soon as he applied the tampon full on chloroform over the mouth and nose of the woman, his three men immediately took hold of either an arm or a leg, to prevent their victim from thrashing around and make noise before the chloroform could take effect. The sudden contact of the tampon over her face abruptly woke up Johanna Kruger but she was unable to move, with three strong men holding her solidly, while the thick tampon muffled her attempt as screaming for help. After trying to fight herself free for a few seconds, she finally passed out, thanks to the chloroform vapors, and became inert. Langefeld then withdrew his tampon and whispered to his men.

"Klaus, Heinrich, you grab Kruger and carry her down and out, then tie her up and gag her before carrying her to our van. In the meantime, me and Felix will go look for Lenoir."

The two German agents obeyed at once, grabbing the inert Johanna and pulling her out of bed in order to throw her over the shoulders of Heinrich, the bigger of the two men. That was when the Germans realized that Johanna had been sleeping in the nude, something that brought mean smiles on their faces but also a rebuke from Langefeld.

"Remember: she holds a lot of very important information for us, so concentrate on the job at hand and keep your sexual fantasies for later, when we will be interrogating her in our safe house."

"Yes, Herr Hauptmann!" Whispered Heinrich before leaving the room with Klaus, his load still draped over one shoulder.

With one of his two intended targets captured, Langefeld went to check the next bedroom with his remaining agent. His second group joined back with him then, with its leader reporting in a whisper.

"We found the black woman in a room on the other side of the hallway, but left her alone. She was in a deep sleep."

"Good! We already found and grabbed Kruger. We only need to find Lenoir now. I will go explore that next bedroom ahead."

Opening slowly the door of that room and entering it on his knees and hands, Langefeld needed only one look after approaching the bed before returning quietly to the door.

"Lenoir is sleeping in that bed. I want four men to surround her bed and be ready to grab her when I will apply my tampon full of chloroform. Take position now."

Doing as little noise as possible, the five Germans took positions around the large bed, ready to pounce on their victim. Langefeld then poured some extra chloroform on his tampon before nodding his head once. When he applied the tampon on her face, Tasha woke up abruptly, like Johanna. However, instead of trying to scream, and as she was being solidly grabbed by four men, Tasha's reflex was to use her implanted communications system inside her skull and emit a call for help, while she kept her breath in to avoid breathing the chloroform for as long as possible.

'Terry, I'm being attacked in my bedroom by at least four men! Come quickly!'

She had time to repeat her call another time before she had to take a breath, inhaling some of the chloroform and passing out a few seconds later. Langefeld was intrigued at first by the fact that she had not attempted to scream for help, but dismissed that once she passed out.

"Alright men, let's pick her up and leave."

Again, like with Johanna, they found out that Tasha had been sleeping in the nude. One of the agents discreetly passed a hand on her left breast while Langefeld was not looking his way, then threw Tasha over his right shoulder.

“This one is also quite nicely shaped. This mission is turning out to be quite entertaining after all.”

Inside her dark bedroom on the other side of the hallway, Terry Clarkson woke up at once when the mental call for help from Tasha resonated inside her brain. Reacting at first purely out of professional reflexes, her first move was to throw away her bed sheets and sit up on the edge of her bed while grabbing her Bergmann-Bayard pistol hidden under her pillow. She never slept while keeping her weapon on top of or inside of a bedside table: that was the best way to let an intruder grab it or tamper with it. Not wasting time to put on some clothes or even her panties, she silently ran to the door of her room and cracked it open just a bit to look in the dark hallway, her pistol ready to fire. What she saw made her blood boil: a group of men wearing dark clothes were now coming out of Tasha's room, with a naked and inert Tasha thrown over the shoulder of one of the men. Many of the men had guns in their hands, something that decided Terry's next move: opening abruptly her door and jumping out in the hallway, she started firing at once, not bothering with shouting any stupid warning like 'Freeze or I shoot!', something that would only give time to the intruders to shoot first. Her first shot, aimed in the near total darkness with the help of her night vision devices integrated into her cybernetic right eye, hit the man carrying Tasha in the head, dropping him to the floor and making him lose his hold on Tasha. The shocked Germans, barely seeing the dark shape now standing in the hallway, then reacted purely by reflex and started pointing their handguns, but were handicapped by the fact that the sights on their pistols and revolvers were not designed to be visible in total darkness. They were also much slower than Terry in their moves, as the black woman fired in quick cadence while walking sideways, downing German after German from a distance of ten meters but not offering them a still target. Only one of the Germans managed to fire once before being hit in the forehead and killed, but his bullet, badly aimed, simply whizzed by Terry's ear before piercing a hole in the ceiling of the hallway. With all the intruders apparently down on the floor, some moving still and grunting with pain, Terry approached them quickly, her pistol still pointed, then used her left arm to drag Tasha's body away from the men, pulling her up to a corner a good ten meters away. Checking first that Tasha was

breathing and unhurt, Terry then returned to the intruders and, using the neuroncic stun unit hidden inside her right index finger, shocked unconscious the two intruders who were merely wounded. As she was finishing doing that, a sudden thought made her swear to herself.

“Shit! Johanna and Hien.”

Running to Johanna’s bedroom, Terry abruptly opened its door and jumped inside, her pistol at the ready. What she found was an empty bed. Right at that moment, she got a mental radio message from an apparently scared Hien.

Tasha! Johanna! Terry! Are you alright? What is happening?”

‘This is Terry! Stay in your room for the moment, Hien: armed intruders entered the mansion to kidnap at least Tasha and Johanna. I was able to stop them from taking Tasha, but Johanna is now missing. I’m going to try to find and retrieve her.’

‘Then, let me at least take care of Tasha. Where is she?’

‘I pulled her away from the intruders I shot. She is in a corner at the end of the hallway. Three of the intruders are dead, but two others were only wounded and I stunned them. If you have time, try to stop their bleeding: to have live prisoners to question could be important. I have to go now.’

Still naked and with her pistol in her right hand, Terry ran to the nearest window and looked outside, hoping to see Johanna and her kidnapers. She didn’t see anyone from that window, so she ran to a window near the main staircase that gave a view of the front lawn. Her cybernetic eye sighted at once the two men running away, with the nude Johanna thrown over the shoulder of one of the men. There was also a small delivery van approaching on the access road of the mansion. Terry didn’t hesitate for one second then. As shouted exclamations and questions were starting to resonate around the Deutsch de la Meurthe residence, Terry opened the window and jumped. She softened her landing by using her implanted directed gravity mini-generators, then started sprinting towards the two men and the approaching van. It was now obvious that the van had to be driven by an accomplice of the kidnapers, as it started to slow down as it got close to the two men. Stopping briefly for a couple of seconds, Terry pointed her left arm, hand twisted up at the vertical, towards the van and mentally activated the medium plasma rifle and sighting unit hidden inside her left forearm. The plasma rifle sighting unit then relayed its targeting data and image to her cybernetic eye, allowing her to point it with precision.

‘Shoot!’

A bolt of extremely hot thermonuclear plasma then shot out of the palm of her left hand with a mighty crack similar to that of a bolt of lightning. The bolt hit squarely the front radiator of the van, melted its way through the engine and passed through the front cabin, killing the driver, before hitting the fuel tank in the back. The van then went up in a ball of fire right in front of the two petrified Germans. The two men turned around and raised their hands up at once, shouting at the naked black woman approaching them, who was now plainly visible thanks to the illumination provided by the burning van.

"DON'T SHOOT! WE SURRENDER!" They shouted at first in German before repeating themselves in French. Terry kept advancing on them, her pistol pointed, while shouting a reply.

"PUT DOWN THAT WOMAN FIRST, THEN STEP BACK FROM HER!"

The two men complied at once, visibly terrified by Terry. However, they had now seen too much about her and she was left with little choice about what to do with them. As soon as they were away from the inert Johanna, Terry shot twice, killing the two men with bullets to the heart. Ignoring from then on the dead men, Terry knelt beside Johanna and checked her pulse. Finding it slow but strong, she draped her over her left shoulder and walked back towards the residence. She was near the main entrance when Suzanne Deutsch de la Meurthe appeared from the inside, a double-barreled shotgun at the ready. Her mouth opened wide on seeing a naked Terry carrying a no less naked Johanna and holding a pistol.

"My God! What just happened?"

"German agents just tried to kidnap Tasha and Johanna. I was fortunately able to stop them and retrieve both of my friends. Tasha is upstairs, unconscious but safe. The two men lying near the burning van were about to put Johanna in it when I caught up with them. One of my bullets must have hit the gas tank, piercing it and igniting it. Let me just bring Johanna back to her bedroom, so that we could treat her and dress her up."

"Uh, of course."

Ignoring the scandalized looks of the few servants she met on her way, Terry carried Johanna to her bedroom and gently laid her down on her bed, then covered her with the bed sheets before going to see how Tasha was doing. She found her in her bed, where Hien had managed to drag her, but still unconscious. Going briefly to her own room to put on a robe and prevent more scandalized looks, she then went to check

on the two Germans she had wounded. Hien had applied some summary bandages to slow down the bleeding but one of the Germans had lost a lot of blood and was now iffy. Terry applied a second bandage on him before examining the other wounded German, who had been shot through the right shoulder. The bandage on that wound seemed to be doing its job, so she took the next minutes to empty the pockets of the five men and to put their weapons a few meters away. She was finished doing that when Henri Deutsch de la Meurthe, an old revolver in his right hand, approached her while looking at the Germans.

"I called the police a couple of minutes ago, Miss Clarkson. They should be here in force in half a hour. What exactly happened here?"

"Seven German men, plus a driver waiting outside, tried to kidnap Tasha and Johanna, but I woke up and was able to stop them. Their reason to do so would be quite obvious, in view of the important technological secrets Tasha and Johanna hold."

"How can you say that they were Germans, miss?"

"First, the two men I killed outside and who were carrying Johanna away spoke in German. Second, there is this."

The oil magnate's eyes widened as he looked at the German diplomatic passport she was now showing him.

"One of them is a German diplomat? This is going to start a firestorm at the Foreign Ministry."

"I hope so, Mister Deutsch de la Meurthe." Replied Terry, her face grave.

14:25 (Paris Time)

French Foreign Affairs Ministry

Quai d'Orsay, Paris

Oberst Hans von Vittingen had a bad feeling as he entered the office of French Foreign Minister Stéphane Pichon in the company of the German ambassador: the tone and urgency of the summons they had received from the Quai d'Orsay bode nothing good. The hard expression on the face of the minister, along with the presence in his office of two men who shot harsh looks at him when he entered, confirmed to him that his feeling had been correct. In a clear diplomatic slap in the face to the two German diplomats, the minister did not invite them to sit down, instead making them stand in front of his work desk as he addressed them in a cold voice.

“Count Wilhelm, Colonel von Vittingen, would you care explaining to me what your Assistant Army Attaché, Captain Langefeld, was doing last night in a French private residence to the West of Paris, armed and in the company of six more German men, all armed, when they were caught in the process of trying to kidnap two American citizens?”

“Minister, I have no clue what you are talking about. Who told you such a frivolous tale?” Replied the German ambassador, trying his best to sound incensed.

“The Minister of Justice, who contacted me this morning after the local police responded to a call for help from the residence of Henri Deutsch de la Meurthe, the oil magnate. We now have the bodies of five men in the Central Police Morgue, all found with weapons and German identity papers. A sixth man was also found dead, charred to the bone in the van he was driving, on the access road to Mister Deutsch de la Meurthe’s residence. Finally, two more German men, including your Captain Langefeld, are now being treated and kept under police guard at the Hôtel Dieu Hospital. Count Wilhelm, your Assistant Military Attaché went beyond all the bounds of diplomatic rules and would normally be charged in a French court of law with breaking and entering, attempted kidnapping and illegal carrying of a weapon. However, his diplomatic status will save him from that. As soon as he is well enough to travel, he will be declared persona non grata and expelled from France. As for you, know that I am going to send to Berlin, via Ambassador Cambon, a strong letter of diplomatic protest for the grievous breach of all diplomatic protocols and rules committed by your Captain Langefeld. Please don’t try to put all the blame on your lowly captain: I am sure that either you or Colonel von Vittingen, or both of you, perfectly knew what Captain Langefeld was up to last night. If another similar incident ever occurs, I will be obliged to declare Colonel von Vittingen persona non grata and to brief the President of the Republic about this.”

“Minister Pichon, I assure you that I had no prior knowledge of this affair until now. Would I be allowed to go visit Hauptmann Langefeld in hospital, to find out what really happened?”

His choice of words seemed to make the minister even more angry.

“What really happened was as I just told you, Count Wilhelm! Don’t try to distort the truth here! Your Attaché was caught at night inside a private property he was not invited in, had an illegal weapon on him and was accompanied by six other German men, all of them carrying illegal weapons. Count yourself lucky that I am not expelling

you and your whole staff for this. As for your Captain Langefeld, yes, you will be allowed to speak with him in the hospital. You may now leave.”

Mortified, the aristocrat turned around and walked out of the minister’s office, von Vittingen at his side. Once out and away from the ears of Frenchmen, Wilhelm von Schoen gave a dark look at his Military Attaché.

“I hope that your assistant’s mission was worth all the trouble it is now bringing us, Oberst.”

Von Vittingen in turn looked at his ambassador with cold eyes: he hated all these hypocritical diplomatic rules and useless conventions and preferred by far more direct methods.

“The orders came straight from Berlin, Count.”

15:46 (Paris Time)

Tasha Lenoir’s research lab complex

Aéro-Parc Blériot, Buc

Brigadier General Hirschauer nearly ran to Tasha after entering her electronics research lab.

“I came as fast as I could when I heard about what happened last night. Are you alright, my friend?”

Tasha gave him a reassuring smile, but her eyes still reflected some of the shock she had felt right after the failed kidnapping attempt.

“I am physically alright, General, but I must say in all frankness that I didn’t really expect the Germans to attempt such an extreme act this early. I guess that my research and Johanna’s plane designs were enough to rattle them quite seriously.”

“Then, I will have the security around your lab and the prototype workshop reinforced. I will also ask the Gendarmerie to post sentries at night around Mister Deutsch’s residence. Your work is too vital to France to risk losing you like this.”

“I suppose that more security won’t hurt, General. I owe a big thank you to Terry for the way she protected me last night and stopped those Germans.”

“She definitely did an excellent job as your bodyguard last night, Tasha. She is a truly admirable young woman.”

“That she is.” Said Tasha, who paused for a couple of seconds before continuing. “General, this incident only reinforces my feelings that Germany is preparing

for war against France. While my research and Johanna's work have already helped a lot to reinforce the military might of France, I believe that more could be done by us, a lot more. I have thus decided to consecrate more of my time and research towards designing better weapons systems for the French Army and Navy."

"But, between your Metallex high explosive, Durex helmets and body armor, aerial rockets and new military planes, you and Miss Kruger have already done plenty." Objected Hirschauer, making Tasha shake her head in denial.

"Not as much as we truly can, General. I have thus started thinking about a new weapon that could interest your artillery branch. You already know about the 75mm and 150mm caliber rockets that I developed for use by Blériot-Kruger military aircraft."

"Of course I do. They gave a tremendous extra punch to our Blériot-Kruger aircraft that are now in service. So, what about them?"

"The reason I mention my rockets is that there is actually a simple, inexpensive and very effective way to turn them into powerful ground artillery systems. Come have a look at these preliminary design sketches I made this morning."

His curiosity now aroused, Hirschauer approached her work bench, on which Tasha spread four large paper sheets with sketches on them. These sketches were far from being simple hand drawings and were precision technical drawings of the kind Hirschauer had grown accustomed to see coming from Johanna Kruger. What he saw was both intriguing and very interesting, with Tasha explaining them as he examined them.

"Basically, my two ground systems, one in 75mm caliber, the other in 150mm caliber, are little more than a set of multiple launch tubes mounted together on a turntable with elevation and aiming mechanisms. The whole assemblies are in turn mounted on the back of truck, or even cars in the case of the 75mm system, to give them good mobility. Their main roles will be area counter-battery fire and area saturation fire and they will be able to fire away their rockets either one by one, by short ripples or by complete salvos shot in mere seconds. The beauty of this kind of rocket launcher is that it is very easy and quick to manufacture and is quite inexpensive. The only drawbacks are that they take some time to reload and also have a very visible signature on firing. An artillery unit using such multiple rocket launchers will thus have to move immediately after firing off its rockets and go to a new location nearby before reloading. I already took on me to ask our technicians working at the prototype workshop to build a first system prototype in 75mm caliber, while I am going to purchase

a light truck suitable as a weapons carrier. The first prototype multiple rocket launcher, or MRL in short, should be ready for fire trial and demonstration in less than two weeks. So, do you think that the head of your Artillery Branch could be interested by this?"

"He would be an idiot not to. Mind you, there are plenty of idiots in the higher echelons of the Army. What kind of range could these two launcher types have?"

"The 75mm MRL should have a maximum effective range of about eighteen kilometers, while the 150mm MRL should have a maximum effective range of about 35 kilometers."

Hirschauer grinned on hearing those figures.

"Like I said, they would be idiots not to be interested by this. I will start arranging for the use of a nearby artillery shooting range for the firing trials of your, uh, MRL things."

"Thank you, General! I knew that I could count on your comprehension and understanding."

Tasha then impulsively kissed him on the cheek, something that troubled Hirschauer: he was a married man and genuinely loved his wife, but he was finding harder and harder not to be attracted to the beautiful and exceptional woman that Tasha Lenoir was. Politely excusing himself with her, he left her lab before his emotions could show.

CHAPTER 9 – PICKING UP THE PIECES

07:50 (Paris Time)

Thursday, August 28, 1913

Aéro-Parc Blériot, Buc

Southwest of Paris, France

Louis Béchereau felt sad as he read the title of the article appearing in page three of the newspaper 'Le Figaro'. He had been expecting to see such a title for some time already, but it still struck a sensitive nerve in him.

"Société Deperdussin declared bankrupt, is put into receivership. Armand Deperdussin accused of fraud and embezzlement... The bastard! To do this to employees who loyally worked for him all that time. Those big industrialists are all the same!"

"Hey, I'm also a big industrialist!" Said someone who he had not heard approach in his back. Turning abruptly around, the newspaper still in his hands, he found himself facing his employer, Louis Blériot. The big smile on Blériot's face turned into an amused grin when Béchereau tried to explain his way out of trouble.

"Uh, I was simply referring to Armand Deperdussin, boss."

"Sure you were!" Said Blériot before patting reassuringly Béchereau's back. "Don't worry: I won't fire you for that. I will just transfer you."

"But, boss, I love the work here and I do a pretty good job at it!"

Louis Blériot nodded his head once and gave a benevolent look at the nervous engineer.

"I know that you do, Louis. As for the transfer, it is no demotion or punishment, believe me. I was on my way to go buy up the Société Deperdussin from the banks that put it in receivership. I then intend to retool its aircraft manufacturing plant in Grenelle to help me produce more CIGOGNE and PÉLICAN heavy seaplanes: right now our production lines in Buc and Suresnes are running at maximum capacity and I just can't keep up with the demand. Since you know well Deperdussin's plant and since you also are by now well trained in our production methods and planes, I would like to put you in charge of managing the retooling and conversion of the Grenelle factory to Blériot-

Kruger standards. You will also help retrain your old comrades there, who were about to be thrown into the streets. So, what do you say to that?"

"That I gladly accept, boss." Nearly shouted the happy engineer.

"Then, pick up your hat and vest: we are leaving for the bank in ten minutes."

11:06 (Paris Time)

Château du Haut-Buc, 20 Rue Louis Massotte

Buc

Having just paid and thanked the departing movers for their work, Tasha took a moment to enjoy the Sun and refreshing wind out on the large, Louis XV-style balcony on the second floor of her new home. She had bought barely a week ago the big, three-storey mansion, which sat on an eight hectare triangular lot of land situated only one kilometer away from her research lab complex at the Aéro-Parc Blériot. The attempted kidnapping against her and Johanna less than two months ago had then convinced her that she needed to move out of the Château de Romainville, and quickly, in order not to expose further the family of Henri Deutsch de la Meurthe to other hostile acts against her. Fortunately for her, the previous owner of the Château du Haut-Buc had died recently, some nasty tongues saying then that the incessant noise of heavy aircraft flying overhead had finished off the old, sick banker, so she had jumped on the occasion and bought the mansion from the family of the deceased. The other big advantage of her new home, apart from making the Deutsch family safer, was of course its proximity to the Aéro-Parc, something that was going to save her a lot of traveling time to and from work at her lab. Overall, the nearly one million francs she had paid for it was well worth it in her mind. She had then spent a few more thousand francs to furnish the mansion with comfortable furniture, but had avoided the excesses of her predecessor, who had transformed his residence into a virtual art museum, with costly paintings and sculptures everywhere. One part that she particularly appreciated about her new home was the vast park with trees, expanses of grass and even a water canal with fountain, which she was now admiring from her balcony. She already could see herself and her three friends, who were moving in with her, have jogging sessions through the park, the way they had done nearly every day in Central Park, in the New York of 2624. Tasha however planned to add two important improvements to her new home that no one else had in this time period: a system of radio-telephone that would link it with the Aéro-Parc

and a multiple array of solar energy panels installed on the flat roof of the mansion, to make her new home energy-independent. Solar energy panels were one of her latest 'inventions' and she had already started using them to provide local backup power to her growing network of navigation aid radio beacon stations, dispersed across Europe and a few places in Africa, Asia and the Americas. Finally leaving with regret her balcony and getting back inside, Tasha went to work unpacking her things and distributing them in the brand new dressers of her main bedroom. Terry and Johanna would soon join her in the afternoon to help her setting up their residence, once they would complete today's test flight of the prototype CONDOR fast bomber.

13:25 (Paris Time)

Château du Haut-Buc

Tasha was finishing eating the sandwiches she had brought for lunch when Terry and Johanna arrived at the mansion. Tasha was ready to greet them with a smile but the sour look on their faces quickly erased that smile.

"What? Something went wrong with the CONDOR?"

"Oh, THAT went fine, Tasha." Answered Terry, looking really pissed. "What is wrong was the response we just got by telegram from the authorities of the city of Atlanta, Georgia, to our proposal to build a small airport there to link Atlanta with New York, Washington and Miami. Basically, it said that, while they would be happy to see us establish an airport with regular air service in Atlanta, our airport will have to follow and enforce all the city ordinances, including those concerning the segregation of black people from the white people. We will need to have segregated waiting lounges, segregated washrooms, segregated restaurants and boutiques and two separate, segregated hotels for the passengers in transit. Oh, I nearly forgot: they also expect that black passengers will be limited to the rearmost seats in our planes and will not gain access to first class seats, even if they pay the full price for them. If we do not respect or enforce those city ordinances, then they will close down our airport."

"WHAT?!"

"My reaction, exactly."

"THOSE FUCKING BIGOTED MORONS! IF THEY WANT IT THAT WAY, THEN THEY WILL HAVE TO DO WITHOUT AN AIRPORT. THERE IS NO WAY IN

HELL THAT I WILL HELP THOSE RACISTS ENFORCE THEIR SEGREGATION RULES!”

In response, Terry clapped her hands in slow applause.

“Exactly the kind of reply I was expecting from you, Tasha. Do you want me to draft our reply by telegram?”

“What I wish I could do right now would be to send you to Atlanta with your heavy plasma rifle, to bring them a blunt answer, but that wouldn’t fly well in Washington.”

“Too bad! I would have enjoyed doing that.”

“I know! I will draft our answer to them. I still don’t know how I will do that without inserting a few swear words in it, though. Well, we have some furniture to move around. Let’s try not to pass our anger on them, girls.”

CHAPTER 10 – THE WINDS OF WAR ARE PICKING UP

06:52 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, July 1, 1914

Château du Haut-Buc

Buc, southwest of Paris, France

Tasha, Johanna, Terry and Hien were eating their breakfast quietly at the large service table of the mansion's kitchen, with Tasha and Hien also reading the morning newspaper while eating. Things had been tense for months now around the Balkans and the situation there was getting worse, thanks to the assassination three days ago by a pro-Serbia Bosnian extremist of the Austrian crown-prince, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and of his wife. Most French citizens also felt the same and were following with apprehension the succession of increasingly belligerent or intransigent declarations between the governments of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Serbia and Russia. For one thing, the four women could now include themselves with other French citizens, since they had all been granted French citizenship a month ago, thanks mostly to the services they had provided to the French military. The certificate of French citizenship had also come with the Order of the Légion d'Honneur, Knight's grade, for Tasha and Johanna, as rewards for their aeronautical and scientific innovations that had brought France at the forefront of aviation technology. Tasha had also been honored by winning the Nobel Prize in physics, for her work on advanced radio and electronic technology. However, those honors couldn't make them forget that a big, ugly war was on the horizon, a war that would see millions die.

Since the living-in cook employed by Tasha was present in the kitchen, and since they were talking about the coming war, all four spoke in Americanish for the sake of privacy.

"This article here says that Austria is accusing Serbia of being behind the assassination of Archduke Franz-Ferdinand. Serbia is of course denying that."

"What did you expect, Hien? Serbia would be crazy to acknowledge its responsibility in this: it would possibly make Russia withdraw its support to them."

Replied Tasha. "This highlights the real problem these days: this explosive system of alliances. It takes only one irresponsible move or mistake and the whole of Europe will go up in flames. Mind you, if not for that assassination, I am sure that someone would have grabbed some other pretext to go to war."

"Talking of the war," said Terry, "you do realize that it will have a very hard impact on Air France and its air operations once it starts. We will probably lose at once nearly all our male pilots and technicians when France will mobilize. We do have by chance a few female pilots and technicians, who will be safe from the mobilization order, but not enough by a long shot to continue Air France operations as in peacetime. The military is also very likely to requisition our planes then."

"I know!" Replied Tasha, feeling a bit down because of that. "Even if I order a stop to our air activity, I will still have to pay my employees overseas and maintain my network of airports and radio beacon stations. I will quickly ruin myself at that game."

"But, the government will surely still need Air France to stay open, in order to keep operating the air links with its colonies." Objected Johanna. "Take Dakar and Tahiti, for example. Dakar, like Rabat and Tunis, will be one of the mobilization centers for colonial troops when the war starts. The French government will need the ability to quickly transport mail, government directives and liaison officers between Paris and those African cities. Right now, Air France is the only fast way to do that. The same goes for Tahiti, Noumea and Saigon. The French naval squadrons based in the Pacific and in the South China Sea will need a quick communications link with Paris for mail and command personnel. We should start pushing gently these points to the Minister of War right now, to preempt any sudden, rash decision that could curtail our Air France operations. Louis Blériot should do the same on his part if he wants to avoid losing most of his aircraft manufacturing workers to mobilization."

"You are right, Johanna. I will start courting the minister of war and General Hirschauer on that tomorrow."

"Tasha, could I ask you and Johanna a couple of favors before the war starts?" That made Tasha raise her nose from her newspaper and look at Terry.

"Of course, Terry! What do you need?"

"What I want from you is that you build for me a full Durex assault armor, similar to what I was wearing in the 27th Century as a commando. As for Johanna, I would like her to secretly modify my personal Blériot-Kruger BOURDON to military specs, complete with machine guns and weapons pylons."

That made Tasha put down her newspaper and look with concern at her friend.

“Terry, you know very well that the French will never accept to let you, or any other woman, fight in the war.”

“I said, ‘secretly’, Tasha. General Hirschauer doesn’t need to be informed of this. As for fighting, I had in mind discreet, anonymous one-person actions against some sensitive and important German installations, like Zeppelin dirigibles’ hangars or German ammunition factories, things that could be blamed on accidents but that would have a serious impact on the German war effort.”

“Hum, commando raids in the enemy rear areas... That actually sounds like a good idea to me. Johanna, do you see any problems with retrofitting Terry’s plane?”

“None, really. I would be more worried about the military requisitioning her plane outright at the start of the war.”

“Couldn’t you claim it to be an essential test aircraft for planned improvements to military planes, Johanna?” Proposed anxiously Terry. “I really want to be able to make a difference in the coming war.”

“That actually would be a plausible excuse I could use to safeguard your aircraft from being grabbed. Good idea, Terry! By the way, that will also be a good excuse to allow me to change the present engine in your BOURDON to the 2C9-TCFO(WM), 760 horsepower engine that is now standard in military FRELON two-seat warplanes. As for you, Tasha, I will be sending you a bill for 18,000 francs, for the official purchase as a private customer of a new engine and other spare parts. You wouldn’t want to rob Louis Blériot for the cost of that engine and parts, right?”

“Uh, right! Johanna, you can be really devious when you want to, you know?”

“All in a day’s work.” Said Johanna with a malicious grin.

“Now that you girls have discussed that, how about thinking about our Air France crews?” Said Hien, making her three friends look at her.

“What do you mean, Hien?” Asked Tasha.

“What I mean is that, if Air France is allowed to continue operating, even in a limited capacity, we will still need to find crews to operate our planes. As Terry said, we are likely to lose most if not all of our male personnel at mobilization time. Right now, Air France has a grand total of eight female pilots qualified on the CIGOGNE, not counting Terry. Even if we cut our routes into shorter legs as much as possible, to avoid having to fly a plane with two full crews aboard, that means that we will be able to operate at the most four CIGOGNE at a time. Some of the routes, like the Paris – New York one, are

however impossible to cut into two legs and will still need double crews to fly them. And I am not even talking yet about the navigators/radio operators and the flight engineers that will be needed as well. The only thing that we will have in abundance during the war will be air stewardesses. So, we have to think about solutions for that, now!”

“Damn, you are right, Hien. Let me think a bit about this.”

The others stayed silent as Tasha went into deep thinking for a couple of minutes. She finally spoke up in a sober tone.

“I may have an ideal: how about hiring older men that have the right technical qualifications, men too old or too lame physically to be mobilized. In terms of navigators and radio operators, I am sure that I could recruit some ex-naval officers with the right experience. We could in fact do the same to replace many of our present technicians. Retired experienced mechanics in their advanced forties or fifties should be legion around Paris alone. I am sure that some of them would be willing to come out of retirement, both to help their country and to supplement their pensions.”

Hien’s face brightened on hearing that.

“Hey, that could work. With solid-enough past experience and background, they would need only refresher and specialty training, something that would take only a few weeks. We would however need to start this right now: we have only a month left before the whole of Europe slides into war.”

“Then let’s discuss this in detail right now.” Decided Tasha in a firm voice.

10:06 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, July 7, 1914

Air France hangar line, Aéro-Parc Blériot

Buc

“Raymond, could I speak with you for a moment?”

Raymond Saulnier, chief of aircraft maintenance for Air France, nodded his head at Johanna Kruger and Louis Blériot, who had just entered his small planning office inside the hangar sheltering the Air France’s repair workshop.

“Of course, Miss Kruger. Good morning, Mister Blériot.”

“And a good morning to you too, Raymond. Miss Kruger already talked to me about what she needs, so consider that I am in agreement with her, as this will touch as well my manufacturing operations.”

"Alright! What do you need done exactly, Miss Kruger?"

"What I need of you is to arrange and direct the quick training, including technical theory and hands-on training, of a new group of mechanics and technicians that are already qualified in their trade but not in our own methods and products. I just hired a group of such experienced workers and they are ready to start today. This, by the way, has a very high priority in my mind."

"Uh, very well, miss. If these men are truly experienced mechanics, then this should be fairly easy and quick. Where are they right now?"

"Inside the hangar: they just arrived by bus from our Paris office."

Getting up from behind his desk, Saulnier followed her and Louis outside of his office, with the trio then going towards one of the personnel access doors of the hangar. The engineer stopped cold when he was able to see the group of about ninety men loosely assembled in a corner, admiring the CIGOGNE that was in the hangar for an engine change.

"My God, Miss Kruger! Did you empty a retirement home or what?"

"Close! I passed ads to hire experienced mechanics and technicians who were retired, either because of age or because of a slight disability. All of these men were considered highly competent in their individual trades and are eager to learn."

"Uh, I will do my best, miss."

What Saulnier didn't see was another group of elderly or lame men who showed up at the radio and electronics repair and maintenance shop, where they were led in by Tasha Lenoir. More people were surprised when some of those old men started flying individually two weeks later on the CIGOGNE seaplanes operated by Air France on its network of air routes, doing supervised in-flight practical training.

CHAPTER 11 – WORLD WAR

16:19 (Paris Time)

Sunday, August 2, 1914

Château du Haut-Buc

Buc, Yvelines Department

France

Tasha was working in her private study on a reply to a letter sent by the Ministry of War when the bell of the village's church started ringing continuously. She had been fearing that moment for months already, but it still made her heart sink. Getting up from her chair, she went to a window giving a view to the village and opened it before leaning partly out. Other inhabitants in Buc also went to look outside, with a few of them then running back into their houses, probably to pass the news to their families.

"General mobilization has now started." Said softly Tasha to herself. "The question is now: how long and how costly will be this folly."

As if to answer her, the antique (for her) telephone set on her work desk rang. Walking quickly to it and picking up its receiver, she then announced herself in a firm voice.

"Tasha Lenoir!"

The voice that she then heard was that of Johanna, who had been working extra hours at the prototype workshop.

"Tasha, this is Johanna. We have somewhat of an emergency here. Most of our Air France crews are either flying on an air route presently or were given the day off in anticipation of the mobilization call. As a result, we have only three qualified CIGOGNE pilots and two qualified navigator/radio operators left in Buc this afternoon, but only one qualified flight engineer. The problem is that a group of senior army officers just showed up with quite a few bags of urgent military papers and missives that need to be flown with them right away to Dakar, in Senegal, with a short stop on the way in Casablanca. They say that it is a question of national emergency and insist on flying out right now. I know that it is not your job to fly as a crewmember and have tons of things to do, like myself, but you are the only one right now who could fill that hole as a flight engineer."

Tasha only had to think briefly for a second before taking a decision.

"I will do it, Johanna! Do we at least have one CIGOGNE available and ready to go?"

"We actually have two CIGOGNE fully ready, fuelled and checked up here."

"Then, tell those officers that I will be at the Aéro-Parc in twenty minutes maximum."

"Thank you, Tasha. In the meantime, I will have their sealed bags loaded in one plane."

Johanna then hung up. Tasha immediately walked out of her private study and into her adjacent bedroom, where she quickly took off her dress and put on a royal blue work coverall with large side and belly pockets that was the standard flying uniform of Air France cockpit crewmembers. After a short hesitation, she donned as well a large black belt supporting a holstered P08 Luger pistol and three spare 8-round magazines in their leather holders. Since the kidnapping attempt against her a year ago, Terry had insisted that she buy a pistol and learn how to use it, offering herself as a firearms instructor. Knowing how insistent and persistent Terry could be and also realizing that she was right, Tasha had followed her counsels and had started practicing regularly pistol shooting. While no champion at it, she could now claim to be at the least a fair shooter. Tasha completed her new outfit with a pair of utility work boots and a standard blue Air France cap. With that done, she then packed quickly a small suitcase with two spare uniforms, a few pieces of underwear and hygiene items. Less than twelve minutes after getting the telephone call from Johanna, she was running downstairs with her suitcase, shouting directives at her head servant.

"YVETTES, I HAVE TO LEAVE ON AN URGENT TRIP TO SENEGAL. I SHOULD BE BACK IN TWO TO THREE DAYS. TAKE CARE OF THE HOUSE IN THE MEANTIME."

"Senegal? Uh, very well, madame."

Once outside, Tasha tied her suitcase to the back of the bicycle she routinely used to travel between her residence and the Aéro-Parc Blériot, situated only one kilometer away, and jumped on it, starting to pedal energetically to cross her estate's park and get on the Rue de la Minière.

When she got off her bike in front of the Air France main maintenance hangar, it was to find a CIGOGNE amphibian parked in front of it, with a number of mechanics and baggage handlers busy loading in it dozens of small but apparently heavy wooden

crates while a group of five French Army officers waited on the side, two big canvas bags and a collection of suitcases by their side. Seeing that Johanna was with the officers, she pushed her bike next to the group and asked a question to Johanna.

"What are those crates, Johanna? You mentioned passengers and bags, but not a cargo of crates."

"They are ammunition cra..." Started to answer Johanna, only to be cut off in a most impolite way by a captain of cavalry who was part of the group of five officers.

"Do not concern yourself with what we bring with us, miss. We have already wasted enough time waiting for you and we..."

It was Tasha's turn to cut the man off, incensed at his arrogance and attitude.

"YOU WILL SHUT UP NOW, MISTER! I AM THE FOUNDER AND OWNER OF THIS AIRLINE AND THE REASON WHY WE WERE SHORT OF CREWMEMBERS IS BECAUSE OVER THREE QUARTERS OF THEM ARE ABOUT TO HEAD TO THEIR MOBILIZATION CENTERS. SO, COUNT YOURSELF LUCKY THAT I CAME TO FILL THIS MANNING HOLE."

The infantry colonel who was the senior officer in the group, who apparently had also not been pleased by the tone used by his subordinate, then inserted himself in the exchange.

"Please excuse Captain Fradette, miss. I believe that his excitement got the better of his manners."

The colonel then presented his right hand, which Tasha shook.

"I am Colonel Henri Vaugirard, from the staff of General Joffre. I am sorry for such a no-notice request for a trip to Casablanca and Dakar, but things have been quite hectic in Paris in the last few days. The crates you see being loaded on your plane are extra ammunition urgently needed by our troops in Senegal, while we are escorting bags containing urgent operational orders for our forces in Morocco and Senegal."

"And I am Tasha Lenoir. Be assured that we will depart as soon as your cargo has been loaded, Colonel. If you will excuse me for a few minutes, I will go check on the preparations for our flight."

"Go right ahead, Miss Lenoir."

Taking Johanna with her, Tasha pushed her bicycle inside the hangar and chained it to a steel pipe before facing her friend.

"So, who do we have available as crewmembers for this flight?"

"I have H el ene Dutrieu, Jeanne Pallier and Beatrix de Rijk available as pilots. Terry is also here, but I know that you prefer for her to stay here with her plane, in case of..."

Johanna didn't have to finish her sentence, Tasha understanding what she was saying. On Tasha's explicit directive, Terry was until further notice to stay available to react with her now fully armed and up-engined BOURDON to any air attack on Paris, whether the French high command approved of it or not.

"Three pilots will do! Who else is coming?"

"Well, while Raymonde de Laroche is also qualified to fly the CIGOGNE, I asked her to act as one of our flight engineers, as she is as well an experienced aircraft mechanic. You will be our other flight engineer, while I have Marie Surcouf and S ebastien Guyot as navigators/radio operators. As for stewardesses, I was able to get hold of Carmen Boujouboura and Judith Benchetrit."

The irony of it then made Tasha smile.

"Does that twit of a captain know that he will be flown by an all-female crew?"

"Not yet." Replied Johanna with a grin before becoming serious again. "As for the plane, it has been fully checked two days ago and has not flown since then. Its tanks are full and we are loading right now for over four days of prepared meals in the refrigerator of its kitchenette."

"I don't want to be crassly commercial, but did those gentlemen say something about the government paying for the trip? I am as patriotic as anyone can be, but I am not ready to ruin myself by offering free rides to the government."

"Don't worry about that, Tasha: Colonel Vaugirard has already given me a government check that more than covers the costs of the flight."

"Good! How much cargo will we have aboard?"

"Six metric tons of ammunition, plus 200 kilos of luggage and mail bags. Colonel Vaugirard had been skeptical about our plane's ability to carry that much and was expecting only half of that to go on our plane. His jaw fell to the ground when I told him that we could have accommodated even more for a flight to Dakar."

"Six tons of ammunition! They want to start a war over there in Africa or what?"

Johanna lowered her voice before answering Tasha on that.

"Just to remind you, Tasha, Senegal is about 1,600 kilometers from Togo, which is presently a German colony held by a German Army garrison."

"Oh! I forgot about that. I thus stand corrected. Well, I better climb aboard and start checking my instruments. Tell Hien to manage Air France operations while I will be in Africa."

"Will do! Have a good trip."

"Actually, I never visited Senegal before in my whole life. I could bring back a souvenir or two for you girls."

Johanna laughed at that and patted her back.

"Just come back in one piece and that will be enough for us, Tasha."

Johanna then walked away, leaving Tasha with her suitcase.

Climbing aboard the big amphibian via its rear access integrated staircase, Tasha went to the cockpit, where she opened the deck hatch leading down to the crew bunks compartment. Going down the steep ladder, she had to bend her head a bit in the low-ceiling compartment and put her suitcase in the luggage racks situated ahead of the aircraft nose wheel casing, then secured the elastic net over the racks before climbing back to the cockpit. There, she nearly collided with the seven other women of the crew, who were arriving with their own luggage.

"Hi girls! You will be flying with the big boss today."

"Wow! Talk about high-priced help." Joked H  l  ne Dutrieu. "Would you mind getting your big ass out of the way, boss, so that we could store our suitcases?"

In response, Tasha pulled out her tongue, triggering a concert of female laughter. She however quickly stepped away from the deck hatch to let the others go down, then went aft to the first class section. In passing, she saw that workers were in the process of filling the refrigerator of the plane's kitchenette and took a moment to check the preparation dates on a couple of the meals: they had been cooked and then frozen yesterday. Satisfied, she went to speak to Colonel Vaugirard, who was just taking his seat beside one of the large oval bubble observation windows of the first class section.

"We should be departing shortly for Casablanca, where we will make a short stop to let part of your group out, Colonel. A meal will be served as soon as we will have taken off and climbed to our cruising altitude."

"That would be nice, Miss Lenoir: we only had time for a quick sandwich at lunchtime."

"Then I will see you again at suppertime, Colonel. I hope that you will have a good trip on Air France."

Tasha then went back to the cockpit, leaving Vaugirard free to look around him at the amenities available in the first class section.

"Hell, I was told that the Air France first class was really luxurious, but this is even better than what I imagined. This is actually my first air trip ever, to be frank."

"For me too, Colonel." Said Commandant Pierre Lauzière, who was due to disembark in Casablanca with his aide and one sealed bag full of operational orders and intelligence files. "It should prove to be an interesting experience. I am sure that, if the Germans saw the inside of this plane, they would choke with envy."

"I hope so, Commandant Lauzière."

Fifteen minutes later, the cargo doors and aft access ramp were closed and the four engines of the amphibian coughed to life one by one. Judith Benchetrit, a young Jewish Moroccan, then gave to the five French officers the standard pre-takeoff safety briefing before going to sit in her seat next to the cockpit door, with Carmen Boujouboura sitting next to her. The takeoff roll was nimble, as they had grown accustomed to, with the big aircraft rolling only 340 meters before its wheels got off the ground. The CIGOGNE then started its climb to its cruising altitude and turned on its calculated heading for Casablanca. They were still climbing when the two stewardesses got up from their padded seats and got busy in the kitchenette, taking out two narrow service carts from their storage lockers. While Judith grabbed five menu lists for their passengers, Carmen took out a selection of bottles and put them in one cart, then rolled it to the first class section.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. Would you like to drink something before supper? It is part of first class service and you may choose whatever you like. Here is a short list of wine and spirits available."

Colonel Vaugirard's eyes widened when he read the list.

"You have bottles of Veuve Cliquot Brut Champagne?"

"We also have some fine, chilled white Moselle wine and a selection of Bordeaux and Bourgogne bottles, Colonel. After supper, we can serve liquors, either cognac, Armagnac or a selection of scotch whiskey or rum."

Confronted with such a choice, Vaugirard took a few seconds to decide.

"Uh, I will have a glass of Champagne first, miss."

Carmen quickly opened a bottle of Champagne and poured a glass for the Colonel, also filling glasses for the other four officers. They were savoring their Champagne when Judith came to distribute her menu lists.

"Here is the choice of meals available, gentlemen. Our prepared meals come in appetizer dishes, entry dishes, side dishes and main dishes. They are designed to allow you to vary your meals according to your tastes and appetite, by combining main dishes with side dishes or by taking an appetizer or entry dish if you are not too hungry. Each category is listed separately on the menu and you simply need to mark which dish or dishes you wish to have. Be aware that our portions are quite large and filling before you start ticking down more than two or three dishes. Once your choice is made, mark your seat number on your menu copy. We will come and collect your menus in a few minutes, time for you to decide."

As Judith walked back forward, Vaugirard found himself nearly unable to choose, so extensive and tempting the choice of dishes was.

"My God! If I listened to my stomach, I would take half of the dishes on this list."

"The same here, Colonel." Said Lauzière. "On the other hand, I see a very tempting coq-au-vin with mushrooms that would go well with a side dish of pommes de terre dauphinoise."

"They got me at the Lobster Thermidor!" Replied Vaugirard, salivating. I think that I will precede it with a shrimp cocktail. I'm starting to feel bad when I think of the kind of swill most of our soldiers will be eating in the field."

As promised, Judith was back six minutes later to collect their choices of meal. Less than twenty minutes later, the five officers were getting their steaming meal plates, served with wine, and started eating with gusto. About four hours into their flight, with the Sun still over the horizon, their CIGOGNE started going down as it approached Casablanca, where it landed smoothly on the dried dirt of the landing field there. Lauzière then left the aircraft with Captain Fradette and his sealed bag and suitcases, following which the plane took off nearly immediately afterwards, heading to Dakar.

05:07 (Dakar Time) / 06:07 (Paris Time)

Sunday, August 2, 1914

Air France's Dakar International Airport

Dakar, Senegal

It was barely past twilight time when the CIGOGNE landed at the small airfield built by Air France on the outskirts of Dakar, the capital of Senegal. Contrary to the New York International Airport established in Queens by Tasha, where she had to shoulder the whole cost, she had gratefully received substantial help from the French government, both financial and material, to build the Air France airfield in Dakar, which included a seaplane ramp that allowed amphibians to land or take off either on land or water. She also had received similar government support when she had built airfields in other French colonial possessions, namely in Tunis, Algiers, Casablanca, Saigon, the Guadeloupe, Port-au-Prince, Tahiti and Noumea. Other airfields around the World that were situated in British-controlled territories had been built with the financial backing of major British banks, which had seen at once the huge interest of her air network, which would permit rich British businessmen and government officials to get to places that previously took them weeks to get to by ship, weeks that represented a tremendous waste of precious time for those businessmen and officials. In exchange for a reasonable share of the profits on the lines passing by British possessions going to those British bankers, Tasha had been able to build airfields at very low cost to herself in London, Belfast, Cairo, Nairobi, Capetown, New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Singapore, Hong Kong, Halifax, Toronto and Saint-John's, Newfoundland. If not for the war that had just started, she would have extended already her air transport network to the South American continent and to Australia. As for her network in the United States, she had decided to limit it for the moment to the transit points needed to get to French Polynesia, namely New York, Los Angeles and Honolulu. Atlanta had unfortunately not been the only American city that had tried to impose its racial segregation laws to her proposed airfield projects. That experience had truly embittered her about the country she had been born in, or rather will be born in, and she had then decided to let the Americans develop their own aviation network and industry without her help. If they could produce the first true flying aircraft, the Wright brothers' 'Flyer', then there was no reason for them not to be able to build decent planes, especially if they paid attention to what she and Blériot were producing.

On lowering the rear access ramp and opening the side cargo doors after their CIGOGNE had come to a stop on the dusty expanse of Dakar Airfield, a French Army

captain quickly climbed aboard, while three trucks and a car rolled forward. Presenting himself to Colonel Vaugirard, he came at attention and saluted him.

"Colonel, I am Captain Fauberg, sent by the governor to greet you and bring you to the presidential palace. I also brought with me trucks to take delivery of the ammunition you brought."

"Well, to be just, I didn't bring that ammunition, Captain: these women did."

The young captain looked past Vaugirard and showed clear surprise to see only women dressed in Air France uniforms.

"Uh, I stand corrected, Colonel. I will order two more cars to bring these ladies to a decent hotel in town."

"That won't be necessary, Captain: I intend to return to Paris as soon as I will have delivered my sealed orders from General Joffre and once this aircraft will have been refueled and checked. Has anything new concerning the war happened in the last eighteen hours?"

Vaugirard didn't like the way the young captain's face suddenly showed bitterness.

"Yes, Colonel! The Germans have invaded the Luxembourg yesterday, without bothering to even declare war to the Duchy. It is said that masses of German troops are now crossing the Luxembourg towards Belgium."

"Those filthy, traitorous bastards! They probably want to go around our border defenses by going through neutral Belgium. Belgium is still officially neutral, right?"

"As far as we know, yes, Colonel. It seems that the Germans were planning to attack us all along, even though this war was triggered by a dispute with Russia over the Balkans. However, if they violate Belgium's neutrality, the Germans will anger the British, who are guarantors of Belgium's neutrality."

"You may be right, Captain, but I am not sure that the Germans care one bit about British threats. Their arrogance is seemingly boundless. Well, enough talking. Let's go to the presidential palace with my sealed pouch and my two aides."

Before leaving the plane, Vaugirard briefly turned around and shouted at Tasha, who was standing between the two cargo side doors.

"MISS LENOIR, I SHOULD BE BACK BY NOON AT THE LATEST. WILL YOUR PLANE BE READY TO DEPART BY THEN?"

"YES, UNLESS WE FIND SOME DEFECT THAT WOULD NEED REPAIRS, COLONEL."

Vaugirard nodded his head in understanding, then climbed down the aft access ramp with his aides and his precious bag of war directives and loaded up in the big car that had come for him. Tasha watched the car roll away, feeling pride: however minor her trip to Dakar could appear, she could now say that she and her airline had started contributing to the war effort.

11:31 (Paris Time)

Monday, August 3, 1914

Aéro-Parc Blériot, Buc

France

Once he had climbed down the steps of the aft access ramp, Colonel Vaugirard stopped and put down his luggage, to then face Tasha.

“Miss Lenoir, I must thank you again for the service you just rendered to France. Be assured that General Joffre and the Minister of War will be told about your celerity and helpfulness.”

“And you can tell them as well that Air France will be ready at a moment’s notice to fly such special long-range liaison missions. Even though most of my personnel has probably been mobilized by now, I still have enough female aircrews and old mechanics that I recently hired out of retirement and retrained to keep open our essential air routes and also keep at least one CIGOGNE and one SUPER BOURDON on standby.”

“I will certainly pass that point to General Joffre, Miss Lenoir and I...”

Vaugirard was then interrupted by the arrival at a run of Johanna Kruger, who braked to a halt near him.

“General, we got some news by radio from our Brussels airfield: the Germans have given an ultimatum to the Belgian government to let its troops pass through Belgium or suffer the consequences. The Belgian government has rejected that ultimatum, while Great-Britain has sent an ultimatum of its own to Germany, telling it that Great-Britain will declare war to Germany if it violates Belgium’s neutrality. Also, Germany officially declared war to France this morning.”

“MERDE! Those Prussian bastards really do want to use Belgian territory to try to outflank our frontier defenses. I wish that we could know for certain the full deployment of the German Army at our borders: that would help us to redeploy our own troops.”

"And why not use your planes to conduct reconnaissance flights along the border, Colonel?" Suggested at once Tasha. "Louis Blériot has been selling dozens of our Blériot-Kruger planes to the French Army and Navy in the last two years, planes that are designed for such reconnaissance work and can also strike the enemy directly. You can talk to Brigadier General Hirschauer about that if you want more details on your army aircraft inventory."

"Uh, to be frank, General Joffre does not have much confidence in the capabilities of planes in doing combat missions, miss. He still thinks of them as mere toys piloted by eccentric young men."

Those words made Johanna Kruger explode in utter indignation.

"OUR PLANES, MERE TOYS?! IS GENERAL JOFFRE THIS DUMB TO BELIEVE THAT?"

Johanna, restraining her anger a bit, then continued in a less loud but as forceful tone of voice.

"Your Army FRELONS and FAUCONS, as well as the naval MOUETTEs we have been selling to your government all have a top speed of 400 kilometers per hour, are armed with six fixed machine guns and can carry up to 600 kilos of bombs or rockets. They also have enough range to go bomb Berlin and then return to their bases in France. No existing German plane is fast enough to have any hope of intercepting them, even when our planes go at their economical cruise speed of 330 kilometers per hour, and no existing German plane even has any fixed armament as we speak, except for the pistols and rifles their aircrews may bring up with them, or for some light, hand-thrown bombs. The PELICAN, the military variant of the CIGOGNE you just traveled into, can carry six tons of bombs, torpedoes, heavy rockets and anti-submarine depth charges, plus a number of machine guns. Lastly, your army bought in the last few months over twenty CONDOR fast bombers, which have a top speed of 560 kilometers per hour and a combat radius of 1,200 kilometers while carrying two tons of bombs and also can carry torpedoes, while it has a fixed armament of eight machine guns. And your General Joffre would be ready to waste the combat potential of all those modern aircraft just because he doesn't believe in new technologies? You could also remind him that his new Metallex-filled artillery shells were made possible by, TA DA, Miss Lenoir right here, who invented both Metallex explosives and Durex bullet-proof polymer. Oh, don't forget all those nice radios he is now using to communicate with his units in the field, radios invented by...Miss Lenoir again."

"Okay, okay, I get your drift, miss." Said defensively Vaugirard as Tasha did her best not to giggle at the virtuoso verbal performance by Johanna. The sad truth was that Johanna was right on everything and that too many French senior officers still refused to acknowledge or understand the capabilities of modern aircraft.

"Now that you said your piece, Miss Kruger, could I ask you for the use of a telephone, so that I could call in a military driver from higher headquarters?"

"I can do better than that, Colonel: I can use one of those 'toys' called a radio to get you in contact with your staff. Follow me, please!"

As Vaugirard walked away with Johanna, Commandant Lauzière wiggled his right hand while making a face.

"Wow! Your friend really didn't go easy on the poor Colonel, Miss Lenoir."

Tasha's expression was somber when she replied to Lauzière.

"Commandant, those things she said were all facts. Me and Johanna have spent two years now designing or inventing new technologies to help France better defend itself. So, can you blame my friend for being furious to learn that all those new technologies could possibly be ignored and wasted just because a bunch of old generals devoid of imagination refuse to recognize the fact that war as they knew it no longer exist? Without exaggerating, the new planes the Army and the Navy bought from us have the potential to dramatically shorten the war if used correctly and could prevent the deaths of hundreds of thousands of our soldiers. Will your superiors finally awake to those facts, or will I and my friend Johanna have to show your generals how it's done? I know how to fly a BOURDON and a CIGOGNE, Commandant, and so does my friend."

"But, war is not the business of women, Miss Lenoir and..."

"WAR HAS NO BUSINESS EXISTING AT ALL, BUT IT STILL DOES, THANKS MOSTLY TO THE STUPIDITY AND GREED FOR POWER OF TOO MANY MEN, COMMANDANT LAUZIÈRE!"

Tasha then walked away at a furious pace, leaving behind the stunned Lauzière and his aides.

16:49 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, August 4, 1914

Tasha Lenoir's electronic research lab

Aéro-Parc Blériot, Buc

The buzz of the intercom box set on a corner of her work bench in her electronics research lab took Tasha's attention from the electronic system she was carefully assembling. The lit numbered button on the box told her that it was coming from the Air France air operations section, situated in the control tower of the airfield.

"Yes, what is it?"

The voice of one of the women trained a year ago as a radio operator and navigator came out of the box, sounding anxious.

"Miss Lenoir, this is Louise Besson, in the control tower. I am presently on radio watch on the company MF frequency and just got an urgent call from our Brussels airfield: they are asking for a plane to be sent as soon as possible to Brussels to go pick up the Belgian royal family there and bring it to England. They are asking for a quick answer on that, Miss Lenoir."

Tasha felt a rush of blood to her brain on hearing that: things had to be really bad in Belgium for such a call to be made.

"Please tell me that we have a CIGOGNE and full crew ready to fly and on standby."

"We fortunately do, miss, as per your standing instructions. Should I tell Brussels that they can expect a plane in a hour or two?"

"Yes, and make that one hour at most! Also, and this is very important, tell our employees in Brussels to start unplugging and preparing for transport all its radio equipment save for one portable VHF radio and one HF radio. We will evacuate that radio equipment as well, to avoid leaving it behind for the Germans to exploit it afterwards. Stress that point to them, please. That is very important. Alert our standby crew to be ready to depart as soon as I will have briefed them. Get an acknowledge from Brussels, then advise me of their response."

"Yes, Miss Lenoir, I will do that right away."

Taking the time first to put away her instruments and her electronic parts, Tasha then changed into one spare Air France aircrew coverall she always kept in her lab these days, also putting on the belt supporting her Luger pistol before running out of her lab. Using her bicycle to get there faster, she then pedaled to the CIGOGNE parked in front of the Air France maintenance hangar. To her satisfaction, she found the crew already waiting near the rear access ramp, with four mechanics ready to help start the

engines if need be. She also found Terry Clarkson, standing beside her armed BOURDON, which was painted a dull gray, contrary to the tricolor CIGOGNE.

"Terry? I did not ask you to accompany us to Brussels."

"Maybe you should have, Tasha." Replied Terry while fixing Tasha in the eyes. "If the situation in Brussels is desperate enough to warrant the urgent evacuation of the royal family, then anything is possible, including a German cavalry column rushing towards Brussels, or a Zeppelin dirigible over the city."

Tasha had to mentally concede that Terry was right, thus nodded her head.

"You are right, Terry. Just be aware that we will have to fly to London afterwards, to drop the Belgian royal family there and that we will probably be on the ground in Brussels for a hour or two, so be skimpy on your fuel once we get there. However, the trip to Brussels will have to be done at high speed, for reasons of urgency. You are fully armed, I suppose?"

"You're kidding? I got full belts in my machine guns and sixteen 75mm high-velocity high-explosive fragmentation rockets with Metallex warheads."

"That should do." Said Tasha with a grin. "We will be on our VHF frequency Number Two for this trip, but keep monitoring as well our HF frequency Number One."

"Will do!"

"Then let's go."

Running to the back of the CIGOGNE, Tasha gesticulated to the four women waiting on the ground.

"LET'S START THIS SHOW RIGHT NOW! YOU HAVE MAPS OF BELGIUM AND ENGLAND WITH YOU, I HOPE?"

Hélène Dutrieu gave her a sardonic look while climbing the access ramp.

"Do I look that dumb or incompetent, Tasha?"

"No! You just look like a Belgian woman about to go rescue the Belgian royal family." Replied Tasha, becoming serious again. Hesitating for a second, she then dragged her bicycle up the ramp with her: there was no way for her to guess what they would find once on the ground in Brussels. Less than twelve minutes, after doing a quick instruments checklist, the big CIGOGNE started its engines and took off from Buc, followed by the much more nimble BOURDON. However, the CIGOGNE was actually the faster plane and had to limit its speed in order to allow Terry to be able to follow.

17:48 (Paris Time)

Passenger terminal building

Air France air station, Brussels

Belgium

King Albert I of Belgium was quickly becoming restless as he waited with his family and close staff in the passenger terminal building of the small airfield on the outskirts of Brussels. He was not worried about himself, as he was fully planning to stay in Brussels for the time being, but he was most anxious to send to safety his wife, Queen Elisabeth, and his three young children, twelve year-old Prince Leopold, ten year-old Prince Charles and eight year-old Princess Marie José, who was ironically celebrating her birthday today. Surrounding him and ready to leave with the Queen and children were a number of loyal family servants and staff, plus a strong escort of royal guards. Finally, not able to wait anymore, he went up the stairs to go on the third floor of the building, which constituted the control tower of the small air station, intent on talking with the airfield manager. What he found was the same young woman in Air France uniform who had greeted him and his family at the terminal, plus another woman wearing a work coverall and busy disconnecting what looked like radio sets. The young woman, who had been talking on a radio, got up from her chair when the King entered.

“Your Majesty! Can I do something for you?”

“Yes, miss. Can you tell me when that Air France plane will arrive? And could you find the airfield manager for me as well?”

“Uh, there is no airfield manager left since two days ago, Your Majesty: he was mobilized and left without giving us any instructions. As for your plane, I just talked on the radio with it: it is about to come within visual range of the airfield and will land in ten minutes at the most.”

“Aaah, good! Uh, are you saying that you and that other woman there are the only staff left in this airfield, miss?”

“Not exactly, Your Majesty: there is still one mechanic left at the maintenance hangar...a woman. All the male employees have been mobilized.”

“Oh! And what is your companion doing over there?”

“She is unplugging and dismantling our radio equipment, so that it could be put in the incoming plane, along with your family. This is to prevent the Germans from

grabbing that radio technology, which is very advanced compared to what you will see elsewhere.”

“I understand! And that incoming plane, does...”

The officer of the Royal Guards that had accompanied the King up the stairs then shouted out, interrupting him.

“YOUR MAJESTY! A GERMAN DIRIGIBLE IS IN SIGHT, OVER THE SOUTHEASTERN HORIZON!”

The young woman manning the radios grabbed at once a pair of binoculars and pointed it at the big cylindrical object in the distant sky.

“It is a German dirigible alright, Your Majesty. I can see a Prussian flag painted on its vertical rudder. It is approaching Brussels from the East at fairly low altitude.”

“It is probably on a reconnaissance flight, Your Majesty.” Suggested the guards officer. “That would explain its low altitude.”

“You are probably right, Major. Hopefully, it won’t be here before my family could depart. Still, we should...”

The dirigible suddenly burst in flames in front of the King’s eyes. A noise of twin explosions followed after many seconds, as the burning Zeppelin was falling, now transformed into a torch.

“Yes! One of our defensive guns must have engaged it.” Said King Albert, feeling his morale go up at that sight. The woman manning the radio, a portable VHF transceiver model, had to contradict him a few seconds later.

“Your Majesty, the escort plane accompanying our transport plane just reported shooting down the Zeppelin approaching Brussels. Our transport plane is now on approach from the Southwest and will arrive in a few minutes. May I ask for the help of a few of your soldiers to help my comrade carry down our dismounted radio equipment, Your Majesty?”

“You certainly may, miss. Major, get six men to climb here to bring down that radio equipment.”

“Right away, Your Majesty.”

As the officer hurried down the stairs, King Albert gave a grateful look to the female radio operator.

“I will not forget the help your Air France is giving us today, miss. Will this airfield continue to operate for long?”

"No, Your Majesty. My orders from Miss Lenoir, the founder and owner of Air France, is to evacuate the airfield with all its sensitive radio and electronic equipment and close operations at the same time your family will depart for London. Me and my two remaining comrades will also leave on the same plane as your family."

"Will that plane be big enough, miss?"

"Don't worry, Your Majesty: the CIGOGNE amphibian that is about to land can seat up to 42 passengers. Talking of it, I can now see it about three kilometers away to the Southwest, on its way to land."

"Thank God, my family will soon be safe in London, while I stay and lead my army here."

Down in the air terminal's passenger lounge, the two young princes and the princess became excited when they saw the big four-engine amphibian transport land. Queen Elisabeth, who had seen the destruction of the German Zeppelin dirigible, felt immense relief when the CIGOGNE touched down smoothly and started rolling towards the air terminal building. The woman in temporary charge of the airfield then came down with a portable radio and shouted around at the occupants of the lounge.

"YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE, YOUR MAJESTY, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! I WILL ADVISE YOU NOT TO WEAR ANY HAT WHEN YOU WILL GO OUT OF THE TERMINAL TO GET IN OUR PLANE. OUR PLANE WILL KEEP ITS ENGINES RUNNING AT LOW POWER, SO WILL CREATE QUITE A LOT OF WIND. WE WILL BE EMBARKING THROUGH THE AFT ACCESS RAMP. PLEASE DO NOT RUSH TOWARDS THE PLANE AND FOLLOW ME AT MY SIGNAL."

The woman then spoke in her headset's microphone, apparently communicating with the approaching plane. The big aircraft soon pivoted on the spot as it arrived level with the terminal building, then stopped and put its engines at idle power, while its aft access ramp started coming down. The woman with the radio then opened the large sliding double doors giving on the tarmac.

"WE CAN EMBARK NOW! MAY I HAVE THE ROYAL FAMILY COME FORWARD FIRST."

With King Albert carrying little Princess Marie José, Queen Elisabeth took the hands of her two sons and followed the Air France woman to the waiting plane, where a female figure in Air France blue now stood at the foot of the access ramp. That woman, an

Eurasian of great beauty with long, silky black hair, bowed respectfully to the Queen and King.

"If you will follow me up to the first class section, Your Majesties, I will guide you to your seats."

"Thank you, miss."

Before they could climb the stairs of the access ramp, though, one of the Royal Guards shouted a warning while pointing up at the sky in the distance.

"I SEE TWO AIRCRAFT APPROACH FROM THE..."

Before he could finish his sentence, one of the dots in the sky suddenly turned into a torch and fell like a stone, crashing in a ball of fire on the ground about two kilometers short of the airfield. The remaining aircraft then made a tight turn to the right, revealing at the same time the large black crosses painted under its wings. That maneuver also revealed the fact that a third aircraft was approaching it from behind, catching up quickly with it. A dense stream of tracer bullets then went from the newcomer aircraft to the German plane, an AVIATIK monoplane. The German plane was hit at once and, trailing black smoke, dove towards the ground, apparently out of control, to crash seconds later. The whole scene excited the King and his officers, along with young Prince Leopold, who cheered when the AVIATIK crashed. They cheered again when the victorious aircraft flew overhead before resuming a circling watch at medium altitude.

"That plane bore French flags under its wings, Your Majesty!" Said the head of the Royal Guards, making King Albert nod his head.

"Yes, I saw that. One Zeppelin and two German aircraft shot down in minutes... That pilot deserves a medal for this. I will have to commend him to the French High Command when I will have time to do that."

The Eurasian woman, who was about to climb the stairs of the access ramp, made an embarrassed smile then.

"Uh, that plane does not belong to the French military, Your Majesty: it is the personal plane of a friend of mine who volunteered to fight in this war."

"And that friend of yours was able to arm his plane with machine guns without any objections from French Army officials, miss?"

"Well, that is a bit complicated to explain, Your Majesty. However, the priority now is to evacuate you and your family."

"Just my family, miss: I am staying behind to lead my army in the field. I want you to fly my wife and children, along with a few select servants and staff, to London and to put them in the protective hands of the British government."

Tasha, her respect for the King enhanced by his first sentence, nodded her head once and pointed the ramp.

"Then, come up with me, Your Majesty: I will show you where your family will sit in our plane."

King Albert eagerly climbed the stairs behind her, Princess Marie José still in his arms. He had read newspapers articles and seen pictures about the luxurious facilities aboard Air France aircraft, but he was still impressed when he entered the aft passenger cabin.

"This is really nice, miss."

"Wait, Your Majesty. This is only the tourist class section. Your family and senior staff will be sitting in the first class section. This way, please."

As they crossed through the mostly empty expanse of the middle section, reserved for cargo handling, Tasha instructed the servants carrying the luggage of the royal family to put the various suitcases and chests inside the luggage bins lining the aft and forward partition walls. She then went into the first class cabin and showed two pairs of large, well-padded seats facing each other beside a large oval bubble observation window.

"If the Queen and her children could take place in these seats and buckle their safety belts, I will go guide the rest of your royal party to their places, Your Majesty."

"Go right ahead, miss." Said King Albert before sitting down little Marie José in one of the seats next to the bubble window.

"Here you go, my little angel. Be nice and obey your mother during this trip."

"I will, father." Replied the preteen girl in her soft voice. Hélène Dutrieu, who had come out of the cockpit to greet her illustrious passengers, smiled tenderly on hearing the little girl.

"The princess is really cute, Your Majesty."

"Thank you, miss. And you are?"

Hélène then made an attempt at a curtsy while presenting herself.

"Hélène Dutrieu, Your Majesty. I am the pilot of this aircraft and also happen to be a Belgian citizen. I was born in Tournai."

"I am pleased to hear that, Miss Dutrieu. Uh, would you mind if I visited briefly the cockpit of your aircraft? I heard many wondrous things about it but never visited one."

"Certainly, Your Majesty. Loading everything in my aircraft will take a few minutes anyway, so we have plenty of time for that. This way, please."

Going forward and passing by the kitchenette and two forward side exit doors, H el ene then invited the King inside the cockpit. One look around was enough to bring an awed expression on the face of the monarch.

"My God! This looks all so futuristic. I never imagined that a plane's instruments would look like this."

"Well, I must say that the planes built by other aircraft builders than Bl eriot are extremely bare and primitive compared to this. All of these instruments were invented or designed by the founder and owner of Air France, Tasha Lenoir, who is a physicist, chemist and electronics specialist. In case you ask, she is the Eurasian woman who went out to the foot of the aft access ramp, Your Majesty."

"Oh!" Said Albert, who then belatedly realized that all four crewmembers in the cockpit were women.

"Don't you have men among Air France crews, Miss Dutrieu?"

"Normally, yes, Your Majesty, but nearly all of them got mobilized two days ago. Tasha Lenoir had however anticipated that, in view of the worsening political situation, and hired and trained in advance a number of women as replacement crew. I must point out that Air France has an equal opportunity hiring policy and already had many female members in its staff."

While King Albert was surprised by that, he was not truly shocked by it, since he was a liberal-thinking man. He was however shocked when he asked for the name of the pilot who had protected the CIGOGNE and got it.

"A woman shot down one Zeppelin and two German aircraft?"

"That is correct, Your Majesty. She has dual American and French nationality. She also happens to be a black woman."

"Well, I'll be!" Could only reply the King. "Thank you for the visit, Miss Dutrieu. I will go kiss goodbye to my family before you leave for London."

The King was still shaking his head when he went to kiss his wife and hug his children.

"You won't believe this, Elisabeth, but the pilot who shot down the Zeppelin and the two German planes is a woman."

"A woman? Fighting in a war? That's unheard of."

"Not really, my dear. You remember a certain French girl named 'Joan of Arc'?"

"A flying Joan of Arc? That's certainly a good one, Albert. Well, the important thing is that our children will be safe in London while you fight the Germans. Be assured that I will come back to you as soon as I will be able to. I may not fight, but I still can take care of wounded men."

"I know that you genuinely care for our people, Elisabeth, and I love you even more for that."

The royal couple exchanged a last kiss before Albert regretfully left the aircraft. The loading of the royal luggage had not taken long, Albert and Elisabeth being accustomed to a simple, unassuming lifestyle. The last to come aboard were the three women that had stayed around to staff the small airfield. The King took note of their names once they had finished loading their precious radio equipment aboard the plane, then gave an accolade to each of them.

"You are brave citizens indeed, ladies, and I will make sure that your services will be remembered. Are you going to stay in Brussels after this?"

"No, Your Majesty. We will go stay in Buc, the main base for Air France, where we will help man its air operations for the rest of the war."

"Then, I wish you the best of luck, ladies."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Replied the temporary manager, flushing a bit, before climbing the access ramp. Now left with his senior officers and royal escort, Albert stepped back to the air terminal building, which was now locked up and dark inside. He watched with growing emotion as the big amphibian aircraft started rolling on the grass of the airfield and took off, to nearly immediately turn towards the West-northwest and London, disappearing into the clouds as it climbed, accompanied by its escort plane. Once it was out of sight, the King turned to face his senior staff officer.

"Let's return to the palace: we have plenty to do if we want to stop those damn Germans."

As soon as her CIGOGNE attained its cruising altitude, H el ene Dutrieu spoke in her cockpit intercom to S ebastienne Guyot, who was her navigator/radio operator for this flight.

"S ebastienne, contact right now our air terminal in Hendon and ask them to inform at once the highest British authorities that we are coming in with Queen Elisabeth of Belgium and her three children, for safekeeping in England. Get an acknowledge."

"I'm on it, H  l  ne." Replied the eighteen year-old teenager, a very intelligent girl with a fierce will and great courage. She came back to H  l  ne six minutes later with her report.

"The message has been passed to Hendon, H  l  ne. They promised to inform the British government right away."

"Good! I'm going to pass a short message to our passengers now."

Switching her intercom to 'cabin' mode, H  l  ne then spoke in a calm, relaxed voice.

"Good afternoon Your Majesty, ladies and gentlemen. This is the pilot speaking. We are now flying at an altitude of 6,000 meters and a speed of 330 kilometers per hour and should arrive at Hendon Airfield, just outside London, in about fifty minutes. Our air stewardess, Miss Lenoir, will now serve meals and drinks for those who wish so. Order whatever you want: the flight is courtesy of Air France. Thank you for your attention."

  lisa Deroche, also known as Raymonde de Laroche, giggled as H  l  ne finished her announcement.

"Tasha, a simple air stewardess? She is liable to rip your head off afterwards."

"Naah! Tasha has a sense of humor, contrary to some other constipated people I know."

18:43 (GMT)

Hendon Aerodrome

Colindale, eleven kilometers northwest of Downtown London

England

Lieutenant-Commander William Berwick looked again at his pocket watch, growing more nervous by the minute. He was waiting inside the Air France air terminal building at Hendon Aerodrome in the company of another officer and pilot of the Royal Naval Air Service, Navy Lieutenant Claude Grahame-White, having been alerted fifty minutes before by the personnel of the Air France air terminal. Weirdly enough, while Berwick was the highest ranking RNAS officer present in Hendon, making him the most senior British officer on the spot, his subaltern, Lieutenant Grahame-White, was the actual owner and founder of the aerodrome, having opened it in 1910.

"Damn! If they are on time, that Air France plane with the Queen of Belgium aboard should be here any minute now and we still have no news about the cars and escort I requested for them."

"And the clouds are low and gray and about to burst, sir." Said Grahame-White while looking skyward.

"Blast! Stay here and wait for that plane. In the meantime, I will go call the ministry...again, to shake them up."

"Have fun, sir." Said tongue in cheek his subordinate, making Berwick grumble to himself as he went inside the air terminal building. Cautiously stepping back a bit to find the protection of the main entrance's porch, in case it started raining, Claude Grahame-White continued to scan the sky in all directions, looking for the precious Air France transport plane. Claude Grahame-White was a 34 year-old slim and handsome man who had been one of the first persons to qualify as a pilot in England, having received certificate number six of the Royal Aero Club in 1910, and this after being instructed at Louis Blériot' flying school. He had then created his own aviation company, the Grahame-White Aviation Company, and had purchased enough land to open a proper airfield, now called Hendon Aerodrome. He also had made the first recorded night flight and knew well the difficulties presented to pilots by the capricious and often very wet climate of England. He suddenly tensed up and turned one ear towards the East, thinking that he had heard an engine approach. He smiled when the noise became the steadily growing purr of an approaching plane, a big and powerful one at that. As if to drench his new hopes, a steady rain then started to come down, cutting drastically the already rather limited visibility. A few seconds later, the landing strip lights installed by Air France a year ago came on in two widely spaced parallel rows, with red lights on the left side and blue lights on the right side. Now frankly worried, Grahame-White tried frantically to locate by sound the Air France plane, only to realize after a moment that there were two airplanes in the air, not one! Now confused, he felt alarm, but just for a second, before he reasoned that a German plane would not have simply followed the Air France plane all the way to London. His heart jumped in his chest when he saw a shape appear in the distance through the rain and low clouds. Astonishingly, it was already correctly lined up for a landing between the two rows of light. Putting his questions about that in the back of his mind for the moment, Grahame-White watched on admiringly as the big amphibian made a near perfect landing despite the awful weather. However, as the heavy transport was rolling slowly towards the air terminal, another, much smaller aircraft also appeared through the rain and landed on the grass of the aerodrome, to then follow behind the Blériot-Kruger CIGOGNE. Claude recognized it as being the now standard model of Blériot-Kruger BOURDON, equipped as an amphibian

with integrated floats and wheels. He had been salivating for months already about possibly buying what was by far the best and fastest two-seater monoplane on the market. However, buying one had proved impossible, with Blériot claiming that his orders book was full for the next year and that he simply couldn't keep up with the demand. Somehow, Claude had found that excuse suspect but, with the war now on, reasoned that Blériot had probably reserved all his late aircraft production for the needs of the French military, and justifiably so. Still, that BOURDON sure looked tempting.

A still grumbling Lieutenant-Commander Berwick came back at his side just as the CIGOGNE was about to pivot on the spot to present its tail to the air terminal. Berwick and Grahame-White barely had time to hold on to their service caps before they were blown away because of the propeller wash of the big aircraft. Thankfully, the pilot then throttled down its engines to idle power. With the aft access ramp now coming down, Claude couldn't help make a remark to his superior.

"Quite something to be jealous about, sir?"

"Damn right! Unfortunately, the stupid government rule that doesn't allow us to buy foreign radios or planes equipped with foreign radios still stands, thanks to Mister Marconi."

"And what did the ministry say about the requested cars and escort, sir?"

"That everybody but the evening watch had already left for the night and that it would take time to recall the needed personnel. I then told those bloody twits to forget it and took on me to call Buckingham Palace directly for help. It may cost me later on, but at least I got a sympathetic ear at the palace and the King is sending a full escort with five cars."

"Sir, nobody will be able to say after this that you don't have balls."

"Well, let's hope that someone at the ministry doesn't cut them off later on. What is that second plane, by the way?"

"It landed just behind that big amphibian, sir. In view of its French markings, it probably flew in formation with the CIGOGNE, sir."

"Well, we'll see about that later. Let's get ready to greet Queen Elisabeth of Belgium. I suppose that we don't have a pence of a chance of finding a proper military band on your aerodrome right now, Mister Grahame-White?"

"Not a chance, sir." Replied Claude just before saluting with Berwick as the Belgian queen showed up at the top of the access ramp, holding the hand of a small girl.

The two RNAS officers stayed at attention, saluting, until Queen Elisabeth had come down the ramp and had saluted back with a short bow of her head. Berwick then spoke to her in a strong but friendly voice.

"Welcome to England, Your Majesty. I am Lieutenant-Commander William Berwick, from the Royal Naval Air Service, and this is my subaltern, Navy Lieutenant Grahame-White. I already called for a proper escort and transportation for you and your party and it should arrive shortly. If you may come inside the air terminal to get out of this rain, Your Majesty."

"Thank you, Commander. I must say that the weather was not much better in Brussels. Come, Marie José!"

Berwick then escorted the Queen and little princess inside the air terminal, where Air France personnel hurried to offer her seats in a private lounge normally reserved for passengers in international transit through England. Grahame-White, on his part, guided in the two princes and the Belgian colonel of the Royal Guards who was acting as the senior aide to the Queen, letting the Air France stewardess that came behind them direct the rest of the Belgian royal party inside the air terminal building and supervising the unloading of their luggage. That stewardess also went to speak briefly with the Air France terminal manager, who nodded his head and disappeared for a couple of minutes before coming back with a small cart supporting a collection of glasses and two bottles of fine French cognac, which he presented to Queen Elisabeth.

"Air France would like to offer you some cognac to you and your retinue, Your Majesty, to help you get over the emotions of the day."

"What a fine thought. I accept with gratitude, sir."

As the manager was serving his cognac to the royal party, Grahame-White saw a tall person wearing an aviator's coverall and some kind of flying helmet hurry inside the terminal building, nearly running. Alarmed, he immediately exited the private lounge and, his right hand on the handle of his holstered revolver, shouted at the unknown aviator.

"HEY, YOU! IDENTIFY YOURSELF!"

Claude was quite flustered when the aviator briefly stopped and turned around, revealing herself as a tall black woman.

"Can you wait just a couple of minutes, mister? I just spent more than three hours in the air and I really must go right now."

"Very well, but I will be waiting for you."

While the black woman was in the women's lavatory of the air terminal building, Claude went briefly to look at her plane through the windows of the terminal. It appeared at first to be a standard Blériot-Kruger BOURDON monoplane but his trained eyes caught quickly on two cylindrical objects with conical noses which were hooked to the top surfaces of the plane's two floats units. Looking carefully at the rest of the plane, he then saw the unmistakable muzzles of six machine guns sticking out of the leading edge inner sections of the wings. With his curiosity now truly aroused, he went outside and braved the rain to go examine from up close the cylinders on top of the floats of the BOURDON. Each of the two objects had eight oval openings in their nose cone, plus corresponding openings in their tail. Two of the sixteen tubes, which had a diameter of about three inches, or 75mm, were empty, while the others contained things that were capped off by what looked furiously like artillery shells. Claude was still examining those things when a female voice in his back made him straighten up and turn around in a flash.

"Would you mind stepping away from my aircraft, mister?"

The black woman facing him now didn't seem too pleased with him and she did have a holstered pistol at her belt, but that didn't intimidate Claude a bit.

"Can you tell me what you are doing with an armed aircraft in England, miss?"

"What I am doing was escorting the plane carrying Queen Elisabeth to here, mister. I wouldn't be too useful for that purpose if I had only my pistol to protect her plane, wouldn't I?"

"A woman, piloting an armed plane in time of war?"

The sarcasm apparent in his voice visibly infuriated the black woman, who glared at Claude.

"Go ahead, play the misogynist all you want, but you are presently the amateur in the business of modern war, not me. Stay away from my plane and don't touch it again."

She then turned away and walked back inside the terminal. Claude followed her inside and became alarmed again on seeing that she was about to enter the private lounge where Queen Elisabeth was.

"HEY, YOU CAN'T GO IN THERE, MISS!"

The black woman did stop, but simply twisted her head to look at him.

"If I could escort the Queen's plane all the way from Brussels, then I figure that it at least gives me the right to go present my respects to her, mister. Now, stop acting like an idiot and let me be."

She then went into the lounge, where Grahame-White saw through the windows the black woman kneel respectfully in front of the Queen, who gently put one hand on her head. He next saw the woman and the Air France stewardess lead the Queen and her senior military aide to an isolated corner of the lounge, where the four of them discussed quietly for a few minutes before seemingly coming to an agreement about something. Once that was done, the black woman and the stewardess left the lounge and walked by him, giving him a last black look before exiting the air terminal building. The stewardess returned inside the big amphibian transport, while the black woman returned inside the cockpit of her BOURDON. Minutes later, both aircraft took off in the rain and disappeared into the clouds. Claude didn't have much time to wonder about what the two women could have discussed with the Belgian queen before the promised motorcade arrived from Buckingham Palace. He immediately came to rigid attention and saluted on seeing no other than King George V himself come out of the lead Rolls Royce. This was decidedly no normal evening at his aerodrome.

CHAPTER 12 – CLANDESTINE MISSIONS

15:50 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, August 5, 1914

Aéro-Parc Blériot, Buc

Paris region, France

“Have a good day, Mister Blériot! And thanks again for your offer of voluntary enrollment.”

Despite the fact that the young army lieutenant who had escorted him back to Buc from Paris probably had meant that as a real compliment, Louis Blériot still closed quite violently the door of the military car that had carried him and walked towards his office while grumbling, his little suitcase in one hand. The pioneer aviator was utterly frustrated by the fact that, when he had tried to enroll into the French Army as a volunteer pilot, despite being only one year shy of the maximum age allowed to do so, his candidacy had been refused on the direct orders of General Hirschauer, who had rather justly said that Louis would be a lot more useful managing and directing the production of warplanes at his manufacturing plants than at playing fighter pilot over the battlefields of France. While Louis could understand the logic in Hirschauer’s decision, he still felt frustrated at not being able officially to do his part in the fighting.

Louis finally decided to go visit the prototype workshop first, to see what Johanna Kruger was cooking up lately. Louis knew that she had ideas for at least two other new models of planes but that the demands of war production had delayed many of her long-term projects, like in the case of Tasha Lenoir. When he entered the prototype workshop, he found mostly new replacement mechanics and technicians that had been hired so thoughtfully in advance of mobilization by Tasha. There were however a few of the old hands still present and those, along with Johanna Kruger, came to him at once.

“Where have you been, boss? We were getting worried for you.” Said his workshop manager, attracting a bitter smile on Louis’ face.

“Where I was? I was trying to do my patriotic duty to France, that’s where I was. However, I was told by General Hirschauer in person, who was called once they realized

who I was, that I was more important here than in some air battle. So they drove me back here with a thank you. MERDE! I so wanted to enlist.”

“Don’t tie yourself in knots over this, Louis.” Said softly Johanna while gently patting his back. “Come to my office: I have a bottle of cognac that will help you calm down your frustrations.”

With his little suitcase still in hand, Louis weakly nodded his head and started walking towards her small planning and engineering office. Something however caught his eyes after a few steps and he stopped cold, to point at a BOURDON apparently getting some major overhaul or repair.

“Hey, isn’t that the personal plane of H el ene Dutrieu? It has her aircraft number on it, plus a Belgian flag that was not painted on before. Did she have an accident?”

“Not really! I will explain that to you once in my office.”

Once in her office, Johanna produced a bottle of fine cognac that was already half empty and poured a small glass for Louis, who gratefully accepted it. As he was sipping the strong alcohol, he saw Johanna call Tasha at her lab, asking her to come in and to grab Terry Clarkson, H el ene Dutrieu and Marie Marvingt on her way in. Now intrigued, Louis looked at her questioningly as she put down the receiver.

“Why do you need those girls here, right now?”

“You will soon see, Louis. Let’s say that you have an important management decision to take, but it has to be taken collectively.”

“Uh, you really lost me there, Johanna. What is it about?”

“You will know in a few minutes, Louis. In the meantime, enjoy your cognac.”

Now smelling some kind of setup, Louis held his tongue and continued sipping his alcohol. Tasha and the three other women called in by Johanna finally arrived and took chairs or leaned against a wall, while Johanna closed the venetian blinds of the office’s windows. Going to a desk drawer, Johanna opened it and pulled out a thin file, presenting it to Louis.

“Before we start the serious discussion, I would like to refresh your memory about one of the production contracts made for some of the planes we built recently.”

Giving her a questioning look first, Louis took the file and opened it, reading quickly the document inside it. It wasn’t long before he jerked, then looked up at Johanna with confusion.

“But, I never sold any planes to the Belgian government. This must be a fake!” His last sentence made both Johanna and Tasha grin, with the latter replying to him.

"Of course it's a fake, Louis: we made it. However, we made it so that you and us could do what you just failed to achieve: go fight the Germans in the air."

Those last words at once changed Louis' mood from one of suspicion to one of hope.

"Oh? Go on!"

"Well, to make a long story short, the female pilots here all want badly to go fight the Germans in the air, ideally while flying in armed Blériot-Kruger aircraft. However, knowing how the French military is dead set against letting women fight and how rigid it is about regulations and laws, we looked for a way that would camouflage our actions from official French attention, while letting us deal serious blows to the Germans. Something that happened yesterday, while you were having your escapade at the army mobilization center in Paris, then showed us a way on how to do that."

Tasha then took a couple of minutes to tell Louis about how they got a radio call for help from Brussels and how she and the girls had responded and flown Queen Elisabeth and her party from Brussels to London. That story left Louis to look with envy at Terry.

"You got the chance to shoot down one Zeppelin dirigible and two German reconnaissance airplanes? You lucky you!"

"Well, if you will agree to the little scheme we concocted together with the approval and complicity of Queen Elisabeth, you just may have your own chance to shoot down or bomb quite a few Germans, Louis." Replied Terry, smiling.

"I'm all ears."

"I thought so." Said Tasha, smiling herself. "Here is the deal we made with Queen Elisabeth and the Belgian Army colonel who was escorting her. Officially, King Albert and the Belgian government secretly purchased a small batch of armed Blériot-Kruger aircraft for evaluation, and this just before the German invasion. One of those purchased planes, with a volunteer pilot at the commands, then escorted the Air France CIGOGNE that picked up Queen Elisabeth in Brussels yesterday. That 'Belgian' plane was the one that shot down the Zeppelin and the two AVIATIKS, again officially. Queen Elisabeth was supposed to send today to her husband, King Albert, a sealed letter explaining to him the deal we made with her, so that he could read from the same page of music as the Queen and tell his ministers to go along with our scheme. The British were supposed to help in this by flying that letter to Brussels and deliver it today, even though they don't know about the secret deal, while the Queen was going to ask the British King to keep all details of her arrival in London confidential, to prevent any leaks into the press that could compromise that story. Any future air mission by us over

Belgian and German territory will be officially claimed by the Belgians to be the work of their small air force. Officially, we here will fly clandestine combat missions against the Germans, concentrating our attacks over Belgian or German territory, where the French Air force does not fly...yet. That will help us avoid some embarrassing chance encounters with French Army aircraft, with the questions that could follow. Even if we are discovered by the French Army, something I truly hope won't happen, the French government would have a hard time finding legal reasons to prosecute our actions: both BOURDON aircraft owned by Terry and H  l  ne are private property, fully paid for by private funds, while the prototype of the CONDOR that we are planning to use as well is the property of your company, Louis, and is not due to be transferred to the French Army, as it is still officially needed to continue a series of test flights to test new equipment. As for the munitions we will be using, they will be taken from the stocks made available in Buc by the French Army for the testing of weapons on aircraft due to be delivered by us. I will personally pay for replacement batches of munitions, so we can't be accused of 'stealing' government property. Finally, if worst comes to worst, I still have the capability here in my chemical lab to produce small batches of Metallex explosives and of unguided rockets."

"Wow! You really did think this over, did you?"

"Always, my dear Louis. So, what do you think of our little scheme?"

"That I love it. Count me in, as long as I get to fly missions with you girls."

"Oh, you will, Louis. I believe that it would be best for you to fly the CONDOR, with Marie Marvingt as your navigator/bombardier. Marie is justly reputed as a crack shot with a rifle, thus I would strongly suggest that you pass the controls of your CONDOR to her once you are about to engage Germans, especially when the time comes to fire rockets or drop bombs. As for Terry and H  l  ne, they will fly in formation with you in their two armed and re-engined BOURDON. You three together should be able to cause some significant damage to the German Army and, with any luck, help the Belgian Army repel the German invasion."

"That sounds like a plan." Said enthusiastically Louis, making the women around him smile. "Now, since you seem to be such a good planner, Tasha, and since I am no military strategist, would you have an idea about what kind of targets we should attack in priority?"

"Me, not really. Terry? Certainly! Go ahead, Terry."

“Thank you, Tasha.” Said Terry before looking at Louis, Marie and H  l  ne. “Since we primarily want to help and support the Belgian Army, I believe that the following targets should be our top priorities at first, in decreasing order of importance: the various bridges over the Meuse and the Ourthe Rivers used by the Germans to advance into Belgium; the railroad lines along the German front in Belgium and those leading to it from Germany; any German artillery piece that could be used to destroy Belgian forts and, finally, German field units and their ammunition depots engaged in the siege of Belgian forts. As for targets inside Germany, I would consider as priorities any Zeppelin and their hangars, munitions or weapons factories and bridges along the Rhine River, plus German command and control centers. Any objections or questions about that?”

“These all sounds like logical, legitimate targets to me, Terry.” Said H  l  ne Dutrieu who, as a Belgian woman, had a special stake in this. The others, including Louis, also agreed to the target list, making Tasha nod her head in approval.

“Excellent! We will still have to wait until H  l  ne’s aircraft has finished its retrofitting before launching our first group effort. In the meantime, I suggest that you volunteer as much as possible to effect the pre-delivery weapons test-firings of newly built planes, so that you can get some good practice at it, especially with bombs and rockets.”

06:14 (Paris Time)

Saturday, August 8, 1914

A  ro-Parc Bl  riot, Buc

Paris region, France

“Allons fricoter du Prussien, les filles¹²!” Said with a smile Louis Bl  riot while putting on his flight gloves. Terry Clarkson, Marie Marvingt and H  l  ne Dutrieu nodded their heads in approval, then walked to their respective planes in the semi-obscurity of the morning twilight, with Terry going to her armed BOURDON and H  l  ne Dutrieu walking to her own BOURDON, which had by now also been modified and armed discreetly by Johanna Kruger and her little band of mechanics from the prototype workshop. As for Marie Marvingt, she walked with Louis Bl  riot to the first prototype of

¹² ‘Allons fricoter du Prussien, les filles!’ : ‘Let’s go cook up some Prussians, girls!’ in French.

the CONDOR fast bomber that had been built, which needed some good 'flight testing', according to Louis. His one concession to the fearful protestations from his wife had been to swear to her that he would carry a parachute, just in case. Tasha had designed a model of directional parachute months ago and had offered it to the French Army for its aviators, but some imbecile of a general had then decided that 'the wearing of parachutes would make our pilots less willing to risk their lives in combat'. Tasha had blown a gasket then but even General Hirschauer's intervention had not been enough to reverse that most stupid decision. She still had a number of parachutes produced for the use of the test pilots working for Blériot, something that those pilots had greatly appreciated. This morning both Louis and the three women departing with him did wear such parachutes, plus carried either a pistol or a revolver as a sidearm.

The Sun was about to show up over the eastern horizon when the three heavily armed aircraft took off from Buc. Following the instructions given by Terry at their pre-mission briefing, they kept radio silence at first and, when they had to talk, used only their VHF-FM radio transceivers, so that their transmissions could not be intercepted from long distances. Also, to avoid overflying major French Army field units, they flew straight north at first, passing over Beauvais and Amiens before turning towards the Northeast and Mons, in Belgium. Once past Mons, the three aircraft stayed within Belgian airspace and went east until they came to the Meuse River, where they turned again to the Northeast at Namur and started following the Meuse towards Liege, which had been under German siege for nearly five days now. As decided at the pre-mission briefing, the first thing that Louis, Hélène and Terry did once in view of Liege was to go down and slow down, in order to do an aerial reconnaissance of the situation around Liege. They already knew from newspaper articles that the German Army had already succeeded days ago to cross the Meuse in force north of Liege, thanks to bridges left intact by the Belgians, and that they were surrounding Liege from both sides of the Meuse. With warplanes still being a relative rarity in the skies of Belgium and France and with ground troops mostly ignorant about proper aircraft identification, their overflight of Liege from an altitude of 1,500 meters drew only curious looks and no rifle or machine gun fire, allowing Louis and the three women to have a good view of the city and of its rings of twelve defensive forts, each fort widely spaced from the others and built at distances between six and ten kilometers from the city proper. What they could see was discouraging enough. Terry resumed to the others on the radio what she had been able

to detect about the enemy disposition as they flew north towards the pair of bridges near Vise that had allowed the German Army to cross the Meuse River and surround the city.

“Okay, guys, here is the situation as I saw it: most of the bridges over the Meuse and Ourthe Rivers are still intact, with those north of the city being actively used by the Germans. I counted over 130 artillery guns on the South bank of the Meuse, with 24 of them being heavy siege guns. Those siege guns, along with the intact bridges, will have to be our priority targets today. We will first go blow up the pair of bridges near Vise, then will go down along the Meuse and blow the other bridges in succession. Our CONDOR will be in charge of destroying the bridges by dive-bombing, while the rest of us covers it and observe and record the results. Condor One, you have the lead, over.”

“Condor One acknowledged.” Replied Louis Blériot, who then started taking some extra altitude in advance of his diving attacks while turning slightly to the right. That allowed him to start his approach to the bridges near Vise from the East, flying over and along the pair of main rail tracks coming from the direction of the Rhine and Germany. He then saw something that prompted him to speak on his VHF radio.

“Condor One to Condor Two: I see a train heading west on the tracks leading to Vise. That train appears to be carrying artillery guns and what may be piles of heavy shells. How about you go say hello to that train while I take care of the bridges. Condor Three will be sufficient to escort me, over.”

“Excellent suggestion, Condor One.” Replied Terry. “I will take care of that train. Good luck with the bridges and remember to get out of your dives well above the blast danger zone of your bombs, out.”

Terry then dove steeply while turning away from the two other aircraft. Going down to an altitude of 900 meters, she first flew past one side of the incoming train convoy, in order to inspect from a distance its cargo, then made a wide ‘U’ turn, coming back at the train on its left side and going down to an altitude of 150 meters while staying at a speed of 350 kilometers per hour. Selecting her 75mm rocket pods and switching them to individual rocket fire mode, Terry put her sights on the steam locomotive pulling the twenty flatbed and boxcar wagons.

“Here is a gift from the future, guys!”

She then fired a lone rocket, then immediately pulled up sharply while starting a wide turn to the right. The 75mm rocket was small, but its warhead contained four kilos of Metallex explosive, which had the same blast power as 14.4 kilos of TNT. The rocket slammed into the side of the locomotive at a velocity of 1,400 meters per second, hitting

just above the main traction wheels. The kinetic energy of that impact alone was enough to tip the big locomotive a few degrees from the vertical before the warhead exploded with the power of a heavy caliber artillery shell. The blast instantly killed the crew of the locomotive, blew open its pressure boiler and made it fly off the rails before keeling over on its right side and sliding into the drainage ditch along the track. The wagons attached to the locomotive also left the tracks and started piling up on one another, sending the heavy guns they were carrying careening all around the ditch and nearby trees. The piles of heavy shells also broke their restraining chains and spilled around the surrounding countryside. The German artillerymen riding in the boxcar wagons ended up being projected head over heel inside their wagons, with many breaking bones in the process. Their ordeal was however far from finished. Seeing that some of the boxcar wagons had spilled a number of what looked like large cardboard cylinders, Terry grinned fiercely and lined those wagons up on her combat sight.

“Cordite propellant bags! That should make a nice fireworks display.”

Again, she fired only a single rocket, resolved to save her ammunition as much as possible in view of all the targets they were going to have to hit around Liege today. That rocket went true, hitting squarely a boxcar wagon that now lay on its side in the drainage ditch and was surrounded by cardboard cylinders. The result was nothing less than spectacular, with a giant tongue of fire igniting with a loud **‘WOOSH’** and with the dispersed cylinders also igniting in quick succession. The German artillerymen unlucky enough to be in the boxcars next to the wagons carrying cordite propellant were roasted alive by the burning powder charges, with many men running away screaming, their uniforms on fire. Taking back some altitude, high enough to be out of rifle range and to be able to survey the damage, Terry’s cybernetic right eye then caught a thin column of black smoke rising from the tracks in the distance, maybe twenty kilometers away to the East. She immediately turned towards that smoke column while keying her radio microphone.

“This is Condor Two: the train is now destroyed. I see another train approaching in the distance from the East and am going to attack that train as well. I will then join you afterwards, over.”

“Condor One acknowledged.”

“Condor Three acknowledged.”

Flying east at low altitude, Terry soon arrived in sight of a convoy formed of two locomotives pulling close to forty railcars. Flying by the train but keeping a cautious distance from it, Terry saw that the cars were full of German troops, who were plainly visible through the windows of the railcars. By her count, that train must be transporting at least 2,000 soldiers. She hesitated for a moment at the thought of the kind of carnage that she would cause by attacking the train, but she then remembered the numerous newspaper articles of the last few days, with stories reported by neutral Swiss, Dutch and American reporters of early German atrocities against Belgian civilians, with summary executions of 'suspected spies and saboteurs' and wanton looting and destructions by fire by German troops.

'Well, you wanted to start this war, you bastards, then pay for it!' Thought Terry just before pressing the trigger on her control stick, firing her six machine guns continuously while flying down the line of railcars. With a total rate of fire of close to fifty bullets per second, her bullets, easily piercing the thin wooden roofs of the railcars, caused a mass butchery among the German soldiers packed like sardines in the cars. Going back up after her first pass, she flew in a wide turn back to the train, this time strafing it from head to tail, killing and wounding hundreds more soldiers. For her third pass, she chose to do a frontal pass against the locomotives of the train, which had accelerated to maximum speed in a vain attempt to escape her fire. Two rockets fired from a slightly off angle then blew the two locomotives off their tracks and made them spill on their sides, derailing the rest of the train in the process. With now two extensive train wrecks blocking that rail line, Terry decided that she had done enough here and turned back towards Liege.

Just north of Vise, itself twelve kilometers to the North-northeast of Liege, their CONDOR fast bomber was arriving over the two bridges spanning the Meuse River when Louis spoke to Marie Marvingt on the intercom.

"Time for you to show your marksmanship, Marie: you now have the controls."

"Thanks, Louis. Tell your stomach to hang on: I'm going to dive at near vertical."

"Hey, I do like scenic rides."

"Alright: you asked for it." Said a grinning Marie before pushing forward the control sticks of her navigator/bombardier station, situated in the transparent nose section of their aircraft, while deploying their dive brakes with a push on a side lever and then throttling back their two engines. The CONDOR entered a steep, 75 degree down

angle dive, keeping a relatively slow descent rate thanks to its now fully deployed two dive brake panels. Marie's first target was the railroad bridge, knowing how important the railroads were already proving to be in this war as about the sole way to move rapidly masses of troops and supplies over long distances on the ground. She then selected for ripple release on her armaments control board two of the twelve 100 kilo bombs hooked inside their belly bomb bay. Those bombs, while looking deceptively tiny, were actually extremely powerful and compact for their weight, being filled with 65 kilos of Metallex explosive, which had a density close to that of iron. Those 65 kilos of Metallex in turn had the equivalent blast power of 234 kilos of TNT, more than the blast power of the biggest battleship gun shells in existence. Also, by being much denser for their size and being of small diameter, with a nose made of high-hardness steel, those 'little' 100 kilo bombs had a tremendous penetration power against steel armored decks and concrete roofs, something enhanced by tail fuses with short delay detonation. Carefully aiming for the east bank entrance of the rail bridge through the highly sophisticated (for the time) bomb and rocket aiming sight invented by Tasha Lenoir, which was combined with a radar altimeter and radar rangefinder, Marie carefully lined up her plane before pressing the release button, then immediately started gently pulling out of her dive, making her second bomb be released as her crosshairs wandered towards the center of the bridge. With her two bombs now on their way and with H el ene Dutrieu standing at some distance and observing her bombing, Marie then pulled on her control stick, making her plane come out of its dive at an altitude of 1,600 meters in a two G recovery, voluntarily limiting the centrifugal force because she still carried a ton of bombs. Suddenly, their CONDOR was violently shaken by two huge explosions from below. Returning their plane to level flight and making a wide right turn to go examine the results of her bombing, Marie felt savage joy once the huge pale of smoke and dust created by the explosions was pushed away by the wind. Her first bomb had hit just short of the east bank entrance of the rail bridge and had buried itself deeply before exploding, creating a huge crater and also flipping over the first section of the bridge like a simple pancake, sending it flying into the Meuse River. Her second bomb had missed only by a meter or two the center pillar of the bridge, but its explosion at the bottom of the river had been enough to crumble that center pillar, which in turn had collapsed in the river the second section of the bridge.

"Hell, that was some really nice aiming, Marie!" Exclaimed a joyous Louis. "Let's go for the road bridge now."

"With pleasure, Louis."

Marie's second bombing dive proved even more accurate than the first, with both of her bombs hitting squarely the road bridge and completely destroying it. As their CONDOR was pulling out of its dive, German soldiers started firing at it with their rifles, but the plane proved to be too high to be within effective range of the German weapons. As the CONDOR, accompanied by H el ene Dutrieu's upgraded BOURDON, was flying down the Meuse towards the next bridge to be destroyed, near the village of Herstal, Terry's BOURDON joined back with them.

"Nice shooting, Condor One. I suggest that your next target should be the railroad bridge at the southern end of the city. It seems that the rail lines from the East are still carrying lots of trains full of German soldiers, guns and supplies, over."

"I concur. Am on my way to that bridge. Condor One out."

Flying down to the pair of bridges jumping the Meuse at the southern end of the city, Marie Marvingt took extra care in her bomb aiming this time, as the two bridges had civilian buildings bordering them on each side of the river. She also dropped only one bomb at a time, to limit the blast damage to nearby buildings. Her efforts were rewarded by two successive direct hits, one per bridge, that collapsed entire sections in the water and made them impassable. Encouraged by their successes, Marie and Louis bombed in succession four more road bridges, two that were situated within the city and two others situated between Liege and Vise. Their last two 100 kilo bombs were for two bridges across the Ourthe River, just southeast of Liege. While Marie and Louis were busy doing their dive bombings, Terry again went hunting for German trains coming from the East, flying along the railroad line from Verviers, Eupen and Herbesthal. Her quick reconnaissance paid off at once, with no less than three trains packed with German troops and materiel running westward on that line. Terry then decided to enlist the help of H el ene Dutrieu, who was by now dying to get some action of her own. The Belgian woman soon proved that she had no compunction about shooting up trains full of German soldiers, emptying her machine guns and firing eight of her 28 75mm rockets, wreaking two separate troop trains in the process. Terry then took over from H el ene and shot up a train full of troops and ammunition near Eupen, on the German border. That train went up in a series of huge explosions when Terry's rockets touched off thousands of artillery shells carried by the train. By the time that the two armed BOURDON went

back to Liege to join up with the CONDOR, all the bridges within German-held terrain were destroyed. That was when Terry decided that it was time to take care of the German heavy siege guns.

08:39 (Paris Time)

Fort of Loncin

Six kilometers west of Liege

“Bon Dieu de bon Dieu! I could kiss those aviators on their four cheeks.” Exclaimed enthusiastically Lieutenant-General Gérard Mathieu Joseph Georges Leman, Commander of the fortified position of Liege, as another German heavy artillery ammunition dump, hit by a rocket, blew up in a spectacular and very loud display of fireworks that made the earth shake. Using his binoculars to try to see more details about the three attacking aircraft that were now performing miracles for his command, the only thing that he could really distinguish was the Belgian black, yellow and red flags painted on their sides and wings. Turning his head and looking at the commander of the Fort of Loncin, he gave him a quick order.

“Colonel Naessens, prepare a sortie towards the West by a squadron of cavalry that will escort out a messenger. I am going to write down a report on the action of this morning, to be sent to Brussels as quickly as possible.”

“Understood, General. I’m on it.”

As Naessens walked away, Leman went back inside the nearest bunker, to go write his report. With over half of the German heavy siege guns now destroyed, the chances of his command to hold the German advance towards Brussels were now much better than just one day ago, when he was expecting his forts to be bombarded by the German ‘Big Bertha’ 420mm howitzers and 305mm heavy mortars.

08:52 (Paris Time)

German Army first aid station

Village of Micheroux, 11 kilometers east of Liege

“MAKE WAY! MAKE WAY FOR THE GENERAL!”

The medical orderlies and walking wounded in the way of the four German soldiers and one officer carrying a wounded senior officer on a stretcher quickly stepped out of the way, allowing the group to finally put down the wounded on his stretcher down near the entrance of a dugout marked by a red cross sign. The officer in the group, a major, then burst inside the first aid station, shouting.

“I NEED A SURGEON NOW! GENERAL VON EMMICH IS GRAVELY WOUNDED.”

A military doctor whose white overcoat was already covered with dried blood and who was already operating on a wounded soldier left his patient into the care of his assistant before going to the major.

“Where is the general, Major?”

“Just outside, doctor. He was inspecting one of our heavy artillery positions when it was hit by those three devilish Belgian planes with some sort of bomb. The general was projected in the air by the blast and he has great difficulty breathing.”

“Very well: bring him inside.”

The major went out, to return with his four soldiers carrying the stretcher. The surgeon made them put the stretcher down on an improvised operating table and started examining Von Emmich at once. What he saw was not encouraging.

“One lung has collapsed, while the other one is filling with blood. There is also pink foam coming out of the General’s mouth. I am afraid that he suffered extensive internal organ damage from that blast. I will do my best, but I am not optimistic about the prognosis. MEDIC, GET ME NEW GLOVES!”

The major looked on anxiously as the surgeon and his medical team worked quickly to prepare his commanding general for surgery. However, Von Emmich let out his last breath just as the surgeon was about to start operating on him. Despite the best efforts of the surgeon to reanimate him, the lieutenant-general was declared dead sixteen minutes later.

10:03 (Paris Time)

Aéro-Parc Blériot, Buc

France

Johanna Kruger and Tasha Lenoir, accompanied by four of the Blériot mechanics working in the prototype workshop, ran to the two BOURDON and one CONDOR as

soon as they came to a halt and switched off their engines. They met the pilots as those came out of their aircraft, apparently jubilant. Louis Blériot resumed their state of mind when he raised his left fist high and shouted.

“ON LES A EU, LES PRUSSIENS¹³!”

“Were your planes hit?” Asked at once Johanna, making Louis shake his head.

“Not as far as we know. However, feel free to give a good check to our planes, Johanna.”

“Oh, I definitely will, Louis. So, things went well over Belgium?”

“Went well?” Replied a grinning Hélène Dutrieu. “Hell, we truly kicked German ass this morning. All the bridges that they were using around Liege are now destroyed, along with at least half of their heavy siege guns. We also strafed and rocketed five German trains full of troops and equipment. If this doesn’t cause a serious delay in the German advance through Belgium, then nothing will.”

“It will cause a delay, but that won’t win us the war.” Cautioned Terry. “We will need to finish destroying the rest of the German artillery around Liege, and this as quickly as possible.”

“I concur.” Said Louis Blériot, making Tasha nod her head.

“I agree as well. Let a few hours to Johanna to inspect, maintain, rearm and refuel your planes and go eat, then go sleep a couple of hours before leaving on a second mission this afternoon.”

“Sounds reasonable to me.” Said Louis, before grinning again. “God, I really felt alive up there this morning.”

21:16 (Paris Time)

German Army advanced headquarters

Luxembourg

“HOW COULD THREE PLANES, THREE PLANES, CAUSE THIS MUCH DAMAGE? THAT’S IMPOSSIBLE!”

Von Moltke’s operations officer, assembled in the Army Chief of Staff’s office with the other main staff officers of his advanced headquarters on the Western Front, took a good breath before attempting to answer his commander.

¹³ On les a eu, les Prussiens!: ‘We got them, those Prussians!’ in French.

"Actually, Herr General, we have had intelligence reports for months about the new Blériot-Kruger planes. All those reports warned that they were clearly superior to anything else flying these days. We also had reports that the French had developed a new explosive of tremendous power and that they had started to produce shells and bombs filled with that new explosive. We were skeptical of those reports at first, but I'm afraid that what happened around Liege today can be taken as a clear confirmation that those reports were accurate...and then some. We also got reports from our armies in the Alsace and Lorraine regions about French artillery shells proving to have devastating explosive power. Those new French shells have in fact caused very heavy casualties to our troops there. This makes me fear the moment when our Second and Third Armies will first clash with the French Fifth Army around Dinant and Charlerois, Herr General."

"And, talking, of them, when will they be in contact with the French? How is their advance going?"

The Chief of Operations braced himself as he answered that question.

"The Second Army of General von Bülow is still mostly stuck east of the Ourthe River, Herr General, while the Third Army of General von Hausen had to make a substantial detour to the South to bypass the destroyed bridges on the Ourthe River. As for General von Kluck's First Army, it is now hopelessly clogged east of Liege due to the destroyed bridges on the Meuse and to the railroad lines blocked by wrecked trains. The 34th Brigade of General von Emmich's army, which was operating on the west bank of the Meuse when the bridges were destroyed, is now isolated and mostly cut off. As for General von Emmich, he has been replaced by General Ludendorff as the head of the Meuse Army. General Ludendorff reported one hour ago that he has no heavy artillery guns left and that a significant portion of his field artillery pieces have also been destroyed, all by those Belgian planes. He says that he won't be able to make progress until the railroad lines are cleared and some reinforcements are sent to him."

"And how long will it take to clear those railroad lines?"

"Two to three weeks at a minimum, Herr General." Answered von Moltke's Chief of Engineer Troops, triggering renewed anger in Moltke.

"TWO TO THREE WEEKS?! WE DON'T HAVE TWO TO THREE WEEKS! WE HAVE TO GO AROUND THE LEFT FLANK OF THE FRENCH ARMY AND FINISH IT OFF BEFORE THE RUSSIANS FINISH TO MOBILIZE. IF NOT, WE MAY JUST LOSE THIS WAR."

"I do realize that, Herr General, but please understand that complete trains were destroyed and derailed along those railroad tracks east of Liege and Namur. Removing each wrecked wagon and locomotive takes special rail cars with heavy cranes and is the work of one hour at a minimum. Also, even once the railroad tracks will have been cleared and repaired, we have dozens of train convoys presently bottled up that will need to be pushed forward and unloaded before the offensive through Belgium can resume. Lastly, the losses we suffered in those air attacks on our trains were quite heavy and, as a consequence, von Kluck's army has been significantly weakened, on top of being immobilized between Liege and Aachen. The only possible way for him to resume quickly his advance westward would be to backtrack into Germany and move through Maestricht and Holland, but that would mean violating Dutch neutrality."

"Belgium claimed to be neutral and so did the Luxembourg, yet we went through them. Do you think that I really care about Dutch neutrality, General Bergmann? If this is what it will take for our attack to resume, then so be it."

Moltke, still fired up, then turned to look at the commander of his aviation, General von Hoepner, shaking an index finger at him.

"And what are your aviators doing to prevent more such air attacks, von Hoepner?"

Von Hoepner stiffened but did his best to keep his tone polite.

"In truth, Herr General, my pilots cannot do much against those Belgian planes, or against the Blériot-Kruger planes of the French Army: their planes have no fixed armament and are much slower. What he have is hopelessly outclassed by those Blériot-Kruger monoplanes. I however still can provide air reconnaissance sorties in support of our artillery."

"Can't our aircraft manufacturers produce planes that are both armed and fast enough to fight off those French planes?"

"They are working on it, Herr General, but I am frankly not very optimistic about that. There is also the matter of that new French explosive: we have nothing comparable to that, which means that the French and the Belgians can strike us much harder from the air than we can strike them."

"DAMMIT! ARE YOU ALL TELLING ME THAT WE ARE ALREADY IN THE PROCESS OF LOSING THIS WAR ON THE WESTERN FRONT?" Raged Moltke, unable to take so many bad news at once. None of his subalterns dared answer him on

that, even though a couple of his staff officers thought that the answer may very well be a firm 'yes'.

07:26 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, August 12, 1914

Neuilly-sur-Seine, western suburbs of Paris

Paying the newspaper boy, Louis Blériot took a couple of steps away to let others also buy copies of the morning edition of 'Le Figaro', then quickly scanned the titles on the three first pages. He grinned devilishly when he read the big title on the front page that said 'BELGIAN AIR FORCE DESTROYS GERMAN ARTILLERY IN FRONT OF LIEGE'. Reading quickly that article, he nodded his head with satisfaction: King Albert and his government were apparently playing along with the scenario concocted by Tasha Lenoir and were taking the credit for the accomplishments of 'their Belgian Air force'. No doubt that Hélène Dutrieu must be giggling if she read this. A sentence at the end of the front page article however made him raise an eyebrow.

"What is the French Air force doing? See article on page two."

Turning to page two, Louis read quickly the article in question, which filled a full three columns of text and was followed by a number of related, shorter articles. Mainly, the articles were wondering what the French Army was doing with its own Blériot-Kruger aircraft, with the partial answer given in the articles being: not much. One article did displease Louis quite a bit, though. It was capped with an archive photo showing him, Tasha Lenoir and Johanna Kruger, standing and smiling in front of one of the Blériot-Kruger BOURDON that had participated in the Schneider Trophy competition in Monaco a year ago. The title of the article was 'THE ARCHITECTS OF THE NEW BELGIAN AIR POWER', and it described how the new planes used by the 'Belgian Air force' had been designed and built by the trio.

"Damn! They might as well have pinned big targets on our backs for Germans agents to use."

Looking up from his newspaper, he saw that a couple of men who were also reading copies of 'Le Figaro' were now looking at him, apparently wondering if he was the same man as the one on the photo taken in Monaco. Folding up his newspaper, Louis hurried to his car and sat behind the steering wheel, starting the engine and rolling out of his parking spot. He however stopped again a mere 200 meters further, near a newspapers

kiosk, where he stepped out of his car and quickly bought a copy of each of the big Parisian daily newspapers, bringing them back to his car and sitting in it before scanning quickly their covers. They all basically said the same things as 'Le Figaro', with a couple of them talking specifically about the designs and publicly known performances of the Blériot-Kruger aircraft in side articles.

"If only they knew." Wondered Louis. He personally had not flown other combat missions since his two missions on Monday, but Terry Clarkson, Marie Marvingt and Hélène Dutrieu had and were in fact probably in the air right now, continuing their strategic strike campaign against the German railroad system and the bridges the Germans were using to advance into Belgium. Louis knew that their strategic program intended to include at one point the systematic destruction of the bridges over the Rhine River, inside Germany, with priority given to the railroad bridges, in order to greatly reduce the capacity of the Germans to move troops and supplies towards the front. If they could achieve that, then the results could pay off handsomely for France and Belgium and could very well help win the war against Germany. Putting down the newspapers, Louis then put his car into gear and headed to Buc and work.

13:40 (Paris Time)

Office of the Minister of War

Paris

"You asked for me, Minister?" Said Brigadier General August Édouard Hirschauer once he had saluted Adolphe Messimy. The ex-army officer, an energetic man known for easily losing his calm, nodded his head and showed him a chair set on one side of his work desk.

"Yes I did, General Hirschauer. Please, sit down: I have a few questions about our aviation."

Hirschauer then saw the various morning newspapers spread on top of the minister's desk and understood at once what Messimy was after. He however kept silent and sat down, waiting for the minister of war to speak again. Messimy did so while showing one of the newspapers' front page, which announced in bold letters the successes of the Belgian Airforce.

"Have you seen the morning newspapers yet, General?"

"Yes, I did, Minister."

"And what do you think of those titles?"

"That I am happy to see that the Belgians are able to use so effectively the planes they bought from Blériot, Minister."

"Yeah!" Said the minister in a sardonic tone while turning the newspaper to the second page and showing him one article title.

"Then, answer me this question: what is the French Air force doing?"

"Minister, I really can't answer you on that, and you know it: I am only in charge of the procurement of airplanes and the training of their aircrews and support services. Their use in war is strictly the responsibility of the General-in-Chief of the Army and of his aviation deputy."

"Then, let me ask you this: could our airplanes do the same that the Belgians are doing right now?"

"The Blériot-Kruger planes that we have certainly can, Minister. Our pilots and support crews are well trained and they are amply provisioned with the same kind of bombs and rockets than the ones apparently used by the Belgians."

Messimy then threw down the newspaper on top of his desk, frustrated.

"Then why are we not doing the same to the Germans, General?"

"Again, Minister, you should ask that question to General Joffre. He has the tactical control of our warplanes, while I only provide him with the planes and pilots."

"If you were in his place, what would you do with our planes, General?"

Hirschauer was a bit taken aback by that question, which was tantamount to asking him to criticize his army commander in his back. His mounting frustration of the last few days at seeing Joffre basically ignore his aviators however convinced him to answer Messimy truthfully.

"I would use them for reconnaissance, artillery spotting and airstrikes behind the enemy lines, especially against the German heavy artillery, Minister."

Messimy took the time to scribble down his answer before looking back up at Hirschauer.

"Anything else you would do with those aircraft?"

"Yes, Minister: strike German command and control facilities and weapons factories deep inside Germany."

Messimy also noted that down, then smiled to Hirschauer.

"Thank you for this information, General. It was most useful."

Not sure how Messimy was going to use that 'useful information', Hirschauer got up from his chair and saluted the minister before leaving his office.

CHAPTER 13 – SHAKEUP

14:37 (Paris Time)

Friday, August 14, 1914

Advanced headquarters of the French Army

Vitry-le-François, Marne Department

France

General-in-Chief of the French Army Joseph Joffre had a bad feeling when the important visitors that had just landed unannounced near his advanced headquarters, in the region of the Marne, proved to be President Raymond Poincaré, Prime Minister René Viviani and Minister of War Adolphe Messimy. Also accompanying them was Brigadier General Auguste Hirschauer, the director of the military aviation department at the ministry of war. They had all come in a military PELICAN heavy transport amphibian that had landed with an escort of two armed Blériot-Kruger FRELON fighter-bombers in a field next to his headquarters in the local college of Vitry-le-François. Joffre saluted President Poincaré when he received him in the entrance lobby of the college, then shook hands with him.

“Welcome to my headquarters, Monsieur le Président. I must say that your visit is a bit of a surprise.”

“That is because I had a number of places to visit first and was uncertain about how the weather would affect my flying around, General Joffre. Know that I went this morning to Brussels, to visit King Albert and to discuss with him the war situation in Belgium. He in turn stated a few requests he had for the French Army, requests that I am now conveying to you. Would there be a place where we could discuss in private?”

“Of course, Monsieur le Président. Please follow me to my private office.”

The old, overweight general then led his visitors to his office, which was the old office of the college’s dean. There, he sat down with the President and his followers on two sofas set in a corner of the large office. Joffre noticed at once that the polite smiles on his visitors’ faces mostly disappeared once the doors of the office were closed.

“So, Monsieur le Président, what requests did King Albert have for the French Army?”

"First and foremost, King Albert wants our aviation to support the handful of warplanes he has and which have accomplished miracles up to now, despite their tiny numbers."

"Oh? My impression was that the claims about the damages caused to the Germans by those Belgian planes were only propaganda claims. They certainly were too fantastic to be believed."

Poincaré raised an eyebrow on hearing that, but continued on.

"Second, King Albert requested that our Fifth Army push north as quickly as possible, to take in the flank the German army advancing on Namur and Charlerois. King Albert gave me his implicit permission for the French Army to enter Belgium in order to attack the Germans."

"That is not possible for the moment, Monsieur le Président. Our forces are presently covering the left flank of our armies fighting in the Alsace and the Lorraine. If the Fifth Army would move north, it would create a huge gap that would then allow the Germans to get into the rear of our forces fighting on our eastern frontiers."

"And have you asserted the actual positions of the German forces facing us, notably by using air reconnaissance, General?"

"I much prefer using cavalry units to conduct reconnaissance, Monsieur le Président. Their reports are a lot more reliable than what those fanciful aviators flying their canvas toys could tell me."

"I see!" Said Poincaré, his tone visibly becoming drier and harsher from then on. "So, from what you just told me and from what I saw yesterday at a couple of airfields I visited around Paris, you consciously decided to ignore your military aviation, a new and promising weapon in which the nation has already invested tens of millions of francs. Well, maybe planes were mere toys a few years ago, but not anymore, General. The Blériot-Kruger aircraft equipping our squadrons could help immensely your ground units in many ways, including by doing air reconnaissance and by hitting the enemy in his rear, like the Belgian planes have been doing."

"As I said before, Monsieur le Président, we only have the word of the Belgians about those so-called exploits by their planes."

That was when Poincaré decided that he needed to take on Joffre about his ignorance and refusal to take planes seriously.

"General Joffre, know that, after leaving Bruxelles, my plane flew straight east and went deep into German territory, all the way to the Rhine River, where my plane

turned southward over Cologne and then followed the Rhine until we arrived over the city of Worms, where it turned westward to come here. The reason for that detour was for me to confirm with my own eyes the claims by King Albert that the three aircraft of his puny air force have by now bombed and destroyed all the bridges spanning the Rhine River, and this from Duisbourg in the North to Worms in the South. You know what, General? All those bridges were effectively destroyed, ALL of them! Those three Belgian aircraft have thus already given a near mortal blow to the long-term resupply capabilities of the German Army and have made the timely arrival of more German troops on our front nearly impossible. Now, when I visited a squadron of FRELON fighter-bombers and a squadron of CONDOR fast bombers yesterday near Paris, I asked them how many missions they had flown to date in combat over the front and how many bombs they had dropped on the Germans. Their answers were all the same: zero bombs on the enemy! Why? Because you are, quote, keeping them in reserve, unquote. And we have been at war for nearly two weeks now. Just the squadron of CONDOR fast bombers I visited could have done the same job as the one done by the Belgian planes, but in two to three days only instead of ten. Do you see where I am getting at, General? Well, I will tell you anyway: I believe that, through what I can only call a refusal to embrace new military technologies, you have wasted valuable assets that could have saved the lives of tens of thousands of our soldiers, needlessly killed while conducting on your orders frontal assaults against prepared German positions reinforced by machine guns and heavy artillery. Your planes could have warned you in advance about those German ambush positions and could have destroyed as well the heavy German artillery that outranged and outshot our own 75mm field guns. However, you chose to not use them because you don't believe in them, the same way you still use telegrams because you don't like using a telephone. Things will have to change, General, and quickly!"

Joffre, stung deeply by this criticism, then let his pride get the better of him. Jumping on his feet, he shook an angry index finger at the President of the Republic.

"I have been a soldier for over forty years and a politician like you will not tell me how to run an army in a war."

Poincaré, like Viviani and Messimy, stared at him hard for a moment before speaking again in a dangerous tone of voice.

"Are you refusing to use properly our aviation as I suggested and as King Albert of Belgium is asking through me, General?"

"What I am refusing is to let myself be told how to run my armies."

"YOUR ARMIES? These are the armies of France, General, not YOUR personal armies, and their soldiers are French citizens, not simple toy soldiers that you can maneuver and sacrifice as you please. As President of the Republic, I was elected to see to the welfare and security of all French citizens, whether they are in uniform or in civilian clothes. I am simply asking you to use efficiently all the tools in our arsenal, in order to avoid wasting lives for nothing. Is that really asking too much from you, General?"

"By asking me this, you are putting in doubt my competence as an officer, Monsieur le Président. If you really don't have confidence in me, then I will tender my resignation, but you will then be responsible for the bloody mess that will follow."

Poincaré got up at that point, imitated by his three followers, and glared at Joffre.

"You are so vainglorious that you think that you alone can save France in this war, General? Your last words have decided me on what action to take: you are relieved of command as General-in-Chief of the French Army as of right now. General de Castelnau, the Commander of the Second Army, will take over your post here as soon as he can come from the Lorraine. General d'Esperey will in turn take the place of General de Castelnau at the head of the Second Army, while Major-General Belin, your chief of staff here, will take care of the daily operations until the arrival of General de Castelnau. Go pack your things: you are leaving with me on my plane. In exchange, Brigadier General Hirschauer will stay here with a number of his staff personnel and radio equipment and will personally direct the strategic activities of our aircraft in support of General de Castelnau and his armies. General Hirschauer, you may now call in your aviation command personnel and radios."

"Right away, Monsieur le Président." Replied Hirschauer before switching on the portable VHF radio transceiver he had carried in one hand and speaking in its handset.

"Hirschauer to Brunet!... Hirschauer to Brunet, come in, over!... You may disembark now with all our men and materiel and come to the headquarters: we are staying."

Joffre could only watch him blankly, unable to believe what had just happened to him. He then stormed out of his office, leaving his visitors behind.

Truly disappointed in Joffre's reaction, President Poincaré, Prime Minister Viviani and Minister of War Messimy left the office as well, going to see Major-General Belin, so

that the new command dispositions could be realized and acted upon. That left Hirschauer alone with his portable radio transceiver. Walking out of Joffre's office and going to the reception lobby of the college, where a duty staff officer sat behind a table supporting a number of telephones, Hirschauer requested that a truck be sent to the President's plane, to pick up his men and materiel, then went to see the officer in charge of logistics, to commandeer some adequate space for himself and his men. They ended up being given a number of old classrooms on the top floor of the college building, which suited Hirschauer just fine, as that gave more range to his radios, with their antennas fixed directly on top of the roof. His aviation command section was nearly finished setting up when an apparently angry Major-General Belin came to see him.

"What kind of stunt is this, Hirschauer? The President comes in unannounced, relieves our army commander and then you and your men requisition space in my headquarters building."

"This is no stunt, General. Thousands of lives were being wasted for no good reason at the front simply because General Joffre refused to use our latest weapon in our arsenal. President Poincaré tried to change his mind about that but General Joffre refused, which forced the President to relieve him. With all due respect, General, what concerns you most: avoiding thousands of unneeded casualties by using correctly our aviation, or sparing the feelings of one man?"

"That one man was our commander-in-chief, Hirschauer."

"And he refused to obey the President of the Republic, General Belin." Replied Hirschauer, hardening his tone. "Now, I came here to help provide tactical and strategic air support to our armies and that is exactly what me and my men intend to do. General Castelnau has up to now used well the limited number of planes assigned to him on the Alsace front, but I still have six squadrons of modern planes based around Paris that never received tasking orders for combat missions from your headquarters since the start of this war. Do you even have an idea of the damage that all those planes could do to the Germans if properly used, General? Look at what three Belgian planes were able to accomplish in just a few days. The people of France is starting to wonder about that and President Poincaré was amply justified to relieve General Joffre for what amounted to criminal negligence on his part."

Belin then hesitated, Hirschauer's arguments starting to erode his unquestioning loyalty to Joffre. He finally took a deep breath and nodded his head once.

“Very well, Hirschauer. I will let you handle the details of our air campaign, but I want to see results, fast. You may start with a front-wide air reconnaissance plan. If your aviators can really hurt the Germans, and especially their artillery units, then they are free to bomb them.”

“Thank you, General. You will not regret this, I promise.”

Belin, still only half-convinced but conscious that he could not oppose the authority of the President of the Republic without suffering the consequences, walked away, leaving Hirschauer wondering how many more senior army officers were going to oppose the use of his aviators. He finally reasoned that the best way to win those skeptics over was still to get concrete results on the ground. For that, he already had a detailed plan of action in mind. If the Germans thought that those three Belgian aircraft had hurt them, then they had one nasty surprise coming to them.

CHAPTER 14 – DEATH FROM ABOVE

15:06 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, August 18, 1914

Charleville-Mézières, Ardennes Department

Near the Belgian border, France

“And they really can stop rifle bullets fired from a distance, Colonel?” Asked General Édouard de Castelnau as he weighed one of the Durex armored vests delivered by train into the forward lines of the Fifth Army, along with 20,000 Durex helmets. Georges Giffard nodded his head vehemently in response while answering on an enthusiastic tone.

“Absolutely, General! I was present myself when the first trials of these armored vests and battle helmets were conducted at the Fort of Mont Valérien in November of 1912, along with tests of samples of the Metallex explosive we now use to fill our artillery shells and make hand grenades. The inventor of both Metallex and of this Durex, Miss Tasha Lenoir, is an incredible scientific genius and has produced many more inventions that the army now uses, including our new portable radios. I was so impressed by her products that I convinced the then minister of war to buy both those Durex vests and helmets and the production license of the Metallex explosive, which Miss Lenoir graciously sold to the government for a very low sum, considering the huge importance this Metallex now has for our weapons.”

Something that Giffard had said made de Castelnau look crossly at the logistics colonel.

“These were bought in November of 1912, yet we are only getting the first batches now? How come, Colonel?”

Giffard couldn't help sigh at that question, as it reminded him of something that had caused him a lot of frustration.

“General, when the first order for 20,000 such armored vests and helmets was received, the goal was to conduct field trials at regimental level before ordering more to equip the whole army. Unfortunately, General Joffre opposed their distribution to combat troops, saying that such armored vests and helmets were unneeded and would supposedly diminish the fighting ‘élan’ in our soldiers. Now that General Joffre is out,

Minister Messimy has ordered that the stocks we had be distributed immediately to frontline troops. He has also placed urgent orders for the massive production of more vests and helmets. The Lenoir Industries plant that produced those vests and helmets now works day and night to fill those new orders and you should expect another batch of twenty thousand vests and helmets to be delivered by this weekend, General.”

De Castelneau had to turn away for a moment to hide the flash of anger that overcame him, but he still swore violently to himself. In the recent fighting by his Second Army in the Lorraine, thousands of his men had been cut down by German machine guns ringing kill zones in which his troops had been suckered in. Only the devastating power of the few multiple rocket launcher batteries he had received just before the war had permitted him to sweep away those German machine gun nests. His sole squadron of Blériot-Kruger FRELON fighter-bombers had then completed the work by destroying the concentrated groups of German heavy artillery guns that had until then outranged his own 75mm field guns. De Castelneau had been able at the end to keep hold of the newly liberated territories in the Alsace and Lorraine regions, but at a very steep price in lives. To think that at least part of those human losses could have been avoided by simply using those vests and helmets was both frustrating and infuriating. Calming himself down first, he then turned to face Colonel Giffard again.

“I want this first batch of vests and helmets to be distributed to the cavalry units of the Fifth Army, with what may be left afterwards to go to one frontline infantry division. As for the next batches to be delivered, they will go to the rest of our infantry and of our cavalry. I will court-martial any rear service officer or soldier that will appropriate one of those vests and helmets before all of our frontline troops are equipped with them.”

“And what about you, General? You should take a set now, since you are vital to our armies.”

De Castelneau hesitated for a moment, tempted to refuse and thus follow his own rule he had just established. A sudden thought then made him smile and nod his head.

“Well, my officers always try to discourage me from visiting the frontlines, saying that I am too precious to expose myself to enemy bullets. With one set of these, I will be able to counter their arguments. I will thus take one vest and one helmet.”

“A wise decision, General.” Said Giffard, smiling, before going to one of the crates that had just been unloaded from the train that had brought the shipment. “The vests come in ‘short’, ‘medium’, ‘tall’, ‘medium-heavy set’ and ‘tall-heavy set’ sizes, while the helmets come in ‘small’, ‘medium’ and ‘large’ sizes. Such an intellectual as you will

definitely need a 'large' size helmet, General, while I believe that a 'medium-heavy set' vest would best fit your strong body."

De Castelnau, amused by Giffard's choice of words, patted his belly, which showed a bit of a paunch.

"Well, I do like good food, so I will accept one of those 'medium-heavy set' vests, Colonel."

Getting first an armored vest, de Castelnau put it on and adjusted its retaining straps, then knocked the frontal upper plate inserted in the kakhi canvas vest with his knuckles. Jumping up and down a bit to see how comfortable the vest was, he nodded his head in appreciation.

"This is really nice. And I can barely feel the weight of it."

"That is because its weight is distributed all over your torso, General. Here, try this helmet."

De Castelnau first looked approvingly at the small French flag painted on the front of the helmet and at the transparent armored visor that protected the upper half of the face, enhancing the protection against artillery shrapnel given by the sloped surfaces covering the ears and neck. He then put the helmet on and smiled to his aide.

"So, how do I look, Captain Dupont?"

"Very martial, General." Replied diplomatically the junior officer. Satisfied, de Castelnau asked another question to Giffard.

"Since you are in charge of weapons procurement for the Army, Colonel, you can probably tell me when I could expect more of these fantastic multiple rocket launchers: they saved my army more than once in the Lorraine."

"Minister Messimy has authorized more of them to be acquired from the Lenoir Industries, General. Thankfully, due to their simple, lightweight construction, you will be able to get some quite quickly."

That last statement then decided de Castelnau about a plan he had been mulling in his head for the last few days.

"If it is so, then I will delay my ground offensive operations until my troops are better equipped in such rocket launchers and in armored vests and helmets. In exchange, my aviation will have more time to strike the Germans from the air and weaken the enemy. It will also give us more time to replenish our stocks of ammunition, which are quite low right now. With luck, the Germans will be close to withdrawing by the time that I launch my ground offensive."

"That sounds like a plan, General!" Said Giffard approvingly.

08:03 (Paris Time)

Sunday, August 23, 1914

Secondary road north of Clervaux

Occupied Duchy of Luxembourg

Major Rudolph Bruckner was tired to the bone, having been on horseback for nearly four days now, with only a few hours a day taken to let his horses rest and be fed. Normally, his newly formed artillery battalion of sixteen 15cm field howitzers would have travelled by train from Cologne, where he and his men had picked up their new howitzers, to Liège, where they were supposed to reinforce the severely depleted German siege force there. However, with all the bridges over the Rhine River now destroyed and with most of the railway lines between the Rhine and the Meuse hopelessly clogged by trains destroyed by airstrikes, his unit had to cross the Rhine by ferry and then trot along the roads leading into Luxembourg, where the French and Belgian airplanes had been less active up to now. Along the way, Bruckner had heard numerous stories about how murderous those airstrikes could be, with the French rockets in particular being both despised and feared. He had also been able to measure how low the morale of frontline German troops stuck between the Meuse and Ourthe Rivers and the Rhine was. The huge army led by General von Moltke had been basically static for over a week now inside Belgium, the Luxembourg and the Sarre Region, unable to move other than on foot and with its supply lines nearly cut by airstrikes. The Belgian Army, who had at first withdrawn to the Northwest after being beaten around Liege, had now retraced its steps and was engaged in a furious, no-mercy fight with the German infantry holding the city of Liege proper, while the Belgian forts ringing the city still held.

A faint buzz in the distance suddenly made Bruckner and a number of his men raise an ear towards the South. That buzz then became progressively louder, alarming Bruckner, who then shouted to his men behind him.

"AIRCRAFT APPROACHING! GET OFF THE ROAD!"

That was however easier said than done, with deep drainage ditches on each side of the dirt road making it nearly impossible for the horse teams pulling their two-ton field

howitzers to leave the road without getting hopelessly stuck inside the ditches. The horse-drawn wagons carrying their reserves of shells and powder charges were equally stuck on the road when two aircraft sped over them, following the road at low altitude. Bruckner had time to see the French markings on their wings as they overflew him.

“UNLIMBER THE HOWITZERS! LET’S SAVE AT LEAST OUR HORSES BEFORE THOSE PLANES COME BACK TO FIRE ON US.”

His men, most of whom were farmers in civilian life, understood Bruckner’s choice and, engaging the hand brakes of the wagons and howitzers, started at once to unhook their horse teams from their loads. They were however still doing that when the two French FRELON fighter-bombers flew back towards them, obviously about to strafe the German artillery column. What saved the Germans and their horses was the fact that the lead pilot was also a farmer in civilian life. Seeing that the Germans were unhooking their horses while leaving their howitzers and wagons on the road, that pilot went on the radio to talk to his wingman.

“Rouge Un to Rouge Deux. The Germans have chosen to save their horses rather than their guns and ammunition. Let’s do another flyby before starting to fire.”

“Rouge Deux, understood.”

As the two FRELONs sped past the German artillery convoy, the lead French pilot shook his head sadly as he watched the more than a hundred horses being hurriedly led off the road by German soldiers.

“Poor beasts! They didn’t deserve to be slaughtered. At least, there will be sixteen less guns in the German inventory this morning, once we are finished with them.”

The German soldiers, having retreated with their horses into the woods bordering the road, could only watch as repeated salvos of 75mm rockets and strafing machine gun passes by the two French planes destroyed their field howitzers and put on fire the wagons transporting cordite propellant bags. One of the 15cm howitzers, projected high in the air by the explosion of a rocket underneath its wheels, nearly crushed a horse team when it crashed back among the trees. One of the German horse handlers, his heart still pounding in his chest, glanced at the howitzer that had nearly flattened him and his four horses, then looked up at the now receding French aircraft. It was too evident to him that those planes could have fired on their columns right away, instead of giving him and his comrades time to unhook their horses and lead them to safety. If so,

most of them would probably be dead by now. The young German soldier then started to wish that this war could end...and soon.

20:09 (Paris Time)

General von Moltke advanced headquarters

Luxembourg

General Helmuth von Moltke, Commander-in-Chief of the German Army, felt total discouragement as he gazed at his battle map. With the huge Russian Army now fully mobilized and on the attack on the Eastern Front and with his western armies still stuck east of the Meuse and Ourthe Rivers, the vaunted Schlieffen Plan was now as good as dead, with the planned hook across Belgium to outflank the French Army having never materialized. Instead, von Moltke's powerful First and Second Armies were still on the wrong side of the Meuse, stuck in front of the Belgian forts around Liege and Namur and with much of their artillery decimated by air attacks. The destruction of the bridges over the Rhine River and of many sections of railroads between the Meuse and the Rhine had made impossible to Moltke to quickly bring in reinforcements and replacement artillery guns, while incessant air attacks, against which the mostly unarmed German planes were powerless to respond, had gravely wounded the morale of German soldiers, on top of causing heavy casualties. Feeling very old, Moltke then decided to retire to his quarters in the luxurious rural residence belonging to a germanophile Luxembourg aristocrat, which served as his headquarters.

Moltke had taken off his uniform's jacket and was about to take off his boots while sitting on the edge of his bed when a staff officer suddenly rushed inside his bedroom while shouting.

"GENERAL, FRENCH PLANES ARE OVERHEAD! YOU MUST GO NOW TO THE BASEMENT!"

Moltke hesitated for a moment then: maybe those planes were only passing by. To his knowledge, the location of his advanced headquarters was still secret. His mistake then was to underestimate the effectiveness of the French intelligence services. French agents had actually been very active and capable in their quests for German military secrets and the extent of their knowledge would probably have scared von Moltke. What made their successes even more telling was the fact that there was now a French Army

commander in charge who listened to their reports and was willing to use his aviation to exploit that information. As von Moltke went to put his jacket back on first despite the urgings of his staff officer, the first bombs dropped from low altitude by the six CONDOR fast bombers were already on their way down. The old German general was still buttoning his jacket when the first 500 kilo Metallex bomb hit the roof of the mansion, piercing it and then continuing down through three floors before its delayed fuse detonated it. A total of thirteen 500 kilo bombs made direct hits on the mansion, while eleven more bombs either barely missed it or straddled its grounds. The palace then disappeared into a huge cloud of explosions, dust, smoke and flying debris. When the few haggard German survivors who had been posted around the gardens as sentries were able to look at the residence again, they saw only a smoking pile of rubble.

At about the same time, four PELICAN heavy amphibians inaugurated the new French Army strategic bombing plan against Germany, by attacking the Krupp Gun Works in Essen, where artillery guns were being produced. Knowing that the Germans had no truly effective anti-aircraft guns to speak of and being twice as fast as the fastest German planes in service, the four PELICANs released their bombs in tight formation and from an altitude of only 2,000 meters, all things that added to the accuracy of their aiming. With each PELICAN carrying seven tons of bombs, a total of 112 500-kilo Metallex bombs with delayed fuses rained on the large production halls of the Krupp industrial complex. Those bombs in turn transformed over a square kilometer of factory floors into a lunar landscape of huge craters, with big chunks of concrete and heavy machine tools overturned and dispersed all over the place.

Merely minutes after the destruction of the Krupp Gun Works, another four PELICANs of the French Army dropped a similar bomb load on top of another Krupp factory in Essen. Since that factory produced artillery shells, complete with explosive filling, those four PELICANs bombed from a much higher altitude, a decision that proved quite wise indeed, with chains of powerful secondary explosions erupting when the warehouses containing the artillery rounds ready for shipment to the front received some of the bombs. Hundreds of shells of various calibers were projected high in the evening sky, to rain back over all of Essen and its factories, steel mills and steel foundries.

Not to stay inactive on its part, the French Navy sent six of its own PELICANs on a bombing mission over the German Navy base in the port of Wilhelmshaven, on the North Sea coast. With the unsuspecting German warships either at quay or at anchor and with their boilers not fired up, the cruisers, battlecruisers and battleships of the High Seas Fleet made perfect, immobile targets for the bombardiers of the PELICANs. Those bombardiers still managed to miss with over half of their bombs, but the ones that did hit caused plenty of damage. Three battleships, the GROSSER KURFÜST, the FREDERICH DER GROSS and the KAISER WILHELM DER GROSSE, sank at quayside, while the battlecruiser VON DER TANN blew up when a bomb penetrated all the way to a powder magazine. The damage to the shore installations was also substantial and the navy PELICANs were justifiably happy with the final results when they turned back towards France.

The strategic bombing of Germany, first concentrated on the Krupp installations in Essen and on other plants in the Ruhr area, continued on every day, weather permitting, something that soon started to squeeze the flow of new weapons, ammunition and other war materiel to the German Army, a flow already severely inhibited by the destruction of the bridges over the Rhine and of the clogging of rail lines. Added to this was the growing effect of the British sea blockade of the German coasts, instituted as punishment for the violation of Belgium's neutrality by German armies at the start of the war. Kaiser Wilhelm II, faced with this strategic bombing campaign that his own planes could not defend against, soon started to wonder about the wisdom of starting this war with his ally, Emperor Franz-Joseph of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, the Kaiser was soon going to have personal problems of his own.

07:06 (Paris Time)

Blériot-Kruger CONDOR fast bomber

On approach to Berlin, Germany

There was little talk in the cockpit of the CONDOR between Louis Blériot, in the pilot's seat, and Marie Marvingt, in the navigator/bombardier seat during their flight to Berlin. Not because they were in bad terms with each other but because they were conscious of how much rested on the results of their early morning mission, which was going to be officially claimed by the Belgian government to have been meant to strike at

a war criminal, as Kaiser Wilhelm II was considered, since proofs of numerous and widespread German atrocities committed against Belgian civilians had been received in Brussels. Since they had to put as many chances as possible on their side in order to attain success in their mission, the two armed BOURDONs of Terry Clarkson and H el ene Dutrieu, loaded down with heavy 150mm rockets, had taken off with the CONDOR from Buc while night was still on. With a total of three 500 kilo Metallex bombs and sixteen 150mm rockets with concrete-piercing warheads between the three planes, Louis was quite confident that they would inflict lethal damage on their mission.

Seeing their target in the distance, Louis keyed his VHF radio microphone.

“Condor One to Condor Two and Three: objective in sight dead ahead. I am now going to take extra altitude for my diving attacks. Start your wide hook to the left now, over.”

“Condor Two, acknowledged, over.” Replied Terry Clarkson.

“Condor Three, acknowledged, over.” Said H el ene Dutrieu, who was particularly motivated on this mission: after all, the victims of Kaiser Wilhelm’s aggression had been mostly her compatriots. The two BOURDONs then peeled off from the CONDOR, as the bomber started climbing to its attack altitude. Studying their target with a pair of powerful binoculars, Marie Marvingt made a grimace.

“This Berliner Stadtschloss ¹⁴is a truly big piece to take on for just three planes, Louis. We will need luck to hit the correct wing of the palace. Unfortunately, we are not sure of which wing of the building houses the Kaiser’s apartments.”

“That is why we brought Terry and H el ene with us this morning: so that they could hit other wings and maximize our chances of killing the Kaiser, Marie.”

Marie nodded her head at that. Still, the palace, which formed a rectangle with two vast internal courtyard separated and surrounded by the various wings of the building, represented a lot of real estate. They certainly couldn’t afford to waste their munitions this morning. She finally decided that she would pickle her three bombs down along the western fa ade of the palace, which had what appeared to be two groups of ceremonial balconies that could well be connected directly to the Kaiser’s apartments or to his

¹⁴ Berliner Stadtschloss : Berlin Castle. The Berlin palace of Kaiser Wilhelm II, situated on the shore of the Spree River, which flows through Berlin.

offices. She thus keyed her radio microphone to send further instructions to the two BOURDONs.

“Condor One to Condor Two and Three: I am going to aim my bombs along the western façade of the palace. You two are to aim your rockets at the southern façade. I will then fire my rockets along the northern façade bordering the Spree River. Acknowledge, over.”

She soon got confirmation from Terry and Hélène that they had received her message. By then, Louis had brought their aircraft to an altitude of 6,000 meters. Marie then took the controls, so that she could orient their plane correctly before diving.

“Hang on to your stomach, Louis.” She announced before starting a near vertical dive on the palace, her two dive brakes fully deployed and her engine throttles to near idle. Opening her bomb bay and selecting her three heavy bombs for individual release as well as arming them, she carefully lined up the palace in her bombing sight. When she was down to 2,600 meters of altitude, she pressed her bomb release button three times in quick succession while lightly pulling on her control stick, raising her nose by a couple of degrees between each release. She then pulled more strongly on her stick, coming out of her dive and climbing again at an altitude of 1,200 meters. Three formidable explosions shook her plane as she was climbing, but she waited a few more seconds before starting a wide turn to the left, to both examine the results of her bombing and to start lining up with the northern façade of the palace. What she saw then was quite encouraging: except for the southwest corner of the palace, the whole western façade was now gone, either blown away or having collapsed, its foundations destroyed. Anyone occupying the western wing should now rightly be dead. As she was still flying around to aim at the northern façade, Terry Clarkson fired her four 150mm rockets, aiming at the base of the westernmost half of the south façade, with Hélène then firing her four heavy rockets at the easternmost half of the same façade. Fired from a distance of less than a kilometer and traveling at an initial velocity of 900 meters per second, all eight rockets hit along the base level of the south façade. While much less powerful individually than the 500 kilo bombs, each rocket still packed 28 kilos of Metallex, which equated to a hundred kilos of TNT in terms of explosive blast power. With the external walls’ bottom levels essentially blown away, the whole southern façade then tipped over outward and finally collapsed in a giant heap of rubble. With still nothing but a few isolated rifle bullets being shot in her direction, Marie completed her

wide turn and lined up her gun sight on the northern façade while arming the eight 150mm rockets stored in launch tubes embedded in the roots of her plane's wings.

"Breakfast is served, Herr Kaiser." She said sarcastically as she pushed her firing button, sending eight 150mm rockets on their way. Hit hard near ground level, more than half of the northern façade was blown to rubble, with some of the debris raining down on a few river barges passing by the palace on the Spree River.

"Time to go, Condor Group." She nearly yelled on the radio while pulling up sharply. Marie and Louis then heard a couple of weak 'clunk' as rifle bullets, already close to reaching their maximum vertical range, hit their CONDOR. Thankfully, the Durex skin of their plane was thick enough to stop the half-spent bullets. Forming back as a group at an altitude of 2,500 meters, well above the range of rifles and machine guns, the three planes did a last pass above the ruined palace, with Marie taking a couple of pictures before Louis took a heading back towards Buc.

09:38 (Paris Time)

Brussels Air France Air Station

Brussels, Belgium

King Albert was personally on hand at the Air France air station outside Brussels when Tasha landed there with two Air France CIGOGNE amphibians. He climbed aboard the lead CIGOGNE as soon as its side cargo doors were opened and its side cargo lifts were deployed, warmly shaking Tasha's hand once inside.

"It is nice to see you again, my friend."

"And it is nice to see you as well and to be able to help you in your fight against the Germans, Your Majesty. Know that the morning mission by your air force was a success, with the target nearly completely destroyed. We got their in-flight report on the radio while on our way to Brussels."

King Albert nodded his head in understanding, while not showing actual enthusiasm on hearing that: he was still unsure about how ethical the targeting of an enemy monarch was in a time of war. However, the list of atrocities committed by the German Army against unarmed Belgian civilians, along with the arguments from Tasha about cutting the head of the serpent rather than just killing masses of lowly soldiers, had finally overridden his initial misgivings about that operation. Hopefully, Kaiser Wilhelm's elimination would help convince other German leaders to call an early end to this war,

thus saving hundreds of thousands of lives. Right now, Tasha was bringing something that was sure to save at least some lives among his soldiers fighting the Germans.

"So, how many sets of those Durex armored vests and helmets have you been able to bring for my soldiers, Tasha?

"I have a total of 4,000 sets of armored vests, plus 7,000 helmets in my two amphibians, Your Majesty. Producing those sets while still filling the current orders from the French Army however took quite a lot of extra work by the night shift at my Durex plant in Suresnes. At the present rhythm, and if the war goes on for much longer, my plant workers are liable to start keeling over soon from exhaustion. Mind you, the real culprit in this was the fact that General Joffre had refused to order more vests and helmets before the start of the war."

"I realize that, Tasha. Unfortunately, many people showed a severe lack of judgment before and during this war. Well, with these 4,000 sets of vests, I will be able to fully equip a full brigade of cavalry, plus some infantry units. You can expect the payment for them to be wired to your company's account at the Bank of France tomorrow. Like they say: good accounts make for good friends."

That made Tasha smile in amusement.

"Too true, Your Majesty. I must say that I enjoy doing business as much as I enjoy scientific research work. Before we continue, I propose that we go into the first class section to talk further: we are kind of in the way right now if you want those vests and helmets to be unloaded quickly."

"You are right, Tasha. Show me the way."

Going into the first class section of the CIGOGNE and taking place in opposite seats, King Albert and Tasha looked at each other in silence for a moment before the Belgian monarch spoke again.

"Tasha, the more I get to know you, the more impressed I am, truly. In barely two years, you have managed to build a sprawling industrial company, invented many key things, like your Durex, your Metallex explosive and your advanced radio technology and also managed to win a Nobel Prize. I also know for a fact that you have managed to gain a lot of unofficial influence with the French Army and government, two entities that normally don't pay much if any attention to women. You are definitely someone I would call a person of exception. On the other hand, I have the distinct feeling that there is a lot more about you that I would wish to know. Even more, I could say the same thing

about your three female friends who appeared with you in Paris two years ago. Miss Kruger has literally revolutionized aviation with her aircraft designs, while Miss Clarkson has struck me as being an experienced, seasoned soldier with outstanding tactical expertise, something that women are definitely not known or expected to be by common standards. You and your three friends all can be described as 'uncommon', yet you do your best to deflect the conversation when asked about your previous life in the United State. There is also this thing about your strange accents when speaking in either French or English, accents that even Americans I know found strange. You do speak now with a much weaker accent but it is still discernible. All this is to say that I would like to know more about you, if possible."

Tasha thought over her reply to that for a while before answering in a sober voice.

"Your Majesty, it is true that me and my three friends are quite uncommon as both persons and women. It is also true that we are discreet about our past, but there are very good reasons for that, I assure you, Your Majesty. Too many people would love to throw dirt at us or discredit us, either out of misogyny, jealousy or business rivalry. Some others, like the Germans, would want nothing better than to either kidnap us or kill us. If this could reassure you, Your Majesty, I solemnly swear to you that neither me nor my three female friends are hiding past crimes of any kind."

"And that is more than enough for me, Tasha. Know that you will be respected and listened to in Belgium as long as I am the King and that you and your friends will always be treated as friends of the Royal Family."

"I am deeply honored to hear that, Your Majesty. Be assured that we will do our utmost to help your country through this painful period."

"You are already doing just that, my friend. Be assured that your services to Belgium and those of your friends will not be forgotten."

The King then got up from his padded seat and gallantly kissed Tasha's right hand.

"Goodbye, Tasha. Hopefully, we will meet again soon, possibly with your three friends present as well."

"Hopefully, the war will be over by then, Your Majesty."

"I hope so as well, Tasha." Said the King before walking out of the first class section and then leaving the plane. Tasha stayed still for a moment as she reviewed her conversation with King Albert. The King was an intelligent and perceptive man and it was obvious that he believed that she and her friends were hiding a major secret. However, it was also obvious that the King valued enough his friendship with Tasha not

to try forcing her secret out of her. Right now, that was sufficient to calm any of her worries on that subject. She was similarly reassured about the state of her relations with the French government and military, who owed her and Johanna Kruger a lot. If anything, apart from Germany, which was the most immediate threat to her and her friends, the United States could prove to potentially be the most troublesome factor for them in the future.

CHAPTER 15 – GERMAN WITHDRAWAL

09:10 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, September 1, 1914

Advanced field headquarters of the French Army

Vitry-le-François, Marne Department

Northeastern France

“ROOM! HIS MAJESTY, KING ALBERT OF BELGIUM!”

Everyone in the large room used to plan and direct operations came to attention as the Belgian monarch, who personally commanded the Belgian Army in the field, entered, followed closely by two Belgian senior officers and by a young woman in aviator’s garbs. Most eyes were on the woman when King Albert stopped in front of General de Castelnau and exchanged a salute with him, then shook hands as well.

“Welcome to my field headquarters, Your Majesty. Uh, may I ask who this young woman is?”

“She is my pilot for this trip into France, General de Castelnau. Miss Hélène Dutrieu is part of my small air force. I hope that you won’t object to her presence here this morning, General?”

“Uh, not at all, Your Majesty. Now that you are here, we may start this command meeting.”

On de Castelnau’s order, the ten French generals and one British general present in the operations room gathered with him and King Albert around the large map table set in the middle of the room. De Castelnau then let his chief of staff, Major-General Émile Belin, brief the group on the latest news and strategic situation.

“Your Majesty, gentlemen, our latest air reconnaissance flights have shown us that the German Army has now started a general withdrawal movement eastward, leaving its cavalry units and a few infantry regiments to hold the front during its withdrawal. This, however, does not indicate that the Germans are ready to give up in this war, unfortunately. More air reconnaissance missions behind enemy lines has shown us that the Germans, massively using Belgian and French civilians as forced laborers, are building a defensive line that stretches all the way from Liege to

Strasbourg, using the eastern banks of the Meuse, Ourthe, Semois, Saar, Bruche and Rhine rivers to shore up their defenses. Since this new defensive line is actually fairly close to the actual frontlines, the Germans could complete this withdrawal in a matter of only three or four days. General de Castelnau has however already ordered our aviation to strike with maximum effect the German columns retreating on the roads behind the front. Our planes should be able to inflict severe casualties to the Germans, but they will not be able to stop this withdrawal by themselves. This is why we are assembled here this morning, to decide how to respond to this German withdrawal to a new defensive line.”

“Do we know what prompted this general withdrawal by the Germans, General Belin?” Asked General Sir John French, the commander of the British Expeditionary Force.

“We believe that we do, General French. First, the German armies opposite our troops are short of supplies, have lost most of their artillery pieces and are no longer in a state to attack and pierce our lines. Their failure to break through at Liege and Namur and to cross the Meuse in force basically spelled the failure of their master attack plan, the so-called Schlieffen Plan, which was meant to turn our left flank through Belgium and then take Paris and attack the back of our armies in the Lorraine and the Alsace. We actually can thank this on the valiant resistance of the Belgian Army and on the devastating air attacks by the Belgian Air force on the German heavy siege guns and on the bridges and railroads used to supply the German forces in Belgium.”

As King Albert beamed with pride, many of the generals glanced briefly at Hélène Dutrieu, who was also grinning. Belin then continued his exposé.

“The second main factor that may have decided the Germans to withdraw to a defensive line is the fact that they are under very heavy attack on the Eastern Front by massive Russian armies, which they barely managed to stop for the moment. Because of the Russian pressure, the Germans cannot send significant reinforcements to their Western Front at this time, having to prioritize their Eastern Front instead. General von Falkenhayn, who has proclaimed himself wartime leader of Germany following the death of Kaiser Wilhelm, has thus ordered his western armies to take a defensive posture until the Russians can be defeated.”

“So, the German generals are finally showing themselves in their true light: as a military dictatorship rather than simply as defenders of Germany?” Said mockingly

General Auguste Dubail, the commander of the French First Army fighting in the Alsace, making Belin nod his head.

“Very true, General Dubail. They already had extensive powers over all aspects of German life, but now von Falkenhayn has abrogated to himself full dictatorial powers and has started to round up and imprison all the politicians and journalists that he deem to be ‘defeatists’.”

“And where does General von Falkenhayn command from now?” Asked Brigadier General Hirschauer, present as commander of the French military aviation. His question didn’t seem to please Sir John French, who gave him a disapproving look.

“Are you asking so that you could send your bombers after him, General Hirschauer? I find this business of individual targeting of enemy leaders a rather distasteful tactic.”

‘You snobbish, uncaring imbecile!’ Thought Hirschauer before replying out loud in a polite but respectful tone.

“General French, please excuse me if I give more importance to saving French lives by doing anything that could shorten this war, rather than care for an enemy general and aristocrat who just proclaimed himself as a dictator in his own country.”

De Castelnau, seeing anger flare on French’s face, intervened in a firm voice then.

“Gentlemen, let’s stay civil between us, please! General French, General Hirschauer directed his planes the way I asked him to do. I myself see no reasons to play nice or ‘gentlemanly’ with enemy commanders who didn’t hesitate one moment to brutally invade neutral countries and then let their troops commit countless war atrocities against innocent Belgian and French civilians. Those enemy commanders marked themselves as war criminals right from the start and I intend to treat them the way they deserve to be.”

Finding apparently little sympathy for his views, French then wisely clamed up, but not before giving a dark look to both Hirschauer and H  l  ne Dutrieu, who had been quietly sitting near the main door of the room. King Albert saw those glances but decided to deal with that afterwards, at the end of the command meeting.

Belin, using air photos and map traces, then spent a good twenty minutes showing to the other generals and to King Albert where the new German defensive lines lay and in what they were going to consist of. Many frowned on examining the few sets of air photos available, with General Charles Lanrezac, commander of the French Fifth

Army making a grimace as he studied a photo taken over the Ardennes region, near Neufchâteau.

“By digging their networks of trenches right on the opposite banks of rivers and by building barbed wire obstacles right above the water line, the Germans will make any frontal assault on them hideously costly. Also, the difficult terrain of the Ardennes will add a lot to the difficulties our troops will encounter. Short of flanking their positions at some possible gap in their new line, I can’t see how we could pierce through this without suffering extremely heavy casualties.”

“I am of the same opinion as you, General Lanrezac.” Said de Castelnau. “Our planes are presently searching for such a possible gap, but with no luck so far. I will thus be happy to hear any proposition or idea on how to breach that new German line.” A long silence followed, as the generals present looked at the maps and photos, trying to find a way to deal with this problem. To the surprise of many, it was King Albert who spoke up first.

“How about jumping over the enemy and then attacking him in the rear at a specific point, in order to open a breach in that line where our forces could then rush through?”

All the generals present, except for Brigadier-General Hirschauer, looked at him blankly, confused.

“Jump over the enemy? What do you mean by that, Your Majesty?” Asked de Castelnau, as confused as the others. King Albert, who actually got the idea from someone else, used a cane to point at the German city of Aachen, just inside the German border with northern Belgium.

“What I mean is to move a sizeable force by air and land it just west of Aachen, less than thirty kilometers east of Liege. From there, it could advance rapidly westward and attack in the rear the German units still clinging to the east bank of the Meuse and to parts of Liege. Then, in concert with my units that are fighting presently to retake the western half of Liege, that force would punch a hole in that new German line, which seems actually to have Liege as its northern anchor. Once that hole is punched, my army will rush through and veer south, to roll up the new enemy positions from their right flank. If that doesn’t prompt the Germans to further withdraw eastward, then nothing will.”

"But, that's utter nonsense, Your Majesty!" Exclaimed Sir John French. "You could at most move a few dozen men by plane, with no support artillery and little supplies, before the Germans would react and move in to annihilate that unit."

King Albert gave a cold look at French, while Hirschauer's face lit up as he understood what the King had in mind.

"Sir John French, you would be right if you considered only the kind of primitive planes that the British Royal Flying Corps presently has. However, I believe that we could actually land at least a few thousand soldiers each day, and this for a couple of days, before the Germans can understand what is going on and start reacting. For your information, one Blériot-Kruger CIGOGNE heavy amphibian transport aircraft can easily carry on short distances over eighty soldiers and land them on short, unprepared fields or even on rivers or lakes and then beach them. With a large enough group of such planes and with multiple return trips each day, would could land at least a brigade's worth of troop per day."

While most of the other officers present looked at him as if he was crazy, General de Castelnau, along with Hirschauer, seemed fascinated by that proposition.

"Hell, this could actually work, Your Majesty. General Hirschauer, how many of these amphibians do we have in the Army inventory that could be made available for such an operation?"

"Hum, if I suspend temporarily my strategic bombing operations and take a couple of days to effect repairs on my few planes that need them, then I could provide a total of fifteen PELICAN armed transports, General."

"So, we would be talking about 1,200 soldiers lifted per return trip. Not bad at all, I must say."

"I believe that you could easily double that number, General de Castelnau." Said King Albert, surprising the French Army commander.

"Double that number, Your Majesty? How? With what planes?" King Albert smiled in response as he finally gave a clue about where he got his idea from in the first place.

"Let's say that I have a very good relationship with someone who is a dedicated French patriot and who has already helped a lot our cause in this war: Miss Tasha Lenoir, founder and owner of Air France. She told me that she would be ready to temporarily provide her heavy transport planes and their flight crews for any military operation involving the mass transportation of troops, under the condition that her planes

and crews be returned to her after such an operation. Her airline company is after all still providing a steady air service between France and numerous strategically important colonies, flying in mail, liaison personnel and important passengers to places like Dakar, Cairo, New Delhi, Saigon, London, Belfast, Saint-Petersburg and New York. She will need her planes back afterward in order to resume those air services.”

“And who cares what a simple woman wishes, Your Majesty?” Retorted one of General French’s division commander, attracting a hard look and a harsh retort from King Albert.

“I CARE, SIR! For one thing, she has already rendered more services to Belgium in this war than your expeditionary force still sitting in front of Mons has. Miss Lenoir has seventeen CIGOGNE heavy amphibians in her Air France fleet and has graciously offered them for temporary use by my army. If you are not ready to use that offer or to treat her with the respect due to her, then I will. General de Castelnau, I am ready to provide two divisions worth of troops for this air operation, with the rest of my field army ready to push through Liege in conjunction with that air-landed force. I will however need some of your troops to help hold the Meuse in the meantime and to strengthen as much as possible that flanking force near Liege.”

“And she has still enough flight crews to pilot all those planes? Weren’t Air France pilots mobilized into the French Army, like all other able-bodied men?” Asked the commander of the French Fourth Army, intrigued.

King Albert smiled, savoring the irony of the situation.

“Yes, most of her pilots were mobilized into the French Army at the start of the war. However, she still has full female aircrews, which kept operating Air France various routes since then.”

“You want to use civilian planes piloted by women to drop troops behind enemy lines? This is completely insane!” Exclaimed Sir John French, utterly agitated. King Albert, letting fly the fact that French had not addressed him as ‘Your Majesty’, replied with five words while glaring at the British commander.

“Miss Dutrieu, come forward, please.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

Watched by the senior officers and generals present, Hélène got up from her chair and walked quickly to the map table, stopping at attention beside the King, who then asked her a question.

"Miss Dutrieu, how many attack missions have you flown to date behind German lines?"

"Nineteen, Your Majesty." She replied in a strong voice, making more than a few of the old generals choke.

"Thank you, miss. You may go sit down."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

As H el ene went back to her chair, King Albert looked somberly at French.

"For your information, General French, three of the combat pilots of my small air force are women and they have accomplished miracles by themselves up to now and continue to do so today. If you think that French women are less patriotic or brave than Belgian women, then think again. Those Air France women are ready and willing to face danger in order to help their country in this war. You should all be proud of them, instead of treating them like an inferior class of people. Now, General de Castelnau, I believe that we were discussing an operation to land troops in the enemy's rear..."

CHAPTER 16 – AIRPOWER

07:15 (Paris Time)

Sunday, September 6, 1914

Air France Brussels Air Station

Brussels, Belgium

“Now, that is what I call airpower.” Exclaimed Auguste Édouard Hirschauer, nearly intoxicated by the impressive sight he was embracing while standing beside General de Castelneau and King Albert just outside of the Air France terminal building in Brussels, which had been returned to full operational status a week ago. De Castelneau could only agree with him, grinning while eyeing the long line of 32 Blériot-Kruger CIGOGNE and PÉLICAN that had just started their powerful engines, filling the air with powerful roars, even though they were only at idle power while finishing to load up with troops, horses and a few army cars. Since the military version of the CIGOGNE, the PÉLICAN, had a different internal cabin arrangement than its civilian counterpart, with folding seats along its sides and a wider aft ramp meant to handle cargo, horses and vehicles, Hirschauer had decided to use the Air France CIGOGNE heavy amphibians for pure infantry airlift and reserve the PÉLICAN armed transports to carry cavalry units, horse-drawn supply carts, towed 75mm multiple rocket launchers and a few army cars equipped with radios for command purpose. Those horses and cars would in turn give some vital mobility to the airlifted force, while the 75mm MRLs would provide artillery fire support, but in emergencies only, since their ammunition loads to be carried by plane would be strictly limited. One thing that both de Castelneau and Hirschauer noted from watching the last Belgian soldiers embark in the planes was the fact that all of them wore Durex combat helmets and armored vests, all painted a dull khaki color. When asked about that, King Albert answered in a sober voice.

“Gentlemen, I fully realize how risky and dangerous this operation will be for all involved, soldiers and aviators alike. I thus chose in priority as my landing force the units of my army already equipped with Durex armor and helmets, while the rest of my Durex-equipped units will be spearheading the force that will fight to retake Liege. I

believe that the Germans have not fought yet against troops equipped with body armor. Is that correct, General de Castelnau?"

"Correct, Your Majesty. While most of my frontline troops are at last equipped with helmets and armored vests, we have been strictly on the defensive for two weeks now. The Germans are liable to have quite a shock when they will see that our troops are now much harder to kill than before."

"I certainly hope so as well, General. General Hirschauer, how long do you believe that it will take for our planes to get to Broek, land their loads there and return here?"

"Well, the trip will be quite short, since Broek is only about 110 kilometers from here. At maximum cruise speed for our planes, that means they will be in Broek in only twenty minutes. Give them another twenty minutes to land, disgorge their troops and take off again, plus the return trip, and I would say that they should be back in about one hour, if all goes well."

"If all goes well..." repeated King Albert. "The famous saying about the 'fog of war', where things rarely if ever go according to plan. Let's hope that luck will be with us today."

De Castelnau could only nod his head at that as he watched the dozens of women wearing the blue coveralls and high visibility vests of Air France ground personnel starting to run into position and wave their light sticks to make the planes line up for takeoff from the grass field.

"It sure feels strange to me to see so many women involved in a military combat operation, Your Majesty."

"It was the same for me at first, General. Then I met some truly exceptional women who made me think again about how we men treat them socially and legally. You may know that I was always in favor of universal suffrage, although my ministers always opposed that and Belgian deputies kept ignoring or vetoing it. I am now seriously considering adding women to the notion of universal suffrage. After all, women make up half of our population. Is it really just to deny them the right to vote just because they are physically weaker than men? To be frank, I am getting really tired of the worn arguments used by those who insist on denying the right to vote to women."

"I noticed how you took on Sir John French on that subject at our command meeting, Your Majesty. I have to say that he deserved the rebuke."

The trio then fell silent, mostly because the engine noise was now nearly deafening, making everything and everybody on the airfield vibrate. The first plane to take off was an Air France CIGOGNE piloted by H el ene Dutrieu, which King Albert and the two French generals saluted as it lifted off past them.

“May God be with them.” Said softly King Albert.

07:32 (Paris Time)

Lead Air France CIGOGNE heavy amphibian

In flight over Belgium

“Pheww! This is actually not as bad as I expected.” Said one of the sardine-packed Belgian soldiers inside the lead CIGOGNE piloted by H el ene Dutrieu. That attracted a smile from a comrade.

“Is this the first time that you fly?”

“Of course it is! Do I look like I am rich enough to pay for a plane trip for me and my family?”

“They actually say that Air France airfares are actually quite cheap.” Said another soldier.

“How cheap, actually?”

“Well, my brother, who trades in textiles, paid only 24 francs for a return trip from Brussels to London. It was however on one of those small, four-seat Air France Euro-Taxi planes. I don’t know how much it would cost to travel in one of those big things we are riding right now.”

“Well, you can’t complain today, men: the ride is free.” Added loudly a young infantry lieutenant, making his men laugh and also helping to lessen the tension and nervousness aboard.

07:48 (Paris Time)

Lead Air France CIGOGNE

Flying over the Belgian-Dutch border

“I have Broek in sight at two o’clock on the horizon.” Said Tasha Lenoir, who was playing the combined roles of navigator/radio operator and flight engineer and had

been looking outside with the help of binoculars. Hélène Dutrieu, who was piloting with Jeanne Pallier, acknowledge that with a nod and activated her radio microphone.

“Blue One to all Blue call signs, we have our destination in sight at one o'clock on the horizon. Start going down to an altitude of 200 meters and take some distance between each plane. Remember: land quickly and clear the landing strip by turning hard right once you have slowed down to a walk, then line up on the adjacent field for disembarkation and departure. Don't waste time on the ground and be careful about collisions! Blue One out!”

Hélène then started descending from her already fairly low cruise altitude of 500 meters. The armada was flying low and just inside Dutch airspace in order that the Germans in either Liege or Aachen would not spot them from a distance and send the alert. Technically, that meant violating Dutch airspace, but General de Castelnau and King Albert had decided that they could live with such a minor violation, especially in view of the number of pro-German sympathizers in Netherlands, which actually actively helped Germany go around the British sea blockade. That quasi-complicity between the Dutch and German governments was inflaming quite a few nerves in Brussels and Paris, thus the decision to 'overlook' this technical violation. As she was approaching from the North the tiny Flemish-Belgian village of Broek, situated nine kilometers from the Belgium-Germany border and 22 kilometers northeast of Liege, Hélène saw the five small BOURDON four-seat aircraft of the advanced party take off from the fields next to the village, which had been surveyed from very low altitude and selected as the main landing site for the force.

“Throttle down to 120 kilometers per hour of airspeed. Deploy full flaps and landing gear.”

“Throttling down to 120, deploying flaps and wheels.” Replied Jeanne Pallier from her copilot's seat while obeying Hélène. The plane passed to the north of Broek before starting a wide 'U' turn and lining up on the chosen landing strip, which was now marked with giant orange panels fixed at both extremities of the field.

“Blue One to Forward Ground Control: I am now on final approach. What is the situation on the ground, over?”

The voice of the French Army aviation captain in charge of the advanced party answered her at once on the designated VHF-FM frequency. One key advantage of using VHF-FM mode today was that the Germans didn't possess frequency modulation mode technology yet, so could not possibly intercept their radio conversations.

"From Forward Ground Control: the field is free for landing, with no obstacles on the ground. Security posts in place and local telephone wires cut. No signs of Germans yet, but I am starting to have a small group of locals, including children, who are now standing outside their houses to watch, over."

"Well, let them enjoy the show, but warn them not to try to leave the village until further notice. We may still have a few pro-German sympathizers around, especially this close to the border and Aachen. Blue One out."

Next, H el ene briefly looked behind her at the Belgian Brigadier-General who commanded the first wave of troops to be landed, sitting in the navigator/radio operator's seat.

"We are on final approach, General, and will be on the ground in less than two minutes."

"Thank you, Captain!" Said the general, using her new military rank given to her by King Albert. The decision to give to a woman a military commission as an officer had caused a lot of dismay and protestations around the army, but the King had replied to that that an aviator with multiple combat missions under her belt certainly merited a military commission as much as some young aristocrat's son with zero military experience or training who got his commission strictly thanks to his bloodline. This being his first experience of flying ever, the general watched nervously through the cockpit's windshield as H el ene slowed down her plane further while losing altitude progressively, flying just a bit faster than stalling speed in order to come in as slow as possible and thus land in as short a distance as possible. His knuckles were nearly white as he gripped the work table of the navigator's position when H el ene raised slightly the nose of her aircraft and pulled down further on her throttles just before her wheels touched the grass of the pasture field. The brigadier-general resumed breathing again when they were firmly on the ground and rolling, with H el ene then reversing the pitch of her propellers and pushing again her engine throttles to full power for a few seconds, slowing down rapidly her big transport aircraft. Soon down to the speed of a running man, she turned hard right in the adjacent field and put her propellers back in forward pitch, rolling towards the extremity of the field designated for ground maneuvering, to both leave space for the planes landing behind her and to be ready to take off quickly. In the meantime, Tasha activated the plane's intercom system and spoke in her microphone with as soft and feminine a voice as she could muster.

"We have now landed near the picturesque little village of Broek, nine kilometers west of the German border and 22 kilometers to the Northeast of Liege. Please stay sitting until our plane has fully stopped and our pretty stewardesses have opened the exit doors and deployed the access ramps. Thank you for flying Air France."

That attracted laughs all around the plane, including from the brigadier-general, who gently patted Tasha's shoulder.

"Miss Lenoir, you and your girls are truly wonderful. Thank you for helping my country like this."

"My pleasure, General. I will now go help my stewardesses open the doors and deploy our access ramps. Please tell your soldiers to wait for the go from me before starting to get out."

"No problems, miss."

Leaving the cockpit with the brigadier-general and going to the smoking lounge/cargo compartment in the middle of the plane, Tasha spoke briefly with her two stewardesses on this flight, Jeanne Bertrand and Trung Ti Hoa, who wore their Air France uniforms, complete with medium-length skirts.

"Open the side doors now but don't let anyone out yet until we are fully stopped. I will go deploy the aft access ramp."

"Got it, Tasha!" Replied Jeanne. On his part, the brigadier-general shouted out loud to be heard from his soldiers.

"REMEMBER: BEFORE LEAVING THE PLANE, EACH TWO MEN WILL GRAB A SUPPLY OR AMMUNITION CRATE AND WILL CARRY IT TO THE ASSEMBLY POINT DESIGNATED BY A YELLOW FLAG ALONGSIDE THE TREELINE. THERE, YOU WILL BE TOLD WERE TO DROP YOUR LOADS BEFORE WE DEPLOY INTO A TEMPORARY DEFENSIVE PERIMETER. BE CAREFUL NOT TO RUN ACROSS THE PATH OF OUR PLANES ON THE GROUND."

Squeezing her way through the crowded tourist class section, Tasha went to the pressurized aft bulkhead door giving access to the aft access ramp and opened it wide, then activated the outer clamshell doors, opening them and permitting the deployment of the aft ramp. She however waited for the plane to slow down further before partially lowering the ramp, letting it hang one meter from the ground until the CIGOGNE came to a full stop at the end of the field. She could see through the opened clamshell doors that fourteen other planes had already landed and were rolling behind her plane while

keeping a safe distance between each other. With the ramp now fully deployed and on the ground, Tasha stepped aside to let soldiers go past her and shouted out loud and on the intercom box next to her.

“EVERYBODY OUT WITH YOUR LOADS!”

The Belgian soldiers occupying the tourist class section did so at a near run, each pair of soldier holding one of the transport handles of either an ammunition box, rations crate or water can. The soldiers occupying the smoking lounge and first class section exited via the side cargo doors. Seeing no one left in the tourist class section, Tasha raised the ramp and closed the clamshell doors, then the pressurized bulkhead door before running to the smoking lounge section. Seeing that there were no soldiers left there or in the first class section, she pointed the side cargo doors to her two stewardesses.

“Close and secure the cargo doors now!”

Tasha then ran to the cockpit and spoke to H  l  ne.

“The aircraft is empty: we can take off as soon as the way is free.”

“Good! There is only one aircraft left taxiing down the strip. We will take off as soon as it is out of the way.”

Tasha looked outside, anxious to see how things were going for the Belgian soldiers they had just offloaded. She was reassured to see that the brigadier-general, helped by the advanced party and the flags designating the various assembly and drop off points, seemed to have a good control of the situation, with soldiers running away from the planes and not turning into ground obstacles. H  l  ne soon was able to push her throttles forward again and to roll onto the adjacent field to line up for takeoff. With the plane now lighter by a good nine metric tons, the CIGOGNE’s takeoff was quite nimble, thanks to its elaborate blown hyper sustentation flaps system. It rose up in the air after less than 300 meters, watched by the fascinated local villagers. The children present were particularly enthusiastic as they watched plane after plane take off after unloading a total of 1,400 Belgian infantrymen, 180 cavalrymen and their horses, three command radio cars, eight horse-drawn supply carts, four horse-drawn MRLs and four carts loaded with spare 75mm rockets.

“WOW!” Shouted an excited eight year-old boy watching with his parents and siblings from the doorsteps of their farmhouse. “I never saw planes before, but I never thought that they could be so big.”

“Me neither, Jo.” Replied his father, as fascinated as his son was. “That’s funny, though. Isn’t ‘Air France’ a civilian company, Martha?”

"I believe so." Replied his wife. "How come they are carrying soldiers?"

"I don't know! Hopefully, the Germans won't punish us for the fact that those planes used our fields to land."

"Those bastards!" Spat Martha, her tone hardening. "They already looted our village once, treating us like their slaves and taking away our son Sébastien as a forced laborer. I hope that they will all rot in Hell."

Their young son Jo suddenly pulled the left sleeve of his father to attract his attention while pointing at something.

"Father, I see Mister Welken riding away on his buggy."

One look was enough to make his father angry.

"That damn collaborator! He is probably going to alert the Germans about these planes. Not if I can help it."

The farmer then ran to the officer standing near a large yellow flag and who appeared to be directing around the troops that had landed. He put his hands up high in the air while still running and shouting at the same time in Flemish.

"SIR! SIR! I BELIEVE THAT A PRO-GERMAN COLLABORATOR IS TRYING TO GO ALERT THE GERMANS."

That got the immediate and undivided attention of the Belgian captain.

"WHERE? WHO IS IT?"

The farmer then pointed at the one-horse buggy about to turn on the main road, coming from the main grouping of houses in the village.

"IT'S OUR VILLAGE MAYOR! HE IS IN THAT BUGGY AND ALREADY HELPED THE GERMANS TAKE AWAY SOME OF OUR MEN FOR FORCED LABOR."

The captain immediately shouted at one of his men, a certified marksman.

"SERGEANT CHAUVIN, COME HERE QUICKLY!"

"YES SIR!" Replied the soldier, who came to the captain in seconds. The officer then pointed the buggy to his soldier.

"Shoot me down that bastard before he could go alert the Germans, Sergeant."

"Consider it done, sir."

Putting one knee down on the ground and raising his rifle, the soldier took careful aim for a couple of seconds and fired once at the buggy, which was now about 160 meters away, an easy shot for him. The man sitting in the buggy collapsed and rolled out of his seat, falling on the road and not moving again.

"Good shot, Sergeant. Take one man with you and go check that traitor out. Also, bring back his buggy: we will requisition it."

"Right away, sir."

As the sergeant and another soldier ran to the stopped buggy, the captain shook hands with the father of Jo.

"Thank you for alerting us, mister. Do you know if there are other pro-German collaborators in your village?"

"Collaborators, no! However, many people in the village refuse to get involve either way in the war and simply try to survive it and be ignored by soldiers. The Germans already looted the village once for food and they also took away nineteen of our men and teenage boys, including one of my sons, to act as forced laborers for them."

"Where did they bring them, mister?"

"One older German soldier who seemed to be more decent than the others accepted to tell me that they were going to be put to work near Beaufays, just south of Liege."

The captain noted that down before shaking the farmer's hand again.

"Thank you again for your help, sir. I promise you that we will do our utmost to free your son and your neighbors."

"Uh, I don't want to sound cowardly, but will you leave soldiers to protect us? The Germans are liable to punish us for not alerting them to your planes."

The young officer patted his shoulder reassuringly in response.

"Don't worry, my good man: plenty more Belgian troops will pass by here today. Those German bastards are not going to stay very much longer in our country."

14:05 (Paris Time)

Lead ALBATROS B.II German reconnaissance biplane

Flying westward from Aachen

Oberleutnant Karl Lang, sent with one wingman to investigate reports of numerous enemy transport aircraft, felt his heart sink when he saw in the distance the ballet made by over a dozen heavy enemy transport aircraft taking off one by one from a farmer's field not far inside Belgium from the German city of Aachen. If that many of the impressive Blériot-Kruger CIGOGNE amphibians had landed in that field, that also

nearly certainly meant that some Blériot-Kruger FRELON fighter-bombers were also around to watch over them while they were on the ground, unless the enemy commander was completely stupid. That was very bad news for Lang for two reasons: first, the FRELON had quickly proved to be utterly murderous for the German planes it had encountered, being three times faster, being very agile and, mostly, being heavily armed. Second, Lang's own ALBATROS B.II, like all the German aircraft presently in service, was basically an unarmed plane, fit for reconnaissance but not much else. Lang's observer, Obergefreiter Hans Moritz, did bring a Mauser rifle with him to try to compensate for the lack of fixed armament on their plane, but both men had little illusions about the effectiveness of such a puny armament against something like a Blériot-Kruger FRELON, with its six fixed machine guns. Lang had volunteered for the German Army Air Corps out of his love for flying, which he had practiced before the war, but that was proving in retrospect to have been a fatal decision. Over half of the German military aviation, along with all the Zeppelin dirigibles, had been shot down in the span of the first week of the war over France, with most of the remaining half then transferred to the Eastern Front, where the Russians didn't have anything like the Blériot-Kruger planes. The few German airplanes still present on the Western Front, of which Lang's plane was part of, were now strictly used for reconnaissance work near German frontlines.

"I guess that being within sight of Aachen qualifies as being near German frontlines." Said Lang in a fatalistic tone of voice, talking to himself. He couldn't help think briefly about his young wife and his two children, one a mere baby, before speaking up to his observer over the strong wind caused by him and Moritz sitting in open cockpits.

"BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR ENEMY FIGHTERS! WE HAVE A MASS OF ENEMY TRANSPORT PLANES AHEAD."

Lang then twisted his head to the right, to signal his wingman to closely follow him. Returning his attention to the enemy transport planes, he was astounded to see more and more of them taking off from that farmer's field and climbing quickly, heading westward.

"Mein Gott! How many of them are there on this field?"

He never had a chance to find out, as his observer then shouted a warning.

"ENEMY FIGHTERS DIVING ON US!"

“Scheisse¹⁵!” Swore Lang just before launching his biplane into as tight a left turn as he could make. That probably saved his life, as a rain of tracer bullets barely missed his plane. Lang’s wingman, who had been too slow to react, was not so lucky and was shot full of holes. Its pilot killed and its observer gravely wounded, the ALBATROS biplane entered a corkscrew dive that it didn’t come out of, crashing among trees in a ball of fire. Nearly hyperventilating due to the sudden extreme stress, Lang pushed his engine to maximum while heading towards Aachen. He was still hoping to come out of this intact when a hard impact on his back made him groan. His head soon started to swim, while his vision became progressively blurred. Oberleutnant Karl Lang was dead before he could fully understand that he had been hit by a bullet. His observer, Obergefreiter Hans Moritz died screaming, stuck without a parachute inside a falling, out of control aircraft that finally crashed on the ground. The French Army FRELON fighter-bomber that had shot down Lang made one pass over the crash site, with its pilot feeling little joy at his victory: that had been way too unequal a fight.

“Poor bastards.” Softly said to himself Adolphe Pégoud, ex-test pilot at the Blériot center in Buc.

16:38 (Paris Time)

Air France Brussels Air Station

Brussels, Belgium

Hélène Dutrieu was dead tired when she landed back for the eighth time in Brussels with her armada of heavy transport amphibians. She however didn’t see anybody waiting to be transported, nor any crates of supplies to be airlifted. Only three officers seemed to be waiting for them, along with the 35 Air France female ground handlers that had helped load the planes before every departure. The three waiting officers then approached her aircraft, signaling her to put her engines on idle but not to shut them down. Those officers soon turned out to be King Albert, General de Castelnau and Brigadier-General Hirschauer. It was Hirschauer who shouted over the engine noise to Hélène, who had stuck her head out of her side window.

“THE AIRLIFT OPERATION IS OVER FOR NOW! WE HAVE NO MORE TROOPS OR SUPPLIES TO AIRLIFT TO BROEK TODAY. YOU MAY REEMBARK

¹⁵ Scheisse : ‘Shit’ in German.

YOUR GROUNDCREW GIRLS AND RETURN TO BUC WITH ALL YOUR AIR FRANCE PLANES. MY MILITARY AIRCRAFT WILL TAKE OVER THE AIRLIFT TOMORROW AS NEEDED. GENERAL CASTELNAU AND HIS MAJESTY KING ALBERT WISH TO THANK YOU FOR AN INCREDIBLE JOB WELL DONE.”

“THANK YOU, GENERAL! IT WAS A HONOR TO BE ABLE TO ASSIST OUR VALIANT SOLDIERS TODAY. DON’T HESITATE TO ASK FOR OUR HELP AGAIN IF NEED BE.”

“I WON’T, MISS DUTRIEU. HAVE A GOOD TRIP BACK TO BUC.”

Hirschauer then took some distance to get out of the propeller wash of the plane. The 35 Air France women were then thanked personally one by one by King Albert and General de Castelnau before they boarded Dutrieu’s plane, tired but full of pride. The King and the two generals watched on as the seventeen Air France CIGOGNE amphibians took off again, this time heading south-southwest.

“This will truly be a day to be remembered.” Said Hirschauer as he watched the Air France planes recede in the sky. “Nearly 18,000 men, including 1,200 cavalymen, carried by air and landed behind enemy lines. A whole division! And this without losing a single plane or soldier during the move.”

“We now only need to see how the enemy will react to this, General Hirschauer.” Said soberly King Albert. “Will they panic and run, or will they simply dig in on whatever terrain they are on now and resist at all cost?”

“Well, the Germans will have to make their choice quickly, Your Majesty.” Replied General de Castelnau. “With the bridges your engineers have thrown over the Meuse today north of Liege, and with the British Expeditionary Force reinforcing the defenses of Namur and Charleroi along the Meuse, the rest of your divisions will now be able to rush on the east bank and join up with your air-landed division. Tomorrow, my own divisions to the South will launch a large scale spoiling attack against the new German defensive lines, to fix the Germans in their positions and prevent them from turning around to face the steamroller that is about to roll up their right flank. The Germans will either fight and die, or they will flee in disorder, in which case our planes will then be free to strafe their columns at will as they withdraw along the roads.”

CHAPTER 17 – ROUT

09:15 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, September 9, 1914

Eastern districts of Liege, Belgium

“GO!”

At the command of their squad leader, the eight Belgian soldiers burst out from behind the building corner they had been using as cover and ran diagonally across the street, to the entrance of a building from which German soldiers had been firing at them. At the same time, another Belgian Army infantry squad opened fire to keep the Germans' heads down. One German still managed to fire one shot from a balcony, aimed at the rushing squad leader, hitting him in the chest. The Belgian sergeant stumbled under the impact but then resumed his run, throwing himself against the wooden entrance door and crashing through it. As his men rushed in behind him, the sergeant patted the upper chest plate part of his Durex armored vest and found a bullet half embedded in it. He then let out a sigh of deep relief: this was the second time in two days of ferocious street-fighting inside Liege that either his vest or his helmet had saved his life. Half of his men also owed their lives to their armored vest and helmets, which had dramatically reduced the potential number of casualties among the Belgian assault troops. While this had emboldened the Belgian soldiers, it had in turn hit German morale hard and had pushed German soldiers to give up and run much faster than they would otherwise have done. Word among the Belgian soldiers was that German soldiers would do nearly anything to get a set of armored vest and helmet from fallen Belgian soldiers, to try to even the fight. The Belgian high command had replied to that by strict instructions to recuperate and safeguard the vests and helmets of fallen Belgian soldiers. Either way, those Durex armored vests and helmets were going to be the subject of many war tales to come.

Leaving one soldier to guard the small entrance lobby of the apartment building, the Belgian sergeant started cautiously going up the wooden staircase, his rifle at the ready. An ear-splitting rifle shot greeted him as he was about to raise his head to look at the next staircase landing. He then hastily withdrew down by a few steps after feeling a

bullet ricochet against the rounded edges of his helmet. Raising his rifle to the vertical, he shouted to his men just before firing himself.

“SHOOT THROUGH THE CEILING! KEEP YOUR SHOTS NEAR THE WALLS!”

Working frantically their rifle bolts, the seven Belgian soldiers then shot up the wooden floor of the landing above them, emptying their rifles. To the sergeant's satisfaction, he heard one grunt of pain but, just to make sure, he took a grenade out of his belt pouch and pulled its safety pin, then took a couple of steps up the stairs before throwing it into a high arching trajectory. It was one of the new Metallex hand grenades, tiny but dense affairs that had a blast power completely disproportional to its size and weight. Another nice feature about those grenades was that they produced little to no fragments. Thus, if you could stay out of its lethal blast radius, you were likely to be safe, making them ideal for close quarters and street fighting. The blast half-deafened the Belgian sergeant and his men but, in return, they had the satisfaction to see the bodies of two German soldiers being projected down from the landing and onto the stairs.

“RUSH UP, MEN!”

He ignored the two Germans lying on the stairs and ran up past them, followed closely by his six men. The last one however took a second to plunge his rifle bayonet into the throat of one of the Germans, who was moaning with pain, before continuing on. Once on the landing, the Sergeant hurriedly reloaded his Mauser Model 1889 7.65mm rifle with a five-round stripper clip from one of the canvas clips pouches of his armored vest. As he waited for his men to also reload their rifles, he heard faint voices and the noise of terrified sobs coming from inside the apartments situated on this level. His face hardened when he understood who were in those apartments.

“Be careful where you shoot from now on, men: there are civilians hunkered down in those apartments. Those German bastards may possibly be using them as hostages and human shields.”

“What do we do if we find a German hiding behind a civilian, Sergeant?” Asked his youngest soldier, a university student conscripted only four months ago.

“You shoot the bastard right in his spiked helmet! Don't accept to disarm or withdraw because of hostages. If you do, the Germans will then use civilians en masse as human shields. Just make sure to shoot straight.”

“But, Sergeant, the Germans have already used civilians as shields on a number of occasions.”

"I know!" Replied the sergeant, feeling his hatred of Germans redouble then. "The more reasons not to let them get away with that tactic today. Now, the Germans shooting at us did so from the balconies of the street-side rooms on the next floor above us. Here is what we will do to flush them out..."

The sergeant then explained his plan briefly, then made sure that all his men had fixed their bayonets to their rifles before leading them carefully up the stairs as quietly as he could. Thankfully, he didn't find more Germans waiting on the next landing, but he did hear rifle shots being fired down into the street from nearby balconies. As planned, his last soldier stopped on the last stairs before the landing and crouched down on them, aiming his rifle at the door on the right side and getting ready to fire back if Germans came out or opened it. The biggest man in the squad, a muscular hulk standing a good 186 centimeters, quietly leaned on the wall opposite the door of the apartment they wanted to clear first and waited for his six companions on the landing to be ready to rush in on each side of the door. On the silent signal from his sergeant, the big man then charged like a raging bull across the landing, ramming the door with his left shoulder, which was partly protected by the shoulder guard of his armored vest. The door gave up at once with a loud 'CRACK' but the soldier continued his charge straight into the apartment, the door following in front of him. One German soldier who had been posted behind a sofa to cover the entrance of the apartment was taken by surprise by that flash entrance and froze for half a second, long enough to get both the door and the Belgian soldier to smash in his face. The big soldier, not wasting any time in looking around him, then stuck his bayonet right through the German's chest. Following immediately behind him were his six comrades who spread out left and right as soon as they were in, their rifles raised and pointed. Two Germans who were firing into the street from the balcony giving on the lounge were quickly shot before they could fully turn around to face their new opponents inside, with one German keeling over the guardrail of the balcony and falling two storey down, splattering himself on the street pavement. Looking quickly around the apartment, the squad sergeant saw a woman and two young children huddled inside the nearby kitchen area, terrified. Before he could ask the woman if there were more Germans inside the apartment, a rifle shot on the landing, outside the door, made him turn around in a flash, in time to see a German soldier who had opened the door on the opposite side of the landing collapse on the floor, apparently shot by the soldier he had wisely left on guard by the stairs. Raising his rifle quickly, he shot a second German soldier who stood behind the first one and was getting ready to fire back

at his soldier. Not taking the time to think, the sergeant rushed out of the apartment and charged through the landing and inside the other apartment, his bayonet-tipped rifle pointed. A young German officer who was standing in the middle of that lounge then shot at him with his pistol, hitting him in the upper torso. That normally lethal hit was actually barely felt by the Belgian sergeant, who screamed savagely while charging the German officer, whose face was pale from fear. The German had time to fire a second time, with his bullet ricocheting against the front of the sergeant's helmet, before the Belgian drove his bayonet through his stomach, pushing him back and down from the energy of his charge. The lone German left alive in the apartment, who was crouched on the outside balcony, raised his hands high and got up, terrified, on seeing that. That didn't save him from the wrath of the Belgian soldiers, who had seen the results of too many war atrocities and crimes committed by German soldiers against Belgian civilians or had been told stories about them. The German was shot dead at once by two Belgian soldiers and fell backward, tipping over the guardrails and falling down on the street.

"SEARCH THE APARTMENT!" Shouted the sergeant to his men before approaching the balcony, wanting to make sure that no other German hid against the outside wall. Seeing none, he then cautiously waved his left arm out while shouting in French to the other soldiers of his unit still at street-level.

"DON'T SHOOT! THESE APARTMENTS ARE NOW CLEAR!"

Once he got a response from his platoon commander, the sergeant cautiously walked out at a crouch on the balcony, looking towards the part of the street still in German hands. He then saw something that fired anew his anger: about fifteen German soldiers were now coming out of a nearby building, obviously intent on withdrawing away from his advancing unit. The problem was that they were also pushing and dragging with them a dozen Belgian civilians, most of them women and old men but also with some preteen children in the lot, using them as human shields.

"MEN, COME TAKE FIRING POSITION ON THE BALCONIES, QUICKLY!"

As his squad came out on the two balconies of the apartments they had just cleared, the sergeant knelt next to the guardrails of the balcony and pointed his rifle through the space between two rails.

"AIM AT THEIR SPIKED HELMETS! DON'T LET ANY OF THOSE BASTARDS ESCAPE! FIRE AT WILL!"

From their balconies, which gave them a good plunging view of the Germans and their hostages, and shooting from a distance of only sixty meters, the seven Belgian soldiers

started firing aimed shots, downing half of the Germans in seconds. The surviving Germans, apparently having had enough, then broke and ran, leaving behind their civilians hostages. None of them made it to the end of the street, shot down mercilessly one by one by the vengeful Belgian soldiers. Only when he saw no other Germans in sight did the sergeant finally allowed himself to relax and calm down, letting the flow of adrenaline in his veins go down as he sat down.

“Phew! What a fight! It was time that it finished, though.”

“What do you mean, Sergeant?” Asked his youngest soldier, confused by his choice of words. His NCO patted his armored vest and helmet in response while grinning.

“What I meant was that I only have three lives left out of the nine lives these gave me. We should call these ‘Cats’ Vests’, as they give you nine lives before you die.” It didn’t take long for that saying to spread like wildfire through the Belgian Army, with its soldiers soon commonly calling the Durex armored vests ‘Nine Lives’ Vests’.

13:20 (Paris Time)

French Army field headquarters

Vitry-sur-François, Marne Department

France

“General, we just received some good news from King Albert’s field headquarters, via encrypted radio message: the city of Liege has been completely liberated. King Albert’s army will now start rolling up the Germans’ right flank along the Ourthe River.”

“Excellent!” Said de Castelneau, truly happy to hear that. “Thank you very much, Captain.”

General de Castelneau, taking first the copy of the message from his signals officer, then walked to the room adjacent to the operations center that lodged the aviation command section led by Brigadier-General Hirschauer. Presenting first the message to Hirschauer and letting him the time to read it, de Castelneau then walked with him to a large wall map board.

“I will need you to dedicate two of your squadrons of FRELON fighter-bombers, as well as at least one squadron of your CONDOR fast bombers, on the job of closely supporting the Belgian Army in its advance southward along the east bank of the Ourthe

River. I authorize you to coordinate directly your efforts with King Albert's headquarters. If and when the Belgians will hit significant resistance, then I want your squadrons to bomb and strafe the German strongholds until they break. Also, if your planes signal any important grouping of German forces in the path of the Belgian Army, strike it hard."

"You can count on my aviators, General."

"I know I can, my good Hirschauer." Said de Castelneau, patting Hirschauer in the back before walking out.

08:32 (Paris Time)

Saturday, September 12, 1914

Region of Manhay, Province of Liege

Belgium

The Belgian colonel commanding one of the regiments pushing southward east of the Ourthe River tensed up when he heard a heavy exchange of rifle shots ahead in the distance. Stopping his horse for a moment on the road leading to the small town of Manhay, he raised his binoculars to his eyes to examine the tree line of the thick forest some 900 meters in front of him. At first, he didn't see anything, until a number of cavalymen emerged from the forest, galloping down the road towards him while shooting behind them from time to time. The colonel soon was able to identify the cavalymen and relaxed a bit before shouting at the soldiers advancing ahead of him.

"THEY ARE OUR CAVALRYMEN! HOLD YOUR FIRE!"

He then looked at his operations officer, a short but stoutly built major.

"Well, it seems that our reconnaissance units have stumbled upon something ahead, Major Langevin."

"They probably found Manhay occupied in force by the Germans, sir. That town is an obvious choice as a strongpoint to guard one's flank."

"I agree! Let's see what our cavalymen will tell us."

The Belgian cavalry troop unfortunately lost half a dozen riders before they could gallop out of rifle range of the Germans who were starting to emerge from the forest. A young captain soon stopped his exhausted horse beside the mount of the colonel, saluting him before reporting.

"Captain Jan Dahlgren, 23rd Cavalry Regiment, Colonel. We were on our way south to inspect the town of Manhay when we stumbled upon a mass of German troops advancing northward along and on both sides of the road to Liege, sir."

"A mass? How much approximately?"

"Tens of thousands, sir. I am not exaggerating, sir: the Germans were advancing in multiple regimental columns, with cavalry units and horse-drawn guns following. I would say that the enemy is launching a major counter-attack to push us back. They are now in the process of marching through that forest and along the road. The Germans who shot at my unit were part of their scouting line."

"Damn! We better pass the word up and around. Keep going northward, Captain, and warn the regiment following my unit to take immediately blocking positions, in case my regiment gets overwhelmed."

"Yes sir! I'm on my way." Said the young captain before galloping away with the rest of his troop. The colonel then called to him his radio operator, who had his two radios stuffed in saddlebags behind his saddle, with their antennas sticking out. Getting from him the handset of his HF-SSB transceiver, the Colonel then called his divisional commander.

"Colibri, this is Colibri Deux, over."

He had to repeat his call another time before getting a response that was slightly distorted by radio static.

"This is Colibri. Go ahead, Colibri Deux."

"From Colibri Deux: our cavalry screen has encountered massive German columns advancing north from the town of Manhay. I suspect that the enemy has launched a major counter-attack. I will need some serious backup quickly, along with some artillery or aviation support if any is available, over."

"We will see what is available now, Colibri Deux. Can you give me the position of those German columns, over?"

"Only approximately, Colibri: the enemy is presently advancing through a thick forest to my front, with its scouting line now emerging from the woods. Here are the grid squares where I believe the enemy units to be..."

Reading his map quickly, the colonel sent the grid squares numbers by radio, finishing with an urgent request.

"...I will need our other regiments to deploy and take defensive positions on my flanks. If not, I may well be outflanked and overwhelmed, over."

"We are sending the orders for that now, Colibri Deux. Hold your present position and be stout. Colibri, out."

The colonel gave back the HF handset to his radio operator, exchanging it with the handset for his VHF-FM transceiver tuned to the frequency used by his regiment. At the same time, he shouted orders to the battalion commander leading the column.

"MAJOR LECLERC, DEPLOY AT ONCE YOUR MEN INTO DEFENSIVE POSITIONS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE ROAD. USE THE COVER AVAILABLE AS BEST YOU CAN AND STAR DIGGING HASTY HOLES: WE HAVE LOTS OF GERMANS COMING OUR WAY."

"UNDERSTOOD, COLONEL!"

Next, the colonel repeated those orders on the radio to his other battalions and support units, preparing them for the clash to come. Lastly, he asked his second radio operator to loan him his compact, portable VHF-FM radio transceiver reserved to communicate with friendly aircraft and switched it on, then put on its headset, covering it with his helmet. With that done, he and his small group of mounted staff officers withdrew to a patch of trees a bit to the rear, where they dismounted and left their horses to the care of a soldier. Returning at a run to the side of the road, the colonel, his radio operators and two officers crouched into the drainage ditch running along the right side of the road. Once there, the colonel saw that the thin line of German skirmishers was now advancing across the open pasture field separating him from the forest in front of him.

"HOLD YOUR FIRE UNTIL THEY ARE WITHIN 300 METERS, THEN GIVE THEM HELL, MEN."

Tension built up as the Germans continued to approach in their thin, dispersed skirmishers line, either oblivious or uncaring about the presence of the Belgian regiment. By now, thick columns were starting to emerge as well from the woods. Their numbers made the colonel swear.

"Hell! That captain was not exaggerating. There is at least a division coming out of that wood now."

Grabbing the handset of his HF radio, he spoke in it with an urgent tone.

"Colibri! Colibri! This is Colibri Deux! Massive German columns are now emerging from the woods at my front. I will need some fire support soon, over."

"Colibri Deux, this is Colibri. The first rocket salvo is about to be fired and there are now aircraft on their way to your position. Be ready to communicate with these aircraft once they become visible, over."

"Will do, Colibri. Colibri Deux out."

The colonel felt better as he gave back the handset to his radio operator: by now, the 75mm and 150mm MRL units loaned to the Belgian Army by the French Army had acquired a fearsome reputation for both their devastating firepower and their ability to saturate whole square kilometers of ground in seconds. That reputation proved itself again twelve seconds later, when a total of 120 75mm rockets slammed within two seconds into the first trees of the woods along a front of 400 meters, their powerful blasts cutting down trees and turning them into splinters. In turn, those splinters and the shrapnel from their steel fragmentation jackets did a horrible carnage among the German soldiers, who also had to contend with falling trees, which crushed more than a few Germans. The Belgian regimental commander was cheering that spectacle with his men when one of his officers shouted and pointed at the sky to the Southeast.

"THERE! I SEE SIX PLANES ON APPROACH, BIG ONES!"

Raising his binoculars, the colonel looked at the planes for a few seconds and grinned, not believing his luck.

"Those are heavy bombers, boys. It's going to go 'BOOM' very soon."

The commander of the squadron of PÉLICAN heavy armed amphibians saw easily enough from a distance the impact of the salvo of rockets along the edge of a forest. He had been a bit disappointed when an urgent radio call had rerouted him from his original mission of bombing a German oil refinery in the Ruhr area, but supporting friendly troops on the ground always had top priority, according to the directives laid by Brigadier-General Hirschauer. Still being a good thirteen kilometers from the rockets impact zone, the squadron commander spoke to his radio operator/navigator.

"Alfred, call that Belgian regiment and ask them to fire in quick succession two red flares, so we can confirm their location and thus avoid bombing them by mistake.

"On it, sir!"

It took only half a minute before two red flares went up from patches of woods maybe one kilometer away from the rocket impact zone. Now having confirmed the location of both enemy and friendly units on the ground, the squadron commander quickly thought up his strike plan, then activated his radio microphone.

“Stork Two call signs from Stork Two. We will now go down to an altitude of 1,500 meters, from which we will do our bombing. Slow down at the same time to 250 kilometers per hour and line up on me in left echelon formation, with a lateral separation of one hundred meters. We will drop our bombs along a large front, to get as many German units as possible. Set individual bomb release separation delay to two seconds.”

The squadron commander then switched to his intercom to talk with his bombardier, who lay in a half-prone position in the transparent nose of the aircraft.

“Pierre, we will fly along the edge of that big wood just struck by rockets, to target the Germans hiding inside the tree line. Make a course about fifty meters inside the forest edge. You now have the controls.”

“Thanks!” Replied the bombardier, who then steered the plane towards its target and opened the bomb bays, while speaking on the radio.

“Stork Two call signs, open your bomb bays now and arm your bombs... We are now five kilometers from the edge of our bombing zone... Two kilometers from the edge... One kilometer from the edge. Remember: separation delay of two seconds between individual bomb releases and lateral separation of one hundred meters. We want to plaster as wide an area of that forest as possible: it is swarming with krauts... 500 meters from the edge... DROP, DROP, DROP!”

With each of the PÉLICAN heavy amphibians loaded with 32 250 kilo blast-fragmentation Metallex bombs with fuses set on ‘super quick’, a total of 192 bombs fell on the forest over an area 4.5 kilometers long by 600 meters deep. Each bomb blew up with a blast power equivalent to 400 kilos of TNT, projecting thousands of steel beads around on top of transforming whole trees into deadly splinters. Very few of the close to 17,000 Germans advancing in assault formation through the woods survived the bombing, with most of the rare survivors either wounded or deeply shocked, or both. A whole German infantry division ceased to exist in only a bit more than one minute.

On the opposite site of the pasture fields, the Belgian soldiers watching the awesome show made by the successive blast waves from individual bombs sending whole trees up in the air cheered loudly, while the German soldiers of the advancing skirmish line could only look to their back with consternation and terror. The Belgian regimental commander then shouted an order to his cheering men.

“SHOOT THESE SKIRMISHERS DOWN TO THE LAST! REMEMBER LIEGE! SHOW NO MERCY!”

His men, who had heard plenty of harrowing tales about the taking of civilians as hostages or human shields by the German during the fight for Liege, obeyed him with gusto, opening a dense rifle and machine gun fire on the German skirmishers. Those 400 Germans were promptly shot down to the last, with those later found to be only wounded finished with the bayonet. Calling first his divisional commander by radio to inform him of the success of the airstrike, the colonel then gave the order to his regiment to advance in assault formation towards the now devastated forest. With such a large hole suddenly created in the German front, this was now a golden opportunity to insert a wedge in the German flank and then roll through it.

14:01 (Paris Time)

Temporary field headquarters of German 1st Army

Bastogne, Ardennes region

Province of Luxembourg, Belgium

The chief of staff of General von Kluck, Commander of the 1st Army, firmly gestured to the staff officers present near the general's office to go somewhere else, as von Kluck's tone and volume of voice kept rising while he spoke on the phone with General von Bulow, commander of the 2nd Army.

“What am I doing in Bastogne? The enemy didn't give me much choice about that. My temporary headquarters are now less than sixteen kilometers behind my present frontlines facing north and I expect that I will be forced to move again soon, this time towards the East... I know perfectly well that I am now technically within your army lines but, as I said earlier, I didn't have much choice but to withdraw south in order not to be overwhelmed. I lost over 35,000 men in the last two days, mostly because of those damn French warplanes and their super-bombs. The few artillery guns I have left with me are down to their last shells and the troops are low on ammunition. My men are also down to their last rations and I haven't received one decent-sized supply shipment in days... Dig in and hold my ground? You think that I haven't tried that up to now, many times? That only gives nice, fixed targets for the air bombs and rockets of the French aviation. Just yesterday, I had over two kilometers of newly dug trench lines turned into fields full of huge craters in the space of minutes. If I position my men inside forests,

then the French planes come in and deforest the whole area with their bombs... What I intend to do? Simple: I am getting ready to withdraw eastward all the way into Germany. I suggest that you do the same before you are outflanked like me and surrounded... The hell with General von Falkenhayn! He talks the big talk while behind his desk in Berlin, but he doesn't seem to understand the impact of these French planes on our armies. The Schlieffen Plan is dead, has been for over a week now. With the Russian armies still pushing into Eastern Prussia and with our hopes of defeating France down to nearly nil, we might as well concede the war now before Germany suffers too many destructions and losses. Half of our war factories in the Ruhr have been reduced to rubble by now and more plants are being bombed every day. We need to put a stop to this folly... No! I can't guarantee that I will be able to stop the enemy advance for more than a day, maybe two. After that, my army will have no choice but to withdraw eastward to escape complete destruction. The pocket in which my remaining units are is getting smaller by the hour and we already present a nice free-fire zone to the enemy aviation. If I stay much longer here, I will be bombed out of existence in a matter of days... Well, I would say that you should get ready to do like me: withdraw eastward and return into Germany, to defend our national territory. And don't take too long to make your decision."

On that, von Kluck put down abruptly the telephone receiver, utterly frustrated. He also was dead tired, having been able to catch only a few isolated hours of sleep during the last five days. He stayed prostrated on his folding chair for long minutes, silent as he reviewed his options. A shout from outside the requisitioned house that he used as his temporary field headquarters then made him get up on his feet, alarmed.

"AIRPLANES OVERHEAD! TAKE COVER!"

Swearing loudly to himself, the old Prussian general barely took the time to grab his gun belt and spiked helmet before running out of the house and into the street, where German soldiers were running left and right. Looking up, von Kluck saw two small planes flying overhead in formation, just high enough to be out of machine gun range. Von Kluck sighed in exasperation when he saw the two planes calmly continue northward in a straight line, not releasing a single bomb: it had to be a simple reconnaissance flight. In that, von Kluck was right. However, he then forgot about three important things. First, his staff had raised out of habit a big army flag over his temporary headquarters, a flag easily visible and recognizable from the air. Second, nearly all French airplanes were by now equipped with radios and could send reports

immediately to signal possible targets. Thirdly, the heavy models of French rocket launchers had ranges of more than thirty kilometers.

Having taken time to pass a few orders to some of his officers outside his headquarters, von Kluck started to walk back towards the large house that lodged his headquarters. The Belgian civilians originally living in it had been expelled days ago, along with the inhabitants of the street blocks adjacent to it, in order to provide a safe zone for its new German occupants. That was common practice with the German Army, a practice that the Belgians and French knew about by now. The first indication that flying a large German flag had been a mistake came when the first 150mm rocket slammed into the third house to the left of von Kluck's headquarters building, pulverizing it. Arriving at supersonic speed, von Kluck didn't even hear the rocket come down before it exploded, blowing off his helmet and making him stagger on his feet. Before he could regain his footing, three more heavy rockets hit around him in the next second, destroying more houses and killing and wounding scores of Germans. The fifth rocket to fall on this district of Bastogne landed right in the middle of the street where von Kluck was standing, exploding a mere six meters away from him and shredding him to pieces.

A total of 96 150mm rockets with Metallex warheads slammed down within eight seconds on that area of Bastogne, utterly destroying close to a hundred buildings, killing or wounding hundreds of Germans officers and soldiers and, more importantly, erasing out of existence the field headquarters of the German 1st Army and many of its support and logistical units. Within seconds, the remaining units of that army became headless, with their telephone lines cut off. Two infantry divisions, or rather what remained of them, that were barely holding the advance of the Belgian Army on the north flank soon found themselves unable to hold their grounds after receiving repeated rocket salvos and hundreds of bombs. Not getting any directives from their army headquarters and unable to contact it, those two divisions decided by themselves to withdraw precipitously southward. These two divisions however soon started overflowing into the designated rear areas of other German units facing westward and defending the lines along the Ourthe River, causing utter chaos and confusion in those areas. That created a giant domino effect, with more German units abandoning their defensive positions and trying to withdraw to safety in a completely uncoordinated manner and often in opposite directions. The French and British units which had been facing them and exerting a

steady pressure on them, to actually fix them in place and thus help the flanking movement by the Belgian Army, then crossed the Ourthe River in force on improvised bridges as soon as the German withdrawal became apparent to them.

Pushed on two sides and blocked on another side, nearly out of ammunition and without food, a total of 360,000 German soldiers without a functioning central command system started fleeing eastward towards the German border, flooding the roads with thick columns of marching men, cavalry and chariots. The densely forested terrain of the Ardennes did nothing to help that massive withdrawal movement. French military aviators were not long before they jumped on that golden opportunity and started strafing and bombing those German columns, causing massive casualties and panic among the retreating German soldiers. Complete German units, desperate to escape the air attacks, then started marching through the forests and hills, with only a few officers having proper maps of those areas. Those who made it through to the German borders came out half-starved and totally disorganized, with some having even thrown away their rifles.

Brilliantly led by General Charles Lanrezac, the French 5th Army took full advantage of this German mass withdrawal and broke through the German defenses along the France-Luxembourg border, then pushed north, cutting the main German withdrawal roads in that area and trapping most of the German 3rd Army into a pocket inside the southern portion of the Duchy of Luxembourg. Close to 130,000 German soldiers from that army, starving and out of ammunition, had no choice but to surrender after two days of pointless resistance. Another 240,000 Germans, this time from the 1st and 2nd Armies, were either killed by air attacks, surrendered by themselves to the French troops who caught up with them or were cut off and taken prisoners. More German soldiers simply deserted, walking back into Germany through the Ardennes Forest after throwing away their weapons and equipment. Within five days, the mighty marching right wing of the German Army on the Western Front literally disintegrated, with fewer than 100,000 of its soldiers returning to German territory in relative order, but with little ammunition left and no artillery guns, those having been either destroyed by air attacks or abandoned along the way.

10:22 (Paris Time)

Monday, September 21, 1914

Field headquarters of the French Army

College of Vitry-le-François, Marne Department

Northeastern France

General Édouard de Castelnau was in an excellent mood as he assembled with his army commanders around the big map table in his operations center.

“Well, gentlemen, this scheme of landing by plane a force behind enemy lines has succeeded beyond my wildest expectations. The Germans have been thrown out of Belgium and of the Duchy of Luxembourg, suffering a total of nearly 400,000 killed, wounded or taken prisoner. Now, we have to decide how to follow up on such a success. Suggestions?”

General Lanrezac, commander of the 5th Army, was the first to speak.

“We push eastward into Germany until we reach the Rhine River, then turn south and sweep down the west bank of the Rhine to take in their back the German armies still fighting in the Alsace and Lorraine regions.”

“Which would provide us with our main war goal of liberating at last the Lorraine and the Alsace from German occupation.” Added de Castelnau. “I like that! Any other ideas, gentlemen?”

This time, it was General Louis d’Esperey, who had taken over the French 2nd Army from de Castelnau when the latter had taken overall command, who spoke up.

“Yes, General. I propose that, after pushing up to the Rhine and retaking the Alsace and the Lorraine, we cross the Rhine at the level of Cologne or Düsseldorf and go take the German industrial center of the Ruhr. Without the Ruhr, the Germans won’t be able to continue this war and they will be obliged to ask for an armistice.”

“No! No armistice for these damn Germans!” Exclaimed at once General Foch, commander of the freshly formed 9th Army. “Prussia has attacked and invaded France too many times in history and its arrogance and militarism has to be broken once and for all, forever! Either they will surrender without conditions or we will continue the fight. Don’t forget also that the Russian Army is having a hard time right now on the Eastern Front and needs all the help it can get. By forcing the Germans to surrender without condition, this would help the Russians in defeating the German armies on the Eastern

Front. I want Germany to bend its knees, disarm completely and never be able to rebuild an army.”

A concert of quiet approbation went around the map table after those words. De Castelnau himself also tended to agree with Foch’s opinion. The specter of another war with Germany sometimes in the future was something he definitely wanted to avoid. There was however a problem about that.

“While I agree with your point of view, General Foch, such a decision to continue the assault inside Germany proper would be rightly the purview of the President of the Republic, who will have to answer to the French people about the casualties caused by a continuation of the war inside Germany.”

“Then, let’s destroy the German war potential from the air.” Said Brigadier-General Hirschauer, making many head nod at once. “Since the Germans have no effective defenses against our bombers, then let’s bomb the whole Ruhr to rubble. It may take more time than an actual ground invasion, but it would save us tens of thousands of casualties and will come eventually to the same result. I will only need to have our war production of bombs and Metallex explosive, which makes our bombs and shells so much more effective, boosted substantially. Right now, my stocks of bombs and rockets are nearly expended. Mind you, those bombs and rockets were expended in the best way possible, by destroying those German armies inside Belgium and the Luxembourg.”

“How low are your stocks of bombs and rockets, actually?” Asked de Castelnau, a bit worried.

“I am down to four bombs per plane right now, General. I did ask for more bombs and rockets, but the answer I got from the War Minister was that the aviation ammunition budget has been fully expended and that the Parliament is balking at allocating more funds to it, deeming it secondary to the budget for artillery ammunition.”

“Hum... I will have to place a call to both the War Minister and to the President about that. However, once you will get more bombs, I definitely want your bombers to concentrate their efforts on the Ruhr: I want the Krupp factories in particular flattened to the last.”

“Uh, what about my divisions, General de Castelnau?” Asked Sir John French, the commander of the British Expeditionary Force. De Castelnau mulled that for a moment before replying.

"Well, since your troops have seen little action up to now and are still quite fresh, I would be tempted to send your BEF towards Aachen and Cologne, with the ultimate goal to take and hold the western bank districts of Cologne. This should make for quite a painful blow to the Germans. Your BEF, in conjunction with the Belgian Army, would then be able to act as flank guard for our forces sweeping southward along the Rhine towards the Alsace. Will that suit you, Sir French?"

"Very much so, General." Replied French, most satisfied by de Castelnau's answer. The latter then put both of his fists on the map table and looked around at his generals.

"Then, this is our general strategic plan for the incoming fighting. The 4th, 5th and 9th Armies will cross into Germany at the level of the Duchy of Luxembourg, invade the Sarre Region and push all the way to the Rhine, then will pivot southward and sweep down the Rhineland-Palatinate, Sarre, Black Forest and Bade-Wurttemberg regions, in order to take in the rear the German armies facing us in the Alsace and the Lorraine. I want these armies utterly destroyed, so that they will never be a threat to us again. In the meantime, the BEF and the Belgian forces that will be made available by King Albert will secure our northern flank and take the districts of Cologne and Bonn that are on the west bank of the Rhine. As soon as our stocks of bombs are replenished, our aviation will start the systematic destruction of the German heavy industries, particularly the steel, guns and ammunition factories of the Ruhr. That strategic bombing will not stop until everything there will be destroyed. We will ignore for the moment any German request for an armistice until that job is completed, then we will see if we continue bombing or not, depending on how defiant or arrogant the Germans still are. I want the total, unconditional surrender of Germany, not some armistice that will allow it to catch its breath and recuperate during the years to come."

"What about the Austro-Hungarian Empire, General?" Asked General Ruffey, commander of the 3rd Army in the Lorraine region. De Castelnau thought that over for a moment before answering him.

"Right now, our priority is to defeat our most dangerous adversary, Germany. We will complete that job first. Then, if the Austro-Hungarians are still fighting, we will turn our bombers on them. Now, let's plan the details of all this."

It took many hours of staff work, with a lunch served halfway, to decide and record the detailed plans for the incoming offensive. Then, the respective generals left,

returning by liaison aircraft to their various field headquarters around France and Belgium. That was when General de Castelnau went to speak alone to Brigadier-General Hirschauer, warmly shaking his hand.

"I must again thank your aviators for a fantastic job well done, Hirschauer. I never thought that planes could cause so much damage to the enemy."

"Part of the reasons for our success in the air are due to the German lack of truly modern planes comparable to our Blériot-Kruger models, and to their lack of effective anti-aircraft weapons. The new Metallex explosive also played a big role in the decimation of those German armies, General. When we get the Germans to surrender, we should impose as one of the conditions for peace a permanent interdiction on design and production of aircraft in Germany. Imagine if the Germans had possessed planes like our Blériot-Kruger models."

De Castelnau shivered at that thought.

"I see what you mean, Hirschauer. Point taken. I will make sure that the President insists on that point when he will write our lists of conditions for a German surrender. What? You are smiling now."

"Oh, excuse me, General. I was just thinking about a little detail concerning the future boost in production of bombs. Miss Lenoir, who sold us the production license for the Metallex explosive, which she invented, is going to receive quite a big royalty payment soon because of that."

That made de Castelnau raise an eyebrow.

"I hope that this is not because she fleeced us on those royalties, Hirschauer."

"Oh, not at all, General. Everybody at the War Ministry actually thought that she had been naïve and a poor businesswoman because of the very low percentage she had asked as monthly royalties when she sold us the production license for her Metallex explosive. She is actually a very good businesswoman and fully knew that she could have made much more money by asking for a percentage more typical of War Ministry contracts, but the truth is that she acted as a true patriot and passed the good of the country before her personal fortune. That big payment will be due solely to the huge quantities of Metallex that we will still need to produce."

"Oh, I see!" Said de Castelnau, whose view of Tasha Lenoir, already quite high, jumped up further.

CHAPTER 18 – REMOVING GERMANY’S CLAWS

16:49 (Paris Time)

Thursday, October 1, 1914

Tasha Lenoir’s electronics lab

Aéro-parc Blériot, Buc, southwest of Paris

France

Tasha, concentrated on her work on a prototype model of airborne radar, heard someone approach her only at the last moment and was nearly startled as a result. Tensing up at once and snapping her head around, she relaxed when she saw that it was Hien, her executive secretary and her Paris representative for the Lenoir Industries, who had approached her.

“Ooof! You nearly scared me, Hien.”

“Sorry about that, Tasha.” Replied Hien, smiling. “I came to bring you a copy of our monthly business report and of your corporate bank statements for September.”

Tasha, who was nearly as much a businesswoman as she was a top flight scientific genius, took the documents handed to her by Hien and started reading quickly through them, watched by Hien who, for some reason, had a malicious smirk on her face. She nearly fell off her chair when she read a number on the second page of her bank statement.

“FIVE POINT EIGHTY-THREE MILLION FRANCS IN MONTHLY ROYALTIES FOR THE LICENSED PRODUCTION OF METALLEX?!! How many thousands of tons of the stuff did they produce in September?”

“You will find the answer two lines down, Tasha. Don’t forget that the Army has been dropping a lot of bombs and firing a lot of rockets and shells lately in this war. In fact, its ammunition stocks are nearly exhausted and they are now working round the clock at the state arsenals, so you can expect another big deposit in your personal account next month.”

“But, what am I going to do with so much money? My personal lifestyle is not that expensive. In fact, it is quite frugal, if you consider that I spend a lot of my so-called free time working on some new things here in my lab.”

“Well, with the way things are going at the front, we may rightfully hope to see soon the end of this damn war. Why not start thinking about what you will do or accomplish after the war, once the war contracts Lenoir Industries received will end or will be cancelled? You may want to expand further the Air France network around the World, for example, something that will need a lot of money infusion. Let yourself indulge in some dreaming for a change.”

“Dreaming... Hum. That is tempting indeed.” Said Tasha while looking at nothing in particular, her mind in high gear. “And what about you, Hien? What about Johanna and Terry? What about Louis? For two months now, we have been totally consumed in helping win this war. Returning to peacetime routine will mean some serious reassessing of our personal plans.”

“Why not do some of that reassessing in advance, right now, while I am here? Let’s call a group meeting here, where we presently have some intimacy, and take a hour or so to contemplate our post-war futures. After all, we should start planning in advance about that, rather than wait until the war and find our manufacturing plants becoming suddenly idle, throwing thousands of workers out of work. Let’s have something ready in advance for when the fighting will stop.”

“You are right, Hien. Let me call the others in. Hopefully, Terry won’t be in the air, testing a newly produced aircraft.”

Making a number of local telephone calls, Tasha managed to get in touch quickly with Johanna, Terry and Louis Blériot, with all of them walking into the electronics lab within twenty minutes. Louis Blériot, a particularly busy man these days because of the unending French government demands for more Blériot-Kruger planes, was actually happy to have an excuse to escape the mountain of paperwork piled in his office.

“What do you have for us, Tasha? A new idea for some air combat mission against the Germans?”

“Nothing that concrete, Louis. Rather, I called you all here to do some dreaming.”

“Do some dreaming? What do you mean?”

“Hien here just reminded me that we should have post-war plans in place before the shooting stops, so that our plants and workers don’t end up being idle. You may have right now many orders for extra warplanes, Louis, but let’s face the reality: the moment the shooting stops, all those orders not already filled will probably be promptly

cancelled. You and I better have some alternatives ready to compensate for those cancelled contracts.”

“Hum, you are right, Tasha. Do you have any ideas about that?”

“A couple, but all of us and not only me and you should be starting to think about their own goals after this war. Mind you, that does not mean for us to separate and go our own ways, far from it. Rather, I believe that we should fix ourselves some goal or goals and then cooperate together to realize them with each other’s support. We all have our particular strengths and expertise: let’s unite them to realize our future dreams.”

“I like that idea. Count me in, Tasha.” Said Johanna.

“Count me in as well.” Said Terry. “Let’s start with your own dreams and projects, Tasha, since you raised this subject. What are you planning to do after the war?”

“Actually, my choices are probably the most obvious among us: there is so much that I can introduce to this century in terms of electronics and new chemical products that I will probably die of old age before I could develop all of them. However, my immediate goals after the war will be to introduce new electronic instruments for our aircraft, thus keeping them at the finest edge of aviation, and to expand the existing Air France network around the World. This will in turn mean that I will be passing orders for quite a few more CIGOGNE and SUPER BOURDON aircraft, which should help Louis compensate for the stop in military aircraft contracts. Now, your turn, Johanna.”

“Uh, I already had some medium-term aeronautical projects in mind for after the war, like developing the first jet engines and then building a jet airliner. However, I have had an idea for months now about trying my luck at designing modern cars in conjunction with Mister Salmson, who will also find himself out of military contracts at the end of this war.”

“Cars? Why cars?” Asked Hien, intrigued, attracting a grimace on Johanna’s face.

“Because the existing cars and trucks positively suck, that’s why. The actual designs are about as amateurish as the aircraft designs we encountered on our arrival here in 1912. Have you learned to drive yet, Hien?”

“Uh, not really. Marc Lebrun tried a couple of time to show me how to but I never got the hang of using properly those primitive manual gearbox transmissions.”

"The same here, although I can claim to be better than Hien at it." Said Terry. "This decade certainly could use something we could call a 'modern car'."

"Hey, I started my career as a mechanical engineer and my first successful business was in selling headlamps for cars and trucks." Exclaimed Louis, smiling. "Maybe we could all work together to design and produce those new cars and trucks. After all, the market for private cars should be quite good after the war." The five of them looked at each other, smiling, for a few seconds before Tasha spoke again.

"Well, it seems that we now have a common future goal in mind for after the war, that is except for Hien. What would you like to do, Hien?"

"Me? Don't laugh, but I would like to introduce a public broadcast radio network in France, using the radio technology developed by Tasha."

"But, nobody owns a radio in France, except for the military and the government, plus of course Air France." Objected Terry. "Who will listen to those radio broadcasts?"

"It will have to be done gradually, obviously, but I already have some ideas about how to do it. I will start by providing broadcast services to Air France and to some public facilities, like train stations and subway lines, working at a loss at first, to encourage the public to buy radio receivers and thus gradually make the whole thing financially viable. Don't forget that I have degrees in public relations and business communications. If you knew how I miss my daily dose of news, music and talk shows."

"Then, we are set!" Proclaimed a happy Tasha. "Let's talk now a bit about the details on all this..."

13:33 (Paris Time)

Friday, October 23, 1914

French embassy, Zurich

Switzerland

To say that the German ambassador got a cold reception at his unannounced arrival at the French embassy in the Swiss capital would have been a severe understatement. He was however introduced into the French ambassador's office after only a short wait. The latter did not rise from his chair behind his work desk, nor did he come to his German counterpart to shake his hand, instead staring coldly at him.

"What brings you here this afternoon, Herr von Bergen?"

"I came to bring you an offer of conditional armistice from my government, to be transmitted to your government." Said von Bergen, who then opened his leather attaché case and took out a sealed diplomatic letter. He then took a couple of steps forward to give the letter to the French ambassador, who slowly broke its wax seal and opened it. Taking out a folded sheet of velum paper, the Frenchman carefully read it before putting it down on his work desk and looking at von Bergen with a stony expression.

"Herr von Bergen, please understand that I read this offer of conditional armistice strictly to see how arrogant its tone would be, not because France is actually interested in a negotiated ceasefire, which this armistice of yours is actually. You may tell your superiors in Berlin that France will accept nothing less than a total and unconditional surrender by Germany, with the added clause that the German Army and Navy are to be completely dismantled and will cease to exist...forever!"

Von Bergen, an old Prussian aristocrat, stiffened up at once on hearing that.

"Is France mad? Germany will never accept such terms."

"Then, you may tell Berlin that our systematic bombing of your war industries and railroad network will continue until you agree to such an unconditional surrender. The British sea blockade, allied with our military units holding the crossings along the Dutch-German border, is already causing severe food rationing inside Germany, while the destruction of your coal mines in the Ruhr has caused coal to also be rationed severely. Winter is coming soon and Germans will end up starving in the dark and the cold, just because your military dictatorship is too obtuse and arrogant to recognize its defeat on the battlefield. With your rail links with the Eastern Front mostly cut by bombings, you can't even pull troops there to send them westward to replace all the armies you lost in the last two months. Please come back only if your government is ready to surrender unconditionally and to dismantle its military machine for good. You may leave now, Herr von Bergen."

His face pale from shock, the German ambassador pivoted around and walked out of the French ambassador's office like an automaton, having expected the French to jump at any opportunity for a ceasefire and peace. His mind was full of dark, sinister scenarios as he sat back inside his embassy car for the trip back to his office.

07:52 (Paris Time)

Monday, December 14, 1914

German Chancellery, Berlin, Germany

General Erich von Falkenhayn was only partially dressed when he went to look outside through one window of the room that now served as his bedroom in the Chancellery Building. His original apartments in the building housing the War Ministry had been bombed to rubble, along with the rest of the building, over a month ago. The Berlin central Potsdam Train Station and the various canals linking the city with the rest of Germany had also been bombed, further worsening the food and fuel situation inside the capital. From his window, he could easily see the ruins of the Berlin Castle, which had been the Kaiser's palace until destroyed in an air attack that had also killed the Kaiser. Falkenhayn lowered his head in discouragement as he reviewed in his mind the desperate situation in which Germany now was. The seven powerful armies that had been sent nearly five months ago to invade the Luxembourg, Belgium and then France did not exist anymore, having been either destroyed or having disintegrated through surrenders, desertions and mutinies. On the Eastern Front, the German armies there had fared well at first against the huge but poorly led and trained Russian Army, until acute ammunition shortages caused by the bombing of the Ruhr had forced the German divisions to withdraw, allowing the Russians to resume their advance. Königsberg, then Danzig had fallen, along with most of Eastern Prussia. Those defeats had in turn caused many soldiers to surrender or to desert and return to their farms and towns. Even here, in Berlin, a good quarter of the troops had either deserted or mutinied due to the acute shortage of food and the poor living conditions inside the barracks. What had not helped at all had been the widespread popular perception that, while the lowly soldiers and citizens were starving, the Prussian aristocracy and the Army officer corps hoarded much of the little food left. Only a week ago, a crowd of civilian rioters had stormed the Prussian Army Officers' Club, in search of food there. Most of the soldiers on guard duty at the club had then deserted and joined the rioters, a few even going as far as shooting their officers. It had not helped either when the rioters had effectively found substantial reserves of food, wine and liquors stored in the basements of the club. The word had then quickly spread around Berlin, making an already bad situation worse. The aristocrats and their families living in Berlin had then left the capital precipitously, heading to their country estates and castles and leaving their Berlin residences open to the looters.

Von Falkenhayn slowly walked away from the window and went to his dresser, to finish putting on his uniform. One look at the mirror there showed him a face full of wrinkles, with deep pockets under the eyes. As he put on his weapons belt, which supported his sword and his pistol, he hesitated for a moment. Then, his right hand went to his pistol holster, undoing its retaining flap before pulling out his P-08. There was a second moment of hesitation before von Falkenhayn raised his pistol to his right temple and pulled the trigger.

15:06 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, December 22, 1914

Prototype workshop, Aéro-parc Blériot

Buc, France

Johanna Kruger was working in her planning office with the door closed and locked, so that she could discreetly work on her powerful laptop computer, when the distant sound of church bells ringing in the nearby village of Buc caught her ear. Surprised to hear bells at this hour, she closed and locked her laptop, then went out of her office and into the prototype workshop, where she found the technicians and engineers working there also listening to the bells. In a common reflex, they and Johanna walked outside to better hear. It took only a few minutes before one of the women working in the control tower of the aéro-parc appeared on the walking platform on the top level and shouted excitedly at Johanna and the technicians.

"THE WAR IS OVER! GERMANY HAS SURRENDERED!"

Johanna immediately yelled in joy, imitated by the technicians and engineers around her, and shared happy hugs with them. Her next move was to run to Tasha's electronics lab to pass the good news to her, bursting inside while shouting out loud.

"TASHA, THE WAR IS OVER! THE GERMANS HAVE SURRENDERED!"

That piece of news made Tasha, who was sitting at her electronics assembly bench, close her eyes for a second, overwhelmed by emotion. She then got up and tightly hugged her friend.

"Thank the stars that this monstrous bloodbath is now over. We will soon be able to resume normal lives, like the rest of the French citizens."

"And why not right now?" Asked Johanna, a bit surprised by those words. Tasha, still holding her, looked soberly into her eyes.

"Because this is only the first step in returning to peace, Johanna. Now, our soldiers will have to disarm the German soldiers that are left around, destroy or seize their heavy weapons and warships, dismantle what is left of the German war industries and hunt down and arrest those responsible for war crimes. While the fighting will stop now, our soldiers will be kept busy for a few weeks still. Hopefully, our politicians will stand firm and will not let a chance to the Germans to hide their weapons by sending our soldiers home for Christmas or for the New Year."

"Damn! You are right...again. What about at least celebrating a bit this evening? Come, let's close up shop for today and send our workers home."

"I will certainly second that, Johanna."

The next day, with Louis Blériot having given the day off to his workers, he, Tasha and her three friends gathered into Tasha's electronics lab for a sober meeting. Looking in turn at the four women from the future, Louis then spoke softly to them.

"Ladies, I simply can't thank you enough for all that you did for France. By warning me first and then helping me to produce superior warplanes for our military, you turned what should have been a costly, four and a half year war, into a five-month crushing victory, potentially saving the lives of millions of people around Europe. If we continue to work as a team, I am sure that we will be able to prevent or at the least diminish many of the future troubles France was historically due to face in the coming decades."

"And we will all be happy to continue working with you, Louis." Replied Tasha. "Our destinies are now firmly linked to that of France and I promise that we will do our best to turn France into the richest, happiest and most advanced country in Europe and the World."

CHAPTER 19 – PEACE AND JEALOUSY

07:48 (Paris Time)

Monday, January 4, 1915

Durex production plant of Lenoir Industries

Suresnes, western suburbs of Paris

France

“Why am I feeling like they will greet us this morning with a ‘thank you and good luck’ before laying us off?” Said in a low voice one of the women lining up to punch ‘in’ at the employees’ entrance of the manufacturing plant in Suresnes, situated a few kilometers outside Paris. Her friend and coworker nodded weakly her head at that, having the same fear. They and many other women had been hired at the start of the war to replace all the male workers of the plant who had been mobilized into the Army. Now, with the government promising to demobilize most of its soldiers in the coming weeks and months, the women’s jobs at the plant were clearly at risk of simply disappearing. The two women punched their time cards without much conviction and started heading towards the production hall where they had been forming aircraft parts made of Durex in special heated molds. However, a number of shift supervisors redirected all the workers towards the large employees’ cafeteria, where they were told to sit down and wait for an important announcement.

“What did I tell you, Jeanne?” Said the woman who had predicted the loss of their jobs. Her friend had to agree with her: things didn’t look good at all. Jeanne felt some despair at the thought of losing this well-paying job, which had allowed her to support her family for months now with much needed extra revenues. Her husband, an ex-coal miner with a debilitating lung disease, received only a minimal medical pension for his condition, with his family thus living in precarious financial conditions, that is until Jeanne had been able to get this job at the Lenoir Industries’ Durex plant. Right now, fully two-thirds of the present workforce was female, but this looked like it was going to change...drastically. At a bit past eight o’clock, and with all the employees of the day shift present, a tall woman with long black hair entered the cafeteria and climbed on a

table in order to be seen by all, apparently intent on addressing the workers. Jeanne took a deep breath in on recognizing her.

“Oh my God! It’s Miss Lenoir, the big boss of the Lenoir Industries.”

“We’re cooked.” Pronounced her friend Sylvie in a discouraged tone as Tasha Lenoir signaled the crowd to be silent. The owner then spoke up in a clear, strong voice.

“Dear employees of the Lenoir Industries, you have been gathered here this morning for an important announcement from me. For those who were worried that this would be to tell you that your jobs would go away with the end of the war, I am happy to say that they were wrong.”

A mix of exclamations, sighs of relief and surprise went around the cafeteria for a moment before Tasha Lenoir called for silence again.

“I am happy to announce to you all that there will be no layoffs or replacement of workers at this plant or at any of my other plants. Some may ask how this could be possible, with wartime military contracts about to be cut or cancelled. Well, the answer is quite simple: we will return to the production of civilian goods and will also expand the range of our Durex products. During the last few weeks, I have had extensive discussions and meetings with the owners and executives of a few other industrial companies in the region and, together, we have been able to come up with common plans for post-war production and operation. The workers who were mobilized will get their old jobs back once demobilized, but the ones who were hired to replace them for the war’s duration will be able to continue to work under me. You may have noticed that a new manufacturing hall has been under construction for two months now, next to this plant. Well, many of you will be working in that new hall as soon as it will be completed. That new hall will actually build cars in partnership with the Salmson engine company and the Renault automobile company. Salmson will provide the engines and transmissions, while Renault will provide the chassis, the suspension and its know-how in automobile manufacturing. My industries will provide the bodies, to be made of Durex, and the electrical and electronic parts. An assembly chain at the Renault plant in Boulogne-Billancourt, which is presently building military trucks, will be converted to the production of new models of civilian trucks and buses. All these new models of vehicles will be at the edge of present technology, like the planes we build for Air France and the French Army. Those new cars and trucks should thus be able to take by assault the world markets for cars and trucks and sell in huge numbers, thus insuring steady employment for all of you. Air France will also enlarge significantly its fleet of aircraft, in

order to expand its worldwide network. That means more aircraft built here and more jobs. Right now, the government assured me that the last batch of military aircraft it had ordered will be kept in the books, as it wishes to finish fully equipping a minimum number of combat squadrons to be kept as a peacetime force. In turn, it will scrap the older, primitive, non-Blériot aircraft it still has in the Army and Navy inventories, keeping from now on only Blériot-Kruger aircraft in military service. It will also take deliveries of a few more batches of Durex military helmets and armored vests, so that all the soldiers in our army will be protected if they are ever again called to war in the future. Finally, part of this plant will convert to the manufacturing of civilian items not related to aircraft, things like sports and camping equipment, portable boats, modular shelters and so on, things that I have been wanting to produce for years now but could not because of the war effort. You can thus rest easy and go to work knowing that you won't be thrown into unemployment anytime soon. With this said, have a nice day, all of you."

Thunderous cheers and happy yells then shook the cafeteria as all the workers, men and women, jumped on their feet to celebrate as Tasha jumped off her table and left after a last wave of the hand.

09:56 (London Time)

Thursday, January 7, 1914

Prime Minister's official residence

10 Downing Street, Whitehall District

London, England

"And what is happening with the Austro-Hungarian Empire these days, Sir Grey?" Asked Prime Minister Asquit to his foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, who was assembled with the other ministers of Asquit's cabinet around the big conference table.

"Basically, it is disintegrating rather fast, Mister Prime Minister. Ever since that French air bombardment that destroyed the imperial palace of Schönbrunn in Vienna and killed Emperor Franz-Joseph, the imperial hold on power has been shaky. Now, it is on the way out. Charles the First, the son and successor of Emperor Franz-Joseph, is said to be about to flee into exile to Switzerland, while the Vienna parliament is trying to form a government of salvation. The Hungarians are clamoring for independence from the empire and so do the Czechs and the Slovaks. In fact, the Hungarian units of the Imperial Army are already refusing orders that don't come from Budapest and have

started withdrawing back into Hungarian territory. That has in turn allowed the Serbs to push the remaining imperial forces out of its territory. Within a month or two, the map of the Balkans should look quite different from before the war.”

“And the Turks? Are they becoming more reasonable?”

“They are at last, Mister Prime Minister. They have come to regret quite a lot joining Germany last September. The recent bombing by the French of the Sultan’s palace in Constantinople has done miracles to curb the Sultan’s bellicosity and he apparently took good notice of the French threats of further bombings if Turkish forces engage again in abuses and repressions of the various Christian minorities around the Ottoman Empire.”

“Maybe this would be a good time for us throw the Turks out of Palestine, Mister Prime Minister. The Turks in Palestine and Arabia have been a threat to the Suez Canal for far too long now.” Said Field Marshal Sir Charles Douglas, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, making Asquit think for a moment.

“Hum, a tempting idea, I must say. We could always invoke our wish to protect the Christian minorities of the region from Turkish abuses as an excuse for a Palestine expedition. Would the French be ready to support us, or at the least approve of our move if we do enter Palestine, Sir Grey?”

“I believe that the French will neither support such a move by us nor oppose it, Mister Prime Minister. Right now, as French Foreign Minister Delcassé told me recently, the two things that France wants are peace and stability, so that they can repair the war damage to their country and restart their peacetime economy.”

The first sentence from Grey attracted a snicker from the First Sea Lord, Winston Churchill.

“Even if the French would want to oppose us and stop us from taking Palestine, I doubt very much that they would be willing to face the Royal Navy, or risk having their coasts bombarded by our ships.”

More than one minister gave Churchill a horrified look on hearing that, starting with Sir Grey.

“Are you mad, Churchill? Have you already forgotten the kind of damage the French heavy bombers can inflict from the air, bombers that are way faster than our own fighter aircraft and cannot be intercepted by us, or by anybody else?”

"Then, let's produce fighter aircraft that are fast enough, by Jove! We should light a fire under the asses of our own aircraft manufacturers, so that they would start producing something more than mere toys."

"I would agree with Mister Churchill that our aircraft industry has not shone very brightly in the last few years, while the French flew past everyone else." Said Asquit, making many nod their heads. Field Marshal Douglas however felt obliged to correct him in a polite tone.

"It is not the French who flew past everyone else, Mister Prime Minister, but rather more specifically Mister Louis Blériot and his present chief designer, a Miss Johanna Kruger. Those two have been producing since early 1913 planes that have proved far superior to anything else, including the planes built by Blériot himself before 1912. Those new Blériot planes are made even more superior by the fact that they incorporate highly advanced radios and electronic instruments that boost their technological edge. General de Castelnau allowed me to inspect a number of those new Blériot-Kruger aircraft and I must say that I was deeply impressed by them. As Mister Churchill correctly said, compared to the new French aircraft, our own present planes are mere toys."

"Then, why didn't we buy some of those new French aircraft then?" Asked the War Minister, Herbert Kitchener. "Surely, as our allies, the French would have accepted to sell their planes to us."

Douglas answered him with a bitter smirk.

"Oh, they would have...until we refused to buy them."

"WHAT?" Exclaimed at once Asquit, stunned. "Why?"

"Because the Air Department of the Home Office, pushed by Parliament members with links to the Marconi Company, promulgated a directive in 1912 that prohibited us from acquiring radios that were not made by the said Marconi Company. It also prohibited any non-Marconi radio to be put aboard British ships or planes or to be operated by British ground facilities. Since every Blériot-Kruger built has at least one French-made radio set, that prevented us from buying the new French planes. However, it is now too late to repair the damage: Mister Blériot told us when we first refused his planes that he would not sell us his planes from then on."

"BLOODY HELL! All that just to favor one company?"

"It is unfortunately true, Mister Prime Minister." Added the Lord of Exchequer, David Lloyd George. "Even our merchant ships and transatlantic liners have by

government regulations to use Marconi-made radios, which they can operate but now own, as these radios remain Marconi property by contract. I was made to understand that Mister Marconi enjoys some very powerful support from many prominent members of Parliament, who are said to hold shares in his company.”

“That can’t continue like this. I want those regulations abolished and damn Marconi and his political hacks! Please see to that, Lord George.”

“I will, Mister Prime Minister.”

Asquit then regained his calm after a moment and looked at his foreign secretary again.

“Let’s resume our tour of the situation around Europe. What is happening with Russia?”

“With the collapse of the German Army, the Russian Army was able to advance all the way to the Oder River and take much of East and West Prussia. However, the French were then able to convince Czar Nicholas to withdraw partly and to keep only East Prussia, including the vital ports of Danzig and Königsberg. Before they withdrew, however, the Russians extensively looted West Prussia, supposedly as war reparations. The Russians were also able to push the Austro-Hungarians out of Poland and Galicia. Czar Nicholas is thus now in control of an even bigger territory than before.”

“And the Germans in all this?” Asked Lord George. “Their lot must be quite miserable these days.”

“Well, I wouldn’t feel much sympathy for them, even though they are effectively hurting quite a lot now, Lord George.” Replied Field Marshal Douglas. I was able to see the wanton destruction, looting and killings the German Army did when it invaded parts of Belgium before being pushed back. Its conduct was nothing less than barbaric, with summary execution of Belgian civilians, the gratuitous burning of many historical buildings and libraries and the extensive looting and theft of Belgian industrial machinery. I was told by General de Castelnau that the Germans did the same in Alsace-Lorraine as they withdrew, and I have no reasons to doubt his word about that. German arrogance needs to be broken, for good. Right now, the French Army, along with the Belgians, are busy disarming the German Army and are occupying the German lands west of the Rhine. As for the regions of Alsace and Lorraine, the French have retaken them and are vowing never to let Germany invade them again.”

“What about the German Navy?” Asked Winston Churchill, becoming alarmed. “Do the French intend to destroy it or to seize it?”

“That, I am not sure about, Mister Churchill. For the moment, the French have interned the German warships docked in Wilhelmshaven but have not moved them to France yet. We certainly should do our best to secure those warships: they could constitute a future threat to our navy if anyone grabs them and uses them against us overseas. I in fact propose that we send a high level delegation to Paris to discuss that subject with President Poincaré.”

“I will certainly support the sending of such a delegation, gentlemen. Those German warships should either end up in one of our naval bases, in a scrap yard or at the bottom of the sea.” Said Prime Minister Asquith, making Winston Churchill and many other heads around the table nod in agreement. “Well, I believe that we have quite a lot on our plate now, gentlemen. Go back to your respective ministries and start the ball rolling.”

14:14 (Washington Time)

Friday, January 8, 1915

Cabinet conference room, the White House

Washington, D.C., United States

“Can someone tell me how the French, with only rather weak British and Belgian support, could inflict so quickly such a crushing defeat on Germany? I realize that the Russian Army is huge and was pressuring heavily the Germans in the East, but you all predicted to me only a few months ago that France was at grave risk of being overwhelmed by the Germans. What changed the equation so much?”

President Woodrow Wilson’ cabinet members and military chiefs looked at each other in indecision, themselves not too sure about the answer to his question. Major-General Hugh Lenox Scott finally took on him to answer his President.

“My feeling is that, by targeting the German top leaders, the French broke the German chain of command, thus spreading disorder and indecision among the German troops, who then became susceptible to chaos and panic. The biggest German failing in my opinion was their failure to fully take Liege and push the Belgians away from the Meuse River. That resulted in the bulk of the German armies staying stuck in front of the Meuse and being unable to effect their planned flanking move through Belgium against the French armies. The French and Belgians then had an excellent opportunity to surround the Germans, an opportunity they used well.”

"What about the French planes?" Objected Vice-President Thomas Marshall. "The French press praised their performances endlessly. They also supposedly played a big role in the encirclement of the German armies stuck east of the Meuse."

"I believe that those articles are mostly propaganda, Mister Vice-President." Retorted Scott. "In fact, since the French did not allow our attachés to be near the frontlines, we have only what they chose to say about the war as sources of information on what exactly happened at the front."

"What about our military intelligence service?" Asked the Secretary of War, Lindley Garrison. "Didn't they get any secret information about the war? It in fact exists for just such a purpose, no?"

Major-General Scott made an embarrassed smile as he searched for words.

"Well, our Second Staff Division did what it could, but the French and Belgians simply didn't let any foreign observers near the frontlines. Our agents are however starting to get some rumors and stories brought back from the front by demobilized soldiers. These reports are for the moment fragmentary and of unknown reliability, so I would hesitate to try to form a picture from them right now. I am sorry, but we have too little information right now to paint an accurate picture of how the war was fought."

It was evident from his facial expression that the President was not very satisfied with that answer but, not knowing much about the military and war, he was ill placed to second-guess his own generals. Wilson thus let it go at that and switched subjects.

"Very well! Send me an analysis of the war as soon as you feel that you have enough reliable information about the fighting, General Scott. Now, does anyone have another subject to discuss today?"

"I certainly do, Mister President." Said at once the Postmaster General, Albert Burleson, his tone forceful. "It is about the landing and overflight privileges of the French aviation company, Air France, in the United States. Me and the Secretary of the Navy have a real bone of contention about those arrogant French flyers."

Wilson frowned, surprised by the subject raised by Burleson.

"Air France? What exactly is the problem with them?"

"My problem personally is about the way they insulted us by refusing to adhere to our local and state laws concerning the segregation of niggers inside their aviation facilities established in New York, Los Angeles and Honolulu, Mister President. They even had the gall to refuse to land in cities that insisted on enforcing local segregation laws and ordinances."

"And what about you, Secretary Daniels?" Asked Wilson, looking at Josephus Daniels, his secretary of the navy.

"While I share the displeasure of the Postmaster General about Air France's refusal to respect our segregation laws, I am more concerned about their extensive use of radio transmitters within our country, Mister President. As you well know, I have been advocating for years that all radio transmitters within the United States should be under the control of the Navy, and this for national security reasons. However, Air France routinely uses radio transmissions on multiple frequencies while operating over our territory, some of which we can't even intercept because they use a type of radio technology that we do not possess. Furthermore, Air France operates three powerful radio beacon stations in our country, namely in New York, Los Angeles and Honolulu. They say that they are used as navigational aids for their planes flying across the Atlantic and across the United States, but those beacons could as easily be used to direct bombers towards targets within our country or in neighboring countries."

Woodrow Wilson took a moment to think over both arguments from Burleson and Daniels. Like Burleson and Daniels, he was a segregationist and didn't like seeing other countries criticize the United States on that point. There was also this business of radio use, about which he understood little about the technology involved, so he deferred to the judgment of Daniels on that.

"Alright, what do you propose that we do about that state of affairs, gentlemen?"

"We should forcibly close all Air France operations and stations within the United States and Hawaii until they agree to comply with all our state laws and local ordinances." Answered Burleson, quickly followed by Daniels.

"On my part, I believe it to be essential that my department at the least closely monitor and control all the radio transmitters belonging to Air France that are installed in-country, Mister President."

As Wilson was nodding his head at that, apparently won over, the secretary of commerce, William Redfield, objected at once, thoroughly alarmed.

"WAIT! Do you have any idea of the repercussions your proposed measures would have? I'm afraid that you don't understand what is at stake here."

Wilson gave him a jaundiced look then.

"What repercussions? Are you afraid of French retaliations if we enforce our own rules in our own country, Secretary Redfield?"

“French retaliations, no! American popular backlash, yes! Don’t you realize that the Air France service from Paris to New York and to Los Angeles and Honolulu is presently the sole quick means for American travelers and businessmen to get to Europe or to cross the United States within 24 hours? The alternative to that air service is close to a week of travelling by ship or train, at a much greater cost than that of Air France fares. Air France air service is hugely popular with American businessmen and industrialists and our own government officials and diplomats also fly extensively on Air France. Right now, nobody has the aircraft technology possessed by Air France and our own aircraft manufacturers are producing what are mere toys compared to Air France planes. And you want to deprive the American public of such a useful service just so that we could force our segregationist policies on Air France? This is nuts! You do that and I promise you immediate protests from the highest financial and business spheres in this country. As for the Air France radios being a threat to our national security, that is downright laughable. Give me a reason why France would want to attack us. I say, let Air France be.”

Redfield was immediately supported by the Secretary of the Interior, Franklin Lane, who looked hard across the table at Burleson and Daniels while speaking.

“I agree a hundred percent with Secretary Redfield, Mister President. I have personally travelled on Air France planes a number of times to go to California and Hawaii and I have only compliments for the courtesy and professionalism of Air France personnel and service. I also had many conversations with numerous big businessmen and bankers about the state of air travel in the United States. All wished for a more extensive Air France network within the United States, while many lambasted as being stupid and myopic the attempts by numerous American cities and states to force segregationist regulations on Air France, something that decided Air France to cancel its plans to open more air stations within the United States, especially inside our southern states. This obsession about pushing segregation laws on a foreign transportation company providing an essential service to the American public is not only short-sighted, Mister President: it is also damaging our own economic interests.”

“So, you would be ready to let that foreign company laugh at our laws?” Replied Burleson in a combative tone. That prompted Lane to bend forward, his face hard.

“Here is a piece of news, Burleson: most of the rest of the World is already objecting to our segregationist laws. If you are ready to put the brakes on quick travel across the states just so that you could say proudly that a few negroes could be forcibly

segregated within Air France stations in the United States, then expect a severe backlash from people who have been contributing heavily to the coffers of our political party.”

That last part about financial contributions to Democratic Party’s coffers was not lost on President Wilson, who quickly reversed himself on realizing the potential political damage involved.

“On second thought, I believe that you are right, Secretary Lane. However, this only highlights the poor state of development of our own aeronautical industry and technology. Couldn’t American companies buy some of those French planes and then open air routes of their own across the United States?”

Secretary of Commerce Redfield sighed with discouragement then, hit by the irony of all this.

“No, they can’t, Mister President, for the simple reason that Mister Blériot, who builds the planes used by Air France, has told me that he will not sell his planes to our government or to American companies.”

“WHY?” Asked Wilson, becoming instantly angry. “Who the hell does he think that he is?”

“Why, Mister President? Because of the way we rebuffed the owner and founder of Air France, who is a very good friend of Blériot, when she asked to have her air stations exempted from our segregationist laws and ordinances. Mister Blériot also happens to be strongly anti-segregation, like his friend, Miss Tasha Lenoir.”

“And who exactly is this Tasha Lenoir?” Asked Wilson, still pissed.

“She is acclaimed as a scientific genius with strong business acumen and is rumored to be in very good terms with many high-level French officials, including President Poincaré and General de Castelnau, the head of the French Army. She actually has dual American-French citizenship. She invented and developed all the new radio and electronic technology that the French military and Air France are using presently. She is also rumored to have invented many other things, including a new, very powerful explosive and a new lightweight and highly resistant material that is used in the construction of Blériot aircraft. One of the close friends of Lenoir, who arrived with her in France in 1912, is the chief designer of all the new planes that Blériot is now building and that are so superior to everything else.”

“Two mere women could do this much?” Said in a dismissive tone State Secretary William Jennings Bryan, a man with strong religious convictions and firm ideas

about many things, including the role of women in society and the absolute truth of every word in the Bible. "I don't believe that."

"Feel free not to believe me on that, but it won't change the fact that Blériot will not sell his planes to us, while Miss Lenoir won't sell her radios or electronic equipment to us. If we want to develop viable air travel across our country, then we either let Air France operate unimpeded by our segregation laws, or we push our own aircraft designers in doing a much better job than what they are doing now. However, please understand, all of you here, that the present technological edge that Blériot and Air France enjoys over our own designers and aircraft manufacturers is in my opinion nearly impossible to overcome."

Lane's words left the others around the table silent for a moment, until President Wilson spoke up.

"I will not insult our various state governors by capitulating to the demands of that Tasha Lenoir and of her Air France company. However, I am ready to live with letting Air France operate as it does presently in New York, Los Angeles and Honolulu, but nowhere else. Secretary of Treasury McAdoo, I want you to get your Secret Service to start an in-depth investigation of that Tasha Lenoir and of her associates in France. Find out if there could be ways for us to influence her or to make her bend to our demands. The Attorney General's Bureau of Investigation and Secretary of War Garrison's Military Intelligence Division will assist your Secret Service agents to the best of their abilities. If we could procure at the same time that advanced French aircraft and electronic technology, then the better. However, I urge you all to operate discretely in this matter, in order to avoid possible frictions with the French government. Any questions? No? Then this meeting is adjourned."

CHAPTER 20 – PLAYING DIRTY

15:33 (Washington Time)

Wednesday, January 20, 1915

Secret Service offices, Old Executive Building

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

Michael Delong and Roger Bellamy were greeted with expectant smiles on entering the small office assigned to their joint Secret Service-Bureau of Investigation team, with their team leader, Mark Beaupré, asking them aloud.

“So, any luck with newspapers archives?”

“Not much, to be frank.” Replied Michael Delong, a Bureau of Investigation agent of Dutch-French ethnic background who spoke Dutch and French fluently on top of English. “We found a few interesting articles about Lenoir and her three female friends, but they all dated from at most 1912, after they arrived in France. And you, did you find something about their past in the United States?”

“Sweet nothing. Me, John and Richard made calls left and right at various civil registries, at the I.R.S.¹⁶ and at the Passports Section of the State Department and came out completely empty. The more it goes, the more I am convinced that those four women assumed false identities. That is especially true for that Tasha Lenoir, who was said to be already rich when she arrived in France. If she indeed came from a rich family, the I.R.S. should have had at the least something about her parents. However, no income declarations on a Lenoir family from New York was found in their archives. As for the Passports Section, they never delivered passports to a Tasha Lenoir, Johanna Kruger, Terry Clarkson or Pham Ti Hien in recent years.”

“I think that you are right about those women going around with false identities, boss.” Said Roger Bellamy, who had accompanied Delong on his tour of newspapers archive rooms. “If that’s the case, then they can already be accused of a couple of minor felonies.”

¹⁶ I.R.S. : Internal Revenue Services. The tax and revenues department of the American Department of Treasury.

"True, but they also have dual American-French citizenships, which complicates things a bit."

"What about the science and technical degrees claimed by Lenoir and Kruger. If they really earned such degrees here in the United States, it should be fairly easy to trace that, no?" Said Michael Delong. Richard Prescott, another member of the team present in the office, shook his head.

"Nothing on that front either. What is more, not a single American university on the East Coast has ever awarded a doctorate in physics to a woman. Ever! Yet, the scientific achievements that this Tasha Lenoir made in France can't be denied, nor can it be denied that this Johanna Kruger is in fact an extremely talented aeronautical engineer, a field in which no American university has yet awarded a degree to a woman. We thus have a deep contradiction here: from their work in France, those women have proved highly competent in fields in which no American institutions of high learning ever awarded diplomas to women."

"What about the two other women who arrived with Lenoir and Kruger in France in May of 1912?" Asked John McMaster, the last member of the team. Mark Beaupré showed a bit of frustration while answering him.

"They are even more of a blank than Lenoir and Kruger. Terry Clarkson is a fairly common name for a woman in the United States and we have too little background information on her to be able to find more on her through archives. As for Pham Ti Hien, she drew a complete blank. There is only a grand total of four Pham families in the States, all residing on the West Coast, and none of them have a daughter named Hien."

"Then, who the hell are these women and where do they come from?" Asked Roger Bellamy out of frustration. "Even if we can't find traces of them here, they can't be exactly described as nobodies. One, Tasha Lenoir, is described as a filthy rich scientific genius. Johanna Kruger is acknowledged in France as being the top aircraft designer and engineer there at this time. Terry Clarkson, a black woman, is an accomplished aircraft pilot and also gained the reputation of being a deadly pistol shot while visiting New York on the first transatlantic flight ever in June of 1913. She is also said to be Tasha Lenoir's personal bodyguard. Only this Pham Ti Hien could be said to be rather normal but, like the three others, she speaks at least four languages and is said to possess a fantastic memory. Talk about an out-of-the-ordinary quartet. Yet, it is as if they never existed here in the States."

"That is troubling indeed." Agreed Mark Beaupré before looking up at Michael Delong and Roger Bellamy. "Well, show us what you found! Maybe it will help us plug a few holes."

The whole group of five federal agents went to a table set in a corner, near a wall corkboard on which photos and documents were pinned, with Delong taking out of his briefcase a few documents and spreading them on the table.

"Here are copies of what me and Roger found that could be of interest in the various newspapers archives we visited. To be frank, it doesn't amount to much and nearly all deal with the two visits made to New York by Tasha Lenoir. The first visit was when she came on that historic first transatlantic flight, while the second was to inaugurate her Air France airfield in Queens. There may be more articles available on the West Coast about the inauguration of her airfields in Los Angeles and Honolulu, but I would need to travel there to see about that."

"Forget that trip to the West Coast for the moment, Michael: the way things are going, I suspect that we will have a much bigger need to travel to France first, to get facts there that we can't get here... Hum, not much here, as you said. The one thing that those newspaper articles confirm is that this Terry Clarkson must be considered as a potentially very dangerous opponent in a fight. I think that my mind is made: our next move will be to fly to France and collect more information there."

"And how is your spoken French, boss?" asked Michael Delong, smiling. Mark Beaupré made a smirk at that.

"To be frank, I am not sure that Frenchmen will be able to truly understand my Cajun accent. Only time will tell, I suppose."

16:29 (Paris Time)

Saturday, January 23, 1915

**Air France flight AF-002, arriving in Buc
France**

Mark Beaupré was awakened from his sleep by gentle shakes and the voice of John McMaster.

"Mark! Mark! Wake up: we are arriving in Paris."

"Uh? Oh, okay!"

The Secret Service team leader shook his head a bit to chase his sleepiness, then looked through the window of his seat row. He saw that they were overflying at fairly low altitude a collection of farmers' fields, forests and small villages. A mechanical noise made him look at the starboard wing of their Air France CIGOGNE transport amphibian, in time to see the complex system of double flaps and leading edge slats deploy fully.

"Damn! What a machine. This aircraft is a true marvel."

"The stewardesses are not bad either." Replied McMaster with a knowing grin. "Overall, I am really impressed with this flight. The ride was a lot smoother than I expected, the food was great and the seats are really comfortable. I particularly liked these reclining back rests."

"And we are here partly to investigate the designer of this plane." Said Mark in a low voice. "Quite ironic, isn't it?"

"Yes! So, what's next after we arrive?"

"The embassy's Assistant Military Attaché is supposed to be waiting for us at the Buc Airport. He is going to drive us to our hotel in Paris and also will pass on some extra information to help us in our investigation."

"That would be welcomed, especially since none of us ever visited Paris...or France."

The two men then fell silent as their plane came down steadily while lining up on the main runway of Buc Airport. The three other agents of the team were sitting in dispersed seats around the tourist class cabin, in order not to look like part of a group. The agents instinctively braced themselves just before the wheels of their aircraft touched down on the concrete surface of the main runway at Buc, which was still the designated international airport for Paris while the new Le Bourget Airport was being built close to the northeast suburbs of the city. John McMaster allowed himself to relax once their plane had stopped bouncing on its wheels and had slowed down enough to turn on a taxiway leading towards the passengers terminal of the airport.

"Phew! I must say that it takes a while to get accustomed to all this, even though this flight proved quite safe."

"Yeah! When I think that we in the States have produced by ourselves nothing comparable to this airport or to this plane." Replied Mark Beaupré, a hint of bitterness in his voice. Look at that terminal! There are no less than three other heavy transport planes already parked in front of it."

"Who could have predicted that those Frenchmen could have realized all this in just a few years." Said John McMaster, prompting a correction from his team leader.

"Remember, John: two of the women we are investigating are actually the ones who made this possible, if we can believe the little information we have about them. Furthermore, those women are said to have a lot of influence with French authorities. We will have to play it carefully while in France."

"And what could they do to us? Kill us and make us disappear? We are American federal agents, after all."

Mark looked sharply at his agent on hearing that, with his tone hardening.

"No! We are simple tourists, John. Remember that! Also, this country is just coming out of a ferocious, destructive war and I suspect that French authorities are still on an elevated alert level. Don't underestimate the French."

"Uh, understood."

The two agents then fell silent as their plane rolled to one of the gates of the terminal, to finally shut down its four engines once immobilized under a huge inclined overhead transparent roof that was apparently meant to protect the plane from rain or snow while passengers went from the terminal to the plane or vice-versa. While it was not snowing at the time, there was a very thin layer of snow on the concrete tarmac surrounding the circular, tower-like terminal. On the instructions from their stewardess, the agents got out of their seats and collected their coats, hats and small luggage from the overhead storage bins of their seats, then left the aircraft via its aft access ramp, where they were greeted by a cold wind that made them button up their trench coats in a hurry. From there, they followed the other passengers to the ground entrance of their gate, entering a large hall with high ceiling. Being new at air travel and its particularities, the five agents looked around them with curiosity while taking place in the two lines forming in front of the two immigration reception boots in operation at the time. Mark Beaupré saw that the wall behind the immigration boots had large panoramic windows at the level of the second floor, with dozens of persons looking down into the arrival hall and with many of them happily waving their arms as they spotted loved ones or friends among the arriving passengers. When his turn came at the immigration boot of his line, Mark didn't say a word and simply handed his passport to the French immigration officer, who opened it and looked at it before glancing at Mark's face. The man's English actually proved to be quite good, albeit heavily accented.

"What are your reasons to travel to France, Mister Brown?"

"Tourism, sir. I never visited France before."

The immigration officer nodded his head, then stamped Mark's passport and gave it back to him.

"Have a good time in France, Mister Brown. NEXT!"

Pocketing back his passport, Mark then went through the set of transparent double doors in the wall behind the boot, ending up in another large hall. This one was however half filled with six oval carrousel with rolling carpets, with six customs inspection counters at the back of the hall. Following the visual and audio instructions in both French and English given by big light boards and loudspeakers, Mark went to Carrousel Number Two, where the luggage from his flight was suppose to arrive soon. He had to wait maybe five or six minutes before the first suitcases started arriving on the carrousel. With about forty passengers having been on his flight, it didn't take long before everybody had their pieces of luggage and went to the customs inspection counters. Again, Mark didn't encounter any problems there and was able to proceed through quickly, contrary to an unlucky passenger with a German-sounding name who got the full search treatment. On coming out of the customs inspection area and into a visitors' hall, he was met with the relatives and friends that had been waiting for other travelers. There was however one lone man holding high a sign that said 'Mister Brown' and who stood against a wall. Going to him while carrying his two pieces of luggage, Mark stopped in front of him and put down his suitcases before speaking to him in English.

"I am Mister Brown."

"I was sent by the embassy, sir. Please go outside and get in the black Renault sedan with plate number ending with '096'. I will pass the word to your other companions as they emerge."

"Thank you! We are a total of five men."

Richard Prescott arrived at that moment, so Mark told him to follow him. Going outside through double sets of twin doors forming a kind of airlock that stopped the cold January wind to come in the terminal, the two federal agents saw at once the designated black car waiting for them, where a tall man in dark suit and overcoat was waiting. The man immediately asked Mark a question as he and Prescott got near him.

"Your name, sir?"

"I am Mister Brown and friends." Replied Mark, providing the rather simplistic identity confirmation for his group. The tall man then smiled to him and offered his hand for a shake.

"And I am Major Charles Lejeune, Assistant Army Attaché at the embassy. Let's load your luggage in the trunk."

"Uh, we are a total of five men. This car won't be able to carry us all and our luggage, Major."

"The car parked behind us also belongs to the embassy. You met its driver, Sergeant Downey, inside. Once all in the cars, we will drive you to the hotel in the 16th Arrondissement where we booked rooms for you. I will brief you on the way to Paris."

"Fair enough."

Within a few minutes, all five agents had arrived outside and had loaded their suitcases in the two waiting embassy cars. Mark Beaupré and Michael DeLong then took place in the lead car with Major Lejeune and his driver, while the three remaining agents loaded up in the second car. As the two vehicles were pulling out of their parking spaces in front of the terminal building, Mark couldn't help look around at the airport and its facilities, which were quite impressive.

"This certainly looks like a well-organized place. I see a lot of planes, some obviously military, on the other side of the airfield, where there are numerous hangars and other buildings."

"That side of the airport is actually the original Blériot Aéro-parc, which contains the Blériot workshops and the base facilities for Air France. Military planes due to be delivered are first tested there. That is also where Miss Lenoir has her research labs. The international airport section was built opposite the Blériot installations but they share the same runways."

That made Beaupré and DeLong examine with renewed attention the buildings they saw across the airfield as Major Lejeune continued.

"A word of caution, gentlemen. Because of the refusal of the United States to join the war at the side of France, us Americans are not exactly very popular in France right now. President Wilson's insistence in pushing France towards a negotiated peace with Germany, as German armies were invading both France and Belgium, didn't help one bit and was actually perceived by many French citizens as an insult. So, expect the occasional cold reaction to you in Paris."

"Great! Anything else that we should know, Major?"

In response, Lejeune produced a large envelope that he gave to Mark.

"You will find in this envelope a couple of local maps, a list of addresses of interest, including the addresses of the residence of Miss Lenoir and of her company offices in Paris, recent press photos and press articles about the four women who interest you and some ancillary information that could be useful to you. I will add to this the fact that Miss Lenoir and her associates, along with Air France and Blériot, enjoy a very high popular reputation in France, thanks to their role in helping the country defeat Germany."

That last sentence made Mark snap his head around to stare at Lejeune.

"They helped defeat the Germans? How?"

"By making possible many things that tremendously helped the French Army in the war. Those things include the new Blériot-Kruger planes that crushed whole German units from the air, the long range artillery rockets that could flatten a square mile of land in seconds, the compact and reliable radios invented by Miss Lenoir that allowed the French military command to pass orders and directives much quicker than the Germans could via their telephones, the new Metallex explosive that fills French bombs and shells and that was invented by Miss Lenoir and, last but not least, her incredible Durex body armor vests and helmets that saved the lives of tens of thousands of French and Belgian soldiers. As for Air France, its planes and civilian crews provided more than half of the transport planes that landed a full Belgian division in the rear of the German lines near Liege, an operation that started the mass encirclement of three German armies and resulted in their utter defeat. Me and Colonel Jefferson sent reports about all this to Washington, but my strong impression is that very few people over there took our reports seriously. This is all to say that, if you are found to intend to do harm in any way to these women, then expect a violent reaction from the French security services, which by the way are still on a war footing."

"Great! So we will have to walk on eggs while in France, right?"

"Definitely! I also suspect that our embassy is being watched, thanks to all these attempts by President Wilson to gain the support of pacifists among French political parties and intellectuals."

"Even better." Said Mark, shaking his head. "So, we must consider ourselves in hostile territory, is that it?"

"Pretty much! Also, don't make the mistake of underestimating this Miss Lenoir and her three female associates. Beware especially of the black woman, Terry Clarkson. This was not published in the local press but, about a year and a half ago, a team of seven German clandestine agents tried to kidnap both Tasha Lenoir and Johanna Kruger from the residence where they were temporarily residing. That Clarkson woman killed or captured all of these Germans."

Those words made both Mark and Michael look at Lejeune with disbelief.

"You're shitting me, Major!" Said Mark. "Were these Germans armed?"

"Of course they were, but they were apparently still no match for this Terry Clarkson, who by the way has a weapons carrying permit from the French government." Mark and Michael exchanged a glance then before the former spoke again to Lejeune.

"Thanks for the warning, Major. We will keep it in mind. May I ask what you know about those new French planes, new explosives and armored vests? Are they as good as some in Washington say?"

Charles Lejeune was nearly tempted then to vent his frustration at what he believed to be the obtuseness of his superiors in Washington, who had mostly ignored or downplayed the many reports he had sent them about the new French military equipment. He however decided to keep his full frustration in.

"Yes they are. They won the war for the French and the Belgians and all of these new things were invented or designed by either Tasha Lenoir or Johanna Kruger, with the industrial support of Louis Blériot and of oil tycoon Henri Deutsch de la Meurthe. I must also remind you that Miss Lenoir founded what is still the first and only commercial airline company with worldwide reach. Tell me: how are our own aircraft designers and manufacturers doing presently in the United States?"

Mark couldn't help make a dismissive gesture at that question.

"Those guys? They're not even in the same ballpark as Blériot and Air France are. I read in the past few months quite a few newspaper articles that were either laughing at their planes or blasting them for being so far behind the French. Some of those designers are doing honest efforts to try to catch up to the French, but many have just given up and closed up shop. From what I saw of the Air France plane I just flew on, I would say that they have little chances of catching up by themselves."

"Is part of your mission to steal some of that French technology, mister? If so, then I must warn you that security is pretty tight around Miss Lenoir's lab and around the Blériot prototypes workshop in Buc, with French Army soldiers guarding them.

Remember: this country is still on a war footing and will stay so until the German Army and Navy is fully disarmed, along with the Austro-Hungarian forces.”

“Damn! You certainly aren’t painting a reassuring picture for us, Major.”

That prompted Charles Lejeune in giving a warning look at Mark.

“I would be delinquent in my duties if I gave you a view other than reality, mister. Once at your hotel, you will be mostly on your own, as Ambassador Sharp doesn’t want to risk seeing his embassy being implicated if you are ever caught by the French. Oh, one last warning: don’t underestimate the French intelligence services. They proved to be very competent against the Germans and they can play quite dirty when they want to.”

On that, Lejeune turned back in his front passenger seat and let the two federal agents ponder all that he had told them while their car rolled towards Paris.

They arrived forty minutes later at a small hotel on Rue La Pérouse, not far from the American embassy, in the 16th Arrondissement. Major Lejeune however avoided going into the hotel himself and left the five agents with their suitcases on the sidewalk in front of the hotel, a small two-stars affair like hundreds of similar hotels in Paris. A bit disoriented at first, Mark and his agents finally entered the small lobby of the hotel, which acted as well as a coffee lounge, and presented themselves under their false names. The receptionist did ask to see their passports first but nonetheless registered them in fairly quickly, giving them keys to their rooms. While Mark Beaupré ended being alone in his room, his four agents had to share two other rooms. Thankfully, those rooms proved to have their own private bathrooms, even though those proved to be quite small. The agents took only the time to drop their suitcases, coats and hats in their rooms before meeting together in Mark’s room. The latter then took a couple of minutes to repeat to them what Major Lejeune had told him. Next, he opened the large envelope given to him by Lejeune and spread its content on his bed, so that they could start sifting through it. Mark waited until everybody had seen everything before speaking to his team.

“Well, here we are, gentlemen. From what we know now, I would say that our best option is to play the soft, subtle approach. Playing rough with those women will definitely not be a good idea, in view of the protection and favor they enjoy from the French government. Our first goal will be to find out the true identity and origin of Miss Lenoir and of her associates, if that is at all possible. Second, we will have to assess

what their attitude towards the United States is, to see if they could potentially become a security threat to our country. Personally, I doubt so, but we must still check on that. Finally, we will see if we can acquire some of that new French technology without taking excessive risks. However, finding out the true identity and origin of those women will always be our top priority. Questions?”

“Uh, how do you propose that we approach these women, boss?” Asked Richard Prescott. “Only you and Michael speak French.”

“I am inclined to follow our primary plan. We will then see how things go from there. Since nearly all businesses and shops are closed tomorrow, a Sunday, we will take it easy and start getting accustomed to the city. If we can find an open car rental place, we will get a car at the same time.”

09:04 (Paris Time)

Monday, January 25, 1915

32 Avenue de Wagram, 8th Arrondissement

Paris, France

John McMaster, who was driving their rental car, was forced to park further down the street than planned due to a large delivery truck being parked in front of the building containing the offices of the ‘Lenoir Industries’. Mark Beaupré, who was sitting in the front passenger seat, watched the truck for a moment in his rearview mirror as movers took boxes and pieces of furniture out of the truck and into the building.

“At least, this is not the offices of interest to us that are moving out, but rather someone new moving in. You may get out and go sell your story, Michael.”

“On my way, boss!” Replied Michael before opening his rear right door and stepping out. He then walked calmly among the pedestrians moving along on the sidewalk, stopping beside the entrance to Number 32 Avenue de Wagram and looking at the sign posted in the window next to the door.

“Radio France Studios, opening soon...” Read Michael, whose mind clicked into gear at once. In the United States, the only radio transmitters in operation were those belonging to the government or to individual amateur radio operators. Michael was thus not sure what this radio studio implied but, since Tasha Lenoir was reputed for advancing the radio technology in France, this may well be connected to her. Entering the building, Michael found an information board inside the entrance lobby that gave the

room or suite numbers for the various occupants of the building. The offices of the 'Lenoir Industries' were shown to be on the second floor, while 'Radio France' was listed as being on the fourth floor, the top level just before the attic space. There was an elevator cage beside the main staircase, but it was presently being used by the movers to bring pieces of furniture upstairs, so Michael negotiated the stairs to the second floor, where he pushed open a glass door bearing 'Lenoir Industries' in bold, gold letters, entering a sort of waiting lounge with a female receptionist sitting behind a desk in a far corner. Taking off his coat and hat first and hanging them in a wall coat rack, Michael then went to the receptionist, a young and very pretty woman who gave him a big welcoming smile.

"Welcome to the Paris offices of the 'Lenoir Industries', mister. What may I do for you." She said in French, to which Michael replied in his near accent-free French.

"My name is Michael Moorcock and I am a freelance reporter. I arrived from the United States last Saturday and would like to arrange an interview with Miss Tasha Lenoir."

"Then, I will see if Miss Pham can receive you now, Mister Moorcock: she is Miss Lenoir's executive secretary, on top of being the manager for her Paris offices. One moment please."

Pushing a button on an intercom box sitting on her desk, the receptionist waited until a female voice answered her, then spoke for a moment, presumably with the manager. At the end of it, the receptionist closed the intercom link and smiled again to Michael.

"Miss Pham is presently with another person but should be finished in a few minutes. If you could take a seat in the meantime, she will receive you next. If you would like some coffee while waiting, there is a coffee urn on the corner table over there. The coffee is free."

"Thank you very much, miss."

Going to the said corner table, Michael saw that there was as well a platter full of biscuits next to the coffee urn and piles of cups, plus spoons and containers for cream and sugar, with the bottle of cream sitting in a small bucket full of ice cubes. Pouring himself a cup and adding a bit of cream to it, Michael took a sip from his cup and was agreeably surprised: that coffee was strong and of fine quality. Looking at the collection of cookies, Michael gave in to his stomach and grabbed a large chocolate cookie before going to sit in one of the padded chairs lining the walls of the lounge.

His waiting went on for maybe six minutes before a young man who looked very much the part of a rebellious intellectual walked out of an office next to the receptionist's desk, apparently satisfied with his talk with the manager. A very pretty young Asian woman then stepped out of the same office and went to Michael, who hurriedly got up and put his cup on the nearby coffee table. The woman, who wore a very modern looking dress with a rather short skirt, shook hands with him as she spoke in a melodious voice. Her English actually sounded a bit strange to Michael, with an accent in it that he couldn't place and had never heard in the United States.

"Good morning, Mister Moorcock. I am Pham Ti Hien, Executive Secretary to Miss Lenoir. If you may please follow me into my office."

"With pleasure, Miss Pham. Uh, is it 'Miss' or 'Misses'?"

"Miss." Replied Hien with a smile before leading him into her office, where she showed him a comfortable padded chair on wheels placed in front of a large work desk.

"Please sit down, Mister Moorcock."

"Thank you!"

Hien went to her own chair behind her desk and sat down, waiting for Michael to be seated before speaking.

"So, you wish to interview Miss Lenoir? Is it about any specific subject?"

"Not really, Miss Pham. It is just that the story of a successful businesswoman who is also a top notch scientist is fascinating a lot of Americans. As a freelance reporter, I would like to produce a background piece on her and her corporation, a piece that I would then sell to the biggest newspapers in the States. Would Miss Lenoir be amenable to such an interview?"

"Probably, but I will have to check with her when she would be available for that interview: she is a very busy woman indeed. How long will you stay in Paris, Mister Moorcock?"

"As long as it takes, Miss Pham. With the war still fresh in everybody's minds, I should find plenty of materiel for more articles while waiting for my interview with Miss Lenoir."

"Good! Can I have the address where you are staying in Paris, so that I am able to send you a notice as soon as I have a time and place for that interview?"

That apparently innocuous question made Michael hesitate for a fraction of a second, as he didn't like the idea of telling the manager where to find him and his team. That hesitation, however slight, was caught by Hien, who had quite a lot of experience, at

least in the 27th Century, in filtering the would-be visitors to Tasha. Now on her guard but still harboring a friendly smile, she carefully noted down Michael's answer before looking back at him.

"I should be able to send you a notice at your hotel no later than tomorrow evening, Mister Moorcock. When the time of the meeting comes, I will send in advance a driver and car to pick you up at your hotel. Will that be satisfactory?"

"It will, miss." Replied Michael, who really had little choice but to accept. "Uh, before I leave, may I ask you a few questions?"

"Please do."

"Thank you! First, as the representative manager of the 'Lenoir Industries' in Paris, could you give me some basic statistics about your corporation, like its annual revenue, the number of employees it has and the things it manufactures?"

"Certainly, Mister Moorcock. First off, the declared income of the Lenoir Industries, as given in its past year's business report, was just over 686 million francs. This included the revenues from Air France, which is part of our corporation."

"Wow! I didn't expect it to be that much, to be frank, miss."

"That is understandable, mister, as most of our revenues in that year came from military contracts, which were kept confidential for reasons of national security."

"I see! What about your employees, miss?"

"At the last count, the various plants and facilities of the Lenoir Industries employ full time a total of 4,268 employees, about 570 of which work for Air France. Our facilities include a chemicals plant, a polymer bulk production plant, a polymer parts manufacturing plant, a glass fibers products production plant, an electronics production plant, a rocket propellant plant mostly geared towards military contracts and a solar energy systems production plant."

Michael, who was frantically taking notes on a pad, looked up at Hien, confusion visible on his face.

"Solar energy systems? I don't understand. What's that?"

"I am talking about solar energy panels that use photo-voltaic cells to produce electricity when they are hit by sunlight. This is a fairly recent addition to our line of products that has been mostly limited up to now to use by the French military and by Air France airfield facilities. We are however getting ready to expand the sales of these solar systems to the general public worldwide. They should be particularly popular in countries with limited electrical networks, as our solar panels are easy to install and

require very little maintenance. In fact, I can provide you right now with a few sales pamphlets about our solar energy systems and other non-military products. Just give me a second.”

Michael hid his jubilation as Hien started taking out of a drawer of her work desk a few select color pamphlets: these were certainly going to interest a few people back in Washington. He finally ended up being given a total of four multi-page pamphlets, each about different lines of products, complete with quoted prices and general specifications. A quick look through those pamphlets was enough to deeply impress Michael.

“My God! This is truly impressive, Miss Pham.”

“But it is only a start for us, Mister Moorcock. We at Lenoir Industries have plans to expand into more lines of products and expect to increase significantly our production as France switches back to a peacetime economy. Does this satisfy your curiosity, mister?”

“Only partly, I must say. My readers in the United States will be wondering about what kind of woman could create out of apparently nothing such a successful company. What about yourself, Miss Pham?”

Hien’s smile faded a bit at that question as it revived her latent suspicions about her visitor.

“There is not much to say about me, mister. I was born in Vietnam but emigrated with my parents to the United States while still young. I was home-schooled, then studied by myself, concentrating in business administration and public relations. Shortly after my parents died in an accident, I became Tasha Lenoir’s executive secretary and followed her to France when she left the United States in 1912. Do you have any more questions, Mister Moorcock?”

“Only one, miss. On entering this building, I saw movers bringing in things, apparently for a quote Radio France Station unquote that is to open soon. Is that related to the Lenoir Industries?”

“Yes, it is.” Replied Hien, her smile warming up a bit. “Radio France is a new corporate member of the Lenoir Industries and will be a private radio broadcaster directed at the general French public. It will broadcast a mix of news, meteorological reports, public announcements, music, online talk shows and interviews, plus of course a few commercial advertisements to pay for its operations. It will at first have a limited audience, with loudspeakers relaying its programming in such public places as train and subway stations and aboard Air France planes and in air stations. As it becomes more

widely known and appreciated, people will be able to buy low-cost radio receiver sets from us. Eventually, our hope is to see every French family having access to a radio receiver, thus being able to enjoy music and news programs from their homes. One side advantage that convinced the government to support our Radio France project is that such a widespread mean of quick public communication will greatly facilitate the passage of urgent government communiqués to all its citizens when needed. There will actually be three different channels, on both the short-range VHF-FM band and the longwave AM band: Radio France One, which will be geared to the average general public with a mix of news and popular music; Radio France Two, geared to an older, more conservative public with lots of classical music and business news and reports; and Radio France Three, fashioned for a younger public. Relay towers are being built right now across Paris, with regional repeaters in other main cities in France, to compensate for the normally short range of VHF transmissions. Once in operation, our Radio France Station will revolutionize the public medias and will also help improve the lives of all French citizens by giving them access to public entertainment at home, seven days a week.”

That left Michael truly impressed by the grandeur of the scheme.

“My God! I could see something like that catching up quite easily in the United States. Maybe the example of your Radio France will encourage someone in the States in doing something similar.”

“I truly hope so, mister. Imagine how much such music and news broadcasts would impact on American rural families, isolated in their ranches and farms in the middle of Winter. Just being able to get regular local meteorological reports would help them greatly in planning their farming work, or in receiving storm and tornado warnings in time to seek shelter.”

Michael caught himself nodding his head at that, now sold on the idea.

“Damn, I will definitely have to talk about this back home. It would be a true technological and social revolution.”

“And that is why Miss Lenoir is ready to operate Radio France at a loss for the first few months, to give it a chance to catch on and expand its public.”

“And I sincerely wish you a great success in that enterprise, Miss Pham. Thank you again for receiving me. I will be awaiting your notice with impatience.”

Grabbing the precious sales pamphlets given by her and putting them in his briefcase, Michael then got up and shook hands with Hien before leaving her office. He was deep

in thought when he got into his team's car. His expression attracted at once a worried question from Mark Beaupré.

"What happened to you, Michael? You look funny."

"That's because I just met a true visionary. Wait till you see what I got over there. If I would be a real reporter, I would have enough to write one hell of an article."

16:02 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, January 27, 1915

Entrance of the hotel 'L'Étape', Rue la Pérouse

17th Arrondissement, Paris

Michael had stayed inside the small covered space in front of the entrance of his hotel, in order to escape the light snowfall that had been coming down this afternoon. He was looking around for the promised car to be sent by Pham Ti Hien when a dark blue Renault sedan stopped in front of the hotel. The driver then quickly got out and went to him, saluting him with a nod of the head.

"Good afternoon! Are you Mister Michael Moorcock?"

"I am."

"Excellent! I have been sent by Miss Pham to bring you to the residence of Miss Lenoir, where you will be able to interview her. If you will please get into the car."

"Certainly."

Michael waited until seated in the back seat to ask a question to the driver.

"And where is the residence of Miss Lenoir, mister?"

"She lives in the Château du Haut-Buc, next to the Aéro-parc Blériot, sir. We will be there in about forty minutes. I will drive you back at the end of the interview."

"That is much appreciated. Thank you!"

"Just doing my job, sir." Replied the driver before engaging gears and rolling out of this parking spot.

The forty minute ride to Buc gave ample time to Michael to rehash what he and the rest of his team now knew about the mysterious Tasha Lenoir and her associates. Since his interview with Pham Ti Hien, the team had been conducting basic, non-intrusive information collection on the four women and had been able to exploit many sources not available in the United States, like French newspapers archives and a few

bistros frequented by Lenoir Industries workers, where Michael and Mark had discretely listened to the workers' small talk while sipping on a beer at a corner table. For one thing, Tasha Lenoir was no abusive employer and seemed to be universally liked by her employees. Her views and practices about labor relationship would in fact probably be called 'leftist' by most American businessmen and politicians. The one thing that had particularly struck the federal agents was the high proportion of female employees within Lenoir's workforce, with those women often employed in work that was traditionally the purview of men. Some of that could be put on the fact that many men still had not been demobilized after the victory over Germany, but that could not account completely for what they heard and saw. Hopefully, this coming interview with Tasha Lenoir would fill a few holes in their portrait of the four women.

Michael was suitably impressed by Lenoir's residence when the car finally stopped in front of a white, three storey-high mansion: it may not have been a true 'castle', but it would have satisfied many rich American businessmen. Taking his hand camera out of his briefcase, he showed it to the driver.

"Do you think that Miss Lenoir would mind if I took a picture of her residence?"

"I don't believe so, mister: anybody passing in front of it on the street could do the same anyway."

"Thank you! I won't be long."

Getting out of the car and then walking away from the residence for maybe thirty paces, Michael then stopped and turned around. Extending first the accordion-like front lens assembly, he took a couple of pictures of the residence, plus two more of the gardens and park surrounding it. Putting his camera back in his briefcase, Michael walked back towards the residence, where the driver was speaking with a servant at the entrance. Once he got to the main door, the driver bowed politely to him.

"The servant here will lead you to Miss Lenoir. I will wait in the car in the meantime."

"Thank you, my good man."

"If Mister Brown will follow me..." then said the female servant, who wore a traditional French maid's outfit, complete with white apron. Michael followed three paces behind her, ending up in a large private study on the second floor where a tall woman was sitting near a window and looking out, her back to the federal agent. She got up and turned around when Michael was introduced into the study, giving him the first good

look of her since his arrival in France. Blood rushed to his brain as he detailed the tall, beautiful and apparently fit Eurasian woman now facing him. Her long silky black hair added to her exotic look but it was her clothes that truly struck him: she wore a dark suit rather than a female dress with skirt, complete with trousers with slightly flared bottoms and shiny black boots. Her suit was however no simple man's suit: it was obviously designed for a woman and was custom-fitted to enhance her female curves, with a deep plunging 'V' opening in her jacket. The suit's overall style was also unique and had what Michael would not hesitate to call a 'futuristic look' to it. She also wore a few pieces of apparently expensive jewelry, including a large and beautiful gold and emerald broche pinned to her jacket's chest. He then noticed with a shock the two medals that were also pinned on her chest. Tasha Lenoir then walked to him and shook hands with him while presenting herself.

"Welcome to Buc, Mister Moorcock. I am Tasha Lenoir. Let's go sit down and talk."

"Uh, would you mind if I took a picture of you in your splendid outfit before we start the interview, Miss Lenoir?"

"Not at all! Go right ahead, Mister Moorcock." Replied Tasha, smiling. She in fact expressly wanted to make a strong impression during this interview, in order to make an indirect message to whoever would read this man's 'article' in the United States. Hien had already told her that she had a feeling that 'Mister Brown' may be more than he claimed to be. However, even if her visitor was a real reporter, she still wished to use him to show her detractors in the United States that she was no simple woman who could be pushed around or ignored. She thus obliged him by posing in the light from one of the large windows of her study, making sure that her two medals were visible to the camera. Michael ended up taking four pictures, two with a flash just to make sure, then put away his camera before sitting in a sofa facing the easy chair selected by Tasha.

"Thank you again for allowing me to photograph you, Miss Lenoir. Would you mind telling me which medals you are wearing and how you won them?"

Tasha nodded once her head and put an index on the medal with deep red ribbon that she wore next to a medal with purple ribbon.

"No problem, Mister Moorcock. This one is the French Légion d'Honneur, Officer's Grade. This means that I actually won it twice. The first time, in 1913, I got the Knight's Grade for eminent services rendered to the government of France. The second

time, I got the Officer's Grade only months ago, as a reward for lending my Air France planes to a crucial air assault operation behind German lines. I also happened to fly as part of that operation, so I am expecting possibly more medals to come. The purple medal is the Order of Leopold, Knight's Grade, which I won last year as a personal thank you from King Albert of Belgium for the help I provided in urgently evacuating the King's family to London at the start of the German invasion. I also flew on that mission. You may be interested to know that my friend and personal bodyguard, Terry Clarkson, was also decorated by King Albert on that occasion, for shooting down a German Zeppelin dirigible and two German planes over Brussels."

Michael stopped writing notes briefly on hearing that, looking soberly at Tasha.

"That is quite a story, Miss Lenoir. Some of my readers in the United States may have a hard time believing it."

"Because my friend is a woman or because she is black, or both, Mister Moorcock?" Replied at once Tasha, her tone hardening a bit. "If you want confirmation of this, you just need to contact the royal palace in Belgium and they will provide you with the pertinent details."

"Uh, right. Could you give me some personal background on your earlier life in the United States, like where you studied to obtain your science diplomas and how you earned your fortune? I was also curious about your reasons to leave the United States and come to France and why you invented your things here rather than in the States."

Tasha weighed carefully her answers to those questions before speaking again: if this man was really an American government agent, then those were the kind of questions she would have expected from such an agent.

"Mister Moorcock, let's just say that I have very good reasons for not being fond of the United States as it is now. Basically, women there are being ignored, demeaned and repressed, especially when they do not conform to what is considered there as the acceptable mold for them. I came to France simply so that I could fully realize my scientific potential. So did my friend Johanna Kruger, a brilliant, top-flight engineer who could not find any support for her projects back in the States. As for my friend and bodyguard, Terry's reasons to leave the United States were even more obvious: she was not ready to let herself be demeaned and abused by bigoted white morons who claim themselves to be 'superior' to her and to all non-white people. Having inherited enough after my parents' deaths to be able at last to establish my own research lab, I came to France with my friends in hope of finding a more tolerant, free-going society. I

can tell you now that we were not disappointed. If your readers really want to know why we came to France, then they just need to look at themselves and at the racist, misogynistic laws, attitudes and prejudices dominating the American society. When I formed Air France, I was ready to make the United States profit from my airplanes and air travel services. What was the reaction I got? I was told that either I would enforce those hated segregationist laws inside my own air stations or I wouldn't be allowed to operate at all. My choice then was clear and now all but three American cities are still without an air travel service worthy of the name. Maybe you could emphasize in your article the stupidity of this outcome, which your readers can only thank on themselves and their support of racist politicians. In short, I deemed the United States unworthy of benefiting from my inventions and so did my three friends. If my answers anger your readers, then too bad. I am well past caring about their opinions and those of their politicians and religious preachers. And if they think that American inventors and industrialists are going to soon catch up with my discoveries and with the planes designed by my friend Johanna, then they better think again, because we are only starting now to open the floodgates of inventions and novelties in France."

That near-angry tirade left Michael speechless for a moment before he could say something in reply.

"My God, Miss Lenoir. What did the United States do to earn such hostility from you?"

"First, God has nothing to do here: I don't believe in it anyway. Second, it is not hostility that I feel towards the United States: it is disappointment. I wish no harm to all the undoubtedly good people forming most of the American population. However, those same people have and are still mostly staying silent about the racism, bigotry and intolerance of too many of their compatriots. The treatment my friend Terry and any other black person or even non-Caucasians, like my friend Hien, can expect in most parts of the United States is nothing less than shameful in my opinion. President Wilson himself has been too happy to let this despicable state of affair go on. Worse, he picked up certified racists to fill many of the positions in his cabinet and then let them enforce segregation and racism among the various federal departments. That same President Wilson, not content to refuse to help France in its hour of need at the start of the war in Europe, then had the gall to try to push France into negotiating a peace with Germany, the same Germany that was busy invading both France and Belgium. He wanted to appear like a promoter of peace but the only thing he managed to do here in France is to

paint himself as a coward and a hypocrite. If he is ever stupid enough to retaliate against my opinions by ordering the closing of my three Air France stations in the United States, then I will simply push my airline network northward and establish air stations inside Canada. Then, the American people will be able to thank your President for shutting down the only true air service they had access to. So, do you have any more questions for me, Mister Moorcock?"

Quite shaken by her vehemence, Michael tried to calm the atmosphere by changing subject.

"Uh, yes, Miss Lenoir. What are your opinions about the war that France just won?"

Tasha's attitude softened noticeably then, to Michael's relief.

"That it is a truly sad thing that so many people had to die in order to stop the greed for power and megalomania of a few so-called elites in Europe. I personally applauded at the news that Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany and Emperor Franz-Joseph of Austria-Hungary had been killed in allied air bombings of their palaces. Those two, along with the Prussian military aristocrats who pushed so much for war, should have been the only ones to pay with their lives in this war."

"What about the terms of surrender imposed on Germany by France and its allies?"

"Those terms were most appropriate in my opinion, irrespective of what pacifists left unaffected by this war may say. Germany has initiated too many wars in the past and it is high time that its claws be removed and its arrogance be broken...for good."

"And what is the future that you can see for Europe now, Miss Lenoir?"

"To be frank, it is way too early to even try to predict the future of the continent at this time. The war is still too fresh and all the dominos have not stopped yet to fall in place. You may want to ask me again that question in a year or two."

"What are your plans for the future, Miss Lenoir? Do you intend to expand your corporation further, possibly internationally?"

"I certainly intend to expand and increase the density of my Air France network around the World in the coming months and years. There are still too many countries or main cities that have yet to be touched by an air travel link. However, that will need a progressive approach, as establishing new air facilities is not exactly cheap. My other big future project is to possibly get into car manufacturing here in France, to introduce what I consider truly modern cars on the market. I would then probably enter into a joint

venture with a big French car manufacturer, since I or Johanna have no experience in car designs.”

That made Michael look up from his notes and smile to her.

“In view of what you accomplished in collaboration with Blériot, your declaration is going to make many American car producers quite sweaty and scared, miss.”

“Let them be so. Some honest competition will do them some good.”

What Tasha didn't say then was that her 'plans' to manufacture new cars were actually well past the planning stage. In fact, the first prototypes of 'avant-garde' Lenoir-Kruger and Renault-Kruger cars were now only a month away from rolling out.

“I have one last question for you, Miss Lenoir, a rhetorical one: what would you say is your ultimate goal in life?”

“I would say that I actually have three ultimate goals at the moment, mister. First and most important would be to help make France the happiest, most prosperous and just country in the World. Secondly, I want to see racial segregation disappear in the United States. Thirdly, I want women to gain full legal parity with men, including the right to vote. Many will call me a dreamer because of this but I would rather be a dreamer than a defeatist.”

“Well, you certainly are aiming high, Miss Lenoir. I wish you the best of luck in attaining your goals.”

“Thank you, Mister Moorcock. If you don't have other questions, I will have someone escort you back to the car.”

Going to an intercom box set on a work desk in a corner of the study, Tasha pressed a button, then spoke for a few seconds in a language that Michael could not identify. It sounded a bit like English, but it also appeared to contain elements of Spanish and of another language. The voice that answered Tasha also spoke the same language. Less than half a minute later, a tall black woman dressed in the same kind of female dark suit than Tasha entered the study. Michael couldn't help tense up a bit on recognizing Tasha's bodyguard. She also wore medals, like Tasha, but had three of them pinned to her chest.

“You needed me, Tasha?”

“Yes, Terry. Could you please accompany the gentleman here back to Mister Lebrun's car?”

“Of course.” Said Terry before facing Michael, who was actually a bit shorter than her. “If you will please follow me, sir.”

Tasha watched both of them go, then looked out of a window and down at Lebrun's waiting car. She had mixed feelings as she watched the car drive away with its American passenger: maybe she could have been more diplomatic with 'Michael Moorcock', or whoever he really was. That thought however quickly vanished from her mind: she had always been a straight talker and liked to call things the way they were. If the American government or public didn't like her opinions, then tough!

18:25 (Paris Time)

Hotel 'L'Étape', Rue de la Pérouse

17th Arrondissement, Paris

Mark Beaupré assembled his team in his room at once when Michael arrived back from his interview in Buc. The latter then took a good fifteen minutes to brief the team about her talks with Tasha Lenoir, quoting from his notes a number of times to be more accurate. What he painted of Tasha Lenoir's attitude and opinions about the United States displeased the other agents, with Mark Beaupré shaking his head.

"Well, that Tasha Lenoir certainly has some rather harsh opinions towards our country and our President. Mind you, I can understand her hatred of the segregation system in the States: I myself am no fan of the bigots who abuse negroes constantly."

"But she said that she was ready to punish the United States by withholding her inventions from us." Objected John McMaster. "She wants to favor those frogs over her country of birth. I call that treason. Besides, part of our mission is still to try to grab some of her inventions, right?"

"Only if that does not endanger the rest of the mission, which is to assess if she constitutes an actual or potential threat to the United States." Replied Mark. "From what she said to Michael, I would say that she qualifies as a potential but indirect threat to the United States. My recommendation once back in Washington will be to have her arrested and interrogated the next time that she steps into the United States."

Unknown to Mark Beaupré or to the members of his team, a trio of French Deuxième Bureau¹⁷ agents who had rented the room above Mark's room and had installed a discrete microphone had listened on Michael's briefing and on the

¹⁷ Deuxième Bureau : The old designation for the French secret intelligence services.

subsequent exchange. One of the French agents listening on frowned on hearing McMaster use the derogatory term 'frogs' to designate French citizens.

"I will show you soon enough what the 'frogs' think about you yanks!"

02:01 (Paris Time)

Thursday, January 28, 1915

Mark Beaupré's room, hotel 'L'Étape'

The loud noise of his hotel room door's being thrown violently open woke up Mark Beaupré with a startle. His unfocused eyes then saw dark shapes rushing at him in the dark hotel room. His first reflex was to try to grab his revolver, stashed under his pillow, but a brutal swipe with a pistol butt struck him on the forehead, stunning him for a moment. Three strong men then grabbed his arms and legs and pulled him out of his bed, turning him on his belly before dropping him on the carpet, where a man knelt on top of him while another man forcibly cuffed him. The only thing Mark could do was to protest vigorously in his accented French.

"WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU? WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

Trashing noises and shouts in the two adjacent rooms then told him that his four agents were getting the same treatment as he was getting. The ceiling lamp was then switched on, temporarily blinding him. By the time that his eyes got accustomed to the light, he had been forcibly lifted up on his feet and was now facing a medium height man with a hard facial expression, while two men solidly held him by his arms. The man in front of Mark then showed him an open leather holder containing a badge and an identity card.

"French Deuxième Bureau! You are under arrest for espionage, mister."

"Hey, boss, look what I found under his pillow." Shouted another French agent who now held Mark's revolver. The man facing Mark had a mean smile on seeing that.

"Well well, it seems that we can now add the charge of possession of illegal firearm to that of espionage."

"Are you crazy?" Said Mark, now sweating profusely. "I am an American!" That earned him a harsh stare from the French senior agent.

"We know perfectly who you and your four friends are, mister. I shall remind you that France is still under a nationwide state of war regulation and that all civil liberties have been suspended, among other things. You and your friends are foreign agents

engaged in espionage activity on French soil and you will be treated accordingly. Bring him down to our cellular van and don't be too gentle about it, guys"

14:18 (Paris Time)

Saturday, January 30, 1915

Communal holding cell, central police prefecture

Île-de-la-Cité, Paris

Major Charles Lejeune felt an instant flash of anger when he was introduced into the basement communal holding cell and saw the pitiful shape of the five American federal agents, still wearing their pajamas and sitting despondently on hard wooden benches lining the walls of the cell. Turning around to face the Deuxième Bureau agent who had led him to the cell, he nearly shouted in his face in an angry tone.

"WHO DID THIS TO THESE MEN? BY WHAT RIGHT DID YOU BEAT THEM LIKE THIS?"

The captain from the Deuxième Bureau, a Corsican man accustomed to play rough, stared back at him with no sympathy.

"By what right, Major? By the rights and powers invested in the Deuxième Bureau under the State of War regulations. Those men were caught spying on French soil, in possession of illegal weapons and actively using false identities. They only got what any spy caught in the act in France can expect. They still can count themselves lucky: we will simply expel them from France this afternoon, instead of sending them to rot for a few years in one of our colonial penitentiaries in Africa. Oh, I nearly forgot: here is something for you."

Charles Lejeune looked with suspicion at the official-looking letter the French agent took out of his vest, then took it and opened it, extracting a folded sheet of paper bearing an official French government seal.

"You have been declared 'Persona Non Grata' by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Major Lejeune. You will have 48 hours to pack and leave the country."

"This is outrageous! You have nothing to justify such measures, or the abuse committed against our five citizens here."

"On the contrary, Major! We have transcripts of conversations between those five men that clearly indicate that they are American federal agents operating illegally on French soil and actively seeking to acquire sensitive technology from a French firm. If

we would go to a judge with this, your agents would end up in a penitentiary for at least ten years. You ever heard of the 'Devil's Island', Major? That's where a certain Captain Dreyfus ended up spending some very unpleasant years of his life. So, my advice to you and your men would be to shut up and be happy that things end so easily for them."

"Then, I would like at the least to be able to accompany those men back to the United States, to make sure that they are not abused further."

"If you really want to spend two weeks traveling on a slow cargo ship going from Le Havre to New York, then suit yourself, Major."

"What? You are not sending them back by plane?"

The French Deuxième Bureau man snickered at that.

"Oh, you really expected that we would pay top fare to expel those men from France? Are you really this naïve or are you so imbued of your collective superiority as American citizens that you always expect the royal treatment? Those two weeks will give your agents ample time to reflect on what is considered proper conduct by foreign agents while in France. And before you or them do, don't blame Miss Lenoir or her associates for what happened to your agents. They didn't denounce your agents to us."

"Then, who pointed them to you?" Asked Lejeune, too angry to realize that he shouldn't expect an answer to that question of his. However, the Frenchman did answer him, a smirk on his face.

"You did, Major!"

CHAPTER 21 – THE NOT SO CORDIAL ENTENTE

16:30 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, February 17, 1915

Palace of Versailles, southwest of Paris

France

French Foreign Minister Théophile Delcassé nearly slammed the door behind him as he retired temporarily to a lounge with the rest of the French delegation. That lounge was situated down the hall from the big reception lounge where the talks meant to decide the splitting of the spoils between the Allies were being held. With no foreign ears nearby to listen to him, he then let out his frustration.

“IS THERE ANY LIMIT TO BRITISH ARROGANCE AND SELFISHNESS? DID THEY REALLY EXPECT TO COME IN AT THE END OF THE WAR AND SIMPLY GRAB FOR THEMSELVES THE TOTALITY OF THE GERMAN HIGH SEAS FLEET?”

“I would say so, judging by their continued intransigence, my dear Delcassé.” Replied in a more quiet voice the French Minister of the Navy, Victor Augagneur. “Between us, Belgium, Russia, Japan, them and Serbia, the British have suffered the least amount of military casualties of all. In terms of civilian casualties and material destruction of towns and villages, they didn’t suffer at all. In contrast, Liege, Strasbourg, Nancy, Metz and Sedan suffered heavily, along with dozens of lesser towns and villages, while the Belgian and French civilians killed in the war are counted by the tens of thousands. Russia suffered even more, with over 400,000 soldiers dead. Yet, they ask, no, they demand ALL of the German High Seas Fleet as a compensation for their efforts at sea blockade of the German North Sea coast and of the strait of Skagerrak during the war. Every time that we raise the discrepancy between their losses and their demands for war reparations, they put forward the same tired argument: the Royal Navy is the master of the seas and must stay so, with no possible challenger. Personally, I would be inclined to simply tell the British to put their demands where I think and split the German fleet between us, Russia and Japan.”

"I am seriously leaning towards such a position, Victor. It seems as well that the Russian representatives and even the Japanese ones are also getting quite tired of the British intransigence. What do you think, Alexandre?"

The French War Minister, Alexandre Millerand, nodded his head slowly in response.

"We have already wasted too much time trying to bring some good sense to our British colleagues. I say that we should go meet secretly with the Russians and the Japanese this evening and come to a mutual accord between us on how to split the German fleet. We should then implement that accord, whether the British agree with it or not."

"What if the British threaten force and block us from taking away the German warships?" Asked Victor Augagneur. "Their First Lord of the Admiralty, Churchill, can be quite hot-headed, I am told."

Millerand gave his colleague a doubtful look then.

"You really think that the British would go as far as to be ready to fire on our sailors if we sail out of Wilhelmshaven with those German warships?"

"Did they show anything but intransigence up to now? No! I expect the worst from them when they will see us, the Russians and the Japanese leave with the German ships."

"Gentlemen," said somberly Delcassé, "the real question may become this: would we be ready to fire back at the British if they start firing at us? Are those German warships worth the risk of starting a war between France and Great-Britain?"

That got the foreign minister an intense look from the navy minister.

"I would say yes, for two main reasons: first, our present navy is spread way too thin to adequately patrol and protect all our overseas possessions and colonies and their maritime supply links. France has neither the time nor the money to build and equip the number of ships that such a task demands. Those German warships, once reconditioned and manned by French crews, will finally allow us to properly protect and support our overseas possessions. Second, and possibly more importantly, if we let Great-Britain trample us like this today and impose its absolute will at sea, then we will be leaving France at the mercy of the British in any future dispute concerning our overseas territories. We either stand now for our just share of the spoils, or we will forever be bending the knee to the British every time that they will want to grab something overseas. France's dignity and sovereignty are at stake today, gentlemen."

The two other French ministers and their top aides looked at each other for long seconds, the words from the navy minister resonating deeply inside them. The foreign minister finally nodded his head once, convinced.

"I think that you are right, Victor. If you will excuse me, I will go make an urgent telephone call to the President."

Delcassé didn't have time to make three steps before Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Sazonov and the Japanese envoy, Count Chinda Sutemi, entered the lounge immediately after knocking briefly on its door.

"Minister Sazonov? Count Chinda? What may we do for you?"

"We may talk...without the British. We have had enough about their arrogance. I and Count Chinda are of the mind to decide this issue with France and thus end this waste of time. If the British object to our mutual decision, then I pledge the support of Russia in resisting any British abusive move against any of our three countries."

Those words brought a happy smile on the faces of the French delegates, with Delcassé nodding his head in approval.

"I believe that such group solidarity should do wonders to pour cold water on those British hot heads, Minister Sazonov. I was going to call President Poincaré to tell him that we should ignore the British grossly excessive demands, but I will delay that call for an hour or so, time for us to agree on our own demands."

While apparently satisfied, the Japanese envoy still seemed to be preoccupied with something.

"Gentlemen, I am certain that my own government would agree to such a move, but I would have liked to be able to get its formal accord on this first. Unfortunately, telegraphic communication links between here and Japan are both limited and insecure for such sensitive matter and traveling to Japan and then return with an answer would take weeks."

"I may be able to offer a quick and secure solution to your problem, Count Chinda." Said French Navy Minister Augagneur, surprising the Japanese diplomat. "This is still classified, so be careful about speaking about what I am going to tell you. The French Navy has started a few months ago to equip its warships and naval bases with a new type of long-range secure communication system called 'Telex on Radio', which allows the instant sending of encrypted messages in printed text form over intercontinental distance. If I am right, and maybe Foreign Minister Delcassé will be able to confirm this for me, I believe that our embassies abroad have also been equipped with

the same type of telex system. If so, then I propose that you send a message to your superiors via our own embassy in Tokyo.”

“Damn, you are right, Victor.” Said Delcassé, his face lighting up. “We did equip our embassies with such a telex system less than two months ago. No other country knows yet that we have such a system. Gentlemen, I think that we are in business.”

10:50 (Paris Time)

Saturday, March 27, 1915

Command bridge of the Japanese battlecruiser KONGO

On approach to the Wilhelmshaven naval base

Jade Estuary, North Sea coast of Germany

“Admiral, those two ships patrolling off the German coast are British cruisers.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Replied politely Admiral Dewa Shigeto to the bridge duty officer of the KONGO. That those marauding ships were British were not really a surprise to Dewa, a veteran of the Russo-Japanese War. A dignified-looking, 58 year-old man with carefully trimmed gray beard and moustache, Baron Dewa Shigeto was well aware of the now poisoned relationship between Great-Britain and its former allies in the recently concluded war against Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, all thanks to this dispute about the splitting of the spoils that the remains of the German High Seas Fleet constituted. Japan had declared war on Germany in August of 1914, thus joining Belgium, France, Great-Britain and Russia, then had attacked the German bases and possessions in China and the South Pacific, driving the Germans out of the Pacific entirely. As a result, Japan felt justly entitled to at least part of the German fleet, something that both France and Russia had agreed to at once. However, Great-Britain, once a good ally and mentor of the Japanese Navy, had insisted that the whole German fleet rightfully belonged to it and still did so. The Japanese government then had felt that there was no alternative but to ignore the British excessive demands and grab the portion of the spoils agreed to with France and Russia. Now, after a month at sea and numerous stops for coaling, the small Japanese flotilla, consisting of two troopships and four cargo ships escorted by the KONGO, was finally arriving in sight of the German naval base of Wilhelmshaven, where its prize ships were awaiting it.

Leading its six transport ships, two of which were carrying the designated crews for the prize ships, the Japanese battlecruiser passed by the two British cruisers, all but ignoring them, and entered the German harbor area. Admiral Shigeto noticed at once the two French battleships and four armored cruisers moored in the harbor, as well as the sunken hulks of three large German warships resting at quayside. He then embraced with his eyes the impressive fleet of dozens of German warships that were either anchored in the harbor or were tied at quayside. Those warships actually represented a staggering amount of industrial resources and money expended in their construction. To simply send them to the scrap yard would have been a sad waste of fine ships indeed.

"Captain Matsudaira, have the flagship moor next to the French battleship JEAN BART and send our transport ships to positions at quayside."

"Hay, Admiral!"

Twenty minutes later, the KONGO was dropping its anchors less than 200 meters away from the JEAN BART. Admiral Shigeto was about to leave the bridge to go with his aide to the French battleship via his admiral's barge when Captain Matsudaira pointed at something on top of the armored bridge of the JEAN BART.

"Admiral, I see a kind of big ball sitting on top of the forward superstructures of the JEAN BART, atop a tripod platform. I can't seem to identify what it is."

"Oh? Let me see." Said Shigeto, who went to a window of the bridge and raised his binoculars to his eyes. What he saw puzzled him and left him confused.

"This is strange indeed, Captain Matsudaira. That ball must measure at least eight meters in diameter and is positioned high enough to easily dominate the top of the ship's funnels, yet I see nothing that would look like the optics of a rangefinder. I will certainly ask Admiral Guépratte about this once aboard the JEAN BART. You now have command of the flotilla until my return, Captain."

"Hay!"

Shigeto then left the bridge, going down to the level of the weather deck, where his aide was waiting for him next to the access ladder going down the side of the ship to the admiral's barge. Exchanging salutes with the deck officer, Shigeto and his aide went down the ladder and got into the motor boat, which then headed towards the JEAN BART, arriving by its starboard side in a few minutes, tying itself to the French ship's access ladder on arrival. Shigeto, followed by his aide, who spoke a passable English

but no French, climbed the ladder and was greeted by French sailors lined up and presenting arms, along with a group of three French officers. A sailor blew the traditional whistle as Shigeto came to the top of the ladder, making him salute in response. The most senior French officer, a rear-admiral, saluted back Shigeto while presenting himself in French.

“Welcome aboard the JEAN BART, Admiral Shigeto. I am Rear-Admiral Paul Émile Guépratte, commander of the French escort force.”

There was an uneasy silence as the French realized that the two Japanese officers didn't understand French. Guépratte then repeated his welcome, but in English this time, hoping that one of his guests would understand him. To his relief, the navy commander following Shigeto seemed to understand English, as he then whispered something to his admiral in Japanese. Shigeto nodded his head and spoke aloud to Guépratte in Japanese, with the commander translating in English.

“And it is a honor to be aboard your mighty ship, Admiral Guépratte.”

“Thank you! Maybe we should move inside to my quarters before it starts raining: the clouds are dark and heavy and could burst at any time.”

“A fine idea, Admiral.”

Entering the forward superstructures through a steel door, or hatch in naval parlance, Guépratte led his two Japanese guests and his two own senior officers to his quarters, a large, comfortable suite adjacent to the officers' wardroom on the main deck. There, he offered them a choice of beverages and was not surprised to hear them ask for tea. With orders given to a steward to bring a full tea service, the French and Japanese officers sat down in a pair of sofas set in one corner of Guépratte's lounge. They exchanged a few pleasantries at first, with Guépratte also inquiring about how their journey to France had gone. Then, after the tea service had arrived and everyone had been served, Guépratte went directly to the subject most worrying him.

“Admiral Shigeto, what are your instructions from Tokyo in the case that the British would try to stop you from leaving Wilhelmshaven with the ships allotted to Japan? Would you be ready to fire back at the British?”

Putting down his cup of tea first, Shigeto looked straight into Guépratte's eyes and spoke firmly, without hesitation, with his aide translating at once.

“Japan won the right to these German ships through the blood of its soldiers and sailors. We believe that the quota of ships allotted to us is just and fair, considering the

respective losses suffered by each country in our coalition. Unfortunately, it seems that its imperial power has intoxicated Great-Britain into ignoring the suffering of its own allies and into claiming everything for itself. My orders from Tokyo are clear, Admiral Guépratte: we will fight if need be to keep what is rightfully ours. Any firing on a Japanese ship by a British ship will be considered as an act of war, with all the resulting consequences. Furthermore, as a country allied to France, my ships will also fight in defense of French ships if the British fire on your ships as we sail out together. Our foreign ministry has been tasked with giving a clear warning to the British on this subject. The British Navy will not be able to plead ignorance about this.”

“What if the British think that you are bluffing?”

Admiral Shigeto’s answer to that was clear and categorical.

“Japan does not bluff, ever! We live by the Samurai spirit and we fight openly, until victory or death. If the British misjudge us, then they will pay the price for it.”

Shigeto’s tone convinced at once Guépratte that the Japanese meant what he said. He thus changed the subject slightly.

“How many days will your prize crews need to get accustomed enough to their new ships to be able to sail them to Japan, Admiral?”

“Normally, I would allot them a week or more to get accustomed to their ship. There is after all the translation factor at play, with my crews mostly unable to read properly the indications in German on the various machinery instruments and weapons. However, the more time we take to get accustomed to our prize ships, the more time the British will have to react to my arrival and send a battle fleet to block the entrance of Wilhelmshaven. If they manage to do so, our ships will be in an untenable tactical position when they will attempt to leave port in single file, with British battleships crossing their ‘T’, while our ships will be able to use only their forward turrets.”

“I agree. My own prize crews will be ready to sail in four days. Would that be enough for you, Admiral Shigeto?”

“I guess that it will have to be, if we want to leave before the whole Royal Navy can assemble outside of this port. If you would be able to provide translators proficient in both German and Japanese, that would help my crews a lot.”

“Uh, that sounds like a rather difficult proposition to fill, Admiral: there can’t be much more than a handful of such translators in France at the present. You probably could ask your own embassy in Paris about such translators, I suppose.”

"That sounds like a fine idea, Admiral Guépratte. To be frank, such translators proficient in German are a rarity in Japan, while our own embassy in Berlin still has not been reopened. Could you arrange for such a demand to be passed to our embassy in Paris?"

"With pleasure, Admiral! I will pass the necessary orders right after this meeting."

One of the two senior French officers attending the meeting then bent sideways and whispered into Guépratte's ear, who seemed interested at once.

"Really? Please go check at once, Captain Belleville."

As the navy captain got up and walked out of the lounge, Shigeto watched him go, then looked back with curiosity at Guépratte.

"What did your captain say to you, Admiral?"

"That he believed that one civilian contractor actually present aboard with two other civilian workers is reputed to speak many languages. I told Captain Belleville to go check on that."

"May I ask why you have civilian contractors aboard your ship? Would it have something to do with the strange white sphere sitting atop your armored command bridge?"

That question made Guépratte smile at Shigeto.

"I see that you have keen eyes, Admiral. Yes, those contractors are on the JEAN BART to complete the installation of the prototype of a new detection system which, it is claimed, could revolutionize naval warfare."

"That sounds like a rather tall claim, Admiral Guépratte."

"Yes, it does. However, since it is coming from the same person who developed the advanced radios that now equip the French Navy, I would tend to take that claim seriously. Those contractors also brought extra portable radio transceivers for our prize ships, so that I could communicate easily and instantly with all my ships while at sea, something that could prove crucial if the British ever decide to attack us."

"Would they have enough radios to also equip my own ships?" Shigeto asked at once with obvious interest. "They are presently equipped with Marconi spark-gap radio transceivers, but I heard that those new radios of yours are marvels compared with Marconi radios."

"And they are, Admiral Shigeto. The level of technology in our new radios is simply astounding and they are infinitely more reliable and easy to operate than the old

spark-gap radios we had before, on top of having a tremendous transmission range. I will show you my ship's radio room afterward, if you would be interested to do so."

"I would definitely love to do that." Replied Shigeto, sincere.

They continued their conversation for another seven minutes, discussing how they were going to form up once out of the harbor, until Captain Belleville returned to the lounge with a tall woman wearing a work coverall following him.

"Admiral, Miss Lenoir does speak both German and Japanese. May I let her in?"

"By all means."

Admiral Shigeto, along with his aide, eyed with incredulity the tall Eurasian woman who then walked into the cabin and bowed politely in front of him, presenting herself in a strangely accented but comprehensible Japanese.

"Good day, Admiral. My name is Tasha Lenoir, founder and owner of the 'Lenoir Industries' and of 'Air France'. I was made to understand that you could use my services as a translator. Is that correct?"

"Uh, yes it is. My prize crews would need help to translate the indications given by the machinery instruments of the German ships we are to bring back to Japan. Would you be ready to help with that, Miss Lenoir?"

"Normally yes, but I was due to conduct the first operational test on a French ship of my new radar system, so that I could calibrate it properly. How urgent is your need for translations from German to Japanese, Admiral?"

"Quite urgent, I'm afraid. Admiral Guépratte also told me that you brought a number of supplementary radios to equip the ships allotted to France. Would you have some left that could equip my own ships?"

"Right now, I have only one such spare radio at present, but I can easily call for more of them to be delivered by plane. They could be here by tomorrow. How many ships to you have, Admiral?"

"I came in with one warship and six transport ships, but will leave with a total of thirty extra warships, so my ultimate needs would be to equip 37 ships. Could you provide that many radios within four days, miss?"

"I believe that I could temporarily redirect a batch of radios and have them here tomorrow, Admiral. They are actually light and compact enough to be carried by one man and are also easy to operate. They are not exactly cheap but, if Japan is ready to buy them, I will order in a batch in the next hour."

"Japan is eager to acquire any new technology that could enhance its naval power, miss."

'Which is where the problem lies!' Thought Tasha. While Japan was presently an ally of France, she knew that, according to history, the militarist governments that would follow on in Tokyo will possibly start a campaign of conquest around China, Southeast Asia and the Pacific in two decades or so. Selling modern radios to Japan would not be a critical point, but things were much different concerning her new radar systems. While she probably won't have much choice but to show her prototype surveillance and navigation radars to the Japanese officers, selling that technology to Japan would be inviting some possibly catastrophic consequences in the long term, especially since she didn't intend to sell her radar systems to either the United States or Great-Britain, keeping her radar technology strictly in French hands.

"Then, I will order those extra radios and will pass the bill for them to the Japanese embassy in Paris. If you will please excuse me, I must ask something to Admiral Guépratte."

"Go right ahead, miss."

Bowing first to Shigeto, Tasha then turned to face Guépratte and spoke to him in French.

"Admiral, the prototype radar models that I was installing on your flagship are highly classified systems and the understanding I had with the Navy Ministry was that only French ships and planes would be equipped with them and that they would be kept secret. My two radar systems are now in place and ready for a first test. Is Admiral Shigeto allowed to watch that test, or do you prefer to leave him in the dark?"

Guépratte thought that over in his mind for a few seconds before looking up at her.

"That test, would it be enough to tell those Japanese the working principles and technology involved? Would looking at your radar set help the Japanese to duplicate it?"

"Not a chance, Admiral. That technology is very advanced and even building the essential parts for them would take chemical synthesis equipment that nobody but me has."

"Then, I will invite Admiral Shigeto to watch that test of yours, Miss Lenoir. You said that your system is now ready?"

"Ready and connected, Admiral."

"Then, we might as well go see it now. It could only help show our openness to our Japanese allies."

At the invitation of Admiral Guépratte, and with Tasha translating for him, Admiral Shigeto and his aide followed him out of the admiral's suite and up a series of steel ladders, to finally end up on the armored command bridge of the JEAN BART. There, Shigeto had a good view of the whole forward half of the ship through the armored windows of the bridge. Only then did he see the huge, four-engine amphibian aircraft tied along the port side of the battleship.

"By the Kamis!" He exclaimed in Japanese. "This must be the biggest plane that I ever saw."

"That is the plane I came in with my technicians, Admiral." Replied Tasha. "If you don't mind, I will take a minute to send a message to the flight crew."

Expecting Tasha to go into a radio cabin to send her message, Shigeto and his aide were stunned to see her simply grab a handheld radio contained in a pouch hooked to her tool belt and activate it after pulling out its telescopic antenna.

"Marie, this is Tasha, over!... Marie, take note of this, then send it as an urgent request to the Lenoir Industries office in Paris. From Tasha Lenoir to Pham Ti Hien, need you to send as quickly as possible by air the following radio equipment to the German naval base in Wilhelmshaven: forty HF-SSB band, full-duplex portable marine radiotelephone transceivers Model MHFD-03, 46 HFD-02 antenna assemblies, fifty extra long HF transmission wire spools with connectors and 46 power regulation UPS units with dual voltage power cables and multi-type connectors. Tell Hien that they are to be delivered to the JEAN BART in Wilhelmshaven, where I am presently. If these systems can be delivered today, then the better. The Japanese embassy is to be billed for them... You got all that?... Good! Send that at once. Thanks!"

Tasha then smiled to Shigeto, who had been listening with growing wonderment and was eying her handheld radio as if it was a magical item.

"The order for your radios should be on its way in minutes, Admiral. Now, for my radar systems. Follow me, please."

The Japanese and French officers followed her to an aft corner of the command bridge where a dark curtain nearly completely surrounded a floor space measuring about four square meters. Inside, the naval officers were shown a kind of steel console with a large, round glass screen on its top surface, along with a number of dials, buttons and indicators. The round screen's edge comprised both a fixed and a rotating dial

graduated in degrees, while the screen bore concentric circles. Tasha then described briefly her radar system to the officers, speaking first in Japanese, then in French.

"Gentlemen, this is the first prototype of my long range maritime surveillance radar system. It has already been tested in a fixed ground installation, but this will be its first test at sea. Against medium and large size ships and at the height its antenna is presently positioned above sea level on the JEAN BART, its detection range is about 110 nautical miles in radius. Since it uses electro-magnetic waves to detect things around its mother ship, it is not affected by fog or night and is only moderately affected by heavy squalls and storms."

"One hundred and ten nautical miles?" Exclaimed Shigeto, incredulous. "Are you sure, miss?"

"Very sure, Admiral. Two other models of my radar systems have already been tested aboard planes and their detection ranges and performances corresponded to my theoretical calculations. How high a silhouette a ship has will of course be a factor for the detection range against it: a battleship will be detected at much greater ranges than a rowboat, for example. Let me just power up my set and you will be able to see what it can do."

The five senior officers unconsciously took one step forward to see better when she opened the cover of a junction box that was part of a triple level electronic cabinet sitting against a nearby bulkhead, making the dials on that cabinet light up. She then flipped a few switches and turned two dials on the face of the cabinet before turning around and touching a switch on the radar display console top surface. Eyes widened when the large screen became illuminated, glowing a light green color. Exclamations followed as the French and Japanese officers realized that the kind of glowing picture filling the round display screen corresponded exactly with the outlines of the port of Wilhelmshaven, with its docks, moles and with multiple dots either along quays or around the surface of the harbor and of the Jade Bay.

"Gentlemen, what you now see are the contours of the port and the town and countryside around it. You will note that hills and high buildings actually mask what is behind them. That is because radar normally works within line of sight. The multiple dots you see around the harbor are the various ships moored or anchored in the port and in the Jade Bay. The bigger the blip, the bigger the ship. I must however signal that ships made of wood will give a much smaller radar return than ships made of steel. The JEAN BART is situated at the center of the display screen, while the other ships are

shown according to their azimuth and distance relative to the JEAN BART. The further distant a ship is, the further from the center of the display screen its blip will be shown. Those thin concentric circles on the display screen are actually range marks, with a circle every ten nautical miles. Outward to the North, you see the blips from ships navigating near the German coast. Those two strong blips traveling together on the open sea near the coastal island of Hoher Knechtsand are most probably warships.”

“Damn! They must be the two British cruisers we passed by before entering the Jade.” Said Admiral Shigeto. “This is incredible. The tactical advantage of a fleet admiral possessing such a thing as this on his flagship would be tremendous. Would your radar be accurate enough to be used to direct the fire of main guns?”

“This radar, not really. It is designed mostly for long range detection. However, for navigation and fire control, I designed another, smaller model of radar with much less range but also with much better definition and accuracy. One such navigation radar antenna is co-located with the antenna of this search radar, while a second navigation radar antenna is being assembled right now on top of a small platform attached to the rear mast of the JEAN BART. There is a display console for those radars here on this command bridge, plus there are repeater consoles in the armored fire control tower and on the navigation bridge. If you will follow me, I will show you the picture painted by the forward navigation radar.”

The French and Japanese officers eagerly followed her to another kind of steel console sitting just forward of the command chair on the bridge. Powering that console up, Tasha lit its display screen, which proved to also have concentric range circles and azimuth indicators, like the other radar display. Tasha pointed first at a sort of lit dial circle with numbers surrounding the display screen.

“This circle actually shows the orientation of the ship relative to the True North, given by a gyroscopic compass unit that is part of this console. It helps the operator of this radar to correlate the detection azimuth of an object with its azimuth on a map. As you can see now, the picture of the port that you have on this radar is much more detailed. With this radar, you can locate a small or medium sized ship up to the horizon, or a bit further if it has a high silhouette. However, I did put the emphasis on high definition and accuracy at short ranges when I designed this model. With this radar, a ship will be able to navigate safely at night or in fog, as long as it does not go at an insane speed, of course. As for gun fire control, you can see here that targets up to twenty nautical miles away could easily be targeted, using the data shown by this radar.”

“By the Kamis! What I could have done with this at the Battle of Tsushima.¹⁸” Said Admiral Shigeto, while his aide couldn’t stop staring with wonderment at the radar display screen. On his part, Admiral Guépratte felt exhilaration wash over him. It was after all his flagship that now had these incredible radar systems, while no other warship in the World had anything comparable. Looking up at Tasha, he stared at her with genuine admiration.

“Miss Lenoir, you are a true genius. First, your radios, now those radars. With these, France will become nearly unbeatable on the seas.”

“Well, be careful not to become overconfident because of my radars, Admiral. Any equipment can break down, especially in combat. If you let the skills of your officers and sailors degrade because of overreliance on my radar and radios, then you could be in for a rude awakening one day.”

“Hum, you are right, miss. Uh, has the Navy started putting officers and sailors on a training program for these radar systems?”

“Err, not yet. These are prototypes that belong to my company and I had gained permission to mount them on this ship to conduct preliminary sea trials before proposing them to the Navy. They have not yet been accepted into navy service, or even bought. The only ones able to properly operate them are me and one other person from the ‘Lenoir Industries’.”

“Damn! This flagship is about to possibly confront the Royal Navy at sea and it would have to do so with no one to operate such a wondrous thing?”

Guépratte suddenly saw a malicious smile appear on Tasha’s lips.

“Admiral, I would have a solution for this, if you are game: let me and my employee stay aboard during your trip to Brest with your fleet. That way, I will be able to operate those radars while starting to train a few select officers of your staff in their operation.”

Guépratte was about to protest at the idea of having a woman aboard a warship possibly heading into battle, but he swallowed his objection after another look at the display screen of the navigation radar console.

“Hell! I need this too much for our trip to Brest. You may call in your employee, Miss Lenoir.”

¹⁸ Battle of Tsushima : Important naval battle of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904, where the Russian fleet suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Imperial Japanese Navy.

"Thank you, Admiral! You will not regret this."

11:26 (Paris Time)

Sunday, March 28, 1915

French battleship JEAN BART

German naval base of Wilhelmshaven

North Sea coast of Germany

Tasha was on hand to greet Terry Clarkson when she arrived aboard the JEAN BART with one suitcase, having come to Wilhelmshaven in the same CIGOGNE amphibian that was carrying the extra radios asked by Tasha to equip the Japanese warships. She was however surprised to see Pham Ti Hien, wearing a work coverall, follow Terry up the ship's access ladder.

"Hien? What are you doing here?"

"I came to help install those extra radios on the Japanese ships of this armada. I thought that you could use another person who could speak Japanese here. I brought as well six of our technicians to do the installation job."

"That was a fine idea indeed, Hien. Thank you so much for coming. Let me just get a Japanese officer to come and escort you around the various Japanese ships, so that you and your technicians can start working right away. Terry, you will be sharing my cabin for the sea trip to Brest."

"What? You haven't already picked up the most handsome officer aboard this battleship to share your cabin? I am disappointed."

Tasha giggled briefly at Terry's joke before becoming serious again.

"I am afraid that we won't have time for sex on this trip, Terry. We will be quite busy until our departure from Wilhelmshaven and then we will probably have to run a gauntlet of British warships trying to stop us from taking any prize ship to France."

"Yeah! We saw from the air that pair of British cruisers sniffing around the coast. I suspect that a lot more British ships will soon be on their way to here, if they are not already on their way. By the way, I brought in my suitcase the outfit you asked for."

"Thanks! That is most appreciated. Let me just bring you to my cabin, so that you can drop your suitcase there before going to see Admiral Shigeto."

That the two new women attracted a lot of attention while negotiating the passageways and ladders of the battleship would have been an understatement, with Terry's remarkable height for a woman of 185 centimeters also attracting a few whispered comments from the sailors they met. Taking only a minute to drop Terry's suitcase in her cabin, Tasha then led her two friends to the command bridge, hoping to find either Admiral Shigeto or his aide there. They actually found both of the Japanese officers there, along with Admiral Guépratte, who was discussing some tactical matter with Shigeto through the English translation of Commander Komatsuri. The two admirals stopped talking at once at the entrance of the three women, eyeing Terry and Hien with curiosity. Tasha stopped two paces from the two admirals and bowed politely to them, speaking first in French, then in Japanese.

"Good morning, sirs. I would like to present two good friends and collaborators of mine: Miss Terry Clarkson and Miss Pham Ti Hien. Miss Clarkson is a qualified radar operator, while Miss Pham came to help install the radios I ordered for your ships, Admiral Shigeto. She speaks Japanese."

"Aaah, that should help quite a lot, Miss Lenoir. I will have Commander Komatsuri escort her around my fleet: I gave him the order of priority by ship for the radios installation."

"If I may, Admiral." Then said Hien in Japanese. "Your embassy in Paris contacted the offices of the Lenoir Industries, where I work, to ask our company to install two sets of radio teletype stations, one in their embassy, one in your flagship, in order to provide you with a link to your government. I actually went one step further and decided to add two more teletype stations to the deal, one to be installed at the Imperial Japanese Navy headquarters in Tokyo and the other to be installed in the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in Tokyo as well. An Air France CIGOGNE long range amphibian is already on its way to Tokyo with those two teletype stations and a technical crew, plus two translators provided by your Paris embassy. Those teletype stations should be operational in Tokyo within three days, if all goes well. As for the teletype station destined for your flagship, it is aboard the plane that brought me and the extra radios for your ships."

"That is super, Miss Pham." Exclaimed Shigeto, truly happy. During a visit to the radio room of the JEAN BART yesterday, he had watched with envy the two teletype stations in the compartment as they either spewed out or sent printed full text messages between the battleship and the French Fleet headquarters in Brest, with one operator

being enough to operate those stations. Compared to the previous spark-gap radio transceivers, which were still the sole standard long range communications means in ships of the other navies, including the Royal Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy, those teletype systems and new radio sets of the French Navy represented a true revolution in naval communications. Even the small, compact marine radiotelephone sets brought today would represent a huge improvement over the actual means of ship to ship communications, which consisted in flags, manual semaphores and signal lamps, all means subject to fog, rain or obscurity. Looking at Commander Komatsuri, he pointed Hien to him.

"Commander, I want you to go with Miss Pham right away and to ensure that she gets the full cooperation and assistance of our crews as she installs those new radio systems in our ships."

"Hay!" Simply said Komatsuri, bowing low to his admiral before leaving the bridge with Hien. That left Tasha and Terry with both of the admirals and the bridge crew. Guépratte was the one to speak next.

"Miss Lenoir, know that we received this morning a reconnaissance report from one of our maritime patrol aircraft: the Royal Navy's Battlecruiser Fleet and half of the Second British Battle Squadron have left the port of Rosyth, on the eastern coast of Scotland, and are heading this way. They should be here in a bit less than two days."

"Pardon my ignorance in naval matters, Admiral, but how many ships does this represent?"

Guépratte had a somber expression on his face when he answered her.

"That represents a total of nine battlecruisers, four 'ORION'-Class super-battleships, four armored cruisers, four light cruisers and a full destroyer flotilla with nineteen torpedo boats. Contrary to us, all those ships will be fully manned, with their crews thoroughly trained and familiar with their ships. As for us, only three of our seventeen battleships and battlecruisers will have full crews, along with eight cruisers and twelve destroyers, some of them of German design. All the rest of our combat fleet will have only limited prize crews aboard them, and those will be manning ships unfamiliar to our men. Me and Admiral Shigeto have jointly decided that those ships with prize crews will have each one main forward turret fully manned, plus will have only an aiming team for their other turrets and their torpedo tubes, which will be pre-loaded before departing Wilhelmshaven. That way, those prize ships will at the least be able to defend themselves to a degree if it comes to a fight with the British. As you can see,

your radars may make a huge difference in this equation, especially if fog conditions appear then, by giving us more accurate range aiming data than the British could get.”

Tasha paled a bit on hearing that, realizing how heavy the odds would be against the Franco-Japanese fleet. Terry then spoke up, surprising Guépratte and Shigeto.

“If I may, Admiral. First, may I ask at what range the British would typically open fire and what kind of accuracy they are capable of? I would also like to know how they correct their aiming.”

“Well, if the weather is clear and allows firing at maximum range, the Royal Navy normally teaches that its capital ships should start firing their big guns at a range of about 14,000 meters, while their maximum range turns around 22,000 meters. At a range of 14,000 meters, their coincidence rangefinders are very dependent on good visibility conditions, with any fog, smoke or poor light tending to make their range reading less accurate. By doctrine, like in the French and German navies, Royal Navy ships always start long range engagements by firing one gun per main turret in slow fire, to test the range and make corrections according to the observed splashes from the fall of shot. At anything past 10,000 meters, first-shot hits are extremely rare and are due more to luck than anything else. In fact, first shots typically can miss by as much as 2,000 meters or more at such distances. At ranges around 13,000 meters, a good British gunnery officer using a standard Barr and Stroud coincidence rangefinder and a fire control mechanical calculator will normally need three to four ranging salvos at the least before he finds the correct range and solution and straddles his target. Then, that British gunnery officer will go to ‘fire for effect’ mode and fire full broadsides at his target. For us and the Germans, the procedure is quite similar, except that we and the Germans use stereoscopic type rangefinders, which tend to be more accurate at long range than coincidence rangefinders. At 13,000 meters, we would take maybe two ranging salvos before finding the correct range and switch to broadsides. Uh, why do you ask, miss?”

“Because we now have a new element in your fire control equation, Admiral: our high definition navigation radar, which can provide us with ranges to enemy ships accurate to within fifty meters or less, even at distances past 20,000 meters. It can as well provide you with accurate, instant readings on the speed and heading of those enemy ships. With it, I am sure that your gunners will be able to dramatically increase the accuracy of their first shots. If we use our radars correctly and pass the targeting data to the other ships of our fleet in a timely manner, using our radios, then we should be able to win a long range engagement against the British, especially when you

consider the fact that the British cannot possibly have a clue that we have something like our radars and ship-to-ship radios.”

Guépratte’s eyes opened wide when he fully understood the implications of what Terry had said, with Admiral Shigeto also having the same reaction once Tasha had translated Terry’s words for him.

“By God, you are right, Miss Clarkson. If we started the engagement at a slightly shorter range, like around 11,000 meters, we could even manage first-round hits, something that could make a huge difference in the final outcome of any battle with the British.”

“If I may.” Then said Tasha, cutting in. “This may also have another kind of impact on any possible battle with the British, a political impact. By being able to wait for the British to fire first on us with relatively safe expectations that our ships won’t be hit by the first shells, then that would allow us to hold our fire until the British actually attack us, and I am not counting warning shots here. In the eyes of international opinion, the fact that the British would open fire first, and on the ships of two of its allies, will make the British the guilty party in this dispute and will greatly reinforce the credibility of France and Japan’s claims to these German prize ships. With luck, the international condemnation that would follow may just dissuade the British from attacking us again.”

“Miss Lenoir, you are most correct about this and it could indeed be the perfect way to paint the British as the guilty party here, but what if they lie and pretend that we fired first?” Said Shigeto, once Tasha had translated her own words.

“Simple! We get credible neutral observers to watch our sortie from Wilhelmshaven and our run to Brest, observers like diplomats and naval attachés from nations like Italy, Spain and, damn I hate to say this, the United States.”

“But, those neutral observers probably won’t accept to risk themselves by coming aboard our ships, miss.” Objected Guépratte, making Tasha nod her head once in response.

“They won’t need to risk themselves, Admiral: they can fly aboard one of my Air France long range amphibians, which can stay in the air for over eighteen hours at a time. That way, they will both be completely safe and will also enjoy a dominant view of both fleets. Talking of aircraft, I hope that French naval and military planes will be flying in support of our fleet when we will leave the Jade, Admiral?”

“Uh, good idea, miss: I will contact Fleet headquarters right away to request such air support.”

Both Tasha and Terry nearly shook their heads in discouragement then, depressed to see that the lessons of the war about the worth of air power had still not fully sunk in through the French military hierarchy. It was Admiral Shigeto who spoke next to the rest of their group.

“Then, I suggest that we start planning our tactical moves based on the advantages given us by your radars, Miss Lenoir. If the British could ever be made to fire first, then we will be able to fully justify our firing back at them. Let us be firm and stoic against British arrogance and greed and let us look them in the eyes when they will blink first.”

That made Terry wring her hand as she pictured such a confrontation.

“Hell, this may become the biggest Mexican standoff in history, ever!”

“A Mexican standoff? What’s that?” Asked Guépratte, confused.

“It’s only one notch down in craziness from a circular firing squad, Admiral.”

Replied Terry with a grin.

CHAPTER 22 – CLASH OF WILLS

06:23 (Germany Time)

Wednesday, 31 March, 1915

Japanese battlecruiser KONGO

Naval base of Wilhelmshaven, North Sea coast

Germany

“MISS LENOIR, WHERE ARE YOU?”

“UP HERE!”

Navy Lieutenant Takano Isoroku craned his neck up to look skyward from the open bridge on top of the forward superstructures of the battlecruiser. He then saw Tasha Lenoir, waving to him from the armored lookout nest on top of the forward tripod mast.

“MISS, ADMIRAL SHIGETO WISHES TO REMIND YOU THAT WE ARE DUE TO LEAVE THE HARBOR IN 45 MINUTES.”

“I KNOW, BUT I HAD TO FIX A PROBLEM UP HERE WITH THE WAVE GUIDE CONNECTOR TO THE RADAR ANTENNA. I AM ABOUT FINISHED NOW. JUST GIVE ME A COUPLE OF MINUTES.”

“ALRIGHT, MISS! I WILL BE WAITING FOR YOU HERE.”

Takano then waited patiently, looking around him at the combined Franco-Japanese fleet as it formed up in three tight parallel columns to get ready to leave Wilhelmshaven at twilight. Two days ago, Tasha Lenoir had agreed with Admiral Shigeto that the KONGO, as his flagship and lead ship of the combined fleet, should get the second navigation radar that had been destined for the JEAN BART. That, however, had meant two days of frantic work to take off the radar antenna assembly that had just been fixed to the rear mast of the JEAN BART, winch it down on a barge and carry it to the KONGO, along with its electronic components and wave guide, an ordinary-looking but crucial metal square-section pipe that carried the radar wave from the emitter module of the system to the antenna. As the hours passed, Admiral Shigeto had grown both worried and impatient but Takano, who had been assigned to help Tasha Lenoir as much as possible while learning to operate her radar and radio systems, had assured

the old admiral that she was working as fast as humanly possible. Now, with luck, it seemed that her efforts were going to bear fruits soon.

As promised, Tasha climbed down from the lookout nest four minutes later, her tool belt around her waist. Her hands were dirty from the grease used to protect the antenna mount assembly from salt water spray and fatigue showed on her beautiful face.

"It's done! Everything should now work correctly. Let's go down to the armored command bridge, to see if the radar is fully operational."

Takano simply nodded his head at that and led her down the steep ladder going down from the open bridge to the armored command bridge below it. There, Tasha powered up the modules in the components cabinet of her radar system, then switched on the display console. To her joy and that of Takano, the screen lit up at once with a greenish glow, with a detailed picture of the port area and of the ships in it forming on the screen. Once Tasha had performed some quick checks to make sure that the system worked perfectly, Takano went to Admiral Shigeto, who was looking with his binoculars through one of the armored windows.

"Admiral, I am pleased to announce to you that the radar is now fully operational and switched on."

"Excellent! That will help us tremendously for our sortie. Thank you, Lieutenant."

Takano bowed to his admiral, then returned to the radar console in the back of the command bridge, where Tasha was hooking one of her marine radiotelephones to the radar console. She gave him a big smile as he stopped beside her on one side of the console.

"Do you mind monitoring the radar screen for about twenty minutes, Lieutenant? I am going to wash up quickly and change."

"No problem, Miss Lenoir: we still have over thirty minutes before we will start to leave port."

"Thanks! I won't be long."

Takano watched her leave the bridge, hiding his lust for that beautiful, brave and incredibly intelligent woman. It indeed took bravery for a woman untrained in combat to volunteer to stay aboard a warship that was most possibly going to be engaged in a titanic sea battle, especially when she easily could have refused to stay without anybody

thinking less of her. The other woman, Terry Clarkson, had also volunteered to stay aboard the JEAN BART, in order to operate the two radar systems on the French flagship. However, few men had been surprised to see Clarkson volunteer to stay, as she had given early on the impression that she was somehow at home in combat.

Tasha did return on the bridge less than twenty minutes later, this time wearing the 27th Century female business suit with trousers that she had been wearing on arrival in Paris in 1912. While that suit got her more than a few looks from the officers and sailors present on the bridge, including Takano, what got most of the attention were the five medals pinned to the left side of her jacket.

“By the kamis! I didn’t know that you had earned medals before, miss.”

“Well, I don’t like to brag, but I thought that this would be a good time to wear them, as it could be my last chance to do so.”

She said that with a most sober expression that showed Takano that she was not joking and knew what could happen in the next few hours, something that only made his admiration towards her grow.

“May I ask what are the medals you are wearing, Miss Lenoir?”

“Certainly! The first one with a red ribbon is the French Légion d’Honneur, Officer’s Grade. Then, you have the Belgian Order of Leopold, Knight’s Grade, followed by the Belgian Croix de Guerre, the French Croix de Guerre and the French Honour Medal for Courage and Devotion, which I got from Président Poincaré.”

“Very impressive, miss. Most men could only dream of earning such medals.”

“Maybe! Right now, we better start individually identifying our ships on this screen, if we want to pass the correct target ranges to them later on.”

“Right! Let me get a clipboard and some paper and pen.”

07:18 (Germany Time)

Command bridge of the British battlecruiser H.M.S. LION

Cruising off the German coast near Wilhelmshaven

“Sir, the Franco-Japanese fleet is starting to emerge from the Jade.”

On hearing the warning from the bridge duty officer, Vice-Admiral Sir David Beatty, Commander of the Royal Navy’s Battlecruiser Fleet, walked quickly to one of the large portholes facing south and raised his binoculars. Rear-Admiral Brock, Commander of

the First Battlecruiser Squadron, soon joined him in observing the Franco-Japanese fleet as it came out of Wilhelmshaven in three long parallel columns of warships.

"This makes for a lot of warships together, Sir David." Said Brock while looking through his binoculars. "Maybe we should wait for the arrival of the Grand Fleet before challenging them."

"No need to." Replied Beatty, a man known for his impulsiveness. "There are only a handful of French or Japanese warships in that fleet, while the German prize ships they are escorting must have only skeleton crews aboard them. Furthermore, those skeleton crews are unfamiliar with their prize ships and may not be able to read properly the German indications on their instruments. Those prize ships will be more encumbrances than help for them in any fight, believe me."

Brock was tempted to object to that but stayed silent, accustomed to the rigid rules and traditions of the Royal Navy, which discouraged initiatives in subordinates and taught strict obedience to orders. After a minute or so of observation, Beatty shouted an order to his flag officer.

"SIGNAL TO THE FLEET: FORM UP IN BATTLE LINE, WITH OUR DESTROYERS IN PARALLEL COLUMN TO STARBOARD. SEND RADIO MESSAGE TO ADMIRALTY: FRANCO-JAPANESE SQUADRON IS COMING OUT OF WILHELMSHAVEN WITH GERMAN PRIZE SHIPS."

The flag officer acknowledged the orders and ran out to arrange and raise the command flags that would signal the intent of the admiral to all the ships. That process was actually quite long and, if made carelessly, could send the wrong signal and throw the fleet into confusion. By the time that the order was passed by flags and that the British capital ships started forming a single battle line, with their cruisers at the tail end of their line and with their escorting destroyers forming a column parallel to the battleships and battlecruisers, the Franco-Japanese fleet had time to fully come out of Wilhelmshaven and form into their own battle lines. Rear-Admiral Brock frowned on counting the number of major warships forming the Franco-Japanese battle line that was going to cruise parallel to the British battleships and battlecruisers.

"Hmm... Seventeen battleships and battlecruisers, followed by four armored cruisers and 22 light cruisers, plus about forty torpedo boats. That represents a lot of firepower. The KONGO, JEAN BART and PARIS are also impressive ships and have to be fully manned. Has London changed its stance about those German prize ships, Admiral?"

"No! We still want all of those German prize ships. It is already bad enough that we were not able to stop the Russians from seizing the German warships in the Baltic Sea and those of the Austro-Hungarian fleet in the Adriatic Sea. The French and the Japanese will have to show common sense and obey our orders, or they will regret it, allies or no allies."

Again, Brock had to restrain himself in order to not object to that. The opinions inside the Royal Navy about this dispute concerning the German prize ships were far from unanimous, but the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, along with the First Sea Lord, Admiral Fisher, had insisted that the German warships had to go to Great-Britain...all of them. That such a decision risked souring relations with three allied countries and could result in a bloody confrontation seemed to have been either ignored or dismissed by both Churchill and Fisher. The shout from a bridge lookout then made him look up at the sky.

"ONE PLANE COMING AT MEDIUM ALTITUDE FROM THE SOUTHWEST!"

Unable to see well through his porthole, Brock quickly walked out on the open bridge wing, followed closely by Beatty. There, he was able to point his binoculars at the incoming aircraft.

"It is a French CIGOGNE heavy amphibian aircraft. That's weird: it bears the colors of the Air France commercial airline company. What is it doing here and now?"

"Nothing good, I bet." Replied Beatty, also looking up with his binoculars. "Remember that Air France airliners were used in some of the French combat operations of the war. We thus should not assume that it is simply a peaceful, unarmed plane."

The two British admirals kept observing the solitary plane as it started describing large ovals around both fleets, staying at an altitude of about 2,500 meters. Another warning was then shouted by a bridge lookout a few minutes later.

"THIRTY PLUS AIRCRAFT APPROACHING AT HIGH ALTITUDE FROM THE SOUTHWEST!"

"I knew it!" Spat Beatty in an angry tone of voice. "That Air France plane is in reality a scout plane for those approaching planes. If it approaches our ships, then we shall shoot it down."

Beatty then shouted an order at his bridge signals officer.

"SIGNALS OFFICER, SEND BY BLINKING LIGHT THE FOLLOWING TO THE LEAD JAPANESE BATTLECRUISER: TURN AROUND AT ONCE AND RETURN TO WILHELMSHAVEN OR WE WILL FIRE ON YOUR SHIPS."

"AYE, SIR!"

As the young officer ran to one of the signals lamps of the open bridge, Beatty and Brock watched the thirty French warplanes split into four groups, with each group then starting to fly in oval circuits above the British fleet, something that brought a disdainful sneer from Beatty.

"If the French think that the sight of their planes will scare away my fleet, then they are sorely mistaken. Bombing warships stuck at quayside is one thing. To hit moving warships at sea is another thing."

A shout from the bridge signals officer then made Beatty look down at the enemy fleet.

"SIR, RESPONSE FROM THE KONGO: ON MY WAY TO JAPAN. ANY FIRING ON MY SHIPS OR ON FRENCH SHIPS WILL BE CONSIDERED AS AN ACT OF WAR BY GREAT-BRITAIN AGAINST JAPAN AND FRANCE."

That response made Beatty frown: he had truly hoped that violence could have been avoided, as he fully realized the larger consequences from a fight between his ships and the Franco-Japanese fleet. However, his orders from London had been clear. Furthermore, many more British warships were already on their way to reinforce him.

"Well, they were warned. Admiral Brock, have a warning shot fired across the bow of the KONGO."

"Yes sir!" Replied Brock, disappointed by the fact that things had degenerated to this. He thus went back inside the command bridge and gave a string of orders, making the forward-most main gun turret, Turret 'A', pivot to port and elevate its two 342.9mm caliber guns. He hesitated a bit before giving the final order.

"ONE WARNING SHOT ACROSS THE BOW OF THE KONGO, FIRE!"

The blast and recoil from the huge gun shook the whole battlecruiser as it spat out a shell weighing close to half a ton. Brock then raised his binoculars to his eyes to observe the fall of shot ahead of the KONGO, which was steaming on a parallel course to the British fleet at a distance he estimated to be about eight nautical miles. After long seconds, the big shell splashed into the water well away and past the Japanese battlecruiser. To Brock's chagrin, that warning shot didn't seem to impress much the Japanese, who continued on their course at the same speed of twelve knots they had left the Jade. Brock wondered for a moment about why the Franco-Japanese battle fleet

was going so slow, until he sighted in the distance, well behind the battle line of French and Japanese heavy units, a long column of cargo ships escorted by torpedo boats.

“Of course! Those cargo ships must be loaded down with spare parts and ammunition for those German prize warships. The French and Japanese have to go at the same speed as those cargo ships in order to protect them.”

Going out again on the open bridge, Brock went to Sir David Beatty, who was still examining the Franco-Japanese battle line.

“No response or reaction to our warning shot, Admiral. I just noticed that our opponents are keeping their speed low in order to escort a column of cargo ships sailing in parallel to their battle line. I believe that we should slow down as well and match speed if we don’t want to run past them. With the coastline so close to our fleets, turning to port to cross their ‘T’ would be impossible, with no room to turn again towards the sea.”

“I agree! Signal to the fleet to match speed with the enemy, then fire a second warning shot.”

“Yes, Admiral!”

As the British fleet slowed down from 21 knots to twelve knots, a second warning shot was fired, still without any detectable effect. That was when Beatty decided that he had been patient enough.

“TO ALL BATTLESHIPS, BATTLECRUISERS AND CRUISERS, START REGISTRATION FIRE AGAINST THE ENEMY SHIPS!”

07:34 (Germany Time)

Air France CIGOGNE heavy amphibian

Flying over the two battle fleets off the North Sea coast

Louis Blériot looked down at the two fleets with a mix of awe and dread: awe for the huge amount of sea power he was looking at; dread for what could follow. His heart sank when the HMS LION fired its first warning shot across the bow of the Japanese battlecruiser KONGO, prompting him into speaking in his intercom microphone.

“Gentlemen, the British have just fired a warning shot at the KONGO. Things may get ugly soon.”

In the first class section of the passenger cabin, Pham Ti Hien translated Blériot's warning, made in French, into English, Spanish and Japanese, for the benefit of the collection of diplomats and reporters traveling aboard the CIGOGNE. On top of the Japanese ambassador to France and his naval attaché, ambassadors and military attachés from Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Russia and the United States were present in the first class section, with a senior officer from the French Navy riding along to explain France's actions, while a mix of 23 French and foreign reporters occupied the tourist class section. With such a mix of neutral and foreign observers, Hien was confident that any attempt by the British to deform the true events to come would be dismissed by the other countries of the World. Like the diplomats, Hien watched through one of the large bubble windows of the first class section the firing of the British warning shots. Then, the whole British battle line erupted, half of their main guns firing shells in order to find the correct range against the French and Japanese battleships and cruisers. The faces of both the Japanese ambassador and of his naval attaché hardened on seeing those British departure shots, which thankfully missed their targets by wide margins.

"The British will regret this, I promise." Spat out the Japanese ambassador.

07:42 (Germany Time)

Command bridge of the Japanese battlecruiser KONGO

Tasha stiffened with fear and closed her eyes for a second when the first British registration shells flew with the noise of express trains over the KONGO. Lieutenant Isoroku Takano, who was assisting her at the radar console, noticed her reaction but didn't remark on it: her reaction was only natural for a civilian who had never been part of a naval battle. To Tasha's credit, she took back at once control of herself and applied an electronic pen to the green blip that represented the British battlecruiser LION. Typing a few commands and words on a side display screen, she designated again the blip of the LION with her pen and read out loud in Japanese the computed data that appeared on her side display.

"RANGE TO HMS LION: 13,150 METERS. COURSE HEADING OF LION: 013 DEGREES RELATIVE. SPEED: 13 KNOTS!"

Takano immediately relayed that information to both the gunnery officer of the KONGO and to the rest of the fleet, using his marine radiotelephone. Tasha then announced more firing data aloud.

“RANGE BETWEEN THE THURINGEN AND HMS ORION: 13,920 METERS. COURSE HEADING OF ORION: 015 RELATIVE. SPEED: 13 KNOTS!”

Admiral Shigeto, who had been watching impassively the British ships as they fired, shouted an order in his own marine radiotelephone, tuned to the fleet-wide frequency, right after Takano had relayed Tasha’s new information.

“TO ALL SHIPS: OPEN FIRE!”

Less than ten seconds later, as the British were firing their second ranging salvo, the KONGO shook under the firing of two of its 356mm main guns, imitated by the other battleships, battlecruisers and cruisers of the combined fleet. To Tasha’s relief, the second British salvo missed totally, with the British gunners still firing at way too long a range, thanks to the haze and the coastal background that made range reading much more difficult for the British coincidence rangefinders. Fifteen seconds later, the Japanese and French heavy shells started impacting. More than half of them were first-round hits on the British ships, while nearly all the rest were near misses that bracketed their targets, with some of them falling close enough to deform underwater hull plates when they exploded in the water near their targets. Admiral Shigeto couldn’t help exclaim himself on seeing such incredible accuracy at long range.

“By the great Amaterasu¹⁹! This radar thing is a true marvel. TO ALL SHIPS, FIRE FOR EFFECT!”

Seconds later, the Franco-Japanese fleet fired massive broadsides with both its main guns and its casemate-mounted secondary guns, which were also within range of the British battle line.

07:45 (Germany Time)

Command bridge of the H.M.S. LION

Vice-Admiral David Beatty struggled to get back on his feet, severely shaken up by multiple hits on his flagship by 356mm and 152mm armor-piercing shells.

¹⁹ Amaterasu : Japanese goddess of the Sun in Shinto religion.

"HOW THE HELL CAN THEY MANAGE FIRST-ROUND HITS AT SUCH A LONG RANGE? THIS SHOULDN'T BE POSSIBLE! ADMIRAL BROCK, HOW BADLY HAVE WE BEEN HIT?"

"I HAVEN'T RECEIVED DAMAGE REPORTS YET, SIR. I SHOULD GET THE FIRST ONES SOON, BUT IT IS LIABLE TO BE BAD."

Swallowing a strong swear word, Beatty waited impatiently for the promised damage reports while observing the enemy fleet with his binoculars. Unfortunately, the Japanese and French ships, already hard to make out at that distance with the North Sea coast so close behind them, with its fog banks and haze, were now even more difficult to spot because of the dense smoke clouds produced by big guns firing. That was probably why his own gunners were slow in firing more salvos, them still trying to find the correct range to their targets. Beatty's heart skipped a beat when the whole Franco-Japanese battle line erupted again in one huge fleet broadside with both its main and secondary guns. Those new clouds of smoke did nothing to help the aim of the British gunners, who fired a completely ineffective second salvo. Beatty didn't have time to react when more Japanese shells slammed into the LION, as one 356mm shell penetrated the armored barbette of 'B' Turret and exploded inside it. The blast in turn set off the bags of propulsive powder stored inside the barbette, as well as a few British 343mm shells. A titanic explosion then ripped open that barbette, projecting its 550-ton turret high in the air and cutting the ship in two. The blast wave from that explosion shattered the portholes of the command bridge and killed all the bridge personnel, including Vice-Admiral Beatty, via overpressure. Other 356mm and 152mm shells also struck within seconds, part of the second broadside by the KONGO, penetrating and exploding inside the boilers compartments, the superstructures and in the crew messes. The two halves of the ship, ripped open by numerous shell hits and engulfed in fire, quickly sank, with only four British sailors being lucky enough to survive the sinking.

Two minutes after the explosion of the HMS LION, the HMS INVINCIBLE, the oldest and least armored of the British battlecruisers, blew up, completely eviscerated by Metallex-filled 305mm shells from the French battleship PARIS. The battleship JEAN BART, despite having smaller main guns and a thinner armored belt than its direct opponent, the British battleship ORION, won its slugging match by a wide margin, its fire being vastly more accurate than the British fire and its metallex-filled 305mm shells proving to have much more destructive effect than the British 343mm shells. The

ORION gunners still had not found the correct range to the JEAN BART, with only one of their shells simply clipping the aft mast, before the impact and explosion of seven shells, two 305mm ones and five 138mm ones, started secondary ammunition explosions within the side hull casemates of its 102mm secondary guns. That chain of explosions then touched up 343mm propellant bags that had been foolhardily piled up outside their armored magazine in an attempt by the British gunners to accelerate the firing rate of their guns. The ORION was the third British ship to blow up, sinking barely five minutes after the LION. Two minutes after that, the battlecruiser NEW ZEALAND was the next to sink, victim of a magazine explosion. By then, all the remaining British battleships, battlecruisers and armored cruisers were in deep trouble, having already sustained heavy damage and with many of their guns or their firing control systems disabled by hits before they could even find the correct range to their targets. With British fire slackening and with a number of British heavy units either sunk or disabled, the French and Japanese ships were able to redistribute their fire and concentrate on the survivors, making the fight truly unequal by then.

07:51 (Germany Time)

Air France CIGOGNE heavy amphibian

“THERE GOES THE BATTLECRUISER NEW ZEALAND!”

The Japanese naval attaché happily took note of that, along with the time of that event, before looking again through the bubble window of the first class section while speaking in Japanese to his ambassador.

“Today is proving to be a truly glorious day for our navy and Japan, sir. The gunnery skills of our men and of the French sailors are positively incredible. In contrast, the British have only managed a few dispersed hits up to now.”

“Indeed! This naval battle may hurt deeply the relations between our country and Great-Britain, but it is only fair to say that the British attracted this on themselves. How would you explain such superior shooting by our sailors, Commander Yamagushi? The British had a reputation for good gunnery.”

“Frankly, I do not know, sir.”

Hien, who had heard the two Japanese men speak, then approached them and whispered to them in Japanese.

"Please treat this as a most secret information, Mister Ambassador: the reason for the unusually good accuracy of our gunners is that Miss Lenoir has installed prototypes of a new kind of long range detector in both the JEAN BART and the KONGO. That detector type can give exact range, speed and heading information on ships within dozens nautical miles, and this through fog and obscurity. While I am sure that your gunners would have won that fight anyway, I believe that our radar system gave them a crucial edge on the enemy."

The Japanese ambassador was left stunned by that for a couple of seconds, while his naval attaché eagerly followed up at once with a question.

"And would Miss Lenoir be ready to sell more of these 'radars' to our navy after this, Miss Pham?"

"Only Miss Lenoir could answer this, Commander. To be frank, those systems aboard the JEAN BART and KONGO are still only prototype models. They were supposed to make their first sea trials aboard the JEAN BART, so that they could be perfected before being offered for sale to the French Navy. Miss Lenoir's initial intention was to restrict the sale of her radar systems to France, but I suspect that this battle may change things a bit."

"Be assured that Japan will eagerly buy quite a few of her radar systems, miss." Said Yamagushi. "I..."

"THE BATTLECRUISER INFLEXIBLE HAS BROKEN IN TWO!"

That shout from the Italian naval attaché interrupted Yamagushi, who then followed his ambassador back to an observation window. The British armored cruisers HMS DEFENCE and HMS BLACK PRINCE then either sank or blew up in the next two minutes. Yamagushi's trained eyes then noticed something that the others had apparently missed.

"Hey, I see two long columns of our light cruisers and torpedo boats in the process of detaching themselves from our combined fleet. About twenty of our torpedo boats are accelerating sharply to turn in front of our battle line, while ten light cruisers and a dozen torpedo boats at the tail end of the fleet are turning to starboard and accelerating. I think that Admiral Shigeto is effecting a twin pincer attack with our lighter ships."

Numerous dots falling down from the sky on top of the British battle line then caught the attention of the American naval attaché.

"Look! There are planes diving on the remaining British ships. What are they hoping to accomplish against armored ships?"

That last remark earned the American a sharp look from the French Navy commander present in the first class section. The naval attaché was quite old for his rank and probably had risen in the ranks strictly via seniority rather than via true merit or competence.

"What they are hoping to accomplish is to sink those ships, sir. Watch and learn."

With all the diplomats and attachés in the plane now concentrating their attention on the diving planes, the French fast bomber pilots split up into six groups of four aircraft each, with each group then diving on a separate ship. Their task was made that much easier by the fact that the British capital ships possessed next to no truly effective anti-aircraft weapons. While most of the foreign attachés had expected the bombers to drop bombs on their targets, what they saw instead was ripple firing of heavy 150mm rockets, attracting a surprised exclamation from the Italian naval attaché.

"Mama mia! What is that?"

He barely had time to finish his sentence before the rockets, flying at a velocity of over 900 meters per second, faster than battleship shells, slammed through the lightly armored decks of the British battleships and battlecruisers they were targeting. The armor-piercing warheads of the rockets easily pierced the few centimeters of deck armor covering the vitals of the British ships before their sixteen kilos of Metallex explosives detonated inside their targets, devastating the compartments that had been pierced. The battlecruisers HMS INDOMITABLE, HMS TIGER and HMS QUEEN MARY either blew up or broke in two as a result, while the battleships HMS THUNDERER and HMS MONARCH shuddered, with fires spreading through their decks. The battleship HMS CONQUEROR fared a bit better but still sustained some serious damage, while it now became the sole target of the French battleship JEAN BART and of four of the German battleships claimed by France as prize ships. With all of its main turrets soon out of action and on fire from bow to stern, the CONQUEROR endured a deluge of shells for another four minutes before capsizing. That left exactly two British capital ships still afloat, albeit already severely damaged from shell fire, plus half a dozen battered cruisers. Even those survivors were not yet out of trouble, as the terrible battering given to their fleet had allowed the light cruisers and torpedo boats sent by Admiral Shigeto on a double pincer envelopment to cross the 'T' of the head and tail of the British battle line.

However, the main weapon of those lighter ships was now the torpedo, which they launched by the dozen at the surviving British cruisers. The British destroyers, which had up to now kept out of the fight while steaming in parallel column to their battle line, did react to the pincers movement, but were beset at once by the French fast bombers, which copiously strafed them with machine gun fire, turning their thin steel hulls into Swiss cheese and causing heavy casualties among their crews. Only the armored cruiser HMS DUKE OF EDINBURG, burning from end to end, and five damaged destroyers were left afloat by the time that Admiral Shigeto ordered his fleet to cease firing, with Admiral Guépratte then calling away the French bombers.

08:47 (Germany Time)

Air France CIGOGNE heavy amphibian

The American naval attaché sat heavily on his padded chair, unable to comprehend or even believe what had happened in the last half hour.

“The mighty Royal Navy...crushed in such a fashion? How could this be possible?”

French Navy Commandant Pierre Lartéguy answered him in a loud enough voice so that all the other diplomats and attachés could hear him.

“The British lost partly due to their arrogance and hubris, but the main factor in their defeat was the superior technology used by us in this battle. Our planes were part of that superior technology, but so were the radio systems we now use throughout the French Navy to command and control our ships. Hopefully, the British will now reconsider their greedy stance about wanting to grab all of the ex-German Navy ships.”

“What if they don’t, Commandant Lartéguy?” Asked the Spanish ambassador. “What if they attack your fleet again?”

“Then, as in this battle, we will defend ourselves. However, next time, our ships won’t wait until the British open fire to fire themselves, especially if the British enter French territorial waters. You may all tell your governments that any British warship or fleet approaching within fifty nautical miles of the combined Franco-Japanese fleet will be immediately attacked by our warplanes and sunk.”

As the various diplomats and attachés took note of that, Lartéguy then moved to the tourist class section, where he repeated what he had said in the first class section, with Hien helping by translating his words into English and Spanish. As they crossed back to

the first class section, Hien made Lartéguy stop briefly in the smoking lounge and gave him a worried look.

"Is there a chance that Great-Britain will declare war against France and Japan following this, Commandant? The war we just ended was bloody and destructive enough."

"Miss, believe me when I say that nobody in France wants such a war. Despite the battle that we just won, I don't want to see France and Great-Britain become enemies. However, imperial ambitions and belief in their naval superiority may push the British into trying to prove that superiority by attempting again to destroy our fleet. My prediction is that there will be more bloodshed before cooler heads prevail in London." Hien lowered her head in discouragement for a moment before looking back up at Lartéguy.

"I sincerely wish that you will be proven wrong, Commandant. Too many young men have died today."

"I know, miss, and I also hope to be proven wrong."

On the battlecruiser KONGO, Admiral Shigeto contemplated for a moment the burning British cruiser DUKE OF EDINBURG in the distance, then gave a few curt orders.

"To all ships of the fleet, stand down from battle stations. Be ready to report your casualties and damages by radio in fifteen minutes. Navigation Officer, put us on a course to the French port of Brest via the English Channel."

"Hay, Admiral!"

Dewa Shigeto then turned around and walked to the radar console manned by Tasha Lenoir and Lieutenant Isoroku Takano, stopping beside Tasha and bowing to her as a sign of respect.

"Miss Lenoir, your inventions gave us a crucial edge in this battle. Without you, hundreds of Japanese sailors may have died. Japan owes you a great debt."

Tasha bowed back in response, her head ending lower than that of Shigeto.

"To have saved the lives of brave sailors is enough of a repayment for me, Admiral. I only wish that this battle would not have happened. However, the British gave you no choice but to defend yourself."

"Indeed! I myself valued the friendship that existed between the Royal Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy. Hopefully, diplomacy will take over from now on."

Half a hour later, Shigeto had a list of damage reports from his ships and those of the French. Thankfully, the casualties amounted to less than 300 dead and wounded among both fleets, while the only ship lost was the ex-German light cruiser PILLAU, put on fire by three 234mm shell hits. Those fires forced its prize crew to transfer to another cruiser before the PILLAU was scuttled with torpedoes. Another eleven ships had suffered damages ranging from superficial to moderate but were able to continue on with the combined fleet. On its part, the HMS DUKE OF EDINBURG finally sank after its surviving crewmembers were retrieved by the least damaged British torpedo boats. The disappearance under the waves of the burning armored cruiser marked the worst ever British naval defeat in history, with a total of four battleships, nine battlecruisers and eight cruisers lost, plus over 17,000 men killed.

The consequences of this naval defeat in Great-Britain were both severe and swift. When First Sea Lord John Fisher and First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill stated their intent to launch the Grand Fleet in pursuit of the combined Franco-Japanese fleet, Prime Minister Asquit, horrified by the ghastly losses sustained in what was going to be known in history as 'The Battle of the Jade', vetoed them at once. Asquit then did his best to hide that defeat to the British public. However, his efforts were quickly undone when the various diplomats and reporters that had watched the battle from the air started reporting what they had seen, clearly painting the British as both the attackers and the definite losers. With nearly all the countries of Europe blaming Great-Britain for the battle and vowing to ally themselves with France and Japan if the British attacked them again, and with massive anger and indignation growing quickly at home, Asquit tried to save his government by publicly firing both Churchill and Fisher. However, that did not save Asquit from a vote of no-confidence that followed two days later in the House of Commons, a vote that Asquit lost, forcing the calling of new general elections.

Another consequence of the battle was a request by the French and Japanese governments in the next few days to buy large numbers of naval radar systems from the Lenoir Industries, plus an order from Japan for hundreds of radio sets and stations to equip its navy. That forced Tasha to enlarge significantly her electronics manufacturing plant in Suresnes in order to be able to fill those contracts. The start of commercial radio transmissions by Radio France on April First, first playing via public speakers in rail

stations, subway stations and dozens of carefully selected Parisian bars and café-terraces, caught the Parisian public imagination at once, with massive demands for home radio receiver sets following quickly. Within one month, over 12,000 radio receivers had been sold in the Parisian region alone, with that figure quadrupling the next month. With Radio France services then spreading out of the Parisian region thanks to the building of dozen of signal repeating towers and the installations of inter-city landlines, France quickly became the first nation in the World with viable commercial radio stations networks. Local radio stations sprouted out around France in the following months, encouraged by Pham Ti Hien by letting them share Radio France's network of retransmission landlines and towers, and this against a modest fee. The next step was the establishment of a regulated system of Citizens' Bands radios, first in Paris, then across France, with a primary goal of serving the needs of the various French police, firefighting and emergency response departments for quick communications between fixed stations and vehicles. As those CB networks quickly proved their worth, a number of taxi and road transportation companies ordered their own private CB networks. By the Fall of 1915, Tasha was forced again to enlarge her production capacity by building a brand new plant dedicated to the mass production of radio systems. All that boosted Tasha's and Hien's personal fortunes to new heights, with Tasha in particular soon becoming a billionaire. As for Johanna Kruger, she was far from idle during all that time.

CHAPTER 23 – TAKING THE ROADS BY STORM

13:11 (Paris Time)

Friday, May 7, 1915

Offices and plant of the Société des Automobiles Renault

Rue du Court (to become Avenue Émile-Zola)

Boulogne-Billancourt, 15th Arrondissement

Paris, France

Tasha had to swallow the tough words that had come to her mind after the last outburst from the anger-prone Louis Renault. Putting a hand on the shoulder of Johanna Kruger, who was about to reply rather abruptly to the French car maker, Tasha got up from her chair facing Renault's work desk and stared hard in the eyes of the small man.

"Mister Renault, if you think so little about the designing and engineering skills of women, then feel free to complete the designs of your new cars by yourself. However, you will have to pay patent royalties for my friend's new transmission system if you want to use it in your car, on top of paying the full retail cost for them. As for duplicating the Kruger Automatic Transmission and producing it in your plant, forget it, unless you want to be dragged in court for patent violation. As for our planned business association, consider it dead as of now. Goodbye, Mister Renault."

As Tasha and Johanna started to leave his office, Louis Renault shouted angrily at them, making heads turn among the secretaries and Renault design staff members within earshot.

"IF YOU THINK THAT YOU CAN UPSTAGE ME IN PRODUCING WINNING CARS, THEN GO AHEAD, MISS LENOIR! GO MAKE A FOOL OF YOURSELF!"

Tasha had to restrain Johanna from turning back then to go punch Louis Renault.

"Forget him, Johanna: it would only get you in trouble with the law. Let's go!" Her friend obeyed her reluctantly and followed her back to their car, ironically a Renault, driven by the ever loyal Marc Lebrun, who was waiting near the entrance door to the Renault corporate office building. Lebrun noticed at once the sour expressions of the two women when they sat back in his car.

"Something went wrong, Miss Lenoir?"

"You could say that, Marc." Replied Tasha, who had absolute confidence in her personal driver. "Basically, Mister Renault just blew away our project of business alliance with a half dozen mean insults and derogatory remarks about female engineers and businesswomen."

"Oh! Uh, then what will happen to your car building project, miss?"

"I will find a new partner or, at the worst, will do it alone. That last option would mean delaying significantly the start of the production of our new line of cars, but I will be damned if I let some egomaniacal industrialist laugh at me or Johanna or try to fleece us."

"So, where would you like to go, miss?"

"Let's go visit the Citroen company first, at the Quai de Javel. If I am not satisfied there, then I will go see Peugeot and Panhard."

"Very well, miss. Quai de Javel, here we come!"

The next two days proved quite frustrating to Tasha, with the established car makers she visited proving either too narrow-minded or too greedy. At the end, she finally turned to two of the friends from this time period who already knew about her big secret, Ernest Archdeacon and Henri Deutsch de la Meurthe. Both men were co-founders of the Aéro-Club de France, had a passion for technology and were very influential, while Henri Deutsch de la Meurthe was the biggest oil magnate in France and was also a co-founder of the Automobile Club de France. Both men accepted at once to help her, lending her some extra money in order to expand further her car manufacturing plant, which was still being completed, and arranging contacts between Tasha and a number of dependable car parts manufacturers that could provide her a steady flow of various parts and materiel, thus lightening the load on Tasha's own plant. Now free of the incessant bickering that had plagued her during the few months of joint work with Renault, Johanna Kruger temporarily switched most of her attention away from aircraft and aero-engine design, to concentrate on perfecting her car designs and refining their production process in order to keep the costs down and build cars that were affordable to the greater public. Up to now, cars had been widely viewed as mostly meant for the rich and well-to-do. However, both Johanna and Tasha were firmly resolved to change that state of affair...while growing further their joint financial, industrial and technological empire.

09:53 (New York Time)

Friday, December 31, 1915

Main show hall, Grand Central Palace

Lexington Avenue, Manhattan

New York City, U.S.A.

Giuseppe 'Joe the Boss' Masseria, followed by his driver and one bodyguard, paid his entrance ticket to the New York Annual Automobile Show, which had just opened this morning, and entered the huge hall where hundreds of cars from a multitude of car makers were being exposed. His faithful Studebaker sedan had unfortunately expired a few days ago, crushed by an out of control truck while parked in front of his apartment building on 2nd Avenue, and he really needed to get a new car. Since his various rackets were doing well, money was no object and he had decided to go visit the automobile show to find a car that would truly befit a powerful man like him.

While he had expected the car show to be popular, the density of the crowd surprised Masseria. Another thing that intrigued him was the fact that the visitors already in the hall were not equally spread among the display stands, but seemed instead to concentrate in one specific corner of the hall. Seeing a lonely representative at the Lexington-Howard stand, which seemed to be ignored by visitors, the presumptive boss of the Morello crime family walked to the man, who instantly painted a welcoming smile on his face.

"Good morning, sir! Would you like me to show you our new sedan?"

Masseria glanced for a short moment at the white four-door car on display: it was a nice model and the Lexington cars had a good reputation for reliability, but it wasn't exactly what he was looking for.

"Uh, thanks but no. Can you tell me why everybody seems to be attracted to that corner of the hall over there?"

The representative had a quick look in the direction pointed at by Masseria, with his smile fading at once.

"That must be because of that new French brand on display in that part of the hall, sir. Everybody seems to want to see their models."

"A new brand? What is the name of that brand, mister?"

"Kruger! It's a German name but it is based in Paris. After the bloody war they just had, go figure."

"I see! Thank you, mister."

Masseria then walked away with his two men, leaving the discouraged Lexington representative behind. The mafia boss walked by many similarly deserted stands manned by lonely representatives before he got to the fringe of a thick, excited crowd blocking the circulation lane he was in. Not being a very patient man, Masseria had his driver and bodyguard clear a path for him through the crowd with lots of elbow work, until he finally got to the first display stand showing a 'KRUGER' sign. His eyes, like those of his driver and of his bodyguard, opened wide at the sight of the futuristic vehicle now visible to him.

"Jesus! This must be some kind of racing car."

"Er, I don't think so, Boss." Said his driver, pointing to a display panel beside the car they were eyeing. "That thing is described as a two-seater sports car and will be on sale. God, it's a beauty!"

Masseria could only agree with his driver's last sentence: the car, painted orange-red, looked truly magnificent and appeared built for speed. He thus read aloud the display sign.

"The Kruger MIRAGE two-seater sports car. Salmson V-6C, 200 horsepower engine. Standard five speed manual transmission, with optional five speed automatic transmission. What the hell is an automatic transmission?"

He kept reading the rest of the data on the display, but couldn't help shout aloud when he saw the advertized top speed.

"ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTY MILES PER HOUR!?"

"Maybe you could buy that car, Boss." Said his driver, who was nearly salivating as he stared with glee at the sports car. Masseria giggled at that and shook an index at him.

"I'm sure that you would love that, Salvatore, but that is a two-seater. Where will we stuff poor Nick when I need him with me? Mind you, I will agree with you that this is one hell of a car. Let's see if this new 'Kruger' brand has something a bit more appropriate for group transportation."

The next Kruger car on display in the lineup was a small, compact two-door sedan called the 'MINI', which was offered at the very economical price (for the time) of

500 dollars in its basic version. While a compact vehicle indeed, its interior showed a degree of comfort and modernity that Masseria had not seen before. Its magenta pink color made the mafia boss smile.

"Hell, my wife would love that car. Maybe I could buy her one on top of buying a car for myself."

"I actually wouldn't mind one like that, but painted red, as my personal car, Boss." Added his bodyguard. "Look at its advertized statistics. That little thing can really go for a simple city car: ninety miles per hour with the standard 48 horsepower engine. Do you mind if I take the time to check the inside, Boss?"

"Go right ahead, Nick. In fact, I wouldn't mind checking it out myself. Let's go see that representative over there."

The three Mafiosi soon ended up examining the Kruger MINI from up close, with all of them taking turn sitting behind the driver's wheel, which itself was quite stylish and showed a serious attention to detail in both its design and practicability, being very comfortable to the hands and with buttons and controls within easy reach. Salvatore, intrigued by two rubber blades resting on the outside surface of the large, curved windshield, pointed them to the Kruger representative.

"Uh, what are those things at the base of the windshield, mister?"

"Those are wiper blades, sir. They are integrated with a washer spray system and a defroster system. All Kruger cars have such systems. Let me show you."

One short demonstration by the representative of the wipers/washers was enough to impress the Mafiosi. Masseria, who was trying the small rear bench seat, nodded his head in appreciation.

"Decidedly, this new Kruger brand is impressing me up to now. Does Kruger have a model of car that would fit my own needs, mister? I need something large but fast and comfortable to move around with my family."

The representative, a young man who spoke a good English with a notable French accent, smiled on hearing his question.

"Kruger certainly can fulfill your needs, sir. I could counsel you either our 'AVENTURE', especially if you travel in the countryside with your family, or our 'MONARQUE', if prestige and big business is your thing."

"Prestige? That sounds like what I want. Is it very costly?"

"It is actually our most glamorous car, but it is very reasonably priced, especially when compared with what Cadillac is asking for their latest models. I will handle you to the representative in charge of the MONARQUE display."

Masseria's eyes nearly popped out of their orbits when he saw the Kruger employee grab a small microphone attached to a sort of small box stuffed in a pocket of his vest, then speak in the microphone in French.

"Jean, this is Marcel, at the MINI display. I have a customer who could be interested in your MONARQUE. Can you send Ginette to guide him to your display?... Thank you!"

"That little thing in your pocket is a radio?" Asked Masseria, incredulous.

"Yes, sir! The Kruger Car Company is a subsidiary of the Lenoir Industries, which has revolutionized the radio and electronics technologies in France in the last couple of years. The Air France commercial airline company is also a subsidiary of the Lenoir Industries. All the Kruger cars are equipped with radio receiver sets in France, while the export variants, like this one, are pre-wired for such sets and can get radios as soon as commercial radio stations will start operating inside the United States."

Masseria was still digesting that information when a most delectable young woman in a sort of hostess uniform showed up near the MINI.

"Hello, sir! My name is Ginette and I am here to show you to the display of the MONARQUE."

"Well, I am certainly not going to let such a beautiful young lady wait for me, miss." Replied the mafia boss while stepping out of the MINI. "Please show me the way."

Still followed by his driver and bodyguard, Masseria was made to pass by the displays of three other models of Kruger vehicles, all as futuristic and stunning as the others. However, the fourth and last model left him with his mouth gaping as Ginette showed him a long, splendid-looking car painted glossy black.

"Here you are, sir: the Kruger MONARQUE limousine. I will now let you in the good hands of Mister Jean Lafarge."

Masseria shook hands with the tall and thin Frenchman who came to him, noting that no less than two other Kruger employees was assisting the said Lafarge at the display, handling the thick crowd of curious visitors and answering their questions.

"Hi! I was looking for a new car that would reflect well on me. I am a big businessman and often have to go around with important people."

"Then, our MONARQUE limousine should be the perfect car for you, sir. Would you like a quick tour of the MONARQUE first, before we discuss further?"

"I certainly would, mister."

"Then, if you may follow me, sir."

The representative went first to the driver's door, which was already opened, and showed the interior, with posh, well-padded leather bucket seats in the front. Just a look at the dashboard of the limousine was enough to impress Masseria.

"My God! This is like something from the future. Uh, I don't see a clutch pedal. Where is it?"

"There is none, sir. Like many of our models, this car comes with an automatic transmission that makes a clutch superfluous. Basically, you put the transmission in 'drive', then let it do the change of gears as your speed and engine revolution change. It greatly simplifies driving, especially in such a large and heavy vehicle, and allows the driver to fully concentrate on the road and traffic around him."

"Damn, I like that! Tell me more about your MONARQUE, mister."

"With pleasure, sir. Our MONARQUE comes in two basic categories and three levels of finish quality. The one you see here is the standard, four-door version in Luxury Edition finish. It has a Salmson V-6C, 200 horsepower engine, a four-speed automatic transmission, independent coil spring and pneumatic suspension on all four wheels, four disk brakes, electric engine starter, electric windows and sunroof, an AM/FM radio receiver set, electrical windshield wipers and defroster systems, a space heater, an air-conditioning system and a mini-bar with refrigerator in the back. I will be pleased to give you more details later but let's show you the rear seats first."

Going to the large left rear door and opening it, Lafarge invited Masseria to go sit inside. Masseria did so and took place with Lafarge on the large, very comfortable rear bench seat, which faced forward. As for Nick and Salvatore, they took place on the middle, rear-facing bench seat opposite that of Masseria. With four men in the back section, there was still plenty of space for them to fully stretch their legs. Masseria then stood up through the opened sunroof and looked around the display, with his head and upper torso sticking out.

"I love this! You said that you also have another version of your MONARQUE?"

"Yes, there is, sir. It is a stretched model with six doors instead of four and is able to sit comfortably six to seven adults in the back. You can also order an armored body variant at an extra cost of 300 dollars."

Masseria did a double-take on hearing the word 'armored'.

"Did you say 'an armored body', mister?"

"I did, sir. The car you are in, like all the other Kruger cars, have bodies made out of a very tough, yet light polymer we call 'Durex'. The French Army successfully used Durex to make individual bullet-proof vests and helmets for its individual soldiers, which were used with great success during the recent war. Durex has the benefit over steel that it does not rust and, since it is elastic to a point, can absorb shocks without deforming permanently."

"Damn, this is interesting me. Is this car armored?"

"Not this one, sir, but it and the other cars you see today in this show arrived earlier by ship as part of a large first shipment of Kruger cars and spare parts sent to New York with the view of opening a Kruger dealership in Manhattan. That shipment included at least one armored MONARQUE L.E.S., if my memory serves me well."

"And how much would that particular armored car cost me, mister?" Asked Masseria, now truly interested.

"It would cost you 3,500 dollars, plus of course the American import taxes, sir. Normally, we would also add the cost of shipping from France, but Miss Kruger decided that she would not charge the shipping cost on this first shipment of cars."

"Miss Kruger? You mean that the owner of your car company is a woman?"

The representative smiled as he answered the mafia boss.

"Oh, she is much more than that, sir. She is the one who designed all those cars and is also the chief designer of aircraft for the Blériot Company. She designed the first plane to cross the Atlantic, which visited New York two years ago."

"Hell, that woman must be a true genius. No wonder that these cars all look so fantastic."

"Uh, what about maintenance and repair, Boss?" Timidly asked Salvatore, Masseria's driver. "With all those new things and features in these cars, especially with their bodies not being made of traditional steel, no regular mechanic will be able to properly maintain or repair those cars. Who will repair that new car of yours if you buy a Kruger?"

Masseria nodded his head slowly, seeing the wisdom in his driver's question, and looked at Lafarge, who had a prepared answer for that.

"Our official Kruger showroom and maintenance center is due to open next month near Madison Square Park and will handle all periodic maintenance and repairs on the cars we will sell in New York. We also have plans to gradually open more dealerships and maintenance centers across the United States as we sell more cars. However, for customers who buy our top of the line cars, like the MONARQUE and the MIRAGE, we have a customer training program, to be run at our dealership garage, where private mechanics and drivers can follow a two-week session and learn how to properly maintain and repair Kruger cars. The individual cost of that program is sixty dollars."

"Excellent! Do you have pictures of that armored model that I could see?"

"Certainly, sir. Let's step out of this car and I will show you our products catalogue and inventory list."

Masseria was looking at the pictures of his prospective new car, a black six-door armored stretched MONARQUE L.E.S., when his eyes caught a familiar face in the crowd of onlookers around the demonstration model. It was Charles Francis Murphy, the powerful and very influential head of Tammany Hall, the headquarters of what was in effect the Democratic Party political machine in New York. Murphy, as always accompanied by at least one of his Irish bodyguards, also saw Masseria and approached him and Lafarge, politely greeting them.

"Good morning, gentlemen. So, shopping for a new car, Mister Masseria? I must say that this limousine looks very impressive."

"Isn't it?" Replied proudly the mafia boss. "You should get one yourself, Mister Murphy: it would befit such an influential man as you."

"Indeed!" Said the Tammany boss before looking at Lafarge. "Would you mind if I take a look inside your limousine, sir?"

"Not at all, sir. I am presently dealing with this customer here, but I will get one of my assistants to give you a detailed tour of our demonstration model."

"That will be most satisfactory, sir."

Lafarge took a moment to call to himself another representative and to handle Murphy to him before returning his attention on Masseria. The Frenchman however had a question for his customer, asked in a low voice.

"You know that man, sir? He looks like an important person around here."

"He sure is, mister. Charles Murphy is the boss of Tammany Hall, the local Democratic Party machine, and can basically make or break the careers of local New York politicians. You certainly want him as a customer."

"Oh! I see! Just give me a moment, sir."

Lafarge then went to his assistant guiding Murphy and whispered a few words in his ear before returning to Masseria and the car catalogue. With his mind now firmly made up, Masseria soon signed a sales contract for an armored MONARQUE L.E.S. loaded with options, including a powerful, 267 horsepower Salmson V-8C engine and five-speed automatic transmission to boost the performances of the long, heavy vehicle. On a whim, the Mafioso also bought the much cheaper and smaller magenta pink-colored MINI that he had seen, intent on making a nice gift for his wife. Even for a mafia boss, marital peace had no price.

14:09 (New York Time)

Thursday, January 6, 1916

New York Automobile Show, Grand Central Palace

Manhattan, New York City

Jean Lafarge suspected trouble the moment he saw an apparently angry man charging towards the MONARQUE display kiosk, accompanied by a graying man in a top quality suit and a number of big, tough-looking men in uniformly dark suits. Concentrating his attention on the thin, nearly ascetic man in his fifties leading the charge, Lafarge felt a shock when he recognized him from past newspaper pictures: it was none other than Henry Ford, the biggest American car maker! Grabbing urgently the microphone of his pocket radio and keying it, he then spoke in it in French.

"Miss Kruger, we have possible official trouble approaching the MONARQUE display. I request your immediate assistance."

A female voice answered him just before Ford and his group of followers arrived at Lafarge's stand.

"On my way! Stall as long as you can."

"Understood, miss."

Lafarge silently thanked the fact that top help was available today at the auto show and steeled himself for what looked like an incoming verbal confrontation. In that, he was correct, as Henry Ford pointed an angry finger at him while shouting out loud.

“THIS IS NOTHING SHORT OF DUMPING ON THE PART OF A FOREIGN COMPANY BENT ON STEALING JOBS FROM THOUSANDS OF AMERICAN WORKERS! I WILL HAVE YOUR COMPANY’S STANDS CLOSED AND YOUR CARS SENT BACK TO FRANCE.”

The reporters and press photographers present in the show hall converged at once on Lafarge’s stand, sniffing a juicy story. Despite the belligerent tone and attitude of Ford, Lafarge kept an air of politeness mixed with rightfulness.

“I am sorry, sir, but I believe that your accusations have no foundation in facts. We are offering our cars here at the same prices than the ones we sell them for in France, subject to the exchange rate between the dollar and the franc, of course.”

“You are telling me that your MINI, for example, is sold at a fair price, when you offer it for only 500 dollars, barely 110 dollars more than a basic Ford Model T?”

“So? The MINI is the cheapest and smallest category of car that we build, while 500 dollars is the price of its basic version, without any of the extra options we offer for it. Yes, it is a low price, but that is due solely to the advanced mass construction methods we use at the Kruger Company car plant near Paris.”

“What advanced mass construction methods? I am the one who introduced chain assembly in my plants.” Retorted Ford, with the reporters present watching with glee that oral jousting while taking frantic notes and snapping pictures.

“Excuse me, Mister Ford, but you didn’t invent chain assembly and you certainly didn’t invent modular construction.”

“Modular construction? What are you talking about?”

“An advanced mass construction method, Mister Ford.” Replied Lafarge, a sarcastic smile on his lips. “We at Kruger also benefit from a highly motivated and efficient workforce.”

Countered on that front, Ford switched to another argument.

“Still, your prices don’t make sense when you consider all the extras you put in them.”

“We are not in the business of selling empty shells on wheels, Mister Ford.” Retorted Lafarge, making many of the spectators and reporters wince at the barb thrown at the fact that Ford only built one model, the Model T, which never changed with the

years and could be described as 'bare bones'. That angered further Henry Ford, who raised again the volume of his voice.

"I sell cars that are affordable for the average American worker, sir. I don't waste money and add to the price of my cars by offering all the frivolous choices of paint color in which your cars come into."

"Now you are blaming us for wanting to add some color in American streets and roads, mister? The main reason that you sell your cars at such a low price is because you offer no options, minimal passenger comfort and low performances, all that in one color: black. We equip our cars so that driving can be truly enjoyed in full comfort by their owners. Our mass construction methods and our technological expertise, along with the high efficiency of our workers, allows us to equip our cars with the comfort features that you consider so wasteful. There is no price dumping on our part, Mister Ford. We sell our cars here at the same price we sell them in France and thousands of French citizens from all social classes are already enjoying driving a Kruger. Furthermore, the Kruger Company offers a payment plan through banks that allows a French worker to buy a Kruger by monthly installments, without having to pay its full price at once. I believe that your company still refuses to do so, Mister Ford. As for our own workers at the Kruger Company, they enjoy high salaries, full social and medical benefits and follow a five-day, forty-hour work week, like all employees of the Lenoir Industries Consortium, of which the Kruger Company is part of."

The part about a five-day, forty-hour work week left Ford without a counter-argument, while the spectators and reporters were left with their mouths gaping on hearing such a revolutionary social standard. Shouted questions immediately came out of the reporters present, directed at Lafarge, while Ford was all but forgotten.

"HOW LONG HAVE YOUR WORKERS ENJOYED SUCH A SHORT WORK WEEK, SIR?"

"Since the incorporation of the Lenoir Industries by Miss Tasha Lenoir at the end of 1912."

"HOW MUCH ARE THE KRUGER EMPLOYEES IN YOUR CAR ASSEMBLY PLANT PAID, SIR?"

"Our minimum wage is now fixed at the equivalent in francs of 4.3 American dollars a day, and this for an eight-hour work day, with both Saturdays and Sundays being days off for our employees. Our employees also get paid annual leave periods, varying according to their seniority but of no less than two weeks per year of paid leave,

on top of paid statutory holidays. As well, our employees have full medical and dental coverage paid by the company and participate in a registered retirement pension plan in which the Kruger Company contributes sixty percent of the funds. Our female employees can go on paid maternity leave and have their jobs safeguarded while they are on leave. As you can see, we don't treat our workers like slaves and we don't offer low car prices on their backs."

A wave of exclamations and surprised comments went through the crowd of onlookers at those words, while Ford was left speechless. The sound of clapping hands then made everybody look in the direction of two tall women. Johanna Kruger, closely followed by Tasha Lenoir, approached Jean Lafarge and patted him on one shoulder.

"Mister Lafarge, I couldn't have said it better."

"Thank you, Miss Kruger."

Johanna and Tasha then faced Henry Ford and the men accompanying him, with Tasha eyeing in particular the man with graying sideburns standing beside Ford.

"Mister Secretary Redfield, may I ask what you are doing here, in the company of Mister Ford and four of his company goons? Is the American government part and party to those false accusations of industrial dumping uttered by Mister Ford?"

Very conscious that he was not showing himself in the best light right now, the American Secretary of Commerce nearly stuttered his response to Tasha.

"Miss Lenoir, I came here because I heard complaints of possible industrial dumping by the Kruger Company. It was my duty to investigate such complaints."

"With no proper investigators with you and four Ford Company goons at your back, sir? This sounds to me like little but a show trial against a French company engaged in legal international commerce."

"Those Kruger cars, at the prices they are offered, could very well drive into bankruptcy most of the American car manufacturers, miss. I can't allow that!"

"Oh! So, your main concern is for the survival of car makers who specialize in building cars that are only affordable to the rich and wealthy, is that it?"

Redfield reddened with anger at those words and pointed an accusing finger at Tasha.

"You are also threatening the existence of the Ford Company, which is dedicated to provide affordable cars to the average American, miss."

"The Ford Motor Company builds low-priced junk, compared with what the Kruger Company is now offering to the American public. The Kruger Company also offers bank payment plans that make its cars even more affordable to the American

workers. The Kruger cars are so much superior to the present cars offered on the American market because of the superior technologies they incorporate, technologies that I and Johanna Kruger have been developing since 1912, technologies that heavily contributed to the victory of France in the war against Germany. If you want your honest part of the market, then develop your technologies, like we did in France, but if you want to exclude us from the American market via false accusations and unilateral import laws, then you will have a trade war with France on your hands, while the American public will be stuck with low-cost junk or unaffordable cars. Think well before you act, Mister Secretary.”

A glance at the crowd of onlookers told Redfield that he was clearly losing that oral joust, so he decided to simply turn around with a grunt and walk away, leaving Henry Ford alone with his goons. Tasha’s attention then focused on the car maker.

“Mister Ford, if you have objections about the business practices of the Kruger Company or that of any other company part of my consortium, then do them properly, in a court of law and with something more than mere assumptions. Right now, I could bring charges of defamation and false accusations against you and I would very likely win in court. So, I would strongly counsel you to leave peacefully with your goons, now!” His face nearly deformed by contained rage, Ford nonetheless turned around and left, pursued by a few of the reporters present. Facing the remaining reporters, Tasha waited until the crowd had quieted down a bit to speak again.

“Please believe me when I say that the Kruger Automobile Company is a honest company and that its cars are offered at fair prices. Know that a Kruger dealership and maintenance center will open next month in Manhattan, where owners of Kruger cars will be able to have their vehicles maintained and repaired, and where new customers will be able to choose a car that will truly fit their needs and income brackets. In the meantime, I invite you to check out the cars on display and make your minds on your own about them.”

As soon as Tasha was finished, Johanna stepped forward to make an announcement.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, I NOW WISH TO ANNOUNCE THAT I HAVE DECIDED TO START A LOTTERY RIGHT HERE AND RIGHT NOW, WITH A KRUGER ALLURE FOUR-DOOR SEDAN AS THE PRIZE. JUST WRITE YOUR NAME AND ADDRESS ON YOUR ENTRANCE TICKET AND LEAVE IT HERE WITH US. A DRAW WILL THEN BE MADE ON THE LAST DAY OF THIS AUTO SHOW, WITH THE WINNER THEN CONTACTED BY US. I WILL INVITE THE GENTLEMEN OF THE

PRESS TO ASSIST AS WELL TO THAT DRAW, SO THAT THEY CAN CERTIFY THAT IT WAS HELD IN A FAIR AND HONEST MANNER. THANK YOU VERY MUCH AND ENJOY OUR CARS.”

Those words triggered a near frenzy among the onlookers, who hurried to write their names and addresses on their show tickets and then hand those tickets to a Kruger hostess holding an upside down top hat as an improvised ticket container. Tasha smiled on seeing that and patted Johanna’s shoulder.

“You are learning business tricks fast, Johanna: that impromptu lottery will bring you lots of extra, nearly free publicity. From the reaction of this crowd, I believe that Kruger cars will quickly become very popular in New York.”

“Well, it would only be just to also praise the man who held the fort until our arrival.”

She then turned to face Jean Lafarge, shaking his hand firmly.

“Mister Lafarge, you truly went beyond the call of duty on behalf of the company today. You can thus expect a one thousand franc bonus in your next paycheck.”

Jean Lafarge grinned at those words, and with good reasons: that bonus represented more than half of his monthly salary and would allow him to pay for a few things he had been wishing to buy for his wife and his family. Johanna then went to Tasha, who was answering more questions from reporters. She waited for the reporters to be finished with her, then spoke to her in Americanish while keeping her voice low.

“Do you think that we are now free from those accusations of dumping, Tasha?”

“Hardly! However, the legal arguments strongly favor us, so I am not too worried, unless of course the American government decides to play dirty and pass some unilateral trade ruling against us. If that ever happens, then I believe that we can count of the full official support of President Poincaré and of his government. In that case, the Americans will quickly learn that they have a lot more to lose than us in this affair.”

22:11 (New York Time)

Small Italian restaurant

2nd Avenue, Lower East Side District

Manhattan, New York City

Giuseppe ‘Joe the Boss’ Masseria patted with satisfaction his full belly as he walked out of the little but fine Italian restaurant where he just had a nice long business

supper with a number of associates. Bidding goodnight first to his associates, he then walked towards his waiting limousine, with his driver Salvatore waiting behind the wheel and with his bodyguard Nick close behind Masseria. As both men were opening their respective doors, all hell broke loose, with multiple gunshots reverberating around the poorly lit street and with bullets ricocheting against the body, doors and windows of the armored MONARQUE L.E.S.. The mafia boss and his bodyguard didn't waste time in trying to reply to the hidden shooters and jumped instead inside the limousine, closing their doors in a hurry.

"DRIVE, SALVATORE! GET US OUT OF HERE!"

The driver didn't have to be told twice and pressed on his accelerator, making the big car jump forward out of its parking spot while bullets still pinged against its body. However, none of those bullets penetrated the thick Durex body plates and windows of the limousine. Salvatore was thinking that they were out of danger when a Ford Model T suddenly emerged from a side street and stopped in the middle of the avenue, blocking his way. At the same time, a gunman armed with a Thompson submachine gun and who had been standing on the left side running board of the Ford jumped off that car and pointed his weapon at the incoming Kruger MONARQUE.

"Oh shit! HOLD ON, BOSS, IT'S GOING TO SHAKE A BIT!"

The gunman had time to open fire with a long burst that peppered the front and windshield of the limousine before the front bumper of the Kruger hit his legs, sending the hitman in the air like a broken puppet. Driven with virtuoso by Salvatore, the heavy limousine then slammed in the front left corner of the Ford, brutally pushing it out of the way and making it spin wildly on the pavement, its front bumper half thorn off. They were not yet out of trouble, however, as a second car, a Studebaker this time, that was waiting behind the Ford then gave chase to the limousine. One gunman armed with a revolver stuck his head and torso out by the opened front right window of the Studebaker and started firing at the limousine, with at least one bullet hitting the big car's rear window. Salvatore then gunned down his powerful, 267 horsepower V-8 engine, quickly outracing the Studebaker, which soon had to give up the chase. Masseria, who was anxiously watching the pursuing car, then shouted triumphantly.

"YOU MISSED ME, YOU BUMS! NEXT TIME, GET A KRUGER!"

CHAPTER 24 – A NEW ERA

09:53 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, September 26, 1916

Aéro-Parc Blériot, Buc

Southwest suburbs of Paris, France

Louis Blériot happily shook the hand of Lieutenant General Hirschauer, Commander of the French Armée de l’Air²⁰ when the latter stepped out of his official army staff car, completing that with a very French accolade.

“My old friend! It is really nice to see you again. How are you doing?”

“Well! I am due soon to retire, but I will truly regret not being around planes anymore.”

“Who says that you can’t stay around planes after your retirement from the Army? You will always be welcome here in Buc.”

“Thank you, Louis: that really means a lot to me. So, what is this mystery event I am supposed to witness? Have you finally produced a new fighter aircraft to succeed our BOURDONs?”

“Indeed! It is due for its first flight this morning, with Terry Clarkson at the controls. It is called the ‘MÉTÉOR’ and is being readied inside the prototype hangar. Come and I will show it to you.”

The old French officer was too happy to oblige and followed Louis to the entrance of the nearby prototype hangar. Hirschauer however stopped cold once he stepped inside the hangar and could see the new Blériot-Kruger MÉTÉOR, utterly mesmerized by the prototype.

“My God! I was expecting anything but this. What is it?”

“The first ever jet-propelled aircraft in history.” Replied with a proud grin Louis Blériot. “Let’s go see Johanna Kruger, so that she could describe the plane to you in detail.”

Passing by a number of technicians and mechanics, the two men walked to the prototype, finding Johanna Kruger giving a few ultimate counsels to Terry Clarkson, who

²⁰ Armée de l’Air : Air Force in French.

wore a pilot's suit and helmet. Tasha Lenoir was also there, listening to Johanna. All three women smiled on seeing Hirschauer and then took turn to kiss him on the cheeks, something the old officer didn't mind at all. Hirschauer had a big smile on his face as he eyed the three women.

"When I think about all the things we accomplished together, my dear friends. You already did so much for France. Now, this!"

"This is meant to be the next big step in aviation, General." Replied Johanna, obviously proud of her prototype. "With the new type of propulsion offered by turbo-reactors, we will witness huge jumps in top speed and altitude, along with immensely more powerful engines than the present piston engines. The MÉTÉOR that you see here is equipped with one of the three types of jet engines I have been developing for over a year now. The aircraft may look revolutionary to you, General, but I actually kept it rather basic, as it is meant to be strictly a research prototype built to validate my jet engine technology. However, don't be afraid: once I am assured that there are no vices or defects in this prototype and its engine, I will get to work to design a proper military plane out of it, along with a jet-propelled passenger transport aircraft."

"I am sure that all will go well, Miss Kruger: you always designed good aircraft. But what is really this jet engine you are talking about?"

"In very simplified terms, a jet engine is a steel tube containing a compressor that sucks in and compress air through a nose inlet. That compressed air is then mixed with vaporized fuel, in this case kerosene, with the mix then ignited inside the tube. The combustion of that mix in turn makes a turbine rotate, with the turbine powering the compressor. The hot gases then come out of the tube at the rear end, creating thrust that propels the aircraft. The actual process is of course much more complicated and is dependent on many factors in order to achieve best efficiency, but I am confident that I actually master the process."

What Johanna didn't say, of course, was that jet propulsion was in her mind quite primitive compared to what was used in the 27th Century, but she had to work with what was achievable with the technology and tooling available today. Thankfully for her, all the principles and parameters of jet propulsion technology, along with those concerning the aerodynamic laws governing atmospheric aircraft design, had been part of the huge data memory of her portable design laptop, along with a high performance computer engineering design and simulation program that had helped her cut months of work from designing her jet engines and the MÉTÉOR. The next big step, electro-magnetic

propulsion and anti-gravity, was going to be a lot more difficult, due to the need to develop and produce the necessary computerized control systems and thermonuclear fusion power generators that went with them. However, as the old saying went, one had to learn to walk before you could learn to run.

“To talk specifically about the MÉTÉOR, it is powered by a single low-medium bypass turbofan equipped with post-combustion that produces 4,000 kilogram-force of thrust in dry heat and 5,900 kilogram-force of thrust for short boost periods via the injection of extra fuel in the afterburner section. As you can see, the wings have a pronounced sweep to them, General. That is one of the methods to minimize aerodynamic drag in high speed planes that approach or surpass the speed of sound. I chose to design the MÉTÉOR as a two-seater with dual controls, to facilitate the formation of test pilots for it. It also has a classic, retractable tricycle landing gear and a radar in its nose. The wings are shoulder-mounted but, in order to lower its landing speeds and thus shorten its landing runs, the wings’ incidence angle can be modified in flight by raising their leading edge by up to seven degrees. That, combined with an advanced flap system, will allow the MÉTÉOR to operate from existing grass terrains. If I may say so, this general lack of long, paved landing strips around the World is severely constraining the scope of my aircraft designs, General, as I must keep my planes able to take off and land on relatively short, unpaved fields. Just for that reason, the jet airliner that I am presently working on will be an amphibian, on top of having special features to shorten its takeoff and landing runs. There is no point for me in designing a top performance aircraft if it is then limited to using only a handful of airfields in the World. Our Le Bourget International Airport should be a World standard by now but is actually the only one that exists with paved runways longer than two kilometers. Both the British and the Americans are still using strictly unprepared grass strips less than 1,500 meters long, while the state of development of their own aircraft still lags far behind us. Even our Air France airfield in New York has only 1,600 meter-long runways because of the lack of open real estate around it.”

“I fully understand your frustration about this, my friend. Unfortunately, we can’t force other nations to adopt our standards in airfields just to accommodate French planes. Besides, having short takeoff and landing capabilities is always a good thing to have, especially in military aircraft.”

“I will have to agree with you on that, General. Uh, would you mind putting this on before I show you the inside of the cockpit, General?”

Hirschauer looked at first with incomprehension at the flight suit and helmet presented to him by a smiling Terry Clarkson before he understood what was going on. A huge grin appeared then on his face as he eagerly grabbed the items.

"Miss Kruger, the backseat of a prototype aircraft may not be an appropriate place for an aging general nearing retirement, but to be said to have died with a flying helmet on would make a great epitaph on my tombstone. Just give me five minutes to change."

As promised, the old general was back in full flying regalia in only minutes, in time to be presented a parachute by Terry Clarkson.

"Here you go, General. Just in case. Let me help you put it on before you climb into the cockpit."

That took another two minutes before Hirschauer could finally climb the steel ladder hooked to the edge of the cockpit, where he was able to contemplate the very modern-looking instrument panels and controls.

"Wow! I can't wait to be off the ground."

"Well, before we do that, I will show you how to fix your ejection seat harness and plug your oxygen and radio lines, General." Replied Terry, bringing a confused look on Hirschauer's face.

"My what?"

"Your ejection seat. Basically, if we get into trouble and have to parachute out, you will then initiate your ejection seat, which will then basically rocket you out of the cockpit without risks of hitting the vertical rudder on your way out. Let me show you."

Terry took a few more minutes to attach Hirschauer's harness and plug his connectors, then to show him the various controls and instruments in the cockpit. With that done, Terry went to sit in the forward seat and fixed her own harness. An aircraft tractor then pulled the MÉTÉOR out of its hangar and into the open, until it was a good fifty meters from the hangar. A ground crew with a towed starter unit then helped start the aircraft's turbofan engine, which came to life with a long, high-pitched whining noise. Hirschauer's heart accelerated as the turbofan engine attained working power, with the ground crew then withdrawing away with their starter unit.

"Ready, General?"

"Ready as I will ever be, Miss Clarkson."

"Then, let's taxi to the main runway."

Pushing forward the throttle of their turbofan, Terry made the prototype roll along the nearest taxiway, bringing it in minutes at one end of the main runway. By then, all the Blériot and Air France employees present in Buc at the time were either out in the open or standing in front of windows to watch the new aircraft take off. While applying full brakes, Terry gradually raised the turbofan power to maximum dry thrust, making it vibrate like an impatient race horse waiting to burst out of its gate.

“Here we go, General!”

With the brakes released, the MÉTÉOR jumped forward, pushing Hirschauer back into his seat with surprising force, while the plane quickly accelerated down the paved runway. The old general felt like a god when the MÉTÉOR took off cleanly and started climbing at what felt to him like an impossible rate of climb, while the ground flew by with astonishing speed.

“YES! WHAT AN IMPRESSIVE BEAST!”

“Wait, General: this is only the beginning.”

Now enjoying himself in a way he had not felt for months, Hirschauer then stayed silent as Terry climbed to medium altitude and then leveled off her plane.

“I am now going first to try a few gentle maneuvers in order to check the flight stability of the aircraft. Once I will be satisfied that it is safe to do so, I will then let you pilot the plane for a while.”

“Thanks, Miss Clarkson. You are making an old man very happy indeed.”

“You’re welcomed and it’s ‘Terry’ for you, not Miss Clarkson.”

“Understood, Terry.”

The next twenty minutes were like a dream for Hirschauer, who all but rediscovered the joy of flying in the MÉTÉOR, so impressive were the performances of the prototype. Terry then brought the plane to a position east of Buc, to prepare for a speed-clocking run over the airfield.

“Let’s see how close to the speed of sound this beast can get on maximum dry power.”

“And how fast is this speed of sound, Terry?”

“It varies with altitude and atmospheric pressure, but it turns around 1,030 kilometers per hour near ground level. I am now pushing my throttle to maximum dry thrust. Watch closely our true air speed indicator, General.”

Hirschauer did so as the MÉTÉOR's engine noise gradually grew louder. Blood rushed to his brain when the indicator passed the 1,000 kilometers per hour mark, with the plane then showing some temporary, minor instability that was quickly brought under control by Terry.

"Don't worry, General: that was the normal effect on approaching, then passing the speed of sound, which causes some fluctuations in the center of lift of our wings. We are now going at Mach 1.16 and are at maximum dry thrust. With the afterburner on, I bet that we could go up to Mach 1.7 or 1.8. We now have an unofficial World speed record of 1,230 kilometers per hour."

"And this on a first flight or this prototype? Incredible! I can't wait to tell this to the Air Minister and to my pilots."

"Well, you may do that, General, but be careful: there are already too many suspected spies roaming around Buc these days, including British and American spies."

"Yes, I heard about those American agents. Still, this is a truly fantastic beast. What will Miss Kruger build next?"

"A jet airliner that would replace our good old CIGOGNE on the Air France's long range intercontinental trips, so that the traveling time on those routes could be more than cut in half."

"And what will happen then to your CIGOGNEs in service? They are still good for many more years of use, no?"

"Yes, they are, General. Tasha will simply transfer them to the short and medium haul routes around Europe and around our various hub destinations, something that will allow Air France to greatly increase the density of its services around the World. No good aircraft will be wasted, General."

"And that's the way it should be, Terry. Tasha Lenoir surely makes for one very astute businesswoman, on top of being a scientific genius."

"That she is, General."

Hirschauer felt like a brand new man when he finally climbed down from the cockpit of the MÉTÉOR some fifteen minutes later and impulsively hugged Terry, Johanna and Louis Blériot.

"You truly made an old man happy today, my friends. Be assured that the Air Minister will get a glowing report from me about this plane."

That brought a proud smile on Johanna's face.

"Then, I will make sure that your next report will be even more glowing, General. Should I go for a jet fighter-bomber or for a long-range bomber next?"

"Why not both? However, I would preferably go for a fighter-bomber first: it has less potential to alarm other nations than a bomber."

"Good thinking!" Said Tasha Lenoir, who had just joined them. "Great-Britain and the United States are still leery about France's new levels of power these days. Better not give them more pretexts to be suspicious of us."

"I have to agree with you on that, Miss Lenoir. Making the British go over the fact that we sank their fleet, even though we simply defended ourselves, is no easy task and many in Great-Britain are still miffed at France because of that. Hopefully, they will eventually swallow their pill and forgive us and the Japanese. Well, I suppose that I should get going if I want to write that glowing report for the air minister. Have a good day, my friends."

Hirschauer then walked back to his military staff car, which was waiting along one side of the prototype workshop. Once inside, he ordered his driver to return to Paris and gave a last look at the Blériot-Kruger MÉTÉOR as his car rolled past it.

"What a fantastic machine. This Johanna Kruger simply keeps astonishing me with her new planes."

Oddly, that simple last phrase kept echoing inside his head as his jubilation and excitement from his incredible flight slowly faded away, soon replaced by wonderment, then by outright questions as he mentally reviewed all the amazing things that either Johanna Kruger or Tasha Lenoir had invented or designed during their short four years in France. Four years ago, just before Tasha Lenoir and her three female associates arrived in France, the average top speed of most planes in existence turned around 100 kilometers per hour. Barely a few months later, Blériot was flying a completely new design that topped 300 kilometers per hour. That design also happened to be filled with new electronic flight instruments that had been invented by Tasha Lenoir and that had been and still were decades ahead of anything else produced around the World. Then had come Durex, Metallex explosive, incredibly compact and highly advanced radios and the CIGOGNE heavy amphibian transport, which had realized the dream of flying across the Atlantic non-stop. Finally, before the MÉTÉOR, Tasha Lenoir had invented a brand new technology she called 'radar', a technology so potent that it had helped France humiliate the great Royal Navy in a fair fight at sea. As Hirschauer kept remembering anecdotes and rumors about Tasha Lenoir and her three friends, he

started wondering seriously what those four fantastic women could be possibly hiding. He knew from reports from the Deuxième Bureau that the Americans had a few questions of their own about those women and were even claiming that they were not Americans. Maybe he should take the time to dig further about all this...after he had written that glowing report for the air minister.

The next news General Hirschauer got from Johanna Kruger were indeed good ones, with the MÉTÉOR attaining three weeks later the official maximum speed of Mach 1.92 with afterburner on. The development of a fighter-bomber variant of the MÉTÉOR, eventually called the OURAGAN by the French Air Force, quickly followed, with a sizeable government order given to Blériot in October 1916 and with the first operational OURAGAN coming into service in December. With the Blériot assembly halls fully occupied and with the worldwide sales of Kruger cars doing very well indeed, Johanna was then free to fully concentrate on her next projects.

CHAPTER 25 – UNMASKED

08:40 (Paris Time)

Saturday, December 30, 1916

Château du Haut-Buc, Buc

Southwest of Paris, France

Tasha was eating breakfast in her kitchen, still dressed only in a robe and wool slippers and fully intent on enjoying a quiet day of rest in her residence, when the telephone hooked to one wall rang. Sighing with frustration and hoping that this call would not mean the need to go fix some problem somewhere, she went to grab the receiver and spoke in a neutral tone.

“Tasha Lenoir speaking!”

She felt somewhat better when she recognized the voice of General Hirschauer on the line.

“Aaah, just the person I wanted to speak to. This is General Hirschauer, calling from Paris. Are your three friends and associates at home as well today? I was hoping to come and visit you all before I would start my rounds of New Year visits and celebrations with my family.”

“General, you are always welcome in Buc and, yes, my three friends are at the château as well, enjoying some rare time off. At what time would you like to come?”

“How about around two in the afternoon? And please, don’t prepare some elaborate reception for me for the occasion: I want to keep my visit informal.”

“How informal, General?” Replied Tasha, becoming amused. “I could put on a very light attire, just for you.”

She heard the old officer suck air in at those words.

“My dear, as much as that would please me, I believe that I want our meeting to be simply informal rather than intimate.”

“Oh? How about my three female friends?”

“Miss Lenoir, you are indeed tempting very much an old man like me. Thank you anyway for the offer. Maybe another time. I will see you at two this afternoon.”

“We will be ready, General. Have a good day.”

“And a good day to you as well, miss.”

Hirschauer then hung up, cutting the link. Tasha slowly hung up as well, wondering what Hirschauer's visit could be about. It couldn't be for something like the giving away of medals or decorations, as he had stated that he wanted their meeting to be informal. She finally decided that it was probably only a friendly visit prior to the New Year. After four years of professional relations with the old general, they now considered each other good friends but, unfortunately, their respective busy schedules had kept their informal relations too rare indeed. Activating her implanted radio inside her skull, she sent a short message to her three associates and best friends.

"Hey, girls, I just got a call from General Hirschauer: he is coming at two today for an informal visit before New Year."

"Goodie!" Answered Terry. *"Maybe we should take a really good bottle of wine out of the cellar for the occasion. I am sure that he wouldn't refuse to taste a good vintage."*

"A good idea, Terry. I will go choose a couple of bottles after I finish my breakfast. Johanna, Hien, you got that?"

"I did!" Answered Johanna, quickly followed by Hien.

"So did I! If he stays long enough, maybe I would have a chance to cook a nice Bon Cha for supper."

"Feel free to prepare yourself for that if you wish, Hien. Even if he doesn't stay long, you know that I am always partial to your Bon Cha."

"Thanks! Either way, it's Bon Cha for supper."

On that, the four of them cut their conversation and returned to enjoying a too rare quiet morning at home.

As the clock in the château's reception lounge approached two o'clock in the afternoon, Tasha, now dressed in a simple, comfortable gown, posted herself in front of one of the tall windows of the lounge facing the access road. Terry, Johanna and Hien were also present in the lounge, dressed in a variety of informal attires going from a sporting outfit for Terry to a short-skirted dress with short sleeves for Hien. Two wine bottles of excellent vintage and a few cups also waited on top of a small corner table. At about six to two, Tasha saw a car appear between the trees at a far bend of the street that ran past her property.

"There he comes! Get ready to greet him at the entrance, girls. I... what the hell?"

"Is something wrong, Tasha?" Asked Terry while jumping on her feet, immediately on her guard.

"Uh, I'm not sure. I can now see three other cars following the first one. One of them is a Kruger stretched limousine. My God! It is flying a French flag."

"So much for an informal visit." Said Terry, sounding annoyed. "Since it is not a convoy of military trucks or police cars, they are probably not coming to arrest us, whoever they may be. But why would General Hirschauer lie to us like that?"

"Maybe this is an official, albeit discreet visit." Suggested Hien, who probably had the best read of all four women on the public mood and political trends in France, thanks to running her hugely popular Radio France network. "Maybe the general and some minister want to conclude a secret deal with us."

"They would come for a secret deal in a stretched limousine flying a flag? That wouldn't make sense, Hien." Replied Tasha. "Anyway, let's go greet our visitors, whoever they may be."

Fervently hoping that this was not a harbinger of bad news, Tasha walked out of the reception lounge with her friends and went to the main entrance, where they watched through a window as the convoy of four vehicles stopped in the driveway in front of the residence. However, Tasha was not prepared for the ones she saw step out of the limousine, along with what looked like six bodyguards that came out of the other cars.

"President Poincaré?! What could possibly bring him here like this?"

"I see General Hirschauer coming out: he is wearing his full uniform." Added Terry. "A third man in a suit is also coming out, but I don't know him."

Tasha then saw a woman come out last of the limousine. Her identity then threw her in total confusion.

"Marie Curie, here? Why would President Poincaré bring her here for a supposedly informal visit?"

In contrast to Tasha, the appearance of the famous female physicist made Johanna's face suddenly harden.

"I'm afraid that I am starting to understand what is going on here. There is only one reason that I could see for President Poincaré and General Hirschauer to bring Marie Curie with them: they want to know from where we learned our advanced scientific knowledge."

Tasha, along with Hien and Terry, also had her mood sour at those words.

"You are probably right, Johanna. However, I don't think that they came with truly hostile intentions. If it would have been the case, President Poincaré would not be here for this."

"Should we tell them the truth if they ask, then?" Asked Hien.

"Let's find out first their reasons to come here. Then, we will play it by ear."

On Tasha's signal, Terry opened wide the main door as President Poincaré and General Hirschauer were about to knock on it, with Tasha bowing politely to them.

"Welcome to our home, Mister President. This is quite a surprise indeed: we were expecting only General Hirschauer to come."

As Hirschauer squirmed with embarrassment, Poincaré replied to Tasha in a jovial tone.

"Don't be too harsh on the poor general, Miss Lenoir: this visit was actually my idea."

"Indeed? But please step inside and get out of that cold air, all of you."

Tasha couldn't help look crossly at Hirschauer as the old officer passed by her to enter. Four of the presidential bodyguards also walked in, following close behind Marie Curie and the still unknown man in a suit. Letting her visitors first take off their winter coats to suspend them in the coat rack at the entrance, Tasha then led them to the reception lounge, where President Poincaré turned around to present the unknown man to her.

"I am sorry if I didn't present to you before now Brigadier General Pierre Marigny, the head of the Deuxième Bureau. As for Madame Curie, I am sure that you already met her many times already."

Tasha stiffened a bit at the presentation of the head of the French secret service: this could not mean good news.

"We have indeed. Pleased to meet you, General Marigny. And to what do we owe your visit?"

"To a decision by the President, Miss Lenoir. However, do not be fearful because of my presence here: we came only with good intentions. I will let the President explain."

"I see! How about sharing some good vintage wine before we start discussing, lady and gentlemen?"

"A good idea, Miss Lenoir." Said Poincaré. "I see that you have two bottles of a truly fine vintage waiting. Let's do honor to them."

"With pleasure, Mister President." Said Tasha, who then proceeded to pour some wine in eight cups from the already opened bottles, which she had uncorked one hour before to let the wine breathe. Hien helped her distribute the cups before everybody except the President's bodyguards sat down in sofas surrounding a low tea table. Tasha let her visitors take a first sip of wine with her before looking at Poincaré.

"So, Mister President, what is the reason for your visit here?"

"My reasons are both simple and complicated, Miss Lenoir. First, let me assure you that you and your three friends are considered by me with very high esteem and that I came here with only good intentions towards you. With that said, I must confess that you and your friends constitute somewhat of an enigma to me and many others. That concerns the incredible level of scientific and technological knowledge that you and Miss Kruger have shown since your arrival in France a bit over four years ago. While every invention or design from you ended up greatly benefiting France, many scientists and engineers could not help wonder where you acquired such advanced knowledge. That question became more acute after General Marigny's services apprehended and interrogated some American federal agents sent to spy on you. Those American agents then said that they had found no traces of your previous life or of that of your three friends in the United States prior to your arrival in France. They also said that your old American passports must be faked ones, something that General Marigny's agents later confirmed. When questions about you and your friends started piling up, General Marigny went to see Madame Curie, to ask her what she knew about your scientific knowledge."

As Tasha shifted her eyes to Marie Curie, the female physicist lowered her head, not feeling too proud of herself right now.

"Please forgive me for being partly the cause for this, Miss Lenoir. What I told General Marigny was that me and all the other physicists, chemists and high level scientists who discussed scientific matters with you or with Miss Kruger were deeply struck by the fact that you seemed to hold much knowledge that nobody else had...anywhere! I could only describe to him your level of scientific knowledge as 'out of this world'. That seemingly was enough to encourage General Marigny in digging more into your past."

As her visitors waited for her reaction to Marie Curie's confession, Tasha exchanged long glances with her three friends. What those visitors couldn't know or hear, though, was the mental radio exchange that went between the four women.

"Girls, I am afraid that we have reached a breaking point here."

"It seems so, Tasha." Replied Johanna. *"Should we be truthful or should we lie further? If we say the truth, then there will be no turning back."*

"I know! Hien, Terry, I need your opinion on this, quickly!"

"I say, go with the truth." Answered Hien.

"I agree as well, Tasha. Just don't say anything about me being a cyborg: that could make them do something regrettable."

"Don't worry, Terry: your secret is safe with us all."

Marigny was about to wonder about their long silence when Tasha spoke up in a soft voice, addressing all of her visitors.

"Mister President, Madame Curie, Generals Hirschauer and Marigny, it is true that me and my three friends have been hiding a big secret from everyone else. However, we did so simply to ensure our personal safety and not with some malicious or nefarious intent in mind. This secret of ours will be quite shocking to you and you may refuse to believe me at first, so I will let pictures speak for me. If you will excuse me for a couple of minutes, I will go fetch something in my private study, while my friends stay here with you."

"Go ahead, Miss Lenoir." Said Poincaré, who then made a sign to stop one of his bodyguards from following Tasha out of the lounge. An oppressive silence followed for the two minutes it took for Tasha to be back with what looked like a thin metallic briefcase in one hand and a portable projection screen in the other hand.

"If you are wondering about the projection screen, I brought it so that you could see images in a big enough format to allow all of you to see them clearly. First, Mister President, I must ask you and your bodyguards to treat what you will see as extremely sensitive secrets of national importance for France."

"You can be assured of our complete discretion about what you will say and show us, Miss Lenoir. Where is your projector, though?"

"Here, in my left hand. However, it is a lot more than a simple projector, Mister President. Let me just set up that screen first."

Putting down her 'briefcase' on the tea table, Tasha took a minute to set up properly the rolled projection screen, using a presidential bodyguard to pull closed the curtains of the lounge's windows. With the room now plunged into semi-darkness, Tasha made a show of opening and powering on her laptop computer, attracting exclamations from her visitors at the sight of the colorful images that appeared on the laptop's display. Turning

the laptop's back towards the projection screen, Tasha then flipped open a small cover panel, letting the image on the laptop's display being projected on the much larger screen. She then selected a video file from among the vast databank of her laptop and started playing it, selecting French as the viewing language and cranking the volume to near maximum. As the video started playing on the large screen, Tasha spoke calmly, describing what her stunned visitors were seeing.

"Mister President, this thing you see on the table is what I call a 'computer', a very advanced machine made to store and process enormous amounts of data. What you are now seeing is an advertisement video film that was made in the year 2623, promoting my personal technology consortium of the 'Lenoir Industries', of which I was both founder, owner, chief executive officer and head scientist."

Tasha briefly put the video on 'pause' when she saw that Marie Curie wanted to say something.

"Yes, Marie?"

"You...you are from the future? You are time travelers, you and your friends?"

"Involuntary ones, I'm afraid. Even in the 27th Century, time travel was still only fiction. Unfortunately, something that interfered with the operation of one of my chief inventions must have projected me and my friends in the past, to the year 1912. I still don't know exactly what happened, but the one thing that I am sure is that we will never be able to return to our proper time. As a consequence, we made the best of a bad situation and made France our new home. Fortunately for us, we found France to be a more welcoming and open country than we had feared at first and also had the luck to meet early on some very good people, like Louis Blériot, Ernest Archdeacon and Henri Deutsch de la Meurthe, all of whom know our big secret. I will now resume the viewing, which should answer most if not all of your questions."

She then pushed the 'play' button before anyone else could ask more questions.

The video advertisement went on for a bit over one minute and described briefly all the inventions and products made by the Lenoir Industries, including Tasha's matter transportation device. That last item made Marie Curie look at Tasha as if she was some sort of witch.

"My God! Your science was this much advanced? No wonder that your inventions here baffled us. What about your three friends, though?"

"They were and still are employees and friends of mine who were due to travel with me via transporter beam to our local head offices in Paris. Hien was then my loyal executive secretary and she holds degrees in business administration and in public communications. Johanna was the chief engineer and head designer of my aerospace department and holds a doctorate in aerospace engineering, plus master's degrees in computer sciences and fabrication processing. As for my close friend Terry, she was already my personal bodyguard and is an ex-officer who saw combat as a member of a special operations unit. She was gravely wounded during a hostage rescue operation and I financially supported the extensive medical treatment that she had to go through after having to retire from the military. That was when we became best friends."

On hearing that, Hirschauer looked at Terry with renewed respect.

"The flying helmet that you own bears the insignia of a unit called the '74th S.O.C., The Hell Raisers'. It was your old unit, I suppose?"

"The 74th Special Operations Commando was effectively my old military unit, General. I was wearing the rank of captain when I was gravely wounded in a space hostage rescue operation."

"Wait!" Nearly shouted a shocked Marie Curie. "Did you say 'space rescue'?" Terry gave her an impassive look, with no trace of bluster in her voice as she answered her.

"Yes, I did, Madame Curie. In the 27th Century, space travel within the Solar System was very common, with even tourist resorts existing on or around various planets and moons. The operation I was wounded in happened on Ceres, a dwarf planet and the largest body in the Main Asteroid Belt, halfway between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter."

President Poincaré was by now nearly holding his breath, not having bargained for such explosive revelations.

"Does this mean that you may have the necessary scientific and technological knowledge to make space travel possible for us?"

Tasha took on her to reply to that, her face grave.

"The knowledge and expertise, yes. The industrial means, no. Mister President, please understand that the technological gap between this century and the 27th Century is nearly impossible to grasp for persons of this century. The tools, machines and materials needed to reproduce fully 27th Century technologies, like my own matter transporter beam, simply don't exist today. Durex, the polymer I 'invented' three years

ago, had been in use for over a century in my time and was the culmination of a long development process in polymers. As such, it was actually one of the simplest things to replicate in this century, as it implied only basic chemistry. Electronics are however another matter entirely. The radar technology that I developed and that is now used in French ships and planes is actually primitive by the standards of the 27th Century. However, to do better would necessitate better tools and production means that don't exist now. I will gradually be able to improve on that, but that will involve a long, progressive process. Which brings me to a question of my own, Mister President. Now that you know all this, what do you intend to do about us?"

A bit taken off balance by that, Poincaré glanced at both Hirschauer and Marigny, who were as shaken as him, before looking back at Tasha.

"To be perfectly frank, Miss Lenoir, I honestly don't know. The only thing I can say now is to assure you that I wish for us to be friends and partners. No harm will come to you or your friends from my government and I will make sure that nobody will treat you with anything but utter respect."

"Mister President, that is a most honest answer and I thank you for it. What I do suggest is that, while keeping our true origin secret from anyone else, that you let us gradually push France ahead in the domains of sciences and technologies. I would also be most happy if you at least listened to our occasional advice on the matters of international politics and social matters. Our historical files concerning the 20th Century and contained my our computers are unfortunately very limited, but they still contain enough information that could help France avoid the worst mistakes and calamities that would otherwise happen in the next few decades."

"Well, nothing tells me who will replace me as President of France at the end of my term in 1920, Miss Lenoir, but I will certainly give you an attentive ear for any counsel that you would have for me."

"That will already mean a lot, Mister President. May I start by asking for one little favor?"

"I'm listening, miss."

"Right now, your Chamber of Deputies seems to be growing more and more favorable to the notion of giving the right to vote to women. However, the collection of old farts and knuckleheads filling your Senate completely refuse to budge on that matter. Do you think that you could use your powers as president to make them bend on that subject?"

Poincaré smiled, amused by her description of French senators, while Marie Curie became quite attentive to his response.

“In theory, that would mean amending the French Constitution, a matter that is normally the prerogative of the Senate. However, I certainly can and will have chats with leading senators to try convincing them to be reasonable on the subject of female vote. If that doesn’t work, I may just consult constitutional experts to see if I could bypass them and simply promulgate a presidential decree.”

“That in itself will mean a lot to me and my friends, Mister President. Another thing: could France get rid of that stupid law forbidding women from wearing trousers?” This time, Poincaré, along with Hirschauer and Marigny, burst out in laughter.

“That should actually be less difficult, miss. I will talk to my minister of justice after the New Year. If he refuses to listen, then I will fire him.”

“Uh, may I ask something here, something I believe to be quite crucial?” Said timidly Marie Curie, attracting all the eyes on her. “What will happen when you will eventually die, Miss Lenoir? How could we ensure then that all of your fantastic knowledge is not lost for good then?”

“A very good and pertinent question indeed, Marie.” Said Tasha. She then spoke in a deliberate fashion, closely listened to by visitors.

“Right now, me and my friends are kept very busy just to run what we created up to now and to continue our actual projects. I however already thought a lot about the subject of transmitting our knowledge around and have an idea that could work fairly well. First, let me state that I do not wish other countries than France to be the recipients of my knowledge for now. That is not because of some bigotry but simply because I am better positioned here in France to control and regulate the use of my knowledge. If you take the United States, for example, I absolutely refuse to see my knowledge benefit a government and country that are overtly enforcing racial segregation within its borders. If there is anything that we learned by the time that the 27th Century dawned, it is that racial, ethnic, religious or sexual prejudice act like poisons and are incompatible with truly free and democratic societies. Second, what I propose is for me and Johanna to hold weekend seminars, possibly at my consortium offices in Paris, where scientists and engineers selected by me and Johanna will learn about advanced sciences and technologies. Those selected ones must already hold at least master’s diplomas in their field, so that I and Johanna don’t waste time teaching what is already widely known around the World. Those selectees will have to sign non-

disclosure agreements and will be warned to safeguard any notes or textbooks from their seminars. In turn, the French government would be well advised in my opinion to hire and employ those attendees in various state research or academic centers, where they would be less inclined to export their new knowledge to other countries. I know that this may all sound very restrictive, but understand that this advanced knowledge, if used by unscrupulous states, could cause tremendous damage. Just imagine if the Germans had learned the formula for my Metallex explosive.”

Both Hirschauer and Marigny winced at those words, while Poincaré nodded his head, his expression somber.

“I see what you mean, Miss Lenoir, and agree to all that you said. When could you start giving those weekend seminars?”

“I and Johanna will need a few weeks to prioritize our teaching programs and prepare textbooks, Mister President. Let’s aim for the start of February. That will give us time to select the potential students and will also give time to General Marigny to discreetly vet those candidates for possible hidden links with hostile foreign governments. I however reserve for myself the final choice of candidates that will attend my courses.”

“Sold! Now, would there be anything in your historical data that I should know about in order to avoid a future incoming crisis for France, Miss Lenoir?”

“To be frank, Mister President, I must say again that what we had about the 20th Century was extremely limited in scope. However, just our input in the last four years has been enough to significantly change the course of history. The war against Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire was supposed to go on for more than four years, until November of 1918, and to cost France dreadfully in terms of deaths, destruction and national debt. Instead, we won in a few months only while limiting greatly our losses. However, there are a few things for us to watch in the medium term. First, a worldwide financial meltdown triggered by a crash at the New York Stocks Market in 1929 is supposed to plunge most of the World into a deep, prolonged and severe economic depression that will impoverish hundreds of millions of people. That meltdown was caused by a long pattern of bad financial and banking practices and by out of control financial speculation due to naked greed overcoming common sense. I am no financial expert, but I believe that prudent banking regulations enforced by the government could restrain much of that wild speculation and financial malpractice. Just so you could appreciate how catastrophic was that World economic depression, know

that it took ten years and a world war to stimulate most countries out of it. As for that future world war, we may just avoid it by keeping a very tight grip on Germany and making sure that it doesn't rearm in the future."

"Germany was going to start another war against us?" Asked General Marigny in an indignant tone.

"It was, but that Second World War, originally due to go from 1939 to 1945, was going to start very badly for France, with the German Army invading and occupying it in the first months of the war. That war also saw numerous, widespread atrocities, with a total of 55 million people ending dying in it and with the whole of Europe left in ruins."

"My God!" Said Marie Curie, both shocked and shaken. "Will we ever be rid of that calamity called 'war'?"

"Don't hold your breath, Marie." Said somberly Terry Clarkson. "Part of my military formation as an officer included learning military history. Suffice for you to know that we still have a good seven centuries of all kinds of wars ahead of us, unless we bring some drastic changes to human society in the next few decades."

President Poincaré shook his head in discouragement then.

"First, a worldwide financial meltdown and depression, then a world war. These incoming decades sure look like they will be no cake-walk."

"You may have as well to deal soon with a foreign policy crisis of the first order, Mister President. In the original, recorded history, the war against Germany that we just won went badly for the Russians. Their reverses on the battlefield in turn triggered widespread discontent in Russia and eventually caused a bloody revolution by socialist extremists who managed to seduce the Russian people into joining their revolution. As a result, Czar Nicholas II was deposed in the spring of 1917 and he and his family were then murdered. To be absolutely frank with you about that, Mister President, I can easily understand the reasons why the Russian people would revolt against the Czar: the present system in Russia is riddled with gross social injustices, corruption, incompetence, nepotism and outright abuse of the people by the aristocratic class. Basically, the Russia of today has reached about the same kind of level of social dysfunction and popular discontent as that of France just prior to your French Revolution. That situation simply cannot go on for very long before it explodes in someone's face, with that face likely to be that of Czar Nicholas. I have nothing against that man, personally, but he will either have to start applying extensive and deep reforms in Russia or will have to suffer the consequences. I know that you have good relations

with the Czar, Mister President. Maybe some gentle counsels could help avert such a revolution in Russia.”

Poincaré was thoughtful for a moment as he digested Tasha’s words.

“To be frank, this possibility of a Russian revolution does not really surprise me, miss. Living conditions for most of the Russian population are dire indeed and have already been the cause of many riots and public protests in Russia. That worker discontent has in fact shown its face here in France in the last few years, fortunately at a much less severe level. General Marigny’s services have even tracked some active links between social agitators here and those in Russia, so I am quite aware of this problem. I will have to visit Czar Nicholas and talk extensively with him on that subject. Even better, I could invite him to France and make him visit one of your manufacturing plants, where the workers are said to be treated by you with great respect and care.”

“That would be an excellent idea, Mister President. Be assured that we will do the utmost to help you and France avert those incoming crisis.” Said solemnly Tasha, with her three friends nodding their heads at that. Poincaré looked in turn at all four of them before getting up from his sofa, imitated by the three other visitors.

“Miss Lenoir, know that your devotion to France will not be forgotten. If you ever feel the need to advise me about anything that could impact France, then feel free to drop in at any time at my presidential office. Know that I will always make time for you. I will leave instructions to my staff to let you in, even without prior invitation. Marcel, pass that word among your men, so that no misunderstanding could occur.”

“Your directive will be passed, Mister President.” Replied the head of the presidential security detail. Poincaré then shook hands with Tasha and her friends before leaving with the other visitors and his bodyguards. Hien couldn’t help blow air out in relief as they watched the presidential convoy drive away.

“Wow! Talk about a stress-inducing visit. However, it could have ended in a much worse fashion.”

“Agreed, Hien. Let’s just hope that whoever will replace Poincaré as president of France in four years will be as reasonable as him. Unfortunately, judging from what I have seen of French politics during the last four years, I am not too sure about that.”

“Then, we may just have to force their hand, Tasha.” Said Terry in a low voice.

CHAPTER 26 – THE GAP WIDENS

15:52 (New York Time)

Saturday, June 2, 1917

Passenger air terminal, Queens International Airport

Borough of Queens, New York City

U.S.A.

Police Officer Patrick O'Brien loved to work the beat at the Queens International Airport, opened four years ago by Air France in the middle of Queens, near the shores of the East River. The member of the New York City Police Department liked the airport for many reasons. First, it was a modern, clean and well-kept facility, contrary to most of the warehouses and dock areas of New York he had to patrol in the past. Second, the place was a lot safer than the city docks, where numerous street gangs and petty criminals committed extortions, thefts, assaults and other violent crimes, when they were not fighting and killing each other. Third, the boutiques at the passenger terminal offered many import products of high quality sold at much lower prices than in Manhattan stores, while the restaurant and coffee shop run by Air France served excellent food and beverages at reasonable prices. Last but not least, there were all those young Air France stewardesses, beautiful and most sexy in their royal blue uniforms with gloriously short skirts.

As O'Brien was slowly walking through the passenger registration lounge, he watched briefly as a Blériot CIGOGNE four-engine amphibian took off on one of the three paved runways, which had recently been significantly lengthened, heading for Paris. He then looked at another, much smaller plane that was presently unloading a dozen passengers on the tarmac, having arrived from Chicago a few minutes ago. Having had two years to familiarize himself with the various types of planes flying through this airport, O'Brien quickly recognized it as a Curtiss Model 15, a two-engine biplane with a maximum capacity of fifteen passengers on short and medium range routes. Compared to the CIGOGNE amphibians used by Air France, the Curtiss Model 15 used by the Transamerica Airways and other American airlines looked downright primitive, on top of being much slower and less comfortable. Yet, that was the best that

American airplane manufacturers had been able to come up with when faced with the competition from Air France and Blériot. American companies could have opened dozens of viable air routes across the United States if they would have bought the new Blériot aircraft, but those modern planes were not available to them, thanks to the fact that most of the American state governments, especially in the South and Midwest, had insisted that Air France followed and enforced their racial segregation rules in its own planes and air terminals. The owner of Air France had then given those state governors the proverbial royal finger as a response and had simply cancelled her projects to build airports in their states, while Louis Blériot, equally incensed by this segregation business, had decided not to sell his planes in the United States as long as racial segregation laws were in effect. As a result, New York was still one of the only three airports operated by Air France on United States territory, along with Los Angeles and Honolulu. A handful of American air transport companies had since being created and used American-built planes like the Curtiss Model 15 to offer air services on the more significant routes between major American cities, but the results were less than satisfying to the American public at large and, especially, to American businessmen, who had a need to be able to travel quickly around the country and could only watch in frustration what was available on the other side of the Atlantic.

As he was resuming his patrol, O'Brien's trained eyes noticed something on the big arrivals and departures announcement board of the registration lounge that made him pause.

"Somebody must have made a mistake when setting the announcement board." He said to himself while contemplating the information for the Air France flight AF-001, due to arrive from Paris in a few minutes and to then depart for Los Angeles, Honolulu and Tahiti after a two-hour refueling and maintenance stop in Queens. The board was announcing a departure time from New York of 18: 15 for AF-001, with an arrival time in Los Angeles of 19:45. Now, O'Brien knew that the Air France staff always used local times for the destinations shown and that they supposedly took account of the three hour difference between the East Coast and the West Coast. Even with that, the time on the board implied a flight time of only a bit over four hours, an impossibility when considering that Los Angeles sat a good 2,500 miles away from New York. The police officer thus went to the nearest Air France registration counter, where a pretty French stewardess was preparing a pile of suitcase markers.

"Uh, excuse me, miss, but I believe that someone made a mistake when he set up the arrivals and departures announcement board. It indicates that your flight AF-001 will depart for Los Angeles at 18:15, New York time, and will arrive in Los Angeles at 19:45, West Coast time."

The stewardess flashed him a big smile in response.

"There is no mistake, sir. Our plane will effectively take only four and a half hours to get to Los Angeles."

"But, how could that be, miss? Your regular flight to Los Angeles always took about eleven hours to get there."

"That is because we are inaugurating the use in service of a new, much faster plane, sir. You will be able to see it when it arrives in about four minutes."

The stewardess then seemed to remember something and opened a drawer on her side of the counter, sifting quickly through it and taking out a color brochure that she then gave to O'Brien.

"I am sorry, sir: I had forgotten that we had received yesterday a pile of new publicity pamphlets about our new Blériot ATLANTIQUE jet aircraft. Here, you may keep it."

"Thanks, miss!" Said the policeman, taking the brochure and walking away from the counter before stopping near a support pillar to unfold and read the pamphlet. His eyes nearly popped out of his skull when he saw the picture of the fantastic aircraft featured in it, along with its performance data.

"Holy Mary!... A cruising speed of 620 miles per hour and a range of 6,125 miles? This is plain incredible. How did they manage that?"

A growing whistling noise then made him raise his nose and turn his head towards the large windows of the lounge giving a view of the airport runways and tarmac. Like every other person present in the registration lounge, save for the Air France employees manning the ticketing counters, O'Brien ran to the windows when a big aircraft landed in a thunderous roar from its engines. It had large wings attached to the top of its tubular fuselage, with the wings swept back at a steep angle. Four short, fat tubes that must have been the engines were attached to the top of the wings, near their junction with the fuselage. Those tubes were presently pointed upward to near vertical, something that particularly intrigued O'Brien. Despite its size and speed, the incoming aircraft landed in less than 900 meters of runway, then started taxiing towards the air terminal building. As it taxied, its engine pods pivoted down to the horizontal, to sit on top of the wings.

Exclamations and wonderment went around the crowd of prospective passengers and visitors present in the lounge as they watched the approaching aircraft, which dwarfed in length and span even the Blériot CIGOGNE heavy amphibian. When it stopped in front of an arrival gate and lowered its rear access ramp, no less than 117 passengers came out of the plane, to then enter the international arrival hall where they were to be processed by waiting American immigration and customs officers. A young man with a camera, possibly a reporter waiting for his plane ride, took multiple pictures of the new aircraft before running towards one of the public telephone booths sitting in the hall. Pushed by curiosity, O'Brien decided to go patrol near where the passengers just arrived from Paris would exit the customs area. The usual small crowd of friends and family members waiting for loved ones there was more excited than usual, with the passengers coming out of the customs gates speaking excitedly with them, obviously telling them about their air trip. One graying man wearing a good suit, probably a well-to-do businessman, came out of the customs area, pushing a loaded luggage cart, and shouted out loud at the crowd.

"SIX HOURS AND TEN MINUTES TO CROSS THE ATLANTIC, FROM TAKEOFF TO LANDING. THAT'S WHAT I CALL AIR TRAVEL!"

That announcement nearly froze with stupor the visitors to the airport. After a moment to recover from that, the crowd slowly dispersed, either going to private cars parked in the nearby airport parking lot or taking one of the waiting taxis lined up at the taxi stand. Ironically, many of those taxis were now Kruger models, rather than the Ford Model 'T' that had dominated the taxi market before because of its low price. On his part, O'Brien was left to wonder what would come next.

"Shit! All those American air transport companies better brace themselves. After this, nobody will want to fly in their kites again."

11:29 (Hawaii Time)

Sunday, June 3, 1917

Waikiki Beach, near Honolulu

Oahu Island, United States Territory of Hawaii

"How about if we go change now and then go to a restaurant, Gerry? All that swimming gave me quite an appetite."

U.S. Army Captain Gerald Merrill, wearing only a swimming trunk and lying like his wife Lynn on a beach towel spread over the fine sand of Waikiki Beach, turned his head towards her and smiled.

"You are sure that you don't want to take a bit more Sun, honey? You really look good with a tan: it makes the white parts even more appetizing."

Her response was to giggle and give him a gentle elbowing in the ribs.

"Gerry, you will never change. But seriously: I am getting quite famished by now."

"Alright, alright, let's go change."

Both of them got up and patted themselves down to remove the sand sticking to them, then picked up their beach towels and Lynn's handbag, which contained their wallets and car keys. They had started to walk up the gentle slope of the beach to go to the communal locker and shower building when a whistling noise caught the officer's attention, like that of many other beach goers. Looking upward and towards the Northwest, where the growing noise was coming from, Gerald then stopped and froze, unable to believe his eyes.

"What the hell is that?"

His shocked remark made Lynn stop as well and look up. Not knowing much about airplanes, contrary to her husband, she shrugged her shoulders after a short glance.

"It's just an aircraft, Gerry."

"Just an aircraft? Lynn, that thing doesn't have propellers. It is also going much faster than the regular Air France airliners that land regularly at the Honolulu Airport."

"Can't you identify it, Gerry? You do work at the Army Hawaiian Air Office, after all."

Gerald could understand why his wife would expect him to be able to recognize any aircraft flying over Hawaii. His job at the Army Hawaiian Air Office involved coordinating and planning all Army aviation activities around the islands and he was trained in aircraft recognition, being as well a qualified aircraft pilot. However, what he was looking at now was like nothing he had seen before. He then remembered a classified intelligence report that he had read a couple of months ago.

"A jet aircraft? Only the French have such models, and we knew only about one type, a fighter-bomber. This is clearly a transport, and a big one. I can now see French markings on it. Yeah, it's an Air France airliner alright."

"It sure looks magnificent." Said Lynn. "It also appears to be very fast. How do those 'jet' aircraft work, Gerry?"

"Uh, we are actually not too sure about that, honey, as we know little still about them. Damn, I am really getting jealous of those French aircraft."

"Maybe we could pay ourselves a trip in one of these aircraft when we will travel to the mainland for our next Christmas vacations, Gerry. They do sell air tickets to everyone who go to their airfield."

"That is a fine idea, Lynn." Replied at once Gerald, smiling. "I think that we should go visit the airport this afternoon, to get information from the Air France counter on their flight schedules and air fares."

"Oh yes! I would love that."

Showering and changing quickly at the beach communal services building, the couple then jumped in their car, a well-used Ford Model 'T', to go eat at one of the numerous Chinese restaurants of Honolulu. As they started to eat, Lynn spoke to Gerald in a low voice, not wanting to be heard by the other people in the restaurant.

"Gerry, how come that we don't have aircraft as advanced as those of the French? Shouldn't our own designers be able to produce something at least close to what the French are producing?"

Some discouragement and frustration showed on her husband's face as he tried to find the right words to answer her.

"Honey, I am sure that our own aircraft designers are trying the best they can. However, I read a couple of reports in the past years concerning those French aircraft and it seems that all their new aircraft types that are so advanced compared to ours have been designed by the same, lone person. That engineer, a woman by the way, works for Louis Blériot, the Frenchman who was the first to cross the English Channel in a plane in 1909. Another woman who is also associated with Blériot designed the highly sophisticated radios and electronic instruments that equip the Blériot planes. Both women are said to be true geniuses, with ideas decades in advance of anybody else."

While Lynn was pleased to hear that women could lead in such technical domains, she still was not satisfied by her husband's answer.

"Then, if our own engineers can't do as well as these French women, why don't we buy French aircraft? Our Army aviation certainly could use better planes than what they have now."

"That it can." Agreed wholeheartedly Gerald. "The problem is that Blériot and those women refuse to sell their planes to us. They object to the racial segregation laws and regulations that exist in the United States."

Lynn, who was born in Boston, a liberal-thinking city in the New England states, frowned on hearing that.

"Great! So we can thank those southern bigots for having to make do with antique planes?"

"Basically, yes. Now, our only hope is to be able to catch up technologically with the French. Unfortunately, the French jet aircraft that we saw today proves that the gap between us and France in terms of aircraft designs is now widening instead of shrinking."

Lynn took a bite of her food, to give herself time to mull that information over.

"So, our government is basically doing nothing to correct that situation, is that it?"

"I really couldn't say, honey: I am just a lowly captain and these matters are way above my pay grade. However, I am sure that someone in Washington is working on that problem."

CHAPTER 27 – RECONCILIATION

15:06 (Paris Time)

Thursday, June 21, 1917

Palace of Versailles, southwest suburbs of Paris

France

Multiple flashbulbs exploded as press and official government photographers took pictures of President Poincaré co-signing with British Prime Minister David Lloyd-George the official ‘Declaration of Reconciliation and Friendship between France and Great-Britain’. The ceremony was being held for both historic and sentimental reasons in one the beautifully decorated lounges of the old royal Palace of Versailles, southwest of Paris, with dozens of ministers, aides and reporters in attendance. The two politicians next got up and shook hands while smiling for the cameras, prompting more pictures. They then retired with their ministers and aides to another lounge that was not opened to the press. There, the smiles that had been plastered on their faces were replaced with expressions of relief. Poincaré was the first to speak up, addressing Lloyd-George in a cautious tone.

“I sincerely hope that your signing of this declaration won’t cost you too much politically in England, Sir David.”

The British politician sighed before answering back.

“Well, every family member who lost a loved one in that unfortunate sea battle off Wilhelmshaven two years ago will most probably hate my guts from now on, but most of my citizens have by now understood and accepted the fact that much of the blame for that battle rested on Great-Britain and that our differences needed to be laid to rest, for the greater good of all.”

“Well said, Sir David. Now that we are officially friends again, I am sure that you will want to talk about many things concerning the relations between our two countries, starting with trade.”

“That I certainly want to do in detail, starting tomorrow morning. However, I intend to let my ministers conduct those discussions, as I will need to return to London tonight in order to be able to face Parliament next morning. I can’t say that I am relishing

in advance that session. There is however one subject that I would like to discuss with you before my departure: the buying of aircraft from Blériot.”

Raymond Poincaré smiled on hearing that, having bet with one of his own ministers that this subject would be brought up first by Lloyd-George. In truth, the state of the British aircraft industry could easily be described as nearly moribund, with the British aircraft designers being simply incapable of producing planes that could even remotely compete with Blériot-Kruger aircraft, especially the later jet-powered models. As a result, most British aircraft builders had gone bankrupt or had quit business in disgust and the British public now could only rely on the services of Air France to have access to air travel. Even that had been unavailable for months in 1915, when British animosity towards France after the Battle of the Jade had forced Air France to temporarily close its air terminals in Great-Britain. Even after those air terminals were able to resume operations with reasonable safety, the greeting that French travelers got from British customs officers was on the freezing side. Now, with this declaration of reconciliation and friendship signed, things were now free to change for the better.

“I will be most happy to discuss that subject with you, my dear Sir David, but not here in Versailles.”

“Then, where?” Asked the mystified British Prime Minister, making a malicious smile appear on Poincaré’s lips.

“But, at the Blériot Aéro-Parc, of course. It is only a few miles from here. Let’s jump into our cars and visit that place. I am sure that Mister Louis Blériot and Miss Tasha Lenoir will be most happy to see you.”

“Very well! I must say that I have been curious to meet those two for years now, especially Miss Lenoir.”

Poincaré had a dreamer’s expression as he started walking with Lloyd-George towards the palace exit where their cars were waiting.

“Hmm, Miss Lenoir... She is truly a unique woman, allying both beauty and great genius. You will find her fascinating.”

“They say in England that she must be one of the richest women in the World. Is that true?”

“To be frank, Sir David, I don’t know. You certainly can’t say from the way she lives. Her residence in Buc is a nice mansion on a large property, but it is not the kind of extravagant palace that so many European aristocrats possess. She lives in a relatively frugal manner and reinvests most of the profits from her industrial consortium into

improving her installations and into financing social measures for her employees. That last thing makes her an extremely popular employer and her employees are very loyal to her. She has not had to face a workers strike at any of her manufacturing plants since she went into business.”

“Really?” Said Lloyd-George, a politician who had been promoting for years social measures to help the lower classes in Great-Britain. “What kind of social measures, exactly?”

“Oh, the list is quite long and also mind-boggling to most old-fashioned politicians and industrial tycoons. First, her workers follow a forty-hour work week, with Saturdays and Sundays off. Second, those workers also enjoy periods of paid annual vacation according to their seniority, plus paid statutory holidays, like Christmas and New Year. Third, her workers are covered by health and dental care plans paid by Miss Lenoir, with a hospital purpose-built to care for Lenoir employees and their families. Fourth, her workers have access to a pension plan that is partially funded by Miss Lenoir, while they are also covered by an insurance plan in case they suffer work-related accidents. Fifth, each of her manufacturing plant has a daycare center where female employees can drop their babies and toddlers for the day while they work. Finally, but not least, her female employees who become pregnant receive up to six months of paid maternity leave, while their jobs are safeguarded for them.”

“But, but that’s downright revolutionary! And she still manages to turn a profit despite all those social expenses?”

“Actually, that is the biggest lesson we in France learned from Miss Lenoir, Sir David: happy and motivated workers make for much more productive workers in the long run. Also, that cuts greatly the worker training expenses caused by the high employee turnover so typical around Europe and makes for the retention of experienced, competent employees, something that boosts further employee productivity. At first, the other big industrialists in France and Europe laughed at her because of those social expenses. Not anymore. One last thing: she hires on an equal basis both men and women, of whatever race they may be, as long as they have the needed qualifications. For those who lack qualifications or who are to work on things invented by Miss Lenoir, she will provide paid learning classes for them.”

While most of the British ministers and aides following Lloyd-George harbored scandalized looks on hearing all that, their Prime-Minister was left pensive. Poor worker-employer relations had been plaguing Great-Britain for centuries, with most big

British industrialists and businessmen richly earning awful reputations as heartless, greedy men who grossly exploited their employees and ignored their plight. Even things as scandalous as making preteen children work in factories had been abolished only recently in Great-Britain, while working conditions in the various colonies of the British Empire in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean were much worse than in England.

"I think that I shall discuss those things at length with Miss Lenoir, Mister President. It appears like she could teach us many things indeed."

"Well, she certainly taught me a lot." Replied rather cryptically Poincaré as they got to his Kruger stretched limousine. Lloyd-George eyed the big vehicle with envy as the chauffeur opened the rear right door for him and Poincaré.

"I wish that I could have an official car like this one."

"And why don't you?" Asked Poincaré, a bit surprised.

"Because Rolls-Royce has an exclusivity contract to provide all official V.I.P. cars to be used by British government officials."

"Your loss!" Said Poincaré as Lloyd-George took place on the well-padded rear bench seat. British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour and his French counterpart, Aristide Briand, who was also Prime Minister of France, took place on the opposite, rear-facing middle bench seat, with the limousine then starting to roll.

As the V.I.P. convoy made its way towards Buc, Poincaré surprised his British guests by opening the padded armrest of his seat and grabbing what appeared to be a telephone handset inside it, pushing a few buttons before speaking in the handset's mouthpiece.

"Buc, this is President Poincaré. Could you warn Mister Blériot and Miss Lenoir that I am on my way to the Aéro-Parc with important British visitors?... Thank you!"

"You have a working telephone, inside your car?" Asked a disbelieving Lloyd-George. Poincaré made a contrite smile before answering him.

"This is actually a radio-telephone, one of the inventions of Miss Lenoir. Like much of her most advanced technology, it was not sold to Great-Britain or to the United States, thanks to the opposition from Marconi Company."

Lloyd-George couldn't help exchange a bitter glance with Arthur Balfour before looking back at Poincaré.

"Well, if that can please you, Marconi lost its own exclusivity contracts with the government soon after the Battle of the Jade. It proved too greedy, while its technology

is now trailing way behind that offered by the Lenoir Industries. By the way, your 'Radio France International' channel in English is now very popular in England."

"Glad to hear that, Sir David." Said Poincaré, genuinely happy. The advanced technologies and modern concepts brought by the four young women from the future had resulted up to now into increased worldwide prestige for France, with great benefits for the nation and its people. French citizens could now profit from vastly better communications systems, public radio entertainment broadcast stations, safe and affordable air travel over long distances and equally affordable private cars and trucks, all things that greatly boosted the national economy and had attracted crowds of foreign tourists and traveling businessmen, on top of boosting national exports. The employment practices and workers' benefits pioneered by both Blériot Aéronautique and the Lenoir Industries Consortium had slowly but steadily spread through France, once their most obvious benefits had been recognized by more and more French industrialists and businessmen. That in turn had greatly improved the social climate in the country, with workers strikes and agitation by socialist extremists way down compared to the previous decades. By now, those four women were like national treasures in Poincaré's mind.

The short trip to Buc was mostly spent in silence, with Lloyd-George and Arthur Balfour craning their necks to look at the occasional aircraft approaching or leaving the airfield in Buc, which was still the maintenance and training base for both Air France and for Blériot Aéronautique. Le Bourget Airport, situated in the northeast suburbs of Paris, had now been the official commercial international airport for Paris for about a year now. As the convoy was getting close to Buc, an exclamation from Arthur Balfour made the others in the limousine look at the sky.

"What the bloody hell is that thing?"

Poincaré saw about at the same time as Lloyd-George what had caught Balfour's eyes and was left equally confused. What he could now see looked very much like a giant flying mushroom, which was flying low and slow towards Buc. A kind of small oval cabin seemed hooked to the underside of a ring surrounding a large rotor, with the contraption appearing to be extremely maneuverable. Having an idea, Poincaré pushed the button activating the limousine's sunroof, opening it wide before getting up and sticking his head and upper torso outside, soon imitated by Lloyd-George. They were then able to see much better the contraption as it flew around the airfield, apparently being flight-

tested. It then started a slow, near vertical descent, to finally disappear behind a tall hangar.

“That thing can land vertically, like an auto-gyro?” Said an awed Sir David. “I must see that thing from up close.”

“I must say that I am as intrigued and curious as you about that thing, Sir David.” Replied Poincaré. “We are about to arrive at the Aéro-Parc, so I believe that we will be able to examine that machine together from up close. Decidedly, Miss Johanna Kruger will never stop surprising me.”

“Who?”

“Miss Johanna Kruger, the chief aircraft designer at Blériot and also the owner and founder of Kruger Automobiles, the maker of this limousine. Miss Kruger is another great genius in the same class as Miss Lenoir.”

“Oh, I see!”

The V.I.P. convoy soon arrived at the gate of the Aéro-Parc Blériot, where a private security guard who was obviously expecting them told Poincaré’s driver where to go to find Louis Blériot. Following his instructions, the presidential driver then rolled to a large aircraft hangar, where he stopped his limousine in front of the hangar’s pedestrians entrance. The mysterious machine that had intrigued Poincaré and his British guests was sitting in front of the hangar, with Louis Blériot, Tasha Lenoir, Johanna Kruger and Terry Clarkson standing beside it. Poincaré’s driver, along with the presidential bodyguards, was first out of his vehicle and went to open Poincaré’s door, while one bodyguard opened Lloyd-George’s door. The two leaders, followed by their two ministers, stepped out of the stretched limousine and walked to the group standing near the flying machine. The latter really looked a lot like a giant flying mushroom and didn’t look particularly elegant for an aircraft, contrary to the past designs by Johanna Kruger. However, its demonstrated flying performances certainly made it a machine apart from others. One of the President’s bodyguards stiffened when he saw a sort of short rifle slung across Terry Clarkson’s back, but Poincaré signaled him at once to calm down.

“Don’t worry, Pierre: Miss Clarkson is Miss Lenoir’s personal bodyguard and can be trusted completely.”

Louis Blériot then stepped forward to shake hands with Poincaré and Lloyd-George, speaking in English for the benefit of the latter.

"Mister President, Mister Prime Minister, welcome to Buc. To what do we owe the honor of your visit?"

"To the desire of Prime Minister Lloyd-George to speak with you about possibly buying some of your aircraft, Mister Blériot. We just signed in Versailles a declaration of reconciliation and friendship that basically puts to rest the regrettable animosity that existed between our two nations since the naval Battle of the Jade, two years ago."

"That is correct, Mister Blériot." Added Lloyd-George. "Know that the exclusivity contracts that the Marconi Company had enjoyed with my government are no longer in effect and that there are now no obstacles for us to buy your aircraft, if you would agree to selling them to us, of course."

"Then, let me first present you to three of my associates, who will have a word to say about such sales, Mister Prime Minister. Miss Johanna Kruger here is my chief aircraft designer, while Miss Tasha Lenoir, to her right, designed the advanced electronics found in my aircraft, along with the Durex polymer that is used extensively in the building of my planes. Also, you have Miss Terry Clarkson, Miss Lenoir's personal bodyguard and also a test pilot for my new planes."

Lloyd-George, along with Arthur Balfour, took the time to shake hands with all three women before looking at the flying machine behind them.

"Talking of new planes, you do have a most strange-looking machine right here, Mister Blériot. What is it exactly?"

Louis Blériot broke at once into a big grin, apparently quite enamored of his latest aircraft.

"This is the Blériot-Kruger COLIBRI²¹, the latest design from Miss Kruger. It is a simple, yet revolutionary design that should completely revolutionize short range air transport and that also should open a multitude of new applications for aircraft. Let's get closer to it first."

The group took a few steps until it stood under the horizontal ducted rotor of the machine and close to its transparent cabin. Blériot then started describing the machine to his visitors.

"The COLIBRI is a completely new concept of aircraft that provides the capability to take off and land vertically from anywhere, without any need for long runways or large water surfaces. It can carry up to five persons, six if you include young children, and has

²¹ Colibri : French for 'hummingbird'.

a range of about 750 kilometers, depending on the payload. Above your heads, you can see a pair of rotors that turn counter to each other, in order to eliminate any torque effect. The air displaced by these rotors is contained at first within a circular duct around the rotors, then vectored through those multiple pivoting flaps under the rotors. That creates a strong thrust in the direction commanded by the pilot, who can fly his COLIBRI either forward, backward or sideways, plus can make it pivot on the spot. The pilot can make it go up or down simply by adjusting the engine throttle to increase or decrease power. It has already flown a few times and I can certify that it is extremely maneuverable, on top of being very easy to pilot.”

“And what kind of maximum speed can it attain, Mister Blériot?” Asked Poincaré, already liking the concept. Blériot’s answer nearly floored him.

“Two hundred and sixty kilometers per hour, Mister President. However, its normal, economical cruise speed is 220 kilometers per hour. It also can do a sustained hover at a maximum altitude of 2,800 meters. The maximum payload, meaning fuel, passengers and luggage, is 1,500 kilos. With a pilot, four adult passengers and a reasonable amount of luggage, the COLIBRI could take off from anywhere in Paris and reach every city or place in France, including Bordeaux, Marseille and Nice, within three hours, landing in a simple house courtyard or car parking lot.”

His visitors all opened their eyes wide on hearing that, with Poincaré exclaiming himself.

“But, the possibilities that your COLIBRI offer are simply mind-boggling, Mister Blériot.”

Johanna Kruger took on her to reply to that, a proud smile on her lips.

“Correct, Mister President. That is actually why I decided to design it: to create a machine that could take off and land anywhere, would have a decent range and speed and would be very easy to fly. Some but not all the applications that I could see for my COLIBRI would be as an air taxi, a police patrol craft, an air ambulance, a search and rescue craft, a tactical military observation and liaison machine, a ship-borne liaison craft for personnel movement between ships or between a ship and the shore and a personal air car. The way I see it, the market for my COLIBRI could be huge and it will make air travel possible to all.”

Tasha Lenoir then spoke in turn, adding to Johanna’s words.

“Mister President, I already have plans to use en masse the COLIBRI to provide easy and quick transportation of passengers between city centers and the airfields used by Air France, plus to supplement Air France service by offering air trips to small towns

and villages that would not otherwise rate an airfield. Take for example the French possessions in the Caribbean Basin, with its many dispersed islands: passengers disembarking in the Guadeloupe would then be able to take at once a COLIBRI to reach any particular hotel, resort or house in the islands around the Guadeloupe. In essence, the COLIBRI will be the perfect taxi: versatile, speedy and able to jump over any road traffic jam or other ground or water obstacle. If you think of it as a police vehicle, then it would allow policemen to watch large areas from the air, search for fleeing suspects or missing persons and reach spots that would otherwise be very difficult to get to, like mountain cabins, isolated houses and small islands. Businessmen would be able to board a COLIBRI on the roof of their commercial building or in an adjacent parking lot, then fly directly to another building in another city or nearby country, like Bordeaux, Lyon or Brussels. Tens of thousands of COLIBRI could be built and they still would not be enough to satisfy all the needs I could see for it around the World. However, being a simple craft with minimal instrumentation, in order to keep its price down, it will not be meant to fly in bad weather or adverse conditions, except for the better equipped military and police models.”

“Still, its potential is downright fantastic, miss.” Said Poincaré enthusiastically, with Lloyd-George agreeing with him.

“I believe the same, miss, especially in the case of Great-Britain. We are a relatively small country with a fairly high population density. Such an air taxi vehicle would render priceless services to us. Also, COLIBRIs embarked on our ships would make it so much easier to transport officers and sailors between ships or to the shore, or to carry wounded men to a medical center. The Royal Navy alone could use hundreds of your machines.”

Louis Blériot grinned widely at those words: he could already hear the ringing of his company’s cash register.

“Well, it being a rather simple craft to build, my plants certainly could produce quickly the COLIBRI in large numbers and at a very affordable cost, Mister Prime Minister. What other kind of Blériot aircraft would interest you?”

Lloyd-George decided to go for broke and answered in a firm but friendly voice.

“As you may know, the state of British international air travel presently rests mostly with Air France. I would very much like for British companies to have access to your various models of passenger planes, so that we could properly service our empire according to our particular needs.”

"A legitimate wish, I must say, Mister Prime Minister." Said Blériot, sobering up a bit. "However, some of the technologies contained in my airliners are classified as French national secrets. Could you excuse us for a moment while me and Miss Lenoir discuss this with President Poincaré?"

"Not at all." Replied Lloyd-George, who could easily figure out what technologies Blériot was worried about: the British secret services had been trying in vain for months to learn more about the jet engines and radar sensors used in the Blériot ATLANTIQUE airliner and the OURAGAN fighter-bomber. While Blériot, Lenoir, Kruger and Poincaré discussed together in low voices about twenty meters away, the British Prime Minister took the time to eye the strange but deadly-looking short rifle carried by Terry Clarkson.

"May I ask what kind of weapon you are carrying, Miss Clarkson?"
The tall, wide-shouldered young black woman replied with a polite smile.

"You may, Mister Prime Minister: It is called the ARC-1 and I designed it. Let me unload it first, so that you could examine it from up close."

Watched closely by Lloyd-George's personal bodyguard, a captain of the British Royal Marines, Terry removed the curved box magazine of her bullpup assault rifle, then pulled back its breechblock, ejecting the round that had been chambered in the breech. Instead of giving her weapon directly to Lloyd-George, she handed it to his bodyguard while excusing herself with the Prime Minister.

"Excuse me if I give first my weapon to your bodyguard, sir: this way, he can judge how safe the weapon will be for you. My ARC-1 is what I call an assault rifle. It is chambered for the 7 by 57 millimeter Mauser rifle round and is a selective fire weapon, meaning that it can fire in either semi-automatic, shot by shot mode, or in full automatic mode at a rate of fourteen rounds per second. It is fed by a detachable box magazine with a capacity of thirty rounds. I am presently working on perfecting a drum magazine with a capacity of fifty rounds."

"This looks like a really nice weapon, miss, and it is also surprisingly light for its caliber." Said the Royal Marines captain while handing the rifle to Lloyd-George. "However, I find the emplacements of the magazine and of the pistol grip a bit bizarre."

"That is because my rifle is a bullpup design, where the actions are placed behind the grips in order to decrease the overall length of the rifle without cutting the length of the barrel itself. As you can see, even with a 26 inch-long barrel, my rifle is still

quite compact. With the 7mm Mauser round being renowned for its good ballistics, this makes my ARC-1 suitable both for long-range shooting and for close-quarters fights.”

“And what is that short tube mounted under the barrel, miss?”

“A 30mm, one-shot grenade launcher with recoil buffer. It fires a 30mm caliber Metallex grenade at a muzzle velocity of 160 meters per second, enough for an effective range of at least 400 meters. The grenade’s blast alone will kill anyone within fifteen meters...or wreck a medium-sized room. With this combination of firepower and its compactness, my ARC-1 is the ideal heavy duty weapon for a bodyguard. I am also developing for police duties a submachine gun variant of it in 7.63 by 25 millimeter Mauser caliber. By the way, my ARC-1 is presently being tested by the French Army for possible adoption in service.”

“I must say that I am already jealous, miss. I would positively love to do some test shooting with it.” Said frankly the Royal Marines officer, making Terry smile.

“Well, if President Poincaré decides to let Great-Britain buy our most advanced technologies, then I don’t see why your country couldn’t buy my weapons as well. As for test-firing my ARC-1, there is an underground firing range right here in Buc. You will be more than welcome to go there with me...that is if your Prime Minister would let you go for half a hour or so.”

Lloyd-George nearly laughed on seeing the questioning look of his bodyguard, who now had the expression of a kid hoping for his father to say ‘yes’ to a request.

“Alright, Captain Morris: you may go for a while. I believe that President Poincaré’s bodyguards will be able to protect me despite your temporary absence.”

“Thank you very much, Mister Prime Minister.”

Terry then politely retrieved her weapon from Lloyd-George before walking away with an excited Morris.

Louis Blériot soon returned to Lloyd-George and Arthur Balfour, followed closely by President Poincaré, Tasha Lenoir and Johanna Kruger. It was however Poincaré who spoke first to the British.

“What worth would be a declaration of friendship if we would not be ready to trust each other, Sir David? I told Mister Blériot and Miss Lenoir that they will be free to sell you everything they designed and are producing and that your people will be welcome to come to France to train on those systems and planes. There is however one overall condition to this.”

"Oh? And what would that condition be?"

"That British users of Blériot planes and Lenoir electronics refrain from reselling these products or to divulge their technology to American buyers, be they private buyers or government representatives. The reason for blacklisting the Americans like this is the wishes of Miss Lenoir and Mister Blériot to show to the Americans their deep disapproval of the present system of racial segregation as practiced in the United States with full government approval. Personally, I can understand perfectly their aversion to that institutionalized racism. For claiming to be the supposed champion of democracy in the World, the United States is in a poor position to lecture other countries on the subject."

"Indeed! You may know that I personally am encouraging my governors and representatives overseas to better treat the local populations. Unfortunately, old habits die hard, as you probably know."

"I do indeed, Mister Prime Minister. Well, while we are all here together, why won't you and I go do a short tour in this COLIBRI, with the expert hands of Mister Blériot at the commands?"

"That is a splendid idea, Mister President." Replied enthusiastically Lloyd-George, happy that his personal bodyguard was not around to veto that.

CHAPTER 28 – A LONG SUFFERING MOTHER RUSSIA

09:30 (Paris Time)

Monday, February 25, 1918

Central studios of Radio France

Paris, France

Hien was reviewing the details of a proposed project to create Vietnamese language sub-stations of Radio France in Saigon and Hanoi when her telephone rang. Picking up the receiver, she spoke calmly in it while her eyes kept reading the document in her hand.

“Pham Ti Hien here.”

She then heard the voice of the chief editor of news for Radio France International. The man actually sounded worried.

“Miss Pham? This is Robert Aucoin. We just received an alarming telex from our Saint-Petersburg office: our chief correspondent there says that mass riots and widespread military mutinies by conscript soldiers have broken out and that the situation in the city is now chaotic and very dangerous.”

Hien tensed up at once on hearing that: the last time that riots had shaken Saint-Petersburg about a year ago, because of food shortages, the Czar’s regime had only survived via violent and bloody reaction by Russian soldiers and policemen that had caused dozens of deaths. Since then, the uncaring, aloof and autocratic ruling style of Czar Nicholas II had done little to placate popular dissatisfaction and resentment.

“Are our people there safe?”

“For the moment, yes, Miss Pham, but they say that some political agitators are addressing the crowds around our local office and are accusing France and other European countries of supporting the despotic rule of Nicholas II. Things could sour very quickly there, Miss Pham.”

“I believe that you are right. For the moment, pass the news of these Russian riots as flash news to our radio commentators on both our French and English language networks. Telex back to our office in Saint-Petersburg and tell our people there to stay in their offices and to not venture outside as long as the riots are going on. No heroic

reporting acts on their part, please. On my part, I will advise Miss Lenoir of this and see if we should prepare evacuation flights of French citizens via Air France.”

“Understood, miss.”

The news editor then cut the line, leaving Hien thinking about the implications of those riots in Russia. Czar Nicholas II was as unpopular and despised as ever by the masses of the low classes in Russia and had alienated most of the local politicians as well, thanks to his stubborn refusal to transfer or even simply delegate any of his autocratic powers to elected officials, insisting on continued absolute imperial rule. His lack of concern for the plight of the Russian peasants and of the lowly industrial workers had also not helped one bit. Presently, the Russian people was suffering through a near-famine situation worsened by a very harsh Winter, even by Russian standards. The chronic mismanagement, incompetence and corruption permeating the imperial administration had resulted in widespread food shortages, aggravated as well by shortages in coal supplies and the rapid breakdown of the rail transportation system through negligence and lack of proper maintenance of the rolling stock. As a result, most Russians were being left hungry and cold, while the Russian aristocracy kept living the high life of privilege and luxury they had always enjoyed, the perfect recipe for a popular revolt. Unfortunately, Czar Nicholas II had stayed apathetic and uncaring about the suffering of his people, letting his ministers handle the crisis while refusing to apply any reforms to a system that was obviously broke. In fact, the last news about the Czar was that he was still away from his capital, ‘busy’ with a long hunting excursion somewhere in the Ural Mountains. Shaking her head in disgust at such a lack of human caring, Hien composed the number for Tasha’s electronic lab in Buc, getting an answer after three rings.

“Tasha Lenoir!”

“Tasha, this is Hien. We may have an emergency situation in our hands in Saint-Petersburg.”

Hien then repeated to Tasha what her news editor had told her, leaving her friend thoughtful for a second.

“You are right, Hien: it may be prudent to prepare for an emergency evacuation by air of French citizens in Saint-Petersburg. I am going to initiate that process here at once. Does our government know about those riots?”

“I frankly don’t know, Tasha.”

"Then, could you call Prime Minister Briand and make sure that he knows about this, please? We may have to coordinate our actions with our embassy in Saint-Petersburg."

"Count on me, Tasha. Good luck on your side."

Hien then hung up before searching in her rolodex for the telephone number of Prime Minister Aristide Briand's office.

In Buc, Tasha's next move was to call the Air France operation center in the Le Bourget International Airport and get her air operations director on the line.

"Bertrand, this is Tasha. We may have a crisis situation developing in Saint-Petersburg: Radio France's local studio just warned its Paris office that there are widespread popular riots and mass military mutinies in the Russian capital and that things look really scary there. Have you received any recent reports from our offices in Pulkovo Airport or from our Air France Travel offices in downtown Saint-Petersburg?"

"We actually received a report from Pulkovo Airport about half a hour ago, signaling a significant influx of panicky people showing up and asking to buy tickets on the earliest flights available. The report said that the crowds are a mix of French citizens, citizens from various other European countries and of Russian citizens. The latter were described as being mostly from the upper crust of the Russian society and aristocracy. As a response, I told our ground technicians to prepare and fuel up the two CIGOGNE amphibians and one ATLANTIQUE jetliner held in reserve here. Crews for them are also being called up."

"Good man! Can you tell me if we have a COLIBRI available in Pulkovo?"

"We have, Tasha. Our downtown travel office also had a COLIBRI, but the bad news is that our office is not responding to our calls, either on the telephone or on the radio."

Tasha barely stopped herself from swearing out loud: the Air France Travel offices in downtown Saint-Petersburg was manned by no less than eight persons, most of them young French women.

"Alright, here is what we are going to do: you will send our three available transport planes to Saint-Petersburg as soon as they are ready to take off. Once over Saint-Petersburg, they will confirm by radio with the control tower that it is safe for them to land before starting their descent. Make sure that their fuel tanks are full: Pulkovo may not have fuel reserves available anymore and we better play it safe on our side. I

am going to jump in my personal jet and go in advance of our transport planes. I will call you back once in Saint-Petersburg.”

“Please, Tasha, be careful there.”

“I will, Bertrand. Thank you for your consideration.”

Tasha then hung up, her mind boiling over. According to the history she knew, the Russian revolution was supposed to have taken place a year ago, in February of 1917. However, the fact that the First World War had been won much faster than expected had changed many other things in the historical calendar, starting with the Russian Revolution that would cause the abdication of Czar Nicholas II and the coming into power of, first, a provisional Russian government, followed by the Bolsheviks, who would then establish communism and rename Russia as the ‘Union of Soviet Socialist Republics’, or U.S.S.R. in short. Unfortunately, the quick victory over Germany had apparently not convinced Nicholas II to relax his despotic rule or even to listen more to the complaints from his long-suffering people. Tasha could not find fault in the Russian people in revolting against such an autocratic regime. However, she also knew that the Bolshevik leaders, like Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, would only exchange one abusive regime with another one as despotic and uncaring as that of the Czar’s rule. That communist regime would ultimately be responsible in the decades to come for the deaths of tens of millions of its own citizens and for the long-term oppression of hundreds of millions more people around Russia and Eastern Europe, on top of stirring revolutions and troubles in dozens of other countries. Unfortunately, she just could not see any plausible way to avoid all this. The only thing that she could do right now was to try to safeguard the lives of her employees and of the French citizens presently stuck in Saint-Petersburg.

Making first a call to the Air France maintenance hangar where her PÉGASE supersonic private jet was and ordering it to be readied for an urgent flight, Tasha then shed her laboratory clean coverall and grabbed her winter coat, gloves, boots and hat, putting them on before going out of her lab complex to walk to the maintenance hangar. On her way, she made a slight detour to the Blériot prototype workshop, where Terry Clarkson customarily was when not escorting Tasha around. She effectively found her bodyguard there, discussing some technical matter with Louis Blériot and Johanna Kruger. She walked quickly to the trio and cut them off before they could greet her.

"Heads up, people! We have a crisis developing in Saint-Petersburg: widespread popular riots and military mutinies are raging over there and we may have to conduct an emergency evacuation of our personnel and of French citizens. Le Bourget is going to send two CIGOGNEs and one ATLANTIQUE to Saint-Petersburg to act as evacuation aircraft but I will fly ahead of them in my PÉGASE executive jet. Terry, I will need you to come with me. Dress warmly: it is freezing up in Russia."

"If it is to help save French citizens, then I want to go too, Tasha." Replied without hesitation Louis Blériot. "I can help pilot your jet."

Tasha only hesitated for a second before nodding her head.

"Very well, Louis. That will allow me to use Terry in what she does best. Terry, you will bring your weapons and combat equipment on this flight: we may have to face crowds of rioters."

"How much do you want me to bring, Tasha?"

Tasha replied with a hard look on her face.

"Everything!"

13:19 (Saint-Petersburg Time) / 11:19 (Paris Time)

Pulkovo International Airport, Saint-Petersburg

Russia

A snow storm was sweeping the grounds and runways of Pulkovo International Airport, situated some ten kilometers from downtown Saint-Petersburg. Thankfully, the snow on the runways had been reasonably well plowed and Louis Blériot was able to land their PÉGASE supersonic executive jet without problems. He then taxied to one of the waiting aircraft gates of the airport. In view of the severe winter climate to be expected in Russia, the aircraft gates in Pulkovo were quite different from those of other airports established by Air France around the World. Since such things as de-icing services were still quite difficult to provide due to the lack of proper, mass-produced de-icing fluid, each aircraft gate was in effect a large drive-through hangar, with ends that could be closed off in the case of truly severe freezing weather. Today, that arrangement was proving more than welcomed and it allowed Louis to shut down the two medium bypass turbofan engines of the PÉGASE without fear of seeing those freezing stiff and not be able to restart later on. As soon as Tasha came down from her PÉGASE with a fully armed Terry Clarkson wearing her battle armor, she was met by

her Air France director of air operations for Saint-Petersburg. The man had one awed look at the intimidating Terry before reporting to Tasha.

“Thank God you came, Miss Lenoir. More panicky people are arriving at the airport by the hour, looking for a flight out...to anywhere outside Russia. We must have at the least 300 people presently waiting in the passenger lounge, with that number growing constantly. All of them are afraid that either rioters or Russian Army mutineers will come here to either jail them or kill them.”

“First off, Mister Radzetsky, what is exactly happening in Saint-Petersburg? Has the police lost complete control of the city? Where is Czar Nicholas II and what are his officials doing right now? More importantly to me: have you been able to make contact with our downtown Air France Travel office?”

“The few reports I was able to get about the situation downtown is that rioters and mutineers control the streets and are besieging the Winter Palace and the Admiralty Building, where a few guards and soldiers still loyal to Czar Nicholas are holed up. As for the Czar, he is still somewhere around the Ural Mountains, hunting and probably doesn't even know that a revolution has started. On its part, our downtown office is still not responding to our calls. I am afraid that the worst may have happened already to our people there.”

“How about this airport? Is it still secure and guarded, or is it open to rioters?”

“The Russian police officers that normally guard the airport have all abandoned their posts and fled, afraid that the rioters and mutineers will show up here and kill them. The only ones presently defending parts of the airport are the personal guards of the Russian aristocratic families that have showed up here, demanding to be evacuated.” Tasha frowned on hearing the word ‘demanding’.

“Well, they may demand all they want but they will have to wait their turn. French citizens will have absolute priority in the boarding process, once our planes start arriving in about one hour. Foreign, non-Russian citizens will have the next highest priority, with Russian citizens last. I will not tolerate any attempt at bribery or threat of force from anyone who will want to jump the line, even from royal family members. If anyone objects to that and tries to become violent, then let Miss Clarkson here explain the rules to them.”

The man had another look at the imposing Terry in her full Durex battle armor and holding her ARC-1 7mm assault rifle. While he could not identify as such the heavy

plasma rifle slung in her back, that weapon was also plainly visible, along with plenty of ammunition and grenades in pouches attached to her armored suit.

“Uh, understood, Miss Lenoir. What are we going to do about our people in the downtown office?”

“I see no other choice but to go there myself with a COLIBRI and check on them. Your COLIBRI is still available and fully fueled, I hope?”

“It is, Miss Lenoir. I can lead you to it.”

“Good! Terry, you stay here at the airport and make sure that it stays safe for our incoming planes. If any potential passenger starts panicking or tries to jump the line, put him back in his place.”

“But, I can’t let you go alone downtown: that’s too risky.” Objected at once her bodyguard. Louis Blériot, who had just come down from their plane, then spoke up.

“I will go with you, Tasha. I can pilot your COLIBRI. That will allow you to go out and inquire about our personnel without fear of losing the COLIBRI.”

Tasha gave a sharp look at Louis, while Terry gave her a pleading look.

“Please let him do that, Tasha. I already gave him one of my spare weapons and you will need someone to watch your back downtown.”

“Very well! Terry, make sure that our executive jet is not used by anyone but us. Mister Radzetsky, lead us to your COLIBRI.”

“Yes, Miss Lenoir.”

Walking out of the hangar gate and following a covered walkway, the trio, followed by Terry Clarkson, emerged in the passenger lounge, to which the four hangar gates of the airport’s international terminal were connected. They found the lounge nearly full of scared, worried people sitting or nervously walking around. Many of those people, mostly the ones wearing the expensive suits and dresses of aristocrats, nearly assaulted the group, shouting at the four of them.

“WHEN WILL PLANES ARRIVE TO TAKE US TO SAFETY?”

“WILL THERE BE ENOUGH PLANES FOR ALL OF US?”

“I DEMAND PRIORITY SEATING FOR MY FAMILY!”

Tasha raised both hands to demand silence, then stared hard at the Russian man who had asked for priority seating. She spoke in her Russian, which was by now quite decent after nearly two years of private tutoring with a Russian language teacher.

"Mister, I and my assistants will decide the priority order for embarkation and you will wait your turn. French citizens will have top priority for evacuation. Now, go sit down and follow the rules I will now announce."

The man was tempted at first to object, but the stepping forward of a menacing Terry convinced him to shut up and go sit with his family. Tasha didn't miss the fact that those aristocrats had a mountain of luggage with them, a nonsense she resolved to prevent right away.

"LISTEN TO ME, ALL OF YOU! I AM TASHA LENOIR, FOUNDER AND OWNER OF AIR FRANCE, AND I AM TAKING CHARGE OF THIS EMERGENCY EVACUATION OPERATION. FROM NOW ON, YOU WILL FOLLOW AND OBEY THE DIRECTIVES OF MY ASSISTANTS AND OF THE AIR FRANCE PERSONNEL. IF NOT, YOU WILL BE LEFT BEHIND. THREE PLANES ARE PRESENTLY ON THEIR WAY TO HERE TO PICK UP THOSE WHO WISH TO LEAVE RUSSIA. HOWEVER, SPACE WILL BE AT A PREMIUM AND LIVES WILL HAVE PRIORITY OVER PERSONAL POSSESSIONS. EACH PASSENGER WILL BE ALLOWED ONE SUITCASE AND ONE SMALL CARRY-ON BAG, NO MORE! IF YOU TRY TO BOARD WITH MORE THAN THAT, MY PERSONNEL WILL REFUSE THOSE EXTRA LUGGAGE. IF YOU FURTHER OBJECT AND CAUSE DELAYS IN THE BOARDING, THEN YOU WILL SIMPLY BE TURNED AWAY AND REFUSED BOARDING. NOW, FRENCH CITIZENS WILL HAVE FIRST PRIORITY FOR BOARDING, FOLLOWED BY OTHER FOREIGN NATIONALS, THEN BY RUSSIAN CITIZENS. BE ADVISED THAT THE PLANES THAT ARE ON THEIR WAY EXCEPTIONALLY CARRY ARMED AIR FRANCE SECURITY PERSONNEL, SO I ADVISE YOU NOT TO CAUSE TROUBLE. FOR THOSE WITH EXCESS BAGGAGE, I STRONGLY COUNSEL YOU TO START SELECTING A SUITCASE'S WORTH PER PERSON OF THE THINGS YOU WANT THE MOST TO HAVE WITH YOU. I WILL NOW ASK YOU TO SPLIT INTO THREE DISTINCTIVE GROUPS: FRENCH CITIZENS, FOREIGN NON-RUSSIAN CITIZENS AND RUSSIAN CITIZENS. BE READY TO SHOW PAPERS TO PROVE YOUR NATIONALITY IF ASKED TO. THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION."

Tasha then repeated her announcement in Russian and in English before she turned to face Radzetsky, speaking to him in a low voice.

"Once you will have led me to your COLIBRI, go to your operation center and request more planes for this evacuation, then come back here and help organize the boarding operations with the help of my big friend here."

“Understood, Miss Lenoir. This way, please.”

Crossing the passenger lounge and following a series of hallways, they finally went up to the flat roof of the terminal building, where they found a COLIBRI VTOL gyrocraft waiting beside its small hangar. Radzetsky then handed a city map to Tasha and pointed to her the location of the Air France Travel offices.

“The Air France Travel offices are situated inside a four-storey building forming a square around an internal courtyard. The building sits on Nevski Prospekt, right along the banks of the Mojka Canal, close to the Stroganov Palace and to the imperial Winter Palace. At last news, that whole area was full of rioters, so I counsel extreme caution once there, miss.”

“Don’t worry: me and Mister Blériot are armed and we are not suicidal. Now, go call for those extra planes.”

“Yes, Miss Lenoir.”

As the local director went back inside the terminal building, Louis Blériot quickly sat in the machine’s pilot seat, while Tasha sat next to him, the map given to her in her hands.

“What kind of weapon did Terry give you, Louis?”

“A stun pistol.”

“Good! I also have a stun pistol. We will try as much as possible to not antagonize those rioters, unless they attack us or endanger the lives of our people: I can understand too well their reasons to revolt. Let’s go! Minutes now count.”

“Count yourself already there, Tasha.” Replied Louis as he started the small turboshaft engine of the COLIBRI and gradually throttled up its power. The nimble craft then jump up into the air and took speed towards downtown Saint-Petersburg, ten kilometers away.

What they saw from the air as they overflew the city at an altitude of 800 meters was not encouraging at all: everywhere they saw agitated crowds filling the streets, with some buildings having been put on fire. As they flew down Nevski Prospekt, one of the main arteries of the city, Tasha and Louis were able to hear the distant detonations from a firefight coming from the area of the imperial Winter Palace, now only one kilometer away. That made Louis Blériot frown.

"Well, it seems that the days of Imperial Russia are about over, Tasha. When I think that this idiot of Nicholas II is somewhere in the Urals, playing the hunter while his country is going down to Hell in a hand basket. He will richly deserve to lose his crown."

"Maybe, but many innocent people are liable to pay a dear price during this revolution. Unfortunately, there is little we can do now to change things. The Czar has been warned often enough in the past about the urgent needs for reforms. He didn't want to listen and now others will pay with him for that. I truly could strangle that imbecile right now."

"Too late for that, Tasha. I see the Air France Travel building: there are rioters down in the street in front of it but it seems intact from here."

"Good! Approach it at low altitude from the side of the Mojka Canal, so that those rioters can't spot us early on, then land at the vertical in the internal courtyard. You will stay at the commands, ready to take off in a hurry if need be while I go get our people. And no heroics, please! I need you to be able to pilot our jet out of here later on."

Louis gave her a worried look but obeyed her and lost altitude before approaching their target building from the East. Flying barely high enough to clear the top southeast corner of the building housing the Air France Travel offices, Louis then immediately went down at the vertical to land in the small internal courtyard of the building. Tasha's heart jumped in her chest when she saw an apparently intact COLIBRI parked in one corner of the courtyard, with nobody around it.

"Their COLIBRI is still there, apparently intact, while I don't see anyone around it. Our personnel may still be safe inside. If they are, I will then pilot that second COLIBRI, so that we could airlift all of our people in one shot."

"Sounds like a plan. Let's just hope that our people are still close by and safe." Tasha did not reply to that, instead jumping out as soon as the COLIBRI was about to touch the pavement of the courtyard. Going to the parked COLIBRI, a quick look at it told her that it looked intact and that its fuel tank was nearly full. Next, she rushed inside the building, using one of the doors giving on the courtyard. She already knew her way inside, having helped inaugurate the Air France Travel offices when they had opened four years ago. She however didn't have to go far inside before an excited young woman wearing an Air France uniform ran to her, throwing herself in her arms and hugging her.

"Miss Lenoir! It is so good to see you here. We were despairing of getting any help."

Tasha hugged the woman back for a few seconds before looking into her eyes.

"We tried repeatedly to call your offices via both telephone and radio, but didn't get any answers."

"The rioters cut all the telephone wires they could find and electricity is out in most of the city, Miss Lenoir."

"Well, that's not important anyway. How many of you are here and is anyone missing?"

"All seven of us are here, Miss Lenoir. We are only missing our four local Russian employees, who have not showed up for two days now because of the manifestations and riots. I in fact suspect that one or two of them are now part of the rioters, judging from their past conversations with us."

"Then, go to the waiting COLIBRI in the courtyard. I will go get the others."

"Could I go get my bag first, Miss Lenoir? It is inside our offices."

"Yes, but make it quick."

Tasha then followed the young employee down the hallway, arriving in seconds in the back rooms of the Air France Travel offices. Someone unlocked the door when the young woman called through it. Tasha found six more anxious men and women inside, with both the door to the main offices and the sole window of the room solidly barricaded. She shouted orders at once to prevent the avalanche of questions they were about to ask.

"QUICK, GRAB ONE PERSONAL BAG EACH AND RUN TO THE COURTYARD: WE BROUGHT ANOTHER COLIBRI. GO, GO, GO!"

Her employees did not have to be told twice and bolted out of the room after grabbing their bags. To Tasha's relief, she found the courtyard still free of rioters, with Louis waiting at the commands of his COLIBRI.

"THREE OF YOU GO WITH MISTER BLÉRIOT! THE REST, WITH ME!"

Four women followed her to the second COLIBRI, piling in with their bags while Tasha took place at the controls. As she started the engine of her craft, she called Louis by radio.

"Louis, take off first: I will be right behind you. Then we will fly straight back to the airport."

"Got it!"

As Louis' COLIBRI started ascending, Tasha looked at the senior female employee who had been managing the local offices.

"Have the rioters actually attacked our offices to date?"

"No, Miss Lenoir. They were too busy going to support the military mutineers who are presently besieging the Winter Palace and the Admiralty Building. Are you going to go save the imperial family after that?"

That made Tasha snap her head around.

"The imperial family? But, I was told that the Czar was on a hunting expedition in the Ural Mountains."

"The Czar, yes, but not his wife and children. They stayed behind in the Winter Palace while he went hunting. Czar Nicholas said that hunting was only for men."

Tasha shook her head at that.

"How typical! And how do you know that the imperial family is still inside the Winter Palace?"

"Because Grand Duke Michael called our offices early this morning, before the rioters cut the telephone lines. He asked me if there was an aircraft available at the airport to bring the imperial family to safety. I told him that no aircraft were scheduled in before the afternoon, but also told him that I would try to get a plane to come sooner. Unfortunately, I then lost the lines before I could call the airport, while we have been out of electricity since yesterday."

"Well, I will think about that while we are on our way. Let's get out of here."

Throttling up her engine, she flew her COLIBRI out of the courtyard and caught up with Louis, who was flying at a speed of 250 kilometers per hour, close to the maximum speed of his craft. While the pair of COLIBRIs flew towards Pulkovo Airport, Tasha thought furiously about the wisdom of rescuing or not the members of the imperial Romanov family. While helping the wife and children of the Czar would easily qualify as a simple humanitarian gesture towards persons at grave risk of being murdered, the political ramifications could end up being quite complicated. If a hard-line extreme left government took over in the long run in Russia, as history had recorded, then saving the Czar's family could be construed by that leftist government as a hostile act on the part of France, with possible negative long term repercussions. There was also the simple question about who was more worth saving, in view of the limited payload capacity of the COLIBRI. Was the fact that you were rich and had imperial blood in your veins make you more worthy of saving than, say, a young and courageous imperial guards officer

ready to sacrifice himself in the name of duty and loyalty? Or, what about the maids and servants of the imperial family? In Tasha's opinion, money and titles counted for nothing when time came to evaluate a person's worth. In fact, many members of the so-called high classes of this time period were in her opinion nothing more than snobbish social parasites who would have been incapable of accomplishing by themselves anything worth mentioning and who owed everything to inheritances or bloodlines. In the 27th Century, her opinion was like that of most other citizens of the United States of North America, where simple money could buy you many things...except true respect. In the future, she had a large number of business rivals that would have loved to grab her industrial and technological empire, but they at least respected her at a personal level, while those adversaries also had to work and fight hard to get to where they were. The U.S.N.A. may have been described as a 'dog eat dog' society, but at least the pack leaders there led by example, which in turn made them so much more capable and dangerous.

Once they had landed back on the roof of the international passenger terminal at Pulkovo Airfield, Tasha opened the door for her passengers and gave a number of urgent instructions to the travel office manager.

"Miss Francoeur, go with the others down to the passengers waiting lounge. Once there, tell Miss Clarkson that I am going back downtown to see if we could rescue the Romanov imperial family. You can't miss her: she is even taller than me and wears full battle armor and a big gun. Go!"

Francoeur didn't waste time arguing with her and left with the others at a near run, while Tasha went quickly to the second COLIBRI to speak with Louis, shouting over the din of the rotor.

"LOUIS, DON'T SHUT DOWN YOU ENGINE YET! THE IMPERIAL FAMILY IS STILL IN THE WINTER PALACE, MINUS THE CZAR. I WANT TO GO PICK THEM UP."

Louis in turn looked at her with some doubt visible on his face.

"IS THAT WISE? WE COULD END UP BEING SWAMPED BY PANICKY ARISTOCRATS AND GUARDS."

"TRUE, BUT I BELIEVE THAT IT IS WORTH THE RISKS: THE CHILDREN OF THE CZAR DON'T DESERVE TO BE ASSASSINATED."

"VERY WELL! I WILL FOLLOW YOU."

"THANK YOU, LOUIS!"

Tasha then ran back to her COLIBRI and sat at the controls. She was about to take off when she saw an Air France Blériot ATLANTIQUE land on the main runway, something that brought her much relief.

"At last! We will be able to save at least a few people here, after all."

She then made her COLIBRI jump in the sky and headed towards the imperial Winter Palace, Louis' craft close behind her.

14:23 (Saint-Petersburg Time)

Imperial Winter Palace, Saint-Petersburg

"We should have retreated into the Admiralty Building when we still could: it would have been much easier to defend than this palace."

Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich nodded his head at the declaration from Grand Duke Nicholas Nicholaevich, while Grand Duke Nicholas Michaelovich, a man who loathed military matters, listened on.

"True, but now we are trapped here, with those damn mutineers and Bolsheviks surrounding the palace. Thankfully, for some reason, those rebels are not pushing hard against us and seem to take their time."

"That's because they have the benefit of time and don't need to risk a bloody assault." Said Nicholas Michaelovich, a big man known for his outspokenness and critical mind. "They know that we won't be able to get any reinforcement, if any, before days or weeks. They just need to starve us into submission. Thank God that they didn't bring artillery guns to fire at the palace...yet. If they do, then all will be lost."

"You are unfortunately right, cousin Nicholas." Replied Nicholas Nicholaevich, a giant of a man measuring 196 centimeters who was both a competent military commander and a avid hunter. "When I think that my idiot of a cousin is thousands of kilometers away from here in the Urals, hunting while Russia is falling to pieces."

An imperial guards officer arrived at a run at that moment, cutting him off.

"YOUR HIGHNESS, TWO STRANGE PLANES JUST LANDED INSIDE THE CENTRAL COURTYARD OF THE PALACE. A MAN AND A WOMAN WERE INSIDE THOSE PLANES. THEY PRETEND TO BE FRENCH AND TO HAVE COME TO HELP."

On hearing that, Grand Duke Michael triumphantly pumped his fist.

"Yes! Air France has acted on my request for help to evacuate the imperial family. I called their nearby travel offices early this morning, just before the telephone lines were cut."

"Then, let's go see those Air France people." Ordered Nicholas Nicholaevich. "Captain, go tell the Tsarina to prepare herself and the imperial children for evacuation. Tell her to be quick about it and to keep their luggage to a strict minimum."

"Yes, Your Grace!" Said the young officer before leaving at a run. The three Russian grand dukes then walked quickly down the large hallways of the palace, to emerge two minutes later in the central courtyard. Grand Duke Michael smiled on seeing the markings on the two weird craft that now stood on the courtyard's pavement.

"They're Air France machines alright. We may yet be able to evacuate the Czar's children to safety. Let's go see those two French."

As they walked towards the nearest COLIBRI, a tall Eurasian woman wearing a winter coat, boots and hat walked to meet them halfway. Michael's smile turned into a grin when he recognized the woman.

"It's Tasha Lenoir, the founder and owner of Air France. I met her once during my period of exile in Europe, before the war."

Michael was about to address Tasha when the latter cut him off in an urgent tone.

"I am sorry if I may appear a bit rude right now, Grand Duke Michael, but we really must hurry. While approaching the palace from the air, we saw a column of mutineers heading towards the palace with four howitzers pulled by horses. This place is going to come under severe bombardment within one hour at the most. My two COLIBRIs are capable of carrying a total of 1,200 kilos of passengers and luggage. However, I came to save lives, not to save wardrobes or jewels, if you see what I mean."

"I understand and agree with your set of priorities, Miss Lenoir. An officer has already been sent by us to warn the Tsarina and her children to prepare to move out quickly."

"In fact, I am going to make sure that she understand correctly the message." Said Nicholas Michaelovich as he started to turn around to run away. "That will give me a good reason to scream at that old German bitch."

Nicholas Nicholaevich smiled in amusement on hearing that, then gave a friendly look at Tasha.

"I am Grand Duke Nicholas Nichoaevich, first cousin of the Czar. I am happy to see that France is again ready to help us, miss. Where will you fly the imperial family to?"

"First off, know that I came to help out of my own personal initiative. This is not an official government-sponsored rescue mission. In fact, my original goal was and still is to help evacuate the French citizens trapped in Saint-Petersburg by these riots. I came here only after learning that the imperial family was in this palace. As for your second question, they will be flown to Paris, where I will shelter the imperial family until the French government officially takes charge of them. Please understand that saving the Russian imperial family, even if it was made as a purely humanitarian gesture, may be controversial in France: the Czar is not exactly well-liked by the people of France. To be frank, I myself am not a fan of his rule."

Nicholas Nicholaevich nodded his head somberly at that.

"I can understand your point of view, Miss Lenoir. I myself tried many times to put some sense into the Czar's head, but he didn't listen to any advice except that from the Tsarina and from her damned mystic counselor, Rasputin. Now, we are all paying for his failed policies and poor rule. However, my cousin's children bear no fault in all this and deserve to be saved. We will be most grateful to you for saving them."

"Then know this, Grand Duke Nicholas: if the imperial family can restrain the quantity of luggage that it will carry out, then I may have enough payload capacity left to bring as well to safety another three or four persons, maybe five if there are children in the lot. I wish that I could save more people than that here, but unfortunately I won't have enough time to go back to the airport, drop the imperial family off and return here before those rebels start shooting with howitzers at the palace. So, choose those extra passengers wisely, Grand Duke. I would especially appreciate if an adult member of the Romanov dynasty could accompany the Czar's children to France, to support them and plea for their cause with the French government, and I am not talking about the Tsarina: she may be one of the biggest causes of all this present discontent in Russia."

"I like your frankness, Miss Lenoir: it is very refreshing compared to all those palace intrigues I have witnessed through the past years."

Nicholas Nicholaevich then turned to face Grand Duke Michael, staring into his eyes and exercising all of his considerable command authority.

"Michael, you are the younger brother of the Czar and also a decent man with an open mind who is well liked by the Russian people. You also happen to speak both

French and English fluently. You should go with your wife and children to Paris, along with the Czar's children. In fact, you should not only go: you will go to Paris! You may now be the last hope of the Romanovs to save the dynasty or, at the worst, to become an acceptable interlocutor with whoever will take power next in Russia. Go get your wife and kids, now!"

Grand Duke Michael, a quiet, good-natured man with liberal opinions, hesitated for a moment, then nodded his head before leaving at a run. Nicholas was somber when he faced Tasha again.

"The next few days and weeks may prove most painful to Russia, but I will endure them much better knowing that the imperial children are safe."

Tasha had to swallow hard before being able to reply to Nicholas.

"Grand Duke, you should have been the Czar, instead of Nicholas II. Russia would have been a better place then, for all."

"I am not sure about that, miss." Said Nicholas, smiling. "I am much better at hunting than at politics. Who is the man that came with you, by the way?"

"Louis Blériot, Your Grace."

The eyes of the 61 year-old, bearded aristocrat opened wide on hearing that.

"Really? The man who flew first across the English Channel? Then, I must go speak with him before you leave."

"I am sure that he will like to speak with you as well, Your Grace."

Grand Duke Nicholas Nicholaevich was still conversing with Louis Blériot when Grand Duke Nicholas Michaelovich returned to the central courtyard, escorting the four daughters of the Czar and four servants carrying large suitcases. Nicholas Nicholaevich looked with confusion at the four young grand duchesses, then threw an annoyed look at Nicholas Michaelovich.

"Where are the Tsarina and Tsarevich Alexei?"

Nicholas Michaelovich shrugged his shoulders in response.

"The hag refused to listen to reason, insisting that the Czar's army would show up to save her. She also said that those rebels would never dare hurt her and her children and that God would protect her. I tried in vain to convince her that she was condemning her children to death by not letting them flee but she just wouldn't listen to me and, especially, wouldn't let the young Tsarevich be flown out of Russia, away from

his father. I was finally able to have her accept to let at least her four daughters leave for safety.”

Nicholas Nicholaevich swallowed his frustration at this latest demonstration of dim-witted, illogical and superstitious thinking by the Tsarina. Tasha Lenoir had been right in describing her as being one of the prime reasons for the present discontent in Russia. Unfortunately, Czar Nicholas II was a weak-willed man of low intellect who had let his wife dominate and influence him, making him listen to a long series of charlatans and religious mystics who gave him and the Tsarina all kinds of bad advice. In fact, a number of members of the Romanov dynasty had conspired in the past to get rid of that disastrous Tsarina, who had also inflicted her strain of hemophilia to her only son and imperial heir Alexei, now a twelve year-old sick, fragile boy. Unfortunately, those attempts against the Tsarina had all failed.

“Well, we will at least be able to save the grand duchesses. I am pleased to see that the Tsarina showed some restraint about their volume of baggage.”

Those words made Nicholas Michaelovich grin with malice.

“Aaah, but you should have seen the train of servants loaded down with suitcases and travel chests that departed the imperial apartments with me and the grand duchesses. Once out of sight of the hag, I ordered all but those four servants to disappear with their loads. The only thing that I made sure we kept with us was this.”

He then showed to his cousin, Tasha and Louis a fairly large leather handbag.

“I have in this bag a reserve of diamonds, gems and jewels from the royal treasure, so that the grand duchesses can sustain themselves while in France.”

“A nice thought, Grand Duke, but I would have helped support them anyway.” Said Tasha. “I am after all a billionaire and the grand duchesses will be most welcome to stay at my residence of Buc, near Paris. Alright, lets load the grand duchesses and their bags as best we can in my craft. Mister Blériot’s craft will carry Grand Duke Michael and his family, plus any excess baggage left.”

“My nephew is going to France as well?” Asked a confused Nicholas to his namesake, who nodded his head.

“Yes! I agreed with Miss Lenoir that an adult member of the Romanov family should accompany the imperial children, in order to support them and plead their cause with the French government. Michael was obviously the best qualified for that role, so I sent him to go get his wife and two children.”

"A good idea, I must say. Alright, Your Highnesses, let's take place in this machine and listen to Miss Lenoir's instructions. She will fly you to Pulkovo Airport, where you will board a plane for France. You will soon be out of danger."

The four anxious young grand duchesses, ranging in age from sixteen to 21 years old, stepped inside Tasha's COLIBRI and took the seats designated to them, with their suitcases and the leather bag full of gems then stuffed around, under and over them. It still left three suitcases outside the COLIBRI after Tasha declared it filled to capacity. Thankfully, Grand Duke Michael soon arrived with his wife and two children, a small boy and a teenage girl, bringing only four suitcases with them. That allowed everything left to fit inside Louis' COLIBRI. Before Tasha and Louis could lift off, the two grand dukes who were staying behind kissed for the last time the hands of the four young women, tears in everybody's eyes.

"Goodbye, my fine ladies!" Said in a strangled voice Nicholas Nicholaevich. "May you live safely in France. Listen to Miss Lenoir and to Grand Duke Michael: they will be there to help and support you."

Nicholas then helped Tasha to close and secure the access door of her COLIBRI, then stepped back to let her take off safely. The two craft soon flew up, climbing high in the sky in order to avoid any rifle fire before taking up horizontal speed, heading east towards the airport. Both Nicholas waved a last goodbye then, with Nicholas Michaelovich speaking up.

"May God protect them and Mother Russia."

Despite the dramatic setting and danger of the moment, the novel experience of flying aboard a COLIBRI brought out a few excited exclamations from the four grand duchesses, Olga, Tatiana, Maria and Anastasia. Those exclamations however quickly turned into worried silence when the girls saw the masses of armed rebels surrounding the Winter Palace, then the swirling crowds of rioters and looters filling the streets of Saint-Petersburg.

"My God!" Exclaimed Grand Duchess Olga, the older of the four girls. "Our soldiers defending the Winter Palace will not be able to resist for long against such numbers."

Tasha gave a quick glance to Olga, twisting her head to look at the passenger seats behind her.

"You are unfortunately right, Your Highness."

"What will happen to Mama and Alexei?" Asked in turn Tatiana, the second eldest of the lot, who had always been close to her mother.

"Unfortunately, their fate is now in the hands of those rebels." Replied Tasha, unwilling to lie to the four girls. That plunged them into worried thoughts for the rest of the trip.

As Tasha had the airport in sight ahead of her, she received a radio call from Louis through her radio headset.

"Tasha, I see down below what appears to be a convoy of five trucks full of armed men. They are heading towards the airport and I don't think that they are coming with friendly intentions."

One look downward was enough to convince Tasha that Louis was right.

"The lead vehicle is flying a red flag, the sort favored by anarchists. I will warn Terry about them."

Tasha then switched to her implanted radio system, calling mentally Terry.

"Terry, this is Tasha. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you clearly, Tasha. Go ahead!"

"Then be advised that we have a welcome wagon convoy of five trucks full of armed men and flying a red flag. They are rolling along the main road between the city and the airport and are now about three kilometers short of the airport. Can you take care of them before they arrive at the airport?"

"No problem! The situation here is relatively calm, with the evacuation in progress. In view of the chaos reigning around, I believe that it will be fairly safe to use my top weapons and abilities, if you don't mind."

"Go right ahead, Terry: the important thing is that these men should not be allowed to interfere with our air evacuation. I am soon going to arrive back at the airport with passengers, out!"

Closing her mental radio channel, Tasha then started a gradual descent towards the international passengers air terminal building, heading for its flat roof and the COLIBRI hangars.

In the terminal building, Terry passed quickly the responsibility of keeping order in the passenger lounge to one of the armed Air France security officers who had arrived on the ATLANTIQUE, which was now nearly full. She then climbed to the roof, where

she powered the directional gravity propulsion system implanted in her body and cybernetic limbs, lifting off the roof and taking altitude while following the main road from the city. As she climbed up to an altitude of 1,300 meters, where she would be very hard to spot from the ground, Terry exchanged her 7mm assault rifle for her heavy plasma rifle, slinging her assault rifle while clipping a safety retaining strap between her plasma rifle and a hook on her armored suit. With that done, she switched her cybernetic right side eye to fire control mode, so that it would display the view from the electronic scope of her plasma rifle, which then showed her a greatly magnified view of the five incoming trucks. They were indeed full of armed men, with those armed men being no imperial soldiers. What she didn't see and couldn't even know was that one of the men in the front cab of the lead truck was a brutal thug and one of the leaders of the local 'Soviet'²² who would later get to be better known in history by the name of 'Stalin'. Switching her plasma rifle to maximum burst power, Terry carefully aimed her weapon at the first truck while hovering in the sky.

"Have a nice trip to Hell, guys." She said softly while pressing gradually the trigger.

The powerful energy discharge, its recoil thankfully cancelled by the rifle's counter-recoil directed gravity pad, shot out of the plasma rifle like a bolt of lightning, producing a similar, ear-splitting '**CRACK**'. The bolt of hot plasma energy struck squarely the first truck of the convoy and then expanded in milliseconds into a four meter radius ball of searing light that vaporized the truck and its occupants. The driver of the following truck, frozen with stupor at that sight and half blinded by the flash of light, took seconds to react properly and start braking. By then his truck was already rolling into the large crater created into the road by the plasma blast. The vehicle bounced brutally on the bottom of the crater, its bumper digging into the sub-surface gravel and dirt, projecting in every direction the men standing in its back. The stunned Bolsheviks did not have time to recover from the shock before another plasma ball vaporized them. The three remaining trucks didn't fare better and were vaporized in the next few seconds, along with their occupants. Terry then carefully surveyed the area for surviving Bolsheviks, while still hovering high in the sky. To her satisfaction, she found none.

"Super! I should use my plasma rifle more often."

²² Soviet : Term used among other things to designate an assembly of representatives chosen by the common Russian people.

In the two COLIBRIs, which were now close to the airport, the Russian passengers had seen and watched with awe and incomprehension the straight bolts of lightning that had rained on the trucks and had vaporized them.

"My God!" Exclaimed Grand Duchess Tatiana. "What was that?"

"That," answered Tasha, tongue in cheek, "was probably God administering some instant justice in this sad world."

If anything, the four grand duchesses swallowed at once that declaration and signed themselves, unable to imagine any other explanation. They were then silent until Tasha landed her craft on top of the terminal's roof and shut down the engine. She unlocked and opened the exit doors for the Russian girls and helped them get out before taking out their suitcases. Seeing the girls waiting and doing nothing while standing beside their suitcases, Tasha had to raise a bit her voice to wake them up to reality.

"Your Highnesses, you will not have servants available here to carry your bags for you. You better pick them up yourselves if you want to have spare clothes with you in Paris."

Tasha however did go to the help of young Anastasia, grabbing her two suitcases while giving her in exchange the leather bag full of gems.

"Here, Anastasia. You hold on to that while I carry your bags. We will go down into the air terminal as soon as the other COLIBRI has landed."

That didn't take long, with Tasha, Louis and the eight Russians, loaded with suitcases, then walking inside the roof access hut and going down to the level of the passengers waiting lounge. There, an Air France security officer wearing an armored vest and a Durex helmet and holding an ARC-1 assault rifle came to Tasha to report to her.

"Miss Lenoir, the ATLANTIQUE was filled and lifted off ten minutes ago, while the two CIGOGNEs we were expecting arrived and have started to be filled."

"Will there be enough seats available for all those who want to be evacuated?"

"Unfortunately not, miss. People kept arriving at the airport in a state of panic and we will need another sixty or so more seats to evacuate everybody. That includes our Air France staff that had been manning the company's offices and service counters of the airport. However, another ATLANTIQUE is said to be on the way and should arrive here in about forty minutes."

"Good! In the meantime, I will go bring my Russian companions here to my executive jet. If anything new happens, contact me immediately."

"Yes, Miss Lenoir!"

With her group of royals and Louis closely following her, Tasha went to the hangar gate containing her executive jet and proudly showed the aircraft to the Russians.

"Your Highnesses, here is the plane that will fly you to Paris: my personal Blériot-Kruger PÉGASE executive jet."

"It looks magnificent, Miss Lenoir." Said Grand Duke Michael while admiring the fine lines of the aircraft. "It also appears to be a fast plane. What is its top speed, if I may ask?"

"You may, Your Grace: the top speed of the PÉGASE is 2,400 kilometers per hour, but it more often flies at its more economic supersonic cruise speed of 1,500 kilometers per hour. We will be in Paris in less than two hours."

The six adult Russians opened their eyes wide on hearing those numbers, with Grand Duke Michael then eyeing the aircraft with renewed admiration.

"What an incredible feat of science and engineering. When I think that planes didn't even exist only two decades ago. I myself saw my first plane only in 1912, when I went to watch an aviation show in Reims while I lived in exile in France. What I saw then was downright primitive compared to this plane. How did you manage to advance your technology so quickly?"

"By thinking outside of the box. Well, enough about my plane. Let's get all of you and your luggage inside."

Climbing first the access ladder integrated to the forward side fuselage door of the PÉGASE, Tasha showed to the Russians where to store their suitcases and bags before telling them to sit in the well padded seats of the cabin. She then presented to them a smiling young woman in Air France uniform.

"Your Highnesses, may I present you Miss Nadia Leibovitch, our air hostess? If you are hungry or thirsty, just ask her and she will serve you food and drinks before our departure."

"We are not leaving right now, Miss Lenoir?" Asked Grand Duchess Olga, becoming worried again.

"No! I want to make sure first that all the Air France personnel and all the French and foreign citizens presently in the airport are safely evacuated. Don't worry about our

security while on the ground: I have an Air France security team deployed to defend us. We should be able to take off in about one hour. In the meantime, relax and sustain yourselves.”

Tasha next went to the cockpit, where she found Louis Blériot reviewing his instruments and doing a pre-flight check.

“Louis, I am going out to the passenger lounge to monitor the situation from there and speak with Terry. I will warn you by radio if any new threat shows up.”

“Understodd, Tasha.”

Leaving the executive jet, Tasha returned to the passenger lounge, in time to greet Terry, back from her aerial jaunt. Her bodyguard smiled to her after lifting open the armored Durex faceplate of her helmet and spoke to her in Americanish.

“All five trucks have been vaporized. I took the time to do a short patrol around the airport but saw no other imminent threat to it. The only thing I saw was three civilian cars heading our way, loaded with families: they probably are more would-be refugees intent on flying out. They should be here in about ten minutes.”

“Very well! We are expecting another ATLANTIQUE to arrive in about thirty minutes now: those people will be able to join the others still waiting in this lounge. Once the ATLANTIQUE will be loaded and out of its gate, we will take off behind it after making sure that none of our people was left behind.”

“Excellent! I must say that things went rather more smoothly than I feared at first.”

“Well, things would not be smooth right now if those five trucks full of armed Bolsheviks would have reached the airport. I owe you a big one on that.”

“Bof! Just doing my job.”

“But doing it in exemplary fashion, Terry.”

Tasha then went to a window giving a view of the road linking the airport with the city, looking for the three cars spotted by Terry. She saw three pairs of headlights appear at a bend of the road about nine minutes later. The drivers of the cars seemed to be in a hurry, something that Tasha could understand too well. Making sure first that the stun pistol in her coat pocket was easily accessible, Tasha then went to the main entrance door of the air terminal to wait for the newcomers. She found two of her Air France security officers, armed with ARC-1 assault rifles, watching that entrance.

"Doing a good job, guys. I was just advised that three cars with families inside them are soon going to arrive. Be ready, just in case, but hold your fire unless I tell you otherwise: I will greet them outside the doors."

"We will cover you discreetly, Miss Lenoir."

The three cars arrived a few minutes later and parked in front of the main entrance, with their drivers then starting to unload numerous suitcases and bags from the trunks of their vehicles, while three separate groups of mostly women and children stepped out of the cars. It was now obvious to Tasha that the newcomers were no threat, so she zipped close her winter coat and went out to meet them near the cars, smiling to them and speaking in French at first.

"Hello! Could you identify yourselves, please?"

One of the two men in the group of sixteen newcomers looked at her with a mix of irritation and suspicion, replying in a French tainted with a strong British accent.

"And who are you to ask this?"

Tasha didn't get angry over his tone, understanding full well how tense and nervous the man could be.

"Tasha Lenoir, owner of Air France and the person in charge of the present evacuation operation. Now, identify yourself, mister, if you want to board one of my planes."

The man quickly dropped his aggressive tone on hearing that and answered Tasha in a much more polite voice.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Miss Lenoir. I am Steven Douglas, Second Consul at the British embassy in Saint-Petersburg. I am escorting the wives and children of our diplomatic staff. Sir George ordered them evacuated out of Russia in view of the present perilous security situation. The wife and two children of the Italian Ambassador also traveled with us. Are there planes with seats still available at this airport, miss?"

"An airliner is due to land soon and will have enough seats for everybody presently waiting in the airport. Are your drivers also going to fly out?"

"Uh, no, miss: they have orders to return to the embassy after dropping us off at the airport. Don't worry about them: they possess diplomatic passports."

"I am afraid that diplomatic papers won't count for much today for the mutineers and rioters swirling around downtown Saint-Petersburg, Mister Douglas. However, if

they have orders from your ambassador, then I can only wish them luck. Please follow me inside.”

The two men, five women and nine children grabbed their bags and walked inside with her, with Tasha helping the wife of the Italian ambassador by carrying two of her suitcases, allowing the woman to carry a small girl in her arms. Steven Douglas nodded his head in approval when he saw the two armed Air France security officers guarding the entrance.

“I see that you came to Saint-Petersburg well prepared, Miss Lenoir. Be assured that Great-Britain will thank you for your providential help.”

“Saving innocent lives is always worth the maximum effort possible, Mister Douglas. While the British members of your group will be able to take place in the ATLANTIQUE jet liner that is about to arrive, I will take the family of the Italian ambassador with me on my private jet, in which I had still four seats available. Once at the passengers waiting lounge, I will make sure that your luggage will be added to those already scheduled to be loaded in my ATLANTIQUE.”

One of the British women of the group, who was in her late twenties, smiled on hearing her words.

“Great! I often dreamed of traveling in one of your new jet aircraft. Unfortunately, the regular service between London and Saint-Petersburg is done with a propeller transport aircraft.”

“Then, you should enjoy the coming flight, miss, even in the present circumstances.”

“You mean, especially in the present circumstances, miss?”

Tasha briefly laughed at that.

“Quite right, miss.”

Four minutes later, with the British citizens now inside the passengers waiting lounge, Tasha led the wife and children of the Italian ambassador to the hangar-gate occupied by her executive jet. The overweight woman in her thirties opened her eyes wide with admiration when she saw the sleek aircraft parked inside the hangar.

“Mama mia! This aircraft is truly beautiful.”

“Thank you, Madam Reggiani. Be advised that you will be traveling with a few other important passengers. Let’s climb aboard and I will do the presentations.”

Still carrying the woman's two bags, Tasha climbed the access ladder integrated into the fuselage door and entered the long, rather narrow cabin, which outer diameter varied in order to respect the aerodynamic principle called 'Area Rule', which played an important role in reducing drag at transonic and supersonic speeds. Madam Reggiani's mouth opened wide from shock when she saw and recognized the other passengers already inside the aircraft.

"Dear Mary! The four Grand Duchesses and the Grand Duke Michael? They were able to escape the Winter Palace?"

"Yes, they did, Madam Reggiani." Answered Tasha, choosing not to talk about her part in that. You may take three of the last four rear seats while I store away your bags."

Letting Nadia Leibovitch make the Italian family comfortable by proposing them food and drinks, Tasha stored away the Reggianis' bags before going to the cockpit to ask a question to Louis.

"Do you have an updated timing for the arrival of our last ATLANTIQUE, Louis?"

"Yes! It just called to say that they are on final approach to Pulkovo."

"Excellent! I am going out for a few minutes, to speak with our local airport employees before we leave. I won't be long."

Louis nodded his head at that, guessing what she wanted to do. Tasha had always proved to be very supportive and caring about her employees, be they of the lowest levels. In that she had been a severe contrast to the accepted norm among employers in France when she had arrived with her three friends in 1912. Many big industrialists and bosses had derided at first her inordinate care and compassion for her employees, but they soon enough had changed their tune as their best employees deserted them to go work for Tasha, who now enjoyed the solid loyalty and friendship of her workers. That loyalty and employees content had in turn translated into high productivity and quality work at her various manufacturing plants and companies, helping Tasha turn up nice profits, much of which were then reinvested into her plants and employees. By all rights and accepted norms, Tasha could have lived a much more luxurious standard of living than the one she followed, but Louis knew that Tasha was no vain or arrogant snob.

Going first to the small safe located in the cockpit section and opening it, Tasha took out of it a leather carry-on bag and slung its transport strap across her chest before

walking out of her executive jet. Once in the hangar, she used the gateway connecting it to the air terminal. However, instead of going to the passengers waiting lounge, she went to the baggage handling section, next to the tarmac, where she encountered half a dozen Russian local employees of Air France ready to load the baggage of the waiting passengers aboard the ATLANTIQUE as soon as the plane would stop inside its hangar-gate. Pointing the man who seemed to be the senior baggage handler, she shouted a question in Russian at him.

“YOU! ARE THERE MORE RUSSIAN EMPLOYEES OUT ON THE TARMAC OR IN THE HANGAR-GATE?”

“Uh, yes miss! One man is outside, standing ready to guide the plane on the tarmac, while four more men are inside the hangar-gate, waiting to put in place the mobile access ladder and the luggage rolling carpet.”

“Good! I will go see them after this. All of you, quickly assemble around me, please!”

The Russians, who all knew who she was from previous visits by her to Saint-Petersburg, promptly obeyed her. With seven Russian men now forming a half-circle in front of her, Tasha briefly looked at each man while giving them a friendly smile.

“First, thank you for your loyalty and for staying at your posts in such difficult and dangerous times. You all may have understood already that Air France will have to close at least temporarily its offices and counters here in Pulkovo and Saint-Petersburg. Be assured that I will return to reoccupy them as soon as I am reassured that Air France can return here in reasonably safe conditions. However, it is presently impossible to forecast how long that could take...if ever. If and when we return, then you will be welcomed to take back your jobs. Unfortunately, this may mean some difficult weeks and months with no paying jobs for you until the airport can reopen. In view of this, I would like to give to each of you a cash bonus that will help sustain your families for a while. However, please don't brag about that and don't mention it to others: it may attract jealous reactions or even accusations of colluding with foreigners. You will make me happy if you would accept this bonus.”

Tasha then opened her bag and handed to each of the happy Russian men a large, rolled bundle of Ruble banknotes. Next, she firmly shook the hand of each of her employees while hugging them.

"Good luck to you all during these hard times, my friends. Once all my planes will have left, then take one of the airport trucks and leave to return to your homes. I will now go see the others outside to give them their bonuses. May God be with you."

"And may God be with you, Miss Lenoir." Said the senior baggage handler, who now had tears in his eyes. "You were the best boss we ever had."

"And I count on staying your boss in the future. Goodbye!"

The seven Russians watched her run out of the baggage handling area, then were reminded of the work left to be done by their supervisor.

"Alright men: Let's get ready to bring those baggage chariots to Hangar-gate Two."

After talking to the local employees in the hangar and on the tarmac, Tasha then returned inside the terminal, where she also gave cash bonuses to the Russian employees who helped man the Air France counters and offices, many of whom were young women. The goodbyes they exchanged were quite emotional, with many of the women crying as Tasha left. The latter then did a last inspection tour of the terminal with Terry Clarkson, to make sure that no French or foreign citizen was left behind. Thankfully, there were no signs yet of more Bolsheviks coming to the airport, something that allowed the Blériot-Kruger ATLANTIQUE to leave safely its gate and roll towards the main runway. The eight Russians and three Italians waiting aboard her executive jet stiffened with fear at first when Terry climbed aboard behind Tasha, still wearing her armored battle suit and holding her assault rifle. That fear however changed to surprise and disbelief when Terry took off her helmet, showing her face to the passengers.

"A black woman?!" Exclaimed young Grand Duchess Anastasia. Tasha replied to that with a wide smile while patting Terry's back.

"Yes: a black woman. Your Highnesses, I present you Miss Terry Clarkson, who also happens to be both my personal bodyguard and a close friend. We are now ready to leave. Please buckle up your seat belts while Miss Leibovitch secures the plates and glasses that you used."

Next going to the access door of the plane, Tasha stuck her head out long enough to warn her Russian ground crew.

"We are going to start our engines. Push away your equipment and open the exit door of the hangar. I will have to ask you to close back the hangar door once we are out. Then, take a truck and return home: don't wait for the rebels to show up. If they

stop you on your way to the city, just say that I closed the airport and summarily fired all of you. Look pitiful then! Good luck, men!”

“May the Virgin Mary watch over you, Miss Lenoir.” Said one of the Russians while waving goodbye to her. Two men disconnected the auxiliary power cable attached to the aircraft and rolled it back into its wall receptacle, while the other Russians walked away clear of the engines. The two turbofan engines then started in a long, loud whine, with the aircraft rolling forward as soon as the hangar door was fully opened. The door was closed back once the PÉGASE was out, with the Russians then running out by a side door towards a truck parked nearby, in a hurry to leave the airport before the rebels could arrive.

The takeoff, made at maximum power, was a thrilling experience for the passengers of the PÉGASE, despite the somber circumstances of their departure from Russia. The executive jet then quickly climbed to its cruise altitude, where it caught up with the ATLANTIQUE that had taken off ahead. The two jet aircraft formed up in echelon formation, with the ATLANTIQUE leading the PÉGASE as they headed towards Paris. Switching to the radio channel used by the Air France offices in Le Bourget Airport, Tasha spoke calmly but firmly in her microphone.

“Air France Le Bourget, this is Air France 001. Please pass the urgent following message to the offices of the Foreign Affairs Minister: The four daughters of Czar Nicholas II and Grand Duke Michael are aboard my plane, heading to Paris. I also have aboard diplomatic dependents from both the British and Italian embassies in Saint-Petersburg. Saint-Petersburg was in a state of chaos, with the imperial Winter Palace under armed siege. Please repeat and confirm reception of my message, over.”

Thankfully, the radio operator in Le Bourget was on the ball and correctly repeated her information, promising to pass the message to the minister at once. Tasha then went back in the cabin to see how her passengers were faring. She felt bad on seeing Grand Duchesses Tatiana and Anastasia crying in each other's arms, but there was little Tasha could do to console them: the four imperial girls were probably going to spend the rest of their days in exile outside of Russia. As for what was going to happen to the Czar, his wife, son and his loyal followers, the future looked grim indeed for them.

11:46 (Paris Time)

Thursday, March 14, 1918

Tasha's research complex, Aéro-Parc Blériot

Buc, southwest of Paris

Tasha was busy writing down notes on the results of her latest samples tests in the chemical lab of her scientific research complex at the Aéro-Parc Blériot, when the noise of a door opening made her look up. She frowned a bit when she saw that her visitor was Brigadier General Pierre Marigny, the head of the Deuxième Bureau, the French Secret Services: his infrequent visits tended to bring bad news. The guarded expression on Marigny's face confirmed Tasha's first impression, who let him approach her work bench before greeting him.

"Good morning, General Marigny. What brings you here today?"

"Classified information meant solely for your ears, Miss Lenoir. I just got a report from one of my agents who is part of the French embassy's staff in Saint-Petersburg: Tsarina Alexandra and her son Alexei have been discreetly murdered by the Bolsheviks. Also discreetly killed are both of the Grand Dukes Nicholas as well as a number of other members of the Romanov extended imperial family. It seems that the Bolsheviks, who have now grabbed exclusive power in Saint-Petersburg, have decided to eliminate all possibilities of a return of the Romanovs on the imperial throne."

Even though Tasha had expected such an outcome all along, the news still struck her hard.

"By the stars! What about Czar Nicholas?"

"He is still in the Urals, at his hunting lodge, surrounded by his remaining followers. The word is that the grand dukes that are with him are now trying to mobilize the military units still loyal to the crown, in order to counter-attack the Bolsheviks and crush their revolution. However, the word is that mutinies in the army and navy are extensive and that few military units are ready to support the Czar's cause. In truth, Czar Nicholas is too reviled to have much of a chance of regaining the support of the army, as most of the conscript soldiers have either mutinied or deserted. I forecast that a civil war will follow the revolution in Russia and that it will be long, bloody and indecisive at first, but that it will eventually be lost by the Czar."

"And what will France do if the Czar asks for asylum here?"

"Then, I am afraid that we will say 'no' to him. Please understand that Czar Nicholas is not a popular man in France. Your own employees would probably boo him if he even came to visit one of your manufacturing plants and I suspect that you would join in the booing yourself."

"That is correct, General." Replied Tasha with a caustic smile. "The man himself and his wife attracted all those calamities on his family and reign. Do the four grand duchesses and Grand Duke Michael know about the deaths of the Tsarina and of their brother?"

"Not yet! This will undoubtedly be a very delicate matter to deal with and I was thinking about briefing first Grand Duke Michael, who could then pass the sad news to the grand duchesses."

Tasha nodded her head after a moment of reflection.

"I think that this would be the smartest and most gentle way to pass the news to those four girls, General. I am doing my best to make them feel at home at my residence, but they make for a quite depressed lot these days. May I ask what will be the official stance of France on that Russian revolution and civil war?"

"Well, to say that we are presently walking on eggs would be a gross understatement, Miss Lenoir. Officiously, and knowing what you revealed to us about the history you knew of this Russian revolution and what would follow, we wouldn't mind seeing those murderous Bolsheviks defeated by the forces of the Czar, but that is an improbable prospect at best. For the time being, France will treat this Russian crisis with what I would call 'benign neglect' and will let things follow their course. Once the situation will have stabilized, then we will reassess the situation. As for your Air France links to Russia, I would strongly urge you not to attempt to reopen your airports there, unless the new rulers of Russia come to you and ask you to resume air service. Be careful if that happens, though: my agents all say that the Bolsheviks are unprincipled bastards whose word cannot be relied upon. This business of secret executions is in fact a perfect example of their duplicity and ruthlessness. We are not even sure that the various Bolshevik leaders will not end up killing each other for their share of the power."

"That is a very possible outcome, General. I will keep your advice in mind. Well, it is nearly noon now. How about if you come to my residence for lunch? That will give you at the same time an opportunity to speak quietly with Grand Duke Michael and the four grand duchesses."

"That sounds like a good idea, Miss Lenoir."

Getting up from her high stool, Tasha then went to fetch her winter coat before leaving her lab with Marigny, her heart heavy: announcing bad news like this to four young, charming and intelligent women was not her idea of fun.

CHAPTER 29 – MACHINERY OF WAR

10:32 (Washington Time)

Wednesday, October 6, 1920

Offices of the Second Division of the U.S. Army General Staff

U.S. Army headquarters, Washington, D.C.

U.S.A.

Brigadier-General Georges Armstrong, head of the Second Division (Military Intelligence) of the U.S. Army, got up from behind his desk to greet the junior officer that his deputy, Colonel Frank Reeves, introduced into his office.

“Aaah, my good Captain Hyatt! How nice to see you back from France. So, how did your mission go?”

Joseph Hyatt saluted Armstrong before answering his superior. He would have appeared to European military officers to be quite old for his low rank, him being in his late thirties, but his case was quite common in the U.S. Army. The Army had been afflicted for decades with very slow turnover in senior ranks that bottled up advancement in the more junior ranks and by the fact that promotions were still based nearly solely on seniority rather than merit.

“Quite well, sir, but what I saw in France could alarm quite a few people here in Washington and add to the pile of questions about what the hell is happening there.”

“Are you saying that you saw something that could threaten the United States, Captain?”

“Threaten physically our country? No, sir! However, we may be about to become even more irrelevant than before in terms of true military power. I have a number of rolls of films that will need to be developed first before I could properly brief you and our specialists, but the gist of it is that the French Army is building up a very impressive, ultra-modern arsenal of completely new weapons and equipment, some of which I can barely comprehend the nature and purpose.”

Armstrong, an ordnance engineer by trade, narrowed his eyes as he stared at his field agent.

“Completely new weapons and equipment?”

“Yes, General! And you may not be surprised to learn that much of them are apparently connected to Buc and the Lenoir Industries, near Paris.”

“I see!” Said the Army G2²³, frowning. The more he heard about Buc, Blériot Aviation and the Lenoir Industries Consortium, the more questions he ended having about them in his mind. “Very well! Colonel Reeves, have those films developed at once. Captain, you will go start writing a full report on what you saw while our technicians develop your photos. We will reconvene here once your report and the photos will be ready.”

“Yes, General!” Replied both Reeves and Hyatt, who saluted Armstrong before leaving his office. The Army G2 then sat back slowly, preoccupied. Many disturbing, anomalous things had been happening in Europe in the last six years, all centered on France, Blériot Aviation and this Lenoir Industries Consortium. Those things, especially the crushing defeat at sea administered to the Royal Navy three years ago by a combined Franco-Japanese fleet, should have awakened leaders in Washington to the fact that France was steadily and gradually becoming a World-dominating military powerhouse. However, despite repeated events worthy of note and the warnings from him, the Army leaders still refused to accept the notion that the United States’ military was becoming a third rate force, with poor equipment, inadequate training, outdated military doctrines and geriatric senior leadership. Even the vaunted U.S. Navy, which claimed to be next only to the Royal Navy, was by now no match for the French Navy and, especially, for the deadly French naval aviation. Armstrong’s warnings had fallen mostly into deaf ears, with Army commanders dismissing them as being too alarmist and with Washington politicians refusing to spend extra money on military budgets to correct at least the worst deficiencies in the army.

At three fifteen in the afternoon, Reeves and Hyatt returned into Armstrong’s office with a stack of photo prints and three copies of the report just completed by Hyatt, with the captain then jumping at once to the meat of the matter.

“Well, sir, the rumors about new French weapons entering service or being tested were correct. We already knew about the new rifles and submachine guns that have been adopted by the French Army and by the French naval infantry, but what I saw is of much more consequence. First off, the Lenoir Industries Consortium has opened a

²³ G2 : Designation for the military intelligence branch of the U.S. Army.

completely new industrial plant next to the Kruger automobile plant in Suresnes. That new plant is named 'Atelier de Développement Mécanique Kruger-Clarkson', or 'ADM Kruger-Clarkson' in short, which translates in English into 'Kruger-Clarkson Mechanical Development Workshop'. That plant is not very big and seems devoted to the design and building in low numbers of prototypes of new military vehicles. The photos you now see are of the various military vehicles produced at that plant and then sent by rail for testing to a French Army base near Tarbes, close to the Spanish border. Unfortunately, that base in Tarbes is heavily guarded and I was not able to enter it. To get back to these new vehicles, I saw in Suresnes a total of seven different new vehicles, four of them wheeled ones and three others with something I never saw before. Here are the photos of the most intriguing model, one with what I would call for the moment a kind of steel ribbon surrounding steel wheels."

Armstrong, like Reeves, examined carefully the seven pictures showing an intimidating vehicle, which mounted a large turret armed with a medium caliber gun, only to scratch his head in confusion.

"This is indeed a completely new concept, Captain. I never saw anything like this before, anywhere. By the looks of it, I would say that its body is armored and probably proof against small arms fire and small caliber artillery guns. It also looks like a quite heavy vehicle. Did you see it move around?"

Hyatt nodded his head slowly, his face somber.

"I did, sir, and I must say that this is one scary beast if I ever saw one. It is heavy, as the ground shook when it rolled out of the mechanical plant to get loaded onto a rail car. It was also surprisingly speedy and, by the engine's noise, appears to have plenty of power. Those steel ribbons it rolls on appear to be made of short sections of steel plates connected by pins, with a pair of large wheels with teeth engaging the ribbons and making them turn. The vehicle changes direction by varying the rolling speed of its two steel ribbons and it could even pivot on the spot, with its ribbons turning in opposite directions."

"What about that medium gun sticking out of the front of that turret? What caliber is it?"

"I cannot say for sure, General, but it is around three or four inches in caliber. There is also a machine gun visible, sticking out of a ball mount in the front hull."

"Damn! If our soldiers ever faced that beast on a battlefield, there would be little they could do about it."

"I suspect that most would break up and run on seeing that beast come at them, General." Said Reeves, making Armstrong nod his head reluctantly.

"I hate to say this, but I think that you are right, Colonel. This thing could be a real game-changer on a battlefield. The question is: will the French adopt it into service and, if yes, in what kind of quantities? Unfortunately, we may not have an answer to those questions for a while. Okay, what else do we have here, Captain Hyatt?"

"Two other armored vehicles rolling on steel ribbons and what looks like a armored wheeled vehicle family, sir. The two armored vehicles with steel ribbons are quite voluminous and are probably less protected than the gun model. They also look a bit like boats, with sharp bows. They even have propellers at the back, which would make them in my opinion amphibious vehicles."

"Armored, amphibious vehicles? Many would have a hard time believing that such things are even possible."

"General, I don't believe that the French would have put propellers on these machines just for the fun of it. The why of making such machines could be to equip the French naval infantry units with amphibious combat vehicles. Wouldn't our own Marines like to have the same kind of machines?"

"Hum, you are probably right. But one of those amphibious vehicles looks a bit different from the other. It carries four big steel boxes side by side on its roof, but I can't figure out their use."

"Uh, I believe that I see some sort of hinges linking those boxes, General." Said Reeves after examining closely one of the pictures. Armstrong and Hyatt looked as well at that picture and saw the hinges as well, but just couldn't figure out what they were for. In contrast, the family of eight-wheeled armored vehicles was much easier to understand, their design making their roles more obvious.

"Hum, an armored troop carrier, a mobile artillery gun, a mobile heavy rocket launcher and a heavy cargo truck. They all look quite formidable, I must say." Said Armstrong. "If the French Army decides to adopt them in significant numbers, then these vehicles would greatly increase its tactical mobility in all kinds of terrains. One question for you, Captain: this ADM Kruger-Clarkson, where does the name 'Clarkson' comes from? I already can figure that 'Kruger' comes from that genius female engineer who works for Blériot, but Clarkson?"

Hyatt's expression was most serious as he answered his general.

“Sir, Miss Tasha Lenoir, whom we all know about already, came to France in 1912 with three other young women: Johanna Kruger, Pham Ti Hien and Terry Clarkson, the latter being her personal bodyguard. This Clarkson, a tall black woman in her late twenties, is said to be an expert shooter and a dangerous fighter who knows a lot about weapons and combat. I believe that she has allied her knowledge of weapons to the mechanical genius of Johanna Kruger in order to produce new equipment and weapons for the French Army.”

“Tasha Lenoir... Her again!” Said slowly Armstrong, thoughtful. “What you just said makes a lot of sense, Captain. Given a few more years, she and her female friends will completely transform and modernize the French Army and Air Force into near unbeatable forces.”

“General, I believe that they are doing much more than that already.” Said Hyatt. “Their innovations and influence now permeate much of France. Look at what you can now find in France and that we still don’t have in the United States: a commercial airline with planes able to reach anywhere in the World in record times and in comfort and safety; networks of commercial broadcasting radio stations covering the French national territory and reaching even the farthest French overseas colonies, carrying news, music, live descriptions of sports events, live political and social discussions and more; cheap but high performance cars and trucks for all and, finally but not least, revolutionary new work conditions and social measures pioneered by Miss Lenoir in her plants that are taking hold gradually in the rest of France. I may be exaggerating a bit here, but it is as if Miss Lenoir and her associates have taken on themselves to turn France into a beacon of progress and modernity. To top it all, these women seem to enjoy a lot of political support from high up in France.”

“And why wouldn’t they?” Replied Reeves. “France’s economy is positively booming, with its export-import balance enjoying a significant export surplus. It won nearly by itself and in record time a war that many had predicted would have ended with a German victory. It has the best aircraft in the World, by a long shot, and holds a near monopoly on intercontinental air travel. All that because of Miss Lenoir and her associates. So, what is Washington waiting for to find out more about these women and their secrets?”

Those words made Armstrong sigh in frustration.

“Something has already been tried, Reeves, but the federal agents who went to France were caught, beaten up and then expelled by the French secret services, who

are said to be closely protecting those women. The French government is clearly aware of the importance of these women and is providing them its protection and support. Unless we want to risk war with France, then we cannot do much about those women. Unfortunately for us, doing nothing to them is not saving us from being blacklisted by them: Miss Lenoir is said to be a rabid anti-racist who abhors our segregation laws.”

Colonel Reeves let out his frustration on hearing that and banged his fist on his general's work desk.

“Who the hell does this nigger-loving communist think that she is? This is our country and we will run it the way we decide!”

Joseph Hyatt, who had a number of good friends who were negroes, nearly said something then, but held his tongue.

18:15 (Washington Time)

Monday, February 6, 1922

Officers' mess, U.S. Navy headquarters

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

“Well, things could have been worse for us, James.” Said Navy Captain Paul Kearsage as he sat down with his friend and colleague at a table of the officers' mess. Navy Captain James Meredith made a pinched smile before replying.

“Yes, they could have, but weren't you surprised by how weakly the French disputed their allocations in capital ships and insisted instead on getting as much cruiser tonnage as they could get? You don't win sea battles with only cruisers, right? So, why concentrate on cruisers?”

“Maybe because they still have a glut of battleships and battlecruisers in their fleet, thanks to the ships they grabbed from the Germans in 1915? Then, those German battleships and battlecruisers were among the most modern and powerful in the World and they still are considered good fighting ships, especially with those super-secret 'radars' that were retrofitted to them afterwards. Why bankrupt your military budgets to build something that you already have plenty of? Hell, we proposed this international naval armament limitation treaty conference mostly to avoid ending ourselves into a ruinous warship-building race with other naval powers.”

"True! Still, the choice of priorities by the French really baffled me, Paul. I can understand why they wanted as much aircraft carrier tonnage as they could get, in view of how powerful and effective their naval aviation is, but cruisers?"

"Hey, they have lots of faraway overseas colonies and territories to defend, especially in Asia and the Pacific. Cruisers are especially good at that kind of job, while costing a lot less to build than battleships and battlecruisers. Think about places like Indochina, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, the Maldives and the Reunion in the Indian Ocean, their colonies in West Africa and in the Caribbean Basin. They have about as much overseas territories to defend as the British do, if you discount India."

"Hum, you may be right after all."

The arrival of a black steward bringing menus to their table interrupted their conversation for a moment, time for them to choose and then order their supper. As the steward was walking away, James Meredith saw a senior officer he knew well and signaled him to come and see him. That officer, a commander from the Signals Branch, did change direction and stopped beside their table, where Meredith shook hands with him.

"Why don't you have supper with us, Jason? I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Why not?" Replied Commander Jason Huntley before sitting down at one of the still empty chairs of the table. Meredith waited until Huntley had ordered his supper, then spoke to him in a low voice, so that the officers at the nearby tables could not hear him, forcing his friend Paul Kearsage to bend sideways to better listen.

"Has your crypto team been able to break the French codes yet? We were wondering here about why the French seemed to put more importance on their allotted cruiser tonnage than on their battleship tonnage."

Huntley couldn't help frown at being asked about such a sensitive matter in a public place like this. His work at the Cypher Bureau, also known as the 'Black Chamber', was highly classified and involved the deciphering of foreign government coded communications. He however had full confidence in both Meredith and Kearsage and answered in an equally low voice.

"No! We have been able to break everybody else's codes but the French code is proving to be impossible to break. We are literally pulling our hair out trying to decipher French messages."

That quite surprised Meredith, who then insisted.

"Really? I was expecting the Japanese messages to be hardest to decipher, in view of their different writing system."

"Sorry, but it doesn't exactly work that way, James. As for the French codes, they seem to be using some kind of totally random encryption key. We can't even understand the basic premise of that encryption key. Captain Yardley has all but given up on figuring it out. So, you really don't know why the French attach so much importance to their allotted cruiser tonnage? Could it be that they adopted a new naval doctrine that puts the emphasis on a numerous cruiser fleet rather than a limited force of battleships?"

Meredith and Kearsage exchanged a glance then before the former replied to Huntley.

"Hell, that could be as good an explanation as anything, I suppose. Still, that will mystify more than a few of our admirals."

"Our admirals are on the most part old fossils with little imagination who should retire and make place for younger, more competent blood." Spat out in response the cipher officer, making his two friends nod their heads in approval.

CHAPTER 30 – A NEW SHIP IN THE FLEET

07:20 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, May 15, 1923

French naval base of Toulon (east of Marseilles)

Southern coast of France, Mediterranean Sea

“All the mooring cables have been cast off, Captain.”

“Thank you, Mister Bolduc.”

Captain Jean Laborde took the time to visually check himself that the mooring cables had effectively been cast off, going out on the open bridge wing of his brand new aviation cruiser, LE REDOUTABLE, to do so. As the captain, he would be held responsible for anything that would happen on his new ship, even if he was sleeping at the time. That was an old naval custom that went hand in hand with the absolute authority a captain held on his ship and crew. Seeing that all the lines had been effectively untied from the quay at which his ship had been attached, Laborde shouted orders to the bridge duty officer.

“MAIN ENGINES AT IDLE POWER! PORT SIDE BOW AND STERN THRUSTERS AT TWO THIRDS POWER! TAKE US AWAY FROM THE QUAY!”

The senior petty officer manning the engines remote control station on the bridge pushed forward two of the handles on his large console, making the bow and stern maneuvering thrusters on the underwater portion of the port side hull churn water, creating thrust that slowly made the cruiser take some distance from the quay. That remote engine control system, along with the turbo-electric drive propulsion that allowed it, was a first for a French-designed ship and was still rare around the World, the United States being the only other country to use turbo-electric drive propulsion in a few of its ships. However, LE REDOUTABLE had something else as well that was completely revolutionary...and highly secret: the use of gas turbines rather than conventional water boilers and steam turbines. The six Kruger gas turbines of the cruiser, each producing 15,000 kilowatts of power, were extremely compact and light compared to the traditional arrangement of water boilers coupled to steam turbines. They also burned kerosene, a distillate fuel, instead of coal or thick bunker oil, eliminating a lot of filth from the traditional job of navy stocker. Those six turbines were in turn connected via reduction

gears to six electric turbo-generators. The electrical power produced was then sent to the electric motors connected to the four propeller shafts of the ship, with a total propulsive power of 120,700 shaft horsepower. This made possible a highly flexible propulsion system design and also cut in more than half the length of the heavy propeller shafts, which normally had to be linked directly to steam propulsion turbines. The huge amounts of weight and space thus saved by gas turbo-electric drive propulsion compared to conventional steam propulsion, along with more weight savings from other innovations, had been used to help keep the displacement of the aviation cruiser just below the 10,000 ton standard displacement limit dictated for cruisers by the Washington Treaty. Since that treaty had not set limits on the number of cruisers built by each signatory nations, those being the United States, Great-Britain, France, Italy and Japan, France thus had the right to build as many sister ships of LE REDOUTABLE as it wished, something the French government was firmly decided to do. As much or even more as the British battleship HMS DREADNOUGHT had revolutionized the design of capital warships back in 1906, Laborde believed that his REDOUTABLE and its future sister ships would revolutionize naval warfare. It allied the functions and capabilities of a gun cruiser with those of a light aircraft carrier, plus had additional features and capabilities unique to it. All that was packaged into a hull design which had caused a lot of controversy at first among French admirals and naval purists. However, the word down from the French Presidency and from the Minister of the Navy had been to put up and shut up or get out, so the French naval designers had grudgingly accepted the ideas, proposals and design blueprints from a female aeronautical engineer. As a result, LE REDOUTABLE was going to be the first trimaran warship to sail the seas of the World. If anything, LE REDOUTABLE looked a lot like three long, sharp knife blades positioned side by side, with gaps between them and with a flat top put on their top edge. This gave the ship's three hulls with extremely fine lines, which had helped it attain the considerable speed on sea trials of 36.5 knots. It also had created a lot of extra internal volume for aircraft hangars under the weather deck, thanks to the closed under-deck structures linking the three hulls. The two thin side hulls in turn supported two 190 meter-long flight decks, while the much fatter centerline hull contained the weapons systems and machinery of the cruiser. Most senior officers in the French Navy had recoiled in horror at such an unconventional warship design, but not Laborde, who had seen at once the possibilities and new capabilities offered by it. That in turn had probably done a lot to land him the position of first captain of LE REDOUTABLE. Now,

he was going to command it on its first sea trip, to bring his cruiser to its assigned overseas station in the port of Hanoi, in French Indochina.

“ENGINES ONE FIFTH AHEAD! HELM, HEAD FOR THE EXIT CHANNEL!”

“AYE, CAPTAIN!”

Accelerating to a speed of eight knots, the aviation cruiser cautiously made its way through the busy harbor of Toulon, to finally use the exit channel and emerge on the open sea. All along, other ships blew their horns in salute, while enthusiastic spectators on the shores waved at the cruiser, making Laborde feel immense pride. This trip to the ship's overseas station was meant as much to show the French flag and to demonstrate the might of the French Navy as to being a simple transit. In a year or so, the first sister ships of LE REDOUTABLE would start entering service and would then help contribute to that new might.

Once his ship was on its heading to Egypt and the Suez Canal, which the REDOUTABLE would use to get to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, Laborde sat in his bridge command chair and let his crew do its work, not intervening unless he had to correct some small mistake. Such mistakes were actually rare, as his crew had been carefully selected and was composed mostly of experienced sailors and officers rather than the usual mix of veterans and conscripts. The naval infantry unit and the aviation units embarked on LE REDOUTABLE were equally experienced professionals, having been especially selected for their assignment to the Indochina Station. Laborde actually suspected that his future time once on station would prove to be less than boring. While peace reigned in and around Europe and the Mediterranean, the same thing could not be said about the waters of the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea and the Sea of Japan. As shocking and surprising as it was for many people, the fact was that piracy still existed and actually thrived in some areas of those oceans, while relations between Japan and China were difficult, to say the least. While Laborde did not expect to get into a classic battle between warships, he suspected that his naval infantrymen and aviators were going to be kept fairly busy in the months and years ahead while he patrolled those turbulent waters. While thinking of those months ahead, Laborde couldn't help think about his wife, Marianne, who was going to travel tomorrow by air to Hanoi, along with the wives and children of the ship's other officers. The families of the crewmen, naval soldiers and aviators were already on their way to Indochina with their baggage, but by ship, sailing on a passenger ship chartered by the Navy Department. The words about

life in Indochina for French military members and their families were fairly good, if one dismissed the hot and humid local climate. Overall, Laborde expected this overseas assignment to be both pleasant and gratifying.

20:06 (Cairo Time)

Friday, May 18, 1923

Suez Canal section near Ismailia

Egypt

Commander Geoffrey Hamilton didn't even bother to be discrete as he examined with binoculars the new French warship as it transited one of the sections of the Suez Canal, on its way to the Red Sea. Egypt was after all under British control and he felt no need to hide as he stood on the western shore of the canal with another Royal Navy officer.

"Have you ever seen a warship as bizarre-looking as this one, Bigsby?"

"No, sir! The French seem to truly have a flair for 'La Différence'²⁴." Replied Navy Lieutenant Harold Bigsby, who was taking photographs of the French warship under the direction of his superior. Both men worked at the intelligence section of the Alexandria headquarters of the British Mediterranean Fleet and had been told to find as much as they could on the new French warship. The noise of an aircraft approaching then made both men look up, with Hamilton smiling with satisfaction at the sight of the reconnaissance biplane.

"Aaah, at last! Those overhead photos will help us a lot in analyzing the design of this new French warship."

He then resumed his visual examination of the ship situated less than 200 meters from him, muttering to himself.

"Hmm, I would say that this ship is close to 600 feet in length. From this angle, it is impossible to say how wide are each of the three hulls, but I definitely have serious doubts about this ship truly respecting the 10,000 ton limit for treaty cruisers."

"Sir, this cruiser is clearly designed to operate aircraft, what with its two long flight decks, yet there are no aircraft visible on its top deck right now."

²⁴ La différence : 'The difference' in French.

"The French probably wanted to keep us guessing about the true capabilities of LE REDOUTABLE. That's fair enough. Did you notice that there is only one funnel, and not a very big one at that? There are also no funnels visible coming out of the side hulls, meaning that all the boilers must be in the centerline hull. With only one funnel provided, this cruiser must have a rather limited amount of propulsive power, possibly no more than 50,000 shaft horsepower by my estimates. That is pretty low for a cruiser of this size. If there are propeller shafts in the side hulls, which I believe so, then that means that the geared turbines turning them have to be connected to the centerline boilers by high pressure steam lines. That could be a very vulnerable weak point in a battle."

"What if they use a kind of turbo-electric drive arrangement, like the Americans have done in their NEW MEXICO battleship, sir?"

"That would be a plausible explanation, Bigsby. Good thinking! Now, about the armament on this cruiser. At the least, it seems to be a decently powerful one for this size of cruiser: a total of nine main guns in three triple turrets and sixteen medium caliber, high-elevation guns in eight twin turrets. There are also over twenty 20mm Oerlikon automatic cannons on open pedestals. The French seemingly had the aircraft threat firmly in mind when designing their cruiser, something understandable in view of the fact that this is designed to operate aircraft. It is of course impossible to certify from here, but the caliber of the main guns seems to be around eight inch, while the medium guns seems to have a caliber of three inches. What do you think, Bigsby?"

"You are most probably right about the medium guns, sir. The standard anti-aircraft weapon of the French Navy is the 75mm gun. As for the main guns, one of the standard gun calibers used in French cruisers is the 194mm, very close to our own standard eight inch gun."

"Again, you are probably right, Bigsby."

Hamilton was then silent for a long moment, thoughtful.

"It this thing really displaces no more than 10,000 tons at standard displacement, then, I can't see how it could incorporate any significant amount of armor in its design. If so, this cruiser will be very vulnerable in any fight against another major warship. The French may have sacrificed too much just to add an aviation capability to a gun cruiser. They may come to regret that one day."

While Hamilton's logic was flawless, it was based on a set of incorrect assumptions, something that was now leading him to completely wrong conclusions and would distort the Royal Navy's assessments on LE REDOUTABLE for many years.

The transiting of the Suez Canal was uneventful for the crew of LE REDOUTABLE, if you excepted the widespread curiosity about it shown by the strangers who watched it pass. Once in the Red Sea, the cruiser sailed down to the Gulf of Aden, skirting the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula. While there were no present hostilities with the moribund Ottoman Empire, which still controlled Arabia and much of the Middle East, Captain Laborde chose to keep his ship at partial alert status, just in case. With the central authority of the Sultan in Constantinople greatly diminished following the 1914 war, the pashas, sheiks and sultans who were governing the various provinces and parts of the Ottoman Empire had mostly become a bunch of unpredictable rulers bent on the most part on their personal enrichment rather than on the honest, competent administration of their regions. Some of them even supported and protected pirates, secretly of course, splitting their spoils with them. This was especially so around the Gulf of Oman and the Sea of Oman. However, the sailing across the Indian Ocean and around India proved as equally uneventful as the passage of the Suez Canal. Sixteen days after sailing out of Toulon, the REDOUTABLE finally entered the Strait of Malacca, potentially the most hazardous part of its trip and also the playground of predilection for a wild assortment of local pirates and renegade rulers.

11:05 (Singapore Time)

Friday, June 1, 1923

Command bridge of the aviation cruiser LE REDOUTABLE

Riau Archipelago, Strait of Singapore

Commandant Christian Mondoux was on duty on the command bridge of LE REDOUTABLE when the duty aviation officer, Lieutenant Pierre Kapriski, contacted him by intercom.

“Commandant, this is Lieutenant Kapriski, on the aviation bridge. I just got a report from our plane presently patrolling the strait ahead of us: he saw something that looked suspicious to him.”

“What did he see, Lieutenant?” Asked Mondoux, instantly on alert. If anything would happen, the Strait of Singapore was one place where you could expect it, as it had been an area infested with pirates for centuries.

"Our pilot saw what appeared to be some kind of luxury yacht beached in a small cove on the northwest coast of the island of Batam. What awoke his suspicion was the fact that seven small junks are also in the cove, at anchor and partially camouflaged. There is also a small village situated on the shore of the cove."

"Partially camouflaged? Simple fishermen wouldn't do that. Can our pilot read the name on the hull of that yacht?"

"One moment, sir!" Replied Kapriski before staying silent for maybe a minute. He then came back on the intercom, his voice showing some concern.

"Sir, the yacht's name is 'CALIFORNIA MERMAID'. Our pilot was also able to read the port of registry on the stern: it is San Francisco."

"An American luxury yacht beached in a cove of Batam Island, alongside seven camouflaged junks? That certainly doesn't sound normal. It may very well have been seized by pirates. Tell your pilot to withdraw out of visual range of that village, but to stay close enough to see if any of those ships sail out of the cove. In the meantime, I will call the captain to the bridge. Oh, I nearly forgot: consult the worldwide maritime ship registry to see what it says about that CALIFORNIA MERMAID."

"Yes, Commandant!"

Grabbing the nearest ship telephone and pressing a button on its control panel, Mondoux called the day cabin of his captain, who was taking a nap. He got an answer after the second ring.

"Yes?"

"Captain, this is Mondoux. Our reconnaissance plane may have spotted something suspicious."

"Very well! I will be on the bridge in three minutes. Start right now any precautionary measures that you may judge appropriate to prepare to act on that sighting, but don't start any aggressive move yet."

"Yes Captain!"

Putting down the telephone receiver, Mondoux thought for a moment, then called another station.

"Marines command post? This is Commandant Mondoux. We may need to send men to investigate a suspicious sighting. Have one platoon on standby to depart in two SUPER COLIBRIs... Thank you!"

His next call was to the aviation command bridge, to order two SUPER COLIBRIs to be ready to fly out. The SUPER COLIBRI, twelve of which were embarked on LE

REDOUTABLE, was a much enlarged variant of the small COLIBRI vertical takeoff gyrocraft, with four rather than one ducted fan, and could carry up to 24 men, on top of being armed. Out of the twelve SUPER COLIBRIs carried aboard the cruiser, six were of the armed troop transport variant, while the six others were of the anti-submarine/sea search and rescue type. If those craft needed some serious backup, or if hostile aircraft or ships approached LE REDOUTABLE, then there would be twelve SUPER FRELON fighter-bombers ready to greet them, heavily armed machines with two turboprop engines and capable of a top speed of 650 kilometers per hour. Mondoux had just finished his call to the aviation command bridge when the captain walked into the ship's command bridge. Mondoux immediately got off the command chair and saluted Laborde.

"Captain, our patrol plane saw an American luxury yacht beached in a cove of Batam Island. There were also seven partially camouflaged junks in that cove, along with a small village along the beach. I already ordered our marines to put one platoon on alert, along with two SUPER COLIBRIs."

"Good! What do we know about that yacht?"

"It is named the CALIFORNIA MERMAID and its port of registry is San Francisco, Captain. I am still waiting for more information about it from the worldwide maritime ship registry."

"Fine, but we are not going to wait for that. My feeling is that this yacht was boarded and captured by pirates and then brought to that cove. Its occupants, if they are still alive, may have been transferred to that village, under guard. At the worst, we may be facing a hostage situation. At the best, the owner of this yacht may have decided by himself to stop in that cove for whatever reason. In any case, I believe that we have a duty to at least go and make sure that there is nothing untoward happening. Send out our platoon to that yacht and make them verify, politely at first, if everything is okay on that yacht. If not, and if we find that pirates took that yacht, I will want our platoon to retake it and check for its legal occupants. If need be, we will take that village and search it for the yacht's owners and its crew."

"Understood, Captain. I will give the necessary orders right now."

As Mondoux got on the ship's telephone again, Laborde went to one of the armored Durex windows of the command bridge and looked ahead with his binoculars. As was customary for this area, ship traffic was quite dense and was composed of a bewildering variety of ships and boats of all kinds and origins, including fishing boats. Approaching

that yacht and boarding it, especially if done at night, must have been relatively easy for pirates, as top speed in the strait was limited by the constricted waters and dense traffic. A junior officer then came to him with a written note.

“Captain, here is the information on the CALIFORNIA MERMAID extracted from the ships registry.”

“Thank you, Mister Goulet.” Said Laborde while grabbing the note. The information he then read made him frown: the yacht belonged to a Henry Kohn, owner of a big shipping corporation, and had a crew of twelve men, plus had a capacity for up to 22 passengers. If that yacht had indeed been taken by pirates, then saving that many hostages was going to be a quite tricky job.

12:13 (Singapore Time)

Aéronavale SUPER COLIBRI

On very low altitude approach to the yacht CALIFORNIA MERMAID

Cove on northwest coast of Batam Island, Riau Archipelago

“WE ARE ABOUT TO ARRIVE AT THE YACHT. BE READY TO JUMP OUT ON MY COMMAND.”

Nervously tightening his grip on his SC-1 7.63mm submachine gun, Lieutenant Robert de Jumonville examined quickly from 130 meters away the top deck of the CALIFORNIA MERMAID. It was indeed a luxury yacht, with polished wooden decks and numerous brass fittings, something that would have attracted on it the nefarious attention of any pirate worth his salt. The young officer of the French Fusiliers de Marine²⁵ saw only one man on the yacht, sitting on the rear deck and apparently eating. De Jumonville’s blood raced through his veins and he tensed up on seeing that the man did not look at all like a crewmember of the yacht or like a passenger: the dark-skinned man was dressed in near rags and his long hair was unkempt, while a long machete was visible on the deck, near the man. The man then spotted the two incoming SUPER COLIBRI on approach and opened his mouth ajar in surprise, looking very much like a deer caught in the headlights of a car. His next move was to get up in a hurry and grab his machete before running inside the yacht while shouting something. De Jumonville then knew that he had his confirmation about what kind of situation he and his platoon were now facing.

²⁵ Fusiliers de Marine : French naval infantry, equivalent to the American Marine Corps.

"I JUST SAW WHAT HAD TO BE A PIRATE DISAPPEAR INSIDE THE YACHT AS SOON AS HE SAW US. PREPARE TO JUMP ONCE WE WILL LAND ON THE YACHT BUT BE CAREFUL WHERE YOU SHOOT: THERE COULD BE HOSTAGES ONBOARD. FIRE ONLY ON SEMI-AUTO."

The pilot of his SUPER COLIBRI soon started to decelerate, preparing to hover above the yacht's deck so that the naval infantrymen could jump down on the boat. Just as he was about to start hovering, three dark-skinned men armed with a collection of old rifles, knives and swords came out from the lower decks of the yacht. They however froze for an instant as they stared at the big, bizarre machine they now faced. That gave time to the gunner of the forward chin turret of the first SUPER COLIBRI to react to them and mow them down with point blank fire from his two medium machine guns.

"FOLLOW ME!" Shouted Robert de Jumonville before jumping out from the side door of his craft, landing smoothly on the deck one meter below. He then quickly ran to the deck hatch from which the pirates had emerged, giving space at the same time for his men to jump out as well.

"GRENADIER! STAY ON DECK WITH TWO MEN AND COVER THE JUNKS IN CASE FIRE COMES FROM THEM. THE REST, FOLLOW ME BELOW DECKS."

Again, the young lieutenant went down the inner ladder first, his submachine gun at the ready. Once on the lower deck, de Jumonville found himself in semi-darkness, power having apparently been cut off inside the yacht, probably because the crew was not there anymore to run its systems. De Jumonville thus switched on the small flashlight attached under the muzzle of his SC-1 submachine gun, soon imitated by his men, who also had flashlights fixed to their ARC-1 assault rifles, on top of having one-shot 30mm grenade launchers fixed to their weapons. All the naval infantrymen, including de Jumonville, wore Durex helmets and armored vests, which were standard equipment with all French Army and Naval Infantry units. As they passed doors along the passageway, the young officer assigned soldiers to check the compartments behind them. At first, they found the various cabins and compartments empty of occupants, reinforcing de Jumonville's suspicions that the owner and occupants of the yacht had been transferred to the nearby village. They were still checking out cabins when the noise of an intense firefight suddenly came from above.

"Pirates are reacting to us!" Said de Jumonville before looking at one of his squad leaders. "Petty Officer Francoeur, take six of your men with you and go up to

help our grenadier team. I will keep four men with me to complete the search of the yacht. Go!”

The NCO didn't waste time in replying to him and immediately turned back, tagging six men to follow him. Two minutes later, de Jumonville and his four infantrymen went down to the engine room, only to find a macabre scene in a dark corner near one of the diesel engines. The lieutenant's face hardened when his flashlight illuminated a pile of bloody corpses that had been unceremoniously thrown in that corner. From their uniforms, it was easy enough to guess who the dead were.

“The crew of the yacht, massacred by those damn pirates. I see all of them here except for one, if I can go by the crew count in the shipping registry. I am ready to bet that the pirates kept the skipper alive, for some reason. I better call this in.”

Activating the radio microphone of the headset integrated to his helmet, he then sent out a message via the compact VHF radio transceiver contained into a large breast cargo pocket of his armored vest.

“Colibri One, this is 21 Alpha. Relay the following to LE REDOUTABLE: the crew of the yacht has been found, dead, except for the skipper. No traces yet of the passengers. They are probably held in the nearby village. We will need reinforcements to take and search the village, over.”

The pilot of the SUPER COLIBRI answered him at once.

“From Colibri One, understood. Am retransmitting now to the ship. Be advised that we are now engaged with approximately sixty armed pirates, with more of them appearing by the second.”

“Do your best to neutralize them, Colibri One, but be careful where you shoot: we may have a dozen or more hostages held in one of those huts in the village, over.”

“We will be careful, 21 Alpha. Colibri One, out!”

De Jumonville then looked at the four men following him.

“Let's go back on top, in the open: I don't think that we will find anything more that is significant aboard this yacht.”

By the time that the five naval infantrymen emerged on the top deck of the yacht, they found that the enemy fire had slackened considerably, and for one obvious reason: all seven pirate junks were now either sinking or on fire. De Jumonville smiled at his grenadier, Leading Seaman Albert Savoie, who was crouching behind the yacht's bulwarks while holding his LGC-30 semi-automatic grenade launcher, a fearsome

weapon that fired Metallex-filled 30mm grenades to ranges of up to 800 meters and was provisioned by a fifteen-shot drum magazine.

"Nice job on those junks, Leading Seaman Savoie. You seem to have taken much of the fight out of those pirates."

"I believe that these pirates never had to face the kind of firepower that French soldiers now have, sir. They are now mostly cowering behind whatever cover they were able to find on the beach."

"Good! Continue to keep their heads down: I am going to lead two squads in a wide flanking move through the jungle, in order to enter the village through its back. That way, those pirates won't be able to flee with their hostages through the jungle. Reinforcements were called in and should arrive soon."

"Got it, sir!"

"SECOND AND THIRD SQUAD, WITH ME!" Then shouted de Jumonville. With 22 men behind him, he jumped out of the yacht on the side opposite to the pirates, landing in the wet sand of the beach. Before running into the nearby jungle, he threw two smoke grenades towards the pirates' positions in order to create a smoke screen between them and his men. When he judged the smoke screen to be thick enough, he sprinted to the jungle tree line, a mere thirty meters away, and continued a good hundred meters inside it before stopping and waiting for his men to regroup around him.

"Alright, men, here is what we are going to do: we will first advance in single file to our right, to get in position behind the village. Then, we will advance in skirmisher line towards the village while being as discrete and quiet as we can. What we want to do is to find where the occupants of the yacht are being held and then lead them to safety before they could be harmed by the pirates. Avoid shooting through huts, as you may hit one of the hostages, and aim your shots. Now, follow me."

With still fourteen of his men, plus the two SUPER COLIBRIs, continuing to fire at the pirates and pinning them down in the beach area, de Jumonville was able to advance to a position behind the village, where he formed his two squads into a long skirmish line on both of his sides. Then, on a hand signal from him, his men started a cautious advance at a crouch towards the huts barely visible through the thick jungle. Not seeing any pirates on this side of the village and also being worried about the hostages, the young lieutenant soon decided to accelerate the pace a bit. Thankfully, the ear-splitting noise of the battle around the beach area all but covered any extra noise

he and his men then made while advancing. They finally reached the back of the first huts of the village, long, narrow buildings made of cut branches and leaves and with peaked roofs. Gluing himself to the back wall of one hut and cautiously making a peephole by separating two leaves, de Jumonville looked inside the hut. At first, he couldn't see much inside due to the darkness, but his eyes then adjusted to the obscurity and he was able to see that a group of frightened villagers, mostly women and children, were huddled inside. Not seeing anyone inside who could possibly be a hostage, de Jumonville made silent hand signals to his two squad leaders, telling them to ignore that hut. He then went to the next nearest hut and again made a peephole. What he saw instantly infuriated him and he went to his nearest squad leader, speaking to him in a whisper.

"Five female hostages are tied down inside this hut. Follow me with four of your men: we are going to free them and lead them to safety."

The NCO didn't ask what he had seen exactly inside and obeyed him at once, designating four of his men before following de Jumonville at a crouch along one of the side walls of the hut. The group had arrived at the corner with the front façade of the hut and was ready to slip inside when one pirate, armed with a revolver and a machete, came at a run from the beach and stormed inside. Now mortally worried about the hostages he had seen inside, de Jumonville did not hesitate and ran inside just behind the pirate, followed by his five men. He was in time to see the pirate standing next to one of the five naked girls and women tied spread-eagled between stakes hammered into the dirt floor. The pirate's right arm was actually rising, holding his machete, obviously intent on killing the tied down blond teenager. With fury in his eyes, Robert fired a ten-round burst from his submachine gun into the pirate, killing him instantly and projecting him on his back.

"QUICK, MEN! FREE THOSE WOMEN AND LEAD THEM TO SAFETY!"

Taking out his combat knife, Robert then walked quickly to the blond teenager, who was sobbing with terror, and cut the ropes tying her down, then helped her up and spoke to her in his rudimentary English.

"Don't worry, miss: you are safe now."

Her response was to glue herself to him and cry hysterically, her head on his shoulder. Embarrassed by having a naked girl hug him like this, Robert looked around the hut, searching for her clothes, but saw none. The four other captives, two teenagers and two

adult women, also didn't have any clothes on them or in the hut. With his men quickly cutting their ties and helping them up, Robert took a decision.

"Let's forget about clothes for the moment, men. The important thing is to lead them out of this village and away from the firefight. Petty Officer Boulerice, lead on!"

"Yes, sir!"

As his men were starting to file out while holding the hands of the naked women and girls, Robert spoke softly but urgently to the teenager still clinging to him.

"Miss, can you tell me how many more people from your yacht are being held in this village?"

"Six! Three men, one teenage boy and two small boys. They are being held in the next hut to our left, on exiting this hut. Please tell me that this nightmare is over."

Her supplicant tone and continuing sobs nearly broke Robert's heart and he held her protectively with one arm while leading her towards the door of the hut.

"It is, miss! Soon, you will be aboard our ship, safe. Let's get out of here now."

With his submachine gun pointed and at the ready, Robert walked out of the hut and made the girl crouch at once while leading her towards a corner of the hut.

"Stay down, miss. Just follow me."

Nearly running with her down the side wall of the hut, Robert soon joined up with his men and the four other ex-hostages and gave a few quick orders.

"Petty Officer Boulerice, take your squad and lead those four ex-hostages back to near the yacht, but don't expose them to enemy fire. You will then call one of our SUPER COLIBRIs and put them inside, to be transported to our ship."

"Wait!" Said one of the two adult women, who seemed to be able to speak some French. "We can't go around naked like this. We need some of our spare clothes on the yacht."

Robert sighed with frustration at that but relented: he could understand the woman's point of view, especially since one of the teenagers appeared to be barely twelve or thirteen years old.

"Very well! Petty Officer Boulerice, hide in the jungle near the yacht with the ex-hostages. When it will be safe to do so, you will then bring them to the yacht, to allow them to go to their cabins and dress. In the meantime, I will take the other squad with me and go free the male hostages."

"On our way, sir!" Replied Boulerice before walking away into the jungle with his men and the girls and women. Assembling his remaining squad behind him, Robert

then decided to make a hole in the back wall of the hut containing the male hostages, rather than go around it and through the front door. That job was done quickly with the help of his men's bayonets and they were soon able to enter the semi-dark hut, where they found three adult men and three boys of various age, the younger one being about eight or nine years old. All of them were in sitting positions, with their hands tied in their backs. The older man in the lot, who had graying hair, shouted in near panic when he saw the naval infantrymen enter the hut.

“QUICK! GET US OUT OF HERE BEFORE THESE PIRATES RETURN TO THIS HUT!”

In response, Robert made a sign to be silent before approaching the older man and cutting his ties with his combat knife.

“Be quiet, please! The women and girls have already been freed and led to safety. Can you walk?”

“Y...yes! Who are you?”

“French naval infantry. Our ship saw your yacht in this cove and we came to investigate. You will get more explanations later, once you are safe.”

Robert then helped the man, who had to be in his late fifties or early sixties and was overweight, to get up. He then made him walk to the hole in the back wall and helped him crouch through the small opening. Thankfully, the pirates seemed to be still fully occupied on the beach, where an intense gunfight was still going on. Robert was leading his group and the male ex-hostages through the jungle and towards the yacht when four SUPER COLIBRIs overflew them with the characteristic noise of their ducted fan rotors, making Robert pump one fist in triumph.

“Yes! The reinforcements have arrived. Those pirates are cooked. Let's accelerate the cadence, men.”

By the time that his group joined up with Boulerice's group near the yacht, the fight was all but finished, with Commandant Létourneau's men roughly rounding up the surviving pirates. Those pirates, 26 men and teenage boys in all, were then lined up against the wall of a hut and summarily executed in a hail of rifle fire. Robert nodded his head in approval at that sight: piracy was punishable by death in France and in most countries of the World and those pirates had been caught red-handed abusing and mistreating their hostages in the worst way possible. Létourneau, who commanded the naval infantry unit embarked on LE REDOUTABLE, then ordered the village to be put to

the torch, to teach a harsh lesson to the surviving villagers, who seemed to have been living from the fruits of piracy for years already, judging by the various 'souvenirs' collected by the villagers. Thankfully, the French casualties were limited to one man lightly wounded by a grazing bullet to his left arm, the Durex helmets and armored vests of the naval infantrymen having saved quite a few lives during the fight. As the women and girls freed from the pirates were finally able to go inside the beached yacht to wash and dress, Commandant Létourneau came to Robert, who saluted him while reporting.

"No casualties to my group here, Commandant. We were able to free a total of eleven hostages, including two women and three teenage girls who had been raped repeatedly by the pirates. The women and girls are now on the yacht, cleaning up and getting dressed. Earlier on, we found the yacht's crewmembers' bodies in the engine room. The pirates had slaughtered them."

"You did an excellent job, Lieutenant you and your men. Well done!"

Létourneau then turned to face the older ex-hostage and presented his right hand for a shake, speaking to him in good English.

"I am Commandant Létourneau, commanding officer of the Second Company, First Battalion, Fourth Regiment of the Fusiliers de Marine. I am happy to see that you and the other passengers are safe."

"Thank you, sir! My name is Henry Kohn, owner of this yacht. I will be eternally grateful to you and your men for saving us. The pirates effectively murdered my crew early on: I saw the massacre as we were being led out to the village. What will happen now? Without a crew, my yacht will have to be left here."

"Maybe not. Where were you heading when you were attacked by the pirates, Mister Kohn?"

"We were on our way back to San Francisco, coming from the port of Goa, in India."

"Then, I propose that we provide you with a temporary crew, time for your yacht to join up with our ship, then we will tow your yacht up to the port of Hanoi, which is our designated overseas port station. Once on our ship, you will have access to our radios, so that you can inform your family and friends that you are safe. As for your government, we will send them a report concerning this incident."

Kohn lowered his head at the word 'family' and a dejected expression came on his face.

"My family is here, mister. My wife and daughters were abused for two days and two nights by those pirates and there was nothing I could do to stop that. I should never have brought them with me on this trip. I...I wish..."

Kohn's voice then broke down as tears appeared on the cheeks of the aging man. In response, Létourneau gently patted his right shoulder to comfort him.

"The nightmare is over, Mister Kohn, and your family is now safe."

Létourneau then looked at the next oldest man, who was in his forties and sported a short, well trimmed beard.

"And you are, sir?"

"Alex Tremaine, Commander. I was the captain of the CALIFORNIA MERMAID. Thank you for the intervention of your brave men. I wish that I could have killed myself those pirate bastards. What ship do you come from?"

"We are from the French cruiser LE REDOUTABLE and we were on our way to Hanoi. This is our ship's first cruise since entering service."

"Well, you certainly accomplished something worthy of praise on this first cruise, Commander. I will make sure that the American government takes good notice of the valor of your men."

"Just being able to save innocent lives is enough of a reward for us, Captain Tremaine." Replied Létourneau, smiling briefly before taking a sober expression. "Were your crewmembers American citizens? Where do you wish them to be laid to rest?"

"They were all American citizens, Commander. I wish them to be buried at sea, as good sailors deserve."

Létourneau nodded his head slowly at that.

"That is what we will do, once our ship's doctor will have conducted a summary autopsy on them for legal purposes. As soon as the women and girls are ready, we will fly you to our ship, while my men will sail your yacht out of this cove."

13:24 (Singapore Time)

SUPER COLIBRI, on approach to LE REDOUTABLE

"The aviation cruiser LE REDOUTABLE, the latest pride of the French Navy." Announced proudly Commandant Létourneau to the Americans travelling with him and one squad of naval infantrymen in the lead SUPER COLIBRI of the group of six

gyrocraft. The Americans in turn stared down at the cruiser through the large windows of the craft. While most of them didn't know much about ships and simply wondered at the size of the LE REDOUTABLE, Alex Tremaine was a reserve officer in the U.S. Navy and immediately caught on how unusual the design of the French cruiser was. He however didn't openly make remarks about that and kept his thoughts to himself: after all, the French had risked their men to save the occupants of the yacht and truly deserved praise for that. On the other hand, there were things that Tremaine could see right now that would be worthy of taking notes for a future debrief by U.S. Navy intelligence officers. Already, the amount of firepower carried by the French naval infantrymen was astounding and would have made U.S. Marines green with envy. Now, he was looking at a cruiser that combined a heavy gun armament with a significant aircraft carrying and operating capacity, something never seen before. That operating capacity was further demonstrated by the taking off of a twin-propeller fighter-bomber from one of the two flight decks of the cruiser, while the SUPER COLIBRIs were landing at the vertical on the adjacent parallel flight deck. This alone demonstrated to Tremaine the tremendous agility in air operations that such a two flight deck arrangement offered. As for the triple hull of the cruiser, he had heard before about such a concept but had never seen an actual trimaran ship until now. Tremaine kept looking around him at everything in sight as he stepped out with the other Americans of his group onto the starboard side flight deck of LE REDOUTABLE. As Commandant Létourneau led the group towards the ship's superstructures, which separated the two flight decks, a navy captain and a couple of other French officers came to them and greeted them with handshakes, with the captain speaking in a fair but accented English.

"Welcome aboard the LE REDOUTABLE, ladies and gentlemen. I am Captain Jean Laborde, in command of this ship. Cabins and a good meal have been prepared for you. I can already tell you that your government has been advised about what happened to you and that it has told us that an American destroyer will be rerouted to Hanoi, where it will escort your yacht home once we arrive there."

"I must thank France again for all that your men have done for us, Captain." Replied Henry Kohn while shaking Laborde's hand. "I will make sure to tell in high places in Washington about your providential help."

"Ensuring the safety of high seas navigation is one of the missions of the French Navy, mister. I am sure that any American warship would have done the same to save innocent travelers from pirates. But let's get you inside and out of this wind."

Laborde then led the Americans inside the centerline superstructures through a large steel hatch. Something about the hatch however caught the eyes of Alex Tremaine, who briefly stopped to examine the hatch.

“Hey, what is that kind of backing materiel on that door? It’s not steel.”

Laborde hesitated for a short moment before answering him.

“No, sir, it is not steel, but rather a type of plastic materiel used to save on weight while providing extra stiffness to thin steel surfaces. But that’s not important: first, you need to have a good meal. I am sure that those pirates didn’t feed you very well.”

“They didn’t feed us at all and only gave us some water, Captain.” Replied Kohn in a bitter tone. “Your meal will be most welcome indeed.”

“Then, we will do our best to show you what French cuisine is capable of.” Said Laborde with a wide smile.

The meal, served in the ship’s officers’ wardroom, proved to be excellent and helped improve the morale of the Americans, who were still badly shaken by their misadventures. That was especially true of the women and girls of the group, who had suffered much worse than the men and boys. Laborde noticed that quickly and didn’t make the meal any longer than necessary, providing the help of a few junior officers to guide the Americans to the cabins assigned to them for the trip to Hanoi. Things were further improved for the Americans by the arrival of their yacht, which allowed their personal luggage to be transferred to the cruiser before they yacht was taken in tow.

Now wearing a set of fresh clothes and having taken a long shower, Alex Tremaine decided to leave in mid-afternoon his assigned cabin, which he shared with the younger son of Henry Kohn, in order to tour the cruiser. He was however surprised to find that a French sailor had been posted in the passageway in which the doors of the cabins given to the Americans opened. That sailor, while unarmed, politely blocked one of the extremities of the hallway when Tremaine tried to pass by him.

“I am sorry, sir, but the areas of this ship beyond this point are not open to civilians.”

“Then, where could I go if I wanted to get some fresh air, sailor?”

“The officers’ mess is open to you at all time, sir, along with the observation deck, two levels up from this deck. You can get to it via the ladder at the other end of

this passageway. As for the flight decks, the movement of aircraft and equipment around them makes them too dangerous for unescorted civilians.”

“I see! Thank you anyway, sailor.” Said Tremaine, disappointed and also made more than a bit suspicious by this. It seemed that the French had a lot to hide on this ship. However, that only reinforced his intention to speak with a U.S. Navy intelligence officer as soon as he got a chance to do so. Thinking of it, he could probably meet with such an officer in Hanoi, on the American destroyer that was due to wait for them there to escort the CALIFORNIA MERMAID back to the United States.

To Tremaine’s frustration, the French kept a polite but tight grip on the movements of their American passengers during the trip to Hanoi, which was noticeably slowed down by the need to tow the CALIFORNIA MERMAID without causing damage to it. The machinery spaces in particular were one area kept firmly out of bounds. However, Captain Laborde took on him to give a limited guided tour of his ship to his passengers, showing them in particular the aircraft hangar, which struck Tremaine with its large volume and with the number of aircraft stowed inside it. As for the ship’s weapons, they were shown the 194mm main gun turrets and the 75mm secondary gun turrets, but the twin sets of large, armored deck hatches situated at the bow and at the stern of the ship were not even mentioned by Laborde, who skillfully deflected Tremaine’s question about them. The one thing that the yacht’s captain noticed was the very unusual high elevation capability of the 194mm guns. Normally, the main guns of a cruiser, be they close to six or eight inches in caliber, typically could elevate to a maximum of 25 or thirty degrees. On LE REDOUTABLE, the 194mm guns had a maximum elevation of sixty degrees. That could only mean one thing to Tremaine: that they had a secondary capability to engage aircraft. With their range and big projectile weight, that could mean some devastating anti-aircraft fire against planes approaching from high altitude. Added to the sixteen high elevation 75mm guns and the thirty 20mm automatic cannons of the ship, that made for a truly formidable anti-aircraft defense for the French aviation cruiser, something that Tremaine carefully noted in his memory. When they arrived in the port of Hanoi and Tremaine could finally go speak with a U.S. Navy officer about his observations, he had enough to wake up the man’s curiosity. It also felt to Tremaine as if he was walking into a past century when he left the French cruiser and went aboard the American destroyer waiting for them in Hanoi.

CHAPTER 31 – PROFITING FROM THE OTHERS' MISERY

08:46 (New York Time)

Tuesday, October 8, 1929

Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, Manhattan

New York City, U.S.A.

Tasha put down for a moment her copy of the morning's edition of the Wall Street Journal, time to look at Hien, who was sitting in the other easy chair of their hotel room and reading a copy of the New York Times.

"I think that this is the real deal, Hien."

"I believe so as well, Tasha." Replied her executive secretary and close friend, her expression sober. "It may not be happening on exactly the same date as it did in the history known to us, but I believe that this is the 'Wall Street Crash' that will trigger the Great Depression of the 1930s. All the signs and reactions are there."

Hien then lowered a bit her head, sad and depressed at the thought of all the human misery and suffering that was going to happen in the next few weeks, months and even years.

"Poor people! So many will lose their jobs, their savings, their homes and most of what they possess. Millions will be thrown into utter poverty, with their families going hungry. Yet, here we are, ready to profit from all that misery, thanks to our foreknowledge."

Tasha bit her lip, understanding too well Hien's distress.

"Hien, you know perfectly well how hard and how often we tried to give warning signals about this incoming crisis. The French government listened to us, thankfully, mostly because President Doumergue knows about our big secret, but the American government steadfastly refused to listen to our indirect warnings, thinking that it didn't need advice from other governments. Furthermore, President Hoover will further screw things up with his ham-fisted, nearsighted financial and economic policies. As for us profiting from this, you know that it is a misleading statement. Yes, our financial and business empire will grow from it, but the enterprises that we will take control of by buying their stocks while they have junk status will then operate along the same set of workers' benefits and working conditions that our employees in France have already

enjoyed for years now. Instead of losing their jobs, the employees of these companies will end up keeping their jobs and getting better pay and working conditions as well. Contrary to the actual owners of these companies, we are not in the business of trying to extract the maximum personal profit at the expense of our workers.”

“I know!” Replied Hien in a near whisper. “Still, imagining all the misery that is to come is painful.”

“Then, don’t think about that, Hien. Think instead about all the improvements we could bring to the little people here in the United States. Let’s be positive about this.”

“You...you’re right, Tasha, as always.” Finally said Hien after a long silence. Both women then resumed reading their newspapers, taking occasional notes and circling lines of interest.

They were still reading through the financial news and headlines of their respective newspapers when a loud detonation from nearby made them jump up with a startle.

“What was that?” Said Hien, suddenly worried, while putting down her newspaper. Tasha answered her while getting up from her easy chair.

“That was a pistol shot from the suite next door, to the right. I can’t hear any noise of a fight, though. Either it was an accidental discharge or...”

“Or what, Tasha?”

“Or a suicide. Many businessmen and bankers are due to lose everything today and will end up totally bankrupt overnight. Many men would be ready to commit suicide in such circumstances. I am going to investigate. Please stay here.”

Going out of her suite and turning right, she stopped in front of the next suite’s door and glued her ear for a moment on the panel, but didn’t hear a single noise. She then decided to knock and call out.

“Hello! Are you okay in there?”

She didn’t get a reply, so tried again, increasing the strength of her knocks on the door panel. A maid passing by with a cart full of cleaning products and clean towels stopped near her, intrigued.

“Is there something wrong, miss?”

Tasha gave the middle-aged woman a terse smile.

"I am afraid so: I am staying in the next door suite and heard a single gunshot from inside this room. I came to check but nobody is answering. I suppose that you have a master key with you, madam?"

The maid's face reflected sudden horror on hearing the word 'gunshot'.

"Oh my God! Not another suicide?!"

Her choice of words made Tasha look sharply at the maid.

"What do you mean, another suicide? There was a suicide recently in this hotel?"

"Yes! A man hung himself in his room yesterday. It was so horrible to see."

"I see! Could you please open this door, so that we could check if its occupant is alright? I already knocked four times and somebody inside could be in need of urgent medical help."

"Uh, one moment, please." Said the maid, who then grabbed a key ring hanging by a short chain from her belt and selected a large key. Introducing her key in the door lock and turning it, the maid cautiously cracked open the door by a few inches to look inside.

"Hello! Is anybody in? Hello!"

Gently pushing the maid aside, Tasha then pushed the door wide open and walked in, all her senses on alert. Her first looks around the bedroom of the suite showed her nothing unusual and no occupant, so she looked next inside the bathroom. She stiffened at once and blocked the maid from getting in at the sight that greeted her in the bathroom.

"Call your hotel manager at once and tell him to call the police: there is a dead man in the bathtub, with blood sprayed everywhere."

"Oh my God! Oh my God!" Started saying at once the maid, who nonetheless ran to the telephone set in the bedroom, leaving Tasha to stare at the bloody scene in the bathroom: a man dressed in dark trousers and white shirt lay in the bathtub, his inert right arm hanging out of the tub and with a revolver lying on the ceramic tiles of the floor. The dead man had apparently put the muzzle of his handgun against the bottom of his jaws and had fired upwards, blowing his brains out and spraying gore on the walls and ceiling of the bathroom. Without touching anything, Tasha approached to a couple of paces of the bathtub and contemplated the face of the man. He was a bit overweight and had been in his fifties or early sixties. A gold-plated watch was around his left wrist, while a couple of expensive rings were on his fingers, including an alliance.

"Damn! I hope that he didn't have young kids. His family will be devastated."

Tasha then thought again about all the misery that was soon going to afflict untold millions of other people.

"All this because of greed and stupidity." She muttered to herself in a bitter tone.

20:11 (Paris Time)

Friday, October 11, 1929

Château du Haut-Buc, Buc

Paris region, France

Terry noticed at once the long faces of Tasha and Hien when the two women arrived at the residence from their trip to New York. Being acutely aware about the historically due stocks market crash, her first question to Tasha was made in a cautious tone.

"How bad is it in New York, Tasha?" Here, only a few newspapers caught on to the crisis."

In response, Tasha shook her head in disgust.

"It is plenty bad, Terry. When I researched what measures existed to prevent such a financial meltdown, I found next to nothing. No regulations or limits on stocks speculations, stocks traders themselves actually lending the necessary money to would-be speculators to allow them to buy stocks, people using their life savings to play the stocks market and more. The worst part is that the Hoover government is barely starting to understand the gravity of the situation and is slow to react. This is going to be one epic screw-up, I tell you."

"And...how much have you bought there?"

Tasha sat down heavily in a sofa of her reception lounge, with Hien also taking place on it, before answering her bodyguard and close friend.

"Not that much, actually: I acquired a total of 1.2 million dollars worth of stocks, a small fraction of my cash reserves, in order to take complete control of five distinct companies that should be able to rebound quickly. Most of the rest of the stocks that had turned to junk were either big steel or mining industries, in which I have no interest on and will suffer among the hardest in the years to come, or banks that have seen their customers' deposits evaporate in bad speculations and bad loans. I chose to concentrate on the kind of companies offering goods and services that people will

always need, even in a recession or depression, like clothes, food and affordable housing. I decided to keep most of my cash reserves safely stashed for the moment: the situation is potentially even more volatile than we all imagined. Also, we may have to operate at a loss and financially support our few concessions in the United States, like Johanna's car sales and maintenance centers and my airport in Queens, if we don't want to have to let employees go."

"And what about here, in France?"

"France is actually in good financial shape and stocks markets and trading are by far much less common than in the United States. The two worries I have for France are a possible run on French gold reserves and the indirect impact caused by the American financial crash on other countries in Europe, like Germany, Great-Britain and Italy. Germany in particular is very vulnerable, with a shaky economy and high inflation. That has a potential to create something much more sinister than an economic depression." Terry nodded her head slowly once, understanding perfectly well what Tasha was alluding to. After all, they had been working in the shadows for seventeen years already to prevent a second world war in this century. Furthermore, Terry had personally taken care of some of the measures they had selected to prevent that war.

"Economic trouble often translates into popular agitation and discontent, a fertile ground for the rise of dictators and demagogues. Well, if Germany ever manages to rise again to cause a war, that Adolph Hitler bastard and his minions won't be leading it: they all had unfortunate 'accidents' in the last few years. If ever someone else rises to cause trouble in Germany and incite violence, then he may also suffer an 'accident'."

"Let's not forget the Soviet Union in all this, Terry. The present Soviet leadership, even without Stalin, is as bad as the old Nazi leaders would have been. Remember what followed the final defeat of the Czar's forces in 1923: the Czar was summarily executed and his followers either massacred or sent to work camps in Siberia. I tell you: if there is another major war in Europe in the coming years and decades, then we will probably be able to blame the Soviet Union for it."

Suddenly feeling a bit depressed, Terry went to sit on one side of Tasha on her sofa and passed one arm around her shoulders.

"Seventeen years already spent in this primitive century, with constant work and efforts to manipulate and improve its future. When are we going to be able to think about our own future and happiness at last? Who is going to follow in our footsteps

once we are gone? How can we be sure that all that we accomplished to date will not unravel after our deaths?"

Both Tasha and Hien lowered their heads then, equally preoccupied by the questions troubling Terry. Hien, probably the one in their group that best understood the public mentality and social setup of today's France, finally spoke up softly.

"Nearly everything about that comes down to the legal status of women in France. Right now, women still don't have the right to vote and women who marry lose the control of their finances and possessions to their husbands. If, for example, Tasha married tomorrow, she would immediately lose control of her industrial conglomerate and of her various bank accounts, something that would jeopardize all her efforts to date. The same would go for Johanna, me and you, Terry. As long as women will not enjoy full equal legal rights in France, marrying will be out of the question for all four of us. That means no children of ours that could legally inherit our fortunes and our companies and continue to build up our vision of a future France. The only way out of this conundrum would be to adopt young children, raise them while teaching them our ideals and then hope that they will work for these ideals once they are adults. However, that would mean literally programming those children for a future life they may not want themselves, something that I would hate to do."

"I am afraid that you are right, Hien." Said Tasha, her head still bowed down. "Whatever we will do, nothing will be guaranteed once we are gone. The World will continue to turn without us, headed in whatever direction Humanity as a whole will go. The only thing that we can really do is to insure that our advanced knowledge is not lost and is used strictly for the good of all. In the meantime, we will have to be strong and rely on our mutual friendship for support."

Moved by Tasha's words, Hien and Terry both glued themselves to her while still sitting on the sofa, joining in an emotional hug.

"Damn, I wish that Johanna could be here with us right now." Said Hien. Seemingly in response to that, a pair of arms wrapped around her and Tasha, coming from behind the sofa, from where Johanna had sneaked up on them.

"I am here, girls, and I will be with you forever." Said the blonde engineer, tears in her eyes.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Paris, Le Guide Vert, Michelin Éditions, Boulogne-Billancourt, 2016.
- Werner Hilgemann et Hermann Kinder, Atlas historique, Librairie Académique Perrin, Édition Stock, 2000.
- Bernard Crochet et Gérard Piouffre, La Première Guerre Mondiale, Éditions Novedit, Paris, 2013.
- Atlas Larousse pour la famille, Larousse-Bordas, Paris, 1999.
- Edward Clinton Ezell, Small Arms of the World, Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, Pa., 1977.
- Tony Gibbons, The Complete Encyclopedia of Battleships, Salamander Books Ltd, London, 1983.