

A NEW ERA

A person wearing a futuristic, dark, metallic suit with a helmet and visor, standing against a black background. The suit has various straps and buckles, and the person's face is partially visible through the visor.

A SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL

BY

MICHEL POULIN

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR, VIOLENCE AND SEX, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE NOT SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is a sequel to my THE FIGHTING NOSTROMO and is the seventh novel in the Kostroma Series. It continues the adventures in Space of Captain Tina Forster, her mighty cargo ship NOSTROMO and its crew. The year is 2332 and Humanity has just defeated a terrifying threat posed by the carnivorous Space Predators, with the NOSTROMO having destroyed the home world of those monsters. However, there could still be a few surviving Space Predator ships roaming around the stars and Humanity has to stay vigilant.

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TABLE OF CONTENT

CHAPTER 1 – A NICE VACATION	6
CHAPTER 2 – STAYING VIGILANT	39
CHAPTER 3 – A NEW FORM OF RACISM	48
CHAPTER 4 – A GREAT LOSS	60
CHAPTER 5 – ALTERNATE OCCUPATIONS	66
CHAPTER 6 – GOING ONE’S OWN WAY	79
CHAPTER 7 – OVERPLAYING ONE’S HAND	89
CHAPTER 8 – INVASION	97
CHAPTER 9 – BATTLE FOR NORDLAND	107
CHAPTER 10 – VERMIN ERADICATION	120
CHAPTER 11 – AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE	138
THE ARMED MERCHANT SHIP NOSTROMO	144
BIBLIOGRAPHY	146

CHAPTER 1 – A NICE VACATION

21:57 (Greenwich Mean Time)

Friday, May 20, 2332

English Channel coast near Calais

France, Earth, Solar System



Tentative historical portrait of Joan of Arc

Jehanne de Domrémy contemplated for a moment the waters of the English Channel while standing on a pebble beach near the French port of Calais. A rather stoutly-built teenage girl with tanned skin and short dark brown hair, Jehanne de Domrémy was somewhat pretty but could not be said to be a great beauty. She was also fairly short by the female standards of the 24th Century, standing only 155 centimeters-tall. She presently wore a pair of short pants, a T-shirt and hiking boots while also carrying a voluminous backpack of the kind used by young globetrotting tourists, plus a fanny pack which contained her wallet, identity documents and money. After spending a nice two weeks in France, playing tourist and enjoying her first time on Earth while visiting the medieval native house of the celebrated French heroin Joan of Arc, whom she bore the actual name and appearance, Jehanne was now ready to go to England, where she intended to spend some of her remaining two weeks of vacation time before she would have to return to her job as a security officer aboard the giant armed merchant ship NOSTROMO. Presently, the NOSTROMO was on a cargo and passenger run around the seventeen star systems of the Spacers' League but it was due to return into Earth orbit in time for Jehanne to return to her home in Space.

The Sun had set mere minutes earlier but a half-moon provided some illumination as waves washed over the pebble beach where Jehanne was. The wind was fairly strong and fresh, bringing in the salty smell of seawater. After a quick look around her to make sure that nobody was watching her, Jehanne activated her internal directed gravity propulsion unit and silently lifted off the beach, then took up speed while flying towards the English coast at very low altitude. Since she was legally in France as a visitor, which was like the United Kingdom a member of the European Union, she

could have travelled via a number of official transportations means which crossed the English Channel, like an air bus, a ferry or a train running along a tunnel under the seafloor, but recent events in France had brought to her a public notoriety that made her wish to avoid further publicity during the rest of her vacation. Stopping and killing one of Europe's most wanted criminal had certainly been a sure way to attract lots of media attention on her, most of it quite intrusive and sensationalistic. By flying on her own to England, Jehanne was thus hoping to throw off the army of paparazzi which had been plaguing her vacation since she had killed in Paris the infamous Karl Hausmann, who had tried to kill her as a revenge for foiling a jewelry store heist and for killing in the process six of his gang members. Those gang members and their leader had then learned the hard way that Jehanne, while looking like a typical young farm girl, could be very dangerous if need be. Of course, they could not have known at first who she really was: a sophisticated and intelligent sentient android with a distinct personality, designed and built as a security officer to work aboard the NOSTROMO. However, public video footage showing her in action in Paris while foiling the heist planned by the St-Moritz Gang had quickly made her a media celebrity, something Jehanne had certainly not wanted. Hopefully, by entering England discreetly and without any official travel record would help her regain some privacy during her remaining two weeks of vacation time.

Flying at a speed of 300 kilometers per hour and at an altitude of no more than twenty meters above the waves, Jehanne took only a few minutes to fly the 49 kilometers separating Calais, in France, from Dover, in England. She however chose not to land in Dover proper and instead bypassed the port and city, landing at night in a field near the coast and then continuing on foot along a small regional road running northwest towards Canterbury, Chatham and London. For a Spacer citizen like her who had spent nearly all of her existence aboard spaceships and orbital stations, just the act of hiking along the tree-lined small road was enjoyable, presenting her with an abundance of open nature and vegetation not found in Space. While Jehanne could not actually 'feel' enjoyment as an android, the higher temporary levels of activity in her electronic brain caused by external perceptions and sensory inputs could be equated to either excitement, enhanced interest or curiosity in her. While not flying, Jehanne's pace was a quick, long one, worthy of an Olympian fast walker and she made good progress along the small road, heading in the general direction of Canterbury.

Around midnight, a light rain started falling, making Jehanne stop for a moment under a tree, time to get her raincoat out of her backpack and put it on. As an android, rain could not affect her physically but she didn't want to have her clothes soaked and eventually damaged by the rain. As for her backpack, its outer shell was waterproof, so she didn't need to protect it further. With the hood of her raincoat pulled over her head, Jehanne then resumed her hike along the road. Vehicle traffic along the small regional road she was following proved nearly non-existent, partly because of the late hour and partly because, with modern anti-gravity technology, there was less and less need for transport vehicles to roll on the ground rather than fly directly to their destinations, with the resulting air traffic regulated and controlled by automated air traffic systems. Now, one only had to get in an air-capable vehicle, power it up and program its destination, then let the vehicle fly itself to the desired destination. As a result, the existing network of paved road had been falling in growing disuse during the last few decades, with only the ultra-heavy vehicles and those towing non-flying loads and trailers still rolling at ground level. However, things were different inside villages, towns and cities, where the risks of air collisions over often narrow streets bordered by multi-story buildings forced all vehicles within the built-up areas to go on ground rolling mode.

Dawn had arrived, with the Sun now up but partially hidden by persistent gray clouds, when Jehanne arrived at the small town of Chartham, some five kilometers to the southwest of Canterbury. Jehanne actually had a specific reason to come to this town while on her way to London: a graying couple she had met in France while going to visit Joan of Arc's native house and village lived in a farm near Chartham and she had promised herself to go visit the Farnsworth when she would visit England. Reviewing in her electronic brain the digital map of England where she had recorded the Farnsworth's address, Jehanne walked down the main street of the town, heading towards its northeast extremity. The people she crossed on her way paid little attention to her, as she looked like so many young hikers of the kind frequently seen along the roads and trails of England. That suited Jehanne fine, as she had gotten her fill of unwanted notoriety in Paris, after she had foiled that heist by the St-Moritz Gang. While walking along the sidewalks of the main street, Jehanne took the time to scrutinize the fronts of the shops and commercial establishments lining the street, pushed in this by the insatiable curiosity programmed into her. If anything, curiosity and the wish to learn new things were the main driving forces of her existence, apart from performing her sworn

duty to protect and serve the innocents around her and to prevent and stop crimes. One boutique, which advertised antique items on sale, made her enter a small, narrow store and to slowly walk around its displays. The one article of interest she found and then brought to the cashier was a chess board with painted pewter chess pieces made in the images of medieval soldiers, nobles and commoners. As a game that stimulated mental planning and strategy, chess was popular with Jehanne and the other 801 androids living and working on the NOSTROMO. Putting the set on the sales counter, Jehanne then smiled to the mature woman manning the cash register.

"Good morning, miss! This chess set seems to be of old manufacture. Could you tell me how old it is actually?"

"I sure can, miss: it was made by a local artisan here in Chartham some 160 years ago and was then passed down around his family and descendants until the last owner, who was in need of cash, sold it to me two years ago. In fact, I believe that its artisan signed and dated it on the bottom surface of the board. Let me look for it." Turning around the wooden board and looking at its bottom, the woman smiled and pointed some scribbling to Jehanne.

"Here you are, miss! A Charles Thornton made this chess set in 2166. This is thus a certified antique. Of course, that fact affects its price, which is 327 Pounds Sterling."

Jehanne, who had accumulated for months her pay as a security officer and had ample money with her, nodded her head at the price.

"I believe that it is well worth its price, miss. I will take it."

Jehanne then took out her wallet and counted the equivalent in Euros of 327 Pounds Sterling, making the saleswoman most happy.

"Thank you, miss! I am sure that you will enjoy playing chess with this historical set."

"I certainly will, miss." replied Jehanne as she opened her backpack in order to put the chess set in it. The saleswoman helped her by carefully wrapping and putting the set inside a plastic bag before handing it to Jehanne.

"Thank you for shopping in my boutique, miss."

"The pleasure was mine." replied Jehanne before closing her backpack and passing its carrying straps around her shoulders. Most satisfied with her newest acquisition, she then resumed her walk towards the Farnsworth's farm.

After another fifteen minutes of walking and having left the town proper, Jehanne arrived at a small private lane leading to a farmhouse surrounded by a couple of annexes. An old-fashioned mailbox, most probably placed more as a tradition than as a working object, was posted at the entrance of the lane, with a name and door number on it that made Jehanne smile: she was now at the place she had been looking for. Smiling as she imagined the surprise her visit would bring to the old couple, Jehanne gingerly walked up the lane to the farmhouse, where she rang the buzzer of the main door. James Farnsworth opened it after half a minute but froze the moment he recognized her, something that somewhat alarmed Jehanne. Still, she smiled to the graying British man and spoke in her most friendly tone.

"Hello Mister Farnsworth! I came to England in order to continue my vacation and had the idea of paying you and your wife a short visit in passing."

"Uh, that was a nice thought on your part, miss, but you should have called us in advance."

The fact that the man had called her 'miss' rather than 'Jehanne' further worried her and her expression became more sober as she looked him in the eyes.

"Is something wrong, Mister Farnsworth?"

Before the farmer could answer her, a female voice came in from inside the house.

"WHO IS IT, JAMES?"

"IT IS JEHANNE DE DOMRÉMY, ELIZABETH! SHE CAME TO VISIT US!" Shouted James back to his wife before looking with some embarrassment at Jehanne.

"You didn't tell us in France that you were an android, miss."

Now understanding why the British man showed reserve towards her, Jehanne nonetheless stayed openly friendly and polite with him.

"That's because I thought that it was inconsequential in my mind, Mister Farnsworth. I thought while we met in Domrémy-la-Pucelle that you and your wife were a fine couple worthy of visiting when I would go to England. Can I come in?"

James Farnsworth hesitated for a second before opening the door of his house wide and letting Jehanne walk in. Elizabeth Farnsworth then emerged from her kitchen but froze on seeing Jehanne standing in the entrance lobby. To her credit, she painted a mild smile on her face and nodded once her head at Jehanne.

"Welcome to our house, miss. Did you come by air taxi from France?"

“No, madam: I flew across the English Channel by myself, then walked along a regional road to Chartham, which is on the way to London, where I intend to spend a week or so while on vacation.”

“You walked all night and in the rain? You must be quite...” said Elizabeth before realizing that Jehanne could not actually become tired. The latter understood her unfinished sentence and nodded soberly.

“An android effectively can’t feel fatigue, Madam Farnsworth. As for the rain, I have a good raincoat with me. Look, if my surprise visit makes you uneasy, I can always leave.”

“No! Stay, Jehanne!” said quickly James Farnsworth. “While belatedly learning that you were an android rather than a normal girl was a bit unsettling to us, you were always polite and friendly with us, so it is only just that we treat you decently in return. You are welcomed to leave your backpack near the entrance and to sit with us in our lounge.”

“Thank you, James!” said Jehanne, partly reassured by his change of attitude.

Putting her big backpack on the carpet near the entrance door, Jehanne then followed James Farnsworth to the nearby lounge, where she sat in a sofa offered by him, while Elizabeth Farnsworth took place with her husband in another sofa facing Jehanne. There was a bit of an awkward silence before Jehanne spoke up.

“Look, I am sorry for not being open with you about my true nature but I have experienced too much negative reactions to me and towards other androids like me from Humans and didn’t want to scare you involuntarily when we first met in France. Despite all that was said about me in the medias, most of it false or hyperbole, I am no threat to the innocent people around me. Only criminals and enemies of Humanity need to fear me. I also wish to continue to be your friend, if you will accept me as such.”

James and Elizabeth exchanged a look before Elizabeth replied to Jehanne in a soft voice.

“We know that you are sincere when you say that, Jehanne. It is just that we know so little about you as an android and heard so many things about you.”

“What you heard was mostly uninformed presumptions and outright prejudice, Elizabeth. My programming prevents me from acting with meanness or criminal intent towards others. I was designed and made to fight crime and protect the innocents and I simply am incapable of malice and hatred. Those who spoke ill of me did so out of plain

ignorance, intolerance or bigotry. Unfortunately, intolerance of androids like me is steadily growing into a new form of racism, even within Spacers' worlds, despite the fact that we fought to ensure the survival of Humanity against the threat of the Space Predators."

"I believe your words, Jehanne." said James as he looked at her in a distinctly softer way. "Tell me: do you feel any emotional reactions at the way others have been slandering you?"

"Well, the way I was designed, I should not be able to have true feelings, James. However, I was also designed with the ability to learn and improve by myself through personal experience and studies, plus benefited from the decades of experience about social interaction with Humans that Spirit, the central computer of the NOSTROMO, gained during contact with Captain Forster and her crew, experience which she then transmitted to me and the other androids built by her. I thus recently started sensing what I think are nascent feelings visiting me from time to time during periods of stress or of significant new experiences. I would say that what I feel about the intolerance shown towards me could be loosely described as a mix of disappointment and of frustration. When I started experiencing that intolerance, I read past books and studies about the history of racism and now understand better what could fuel such bigotry and hatred. While I still believe that racism is both despicable and unjustified, I can understand why it manifests itself so often in Humans. However, whatever some Humans think or feel towards me and other androids, I will still respect the coded laws and regulations directing my programming. So, don't expect to see me ever fly into some murderous rage because I was treated badly by certain persons. I will still simply protect myself and the innocents around me while preventing or stopping crimes, especially violent crimes committed against defenseless innocents."

Elizabeth Farnsworth nodded slowly her head at her words.

"I believe you, Jehanne, and understands you better now. For me, you will stay a friend."

"For me too, Jehanne." added her husband. Jehanne then experienced a brief moment of what she would classify as 'happiness' at that twin declaration of friendship.

"Thank you, both of you! This truly makes me happy, as much as I can be. Is there something else that you would wish to know about me, my friends?"

"One thing, Jehanne." answered Elizabeth. "Do you have a goal or goals in your existence and, if yes, which ones?"

"I do have personal goals that were programmed in me as I was built and which still direct my existence. They are the desire to learn things of consequence for me and the others around me and the desire to improve myself as an individual through personal experience."

"The way us Humans do." replied James, making Jehanne nod once.

"Exactly! In the long term, I wish to become as human as real Humans, minus the negative emotions and motivations, like greed, selfishness and thirst for power. The one thing I will never achieve is the ability to reproduce biologically. However, with periodic maintenance and refits, I can reasonably expect to exist much longer than Humans can."

"How long exactly?"

"A couple of hundreds of years or more, easily."

Her answer left the couple thoughtful for a moment before Elizabeth spoke softly.

"A couple of hundreds of years... Many people would wish they could live that long while staying healthy."

"And that may be one hidden reason for the hostility we androids face from members of the public: jealousy!"

"That certainly makes sense to me, Jehanne: jealousy can make people do many bad things."

"Indeed! Well, maybe I should continue on my trek towards London: since I don't need to eat, there would be no point for me to stay for lunch."

"Too true!" said James, amused. So, what do you expect to do once in London, Jehanne?"

"I intend to visit old places reminiscent of the Middle Ages. I was named and made to the appearance of Joan of Arc and, as such, have a continued interest in all things dating from the period of the Hundred Years War. In particular, I would love to find and acquire a good replica of an arming sword of the kind Joan of Arc used '

James then surprised her by flashing a grin and jumping to his feet at her last words.

"I may be able to help you in that, Jehanne. Just give me a couple of minutes and I may be able to get some useful info about that for you."

James then ran upstairs, where his private study was, to return to the lounge some four minutes later, a big smile on his face. He then handed to Jehanne a piece of paper with some notes written on it.

"A friend who lives in nearby Canterbury happens to own a medievalist shop where one can find replicas of arms and armor from the Antiquity, Middle Ages and Renaissance. I just talked to him and he said that he presently has one arming sword of top quality in store, which is on sale for 570 Pounds. If that price agrees with you, I will ask him to reserve it for you."

Taking the paper and reading the address and shop's name on it, Jehanne then looked back up at James while smiling.

"I will certainly be interested in buying his arming sword, James."

"Then, I will call him back and say that you will show up at his store today."

"Uh, did you tell him that I was an android?"

"Me? Not at all! I just told him that you were a young Spacer tourist interested in medieval souvenirs."

Reassured, Jehanne got up from her sofa and warmly shook hands with James.

"Thanks for that, James. Well, I better hit the road again."

Jehanne took the time to exchange a hug with both James and Elizabeth before putting back on her backpack and leave the house, waving goodbye to the couple as she walked out. As they both watched Jehanne rejoin the road outside of their farm and walk towards Canterbury, Elizabeth spoke in a low voice to her husband.

"To be friends with a robot... This may certainly sound strange to most people, James."

"Strange? Yes! Wrong? No! And she is an android, not a robot, Elizabeth."

It took Jehanne only one hour for her to enter the old city of Canterbury, with its celebrated medieval cathedral, after following Cockerling Road and ending on Wincheap Road. Going right once at Pin Hill Road, she finally arrived at the 'Blacksmith's Den'. One look at the collection of antique replicas exposed in its front window display was enough to raise Jehanne's hopes and she eagerly entered the shop, walking at once to the man standing behind the service counter near the entrance, flashing a smile to him.

"Good day, sir! My friend, James Farnsworth, called you earlier to reserve for me a replica arming sword. Could I please see it?"

"Of course, miss!"

Bending down, the shop owner retrieved from behind his counter a long sword held in a black wood and leather scabbard and presented it to her.

"Here is the arming sword I have, miss. It is made of high quality, high-carbon steel and is an exact replica of the kind of arming sword used during the late period of the Hundred Years War. Be careful when you will draw it out: it has been sharpened."

"Would Joan of Arc have had a similar sword, mister?"

"Actually, this is a replica of the model said to have been used by her, miss."

"Excellent!" said Jehanne before drawing the sword out of its scabbard and examining closely the blade, pommel and handle. Next, she tested its balance and edge sharpness and was well satisfied by them.

"This is indeed a fine replica, mister. You did tell my friend that you were selling it for 570 Pounds, right?"

"Correct, miss. However, if you choose to buy other items here today, I would be ready to make a package deal with you."

"Now, that sounds interesting! Would you have a belt made to support this sword and scabbard, by chance?"

"I do, miss! Let me show you what I have in terms of accessories to go with my swords. Please follow me!"

As she followed the shop owner towards the back wall of the boutique, Jehanne saw a number of items of possible interest to her but stayed with the man and stopped with him in front of a wall collection of belts, belt purses, tabards and broches. Looking briefly at her in order to judge her waist size, the owner then selected a large belt with sword frog and presented it to her.

"I believe that this could fit you, miss. If you could try it on..."

"With pleasure!"

To Jehanne's satisfaction, the belt proved to be of the right size, prompting the owner in presenting her a large black leather belt purse and a dagger's support frog.

"This 1400-era belt purse would in my opinion go well with your sword belt, along with this dagger's frog."

"I certainly will take both the belt and the purse, mister, but I don't have a dagger to go with your frog."

"Not a problem, miss!" replied the owner, happy to see such a willing customer. He then led her to a glass counter in which a large and varied collection of daggers, knives, war hammers and maces was on display. One look at the price tags attached to each item then told Jehanne that she would need to use her credit card in order to afford

all that interested her here. Going behind the glass counter and unlocking its back panel, the store owner grabbed and presented to her a long, two-edged dagger.

"This dagger was designed to go with your arming sword, miss, and would nicely complete your outfit."

"I will take it! What about this eight-flanged mace? Is its design from the early 15th Century?"

"It is, miss. In fact, the widespread use of plate armor by the late 1300s and early 1400s had made such maces quite popular with knights and nobles, as they were quite effective in dealing with plate armor. Do you want it?"

"Yes, definitely!"

Jehanne could nearly hear the 'cha-ching' inside the store owner's head as he took out the mace and presented it to her.

"Anything else, miss?"

"A couple of things, actually. First, would you have some kind of book or video document about the art of swordsmanship as it pertains to the Middle Ages? If you would have similar books and documents about medieval arms and armor, I would also be interested in buying them."

"I indeed have such printed books and video documents, miss. Medievalists and amateurs in sword fighting frequently come to my shop for such books. They also often buy pieces of arms, armor and accoutrements for their practice jousting."

"Then, show me to your books display, then bring the items I already selected while I look at what else you have of interest in your store."

As the happy owner brought the belt, dagger, frogs, purse and mace to the sales counter after guiding her to the book shelves, Jehanne quickly reviewed what was on display and grabbed three printed books: one on medieval sword-fighting techniques; one on arms and armor of the late Middle Ages and one on Heraldry. Next, she grabbed their video equivalents before starting to tour in detail the shop, watched discretely by the store owner, who was ready to encourage her in her shopping. The last item she grabbed was a blue and white tabard decorated with embroidered fleurs-de-lis. She made a joke as she brought the books, videos and tabard to the sales counter.

"Well, I was not expecting to find a tabard to the colors of the enemy in an English shop, mister."

The man guffawed at those words.

“Well, the medievalists who come to my shop do need to wear from time-to-time tabards and insignias of other than English knights: we can’t have Englishmen fight only against other Englishmen, right?”

“True! How much for all this, mister?”

The happy store owner made a quick calculation, then thought things over for a moment before looking back at Jehanne.

“Miss, the original total would amount to 1,760 Pounds but, you being such a good customer, I will round it down to 1,600 Pounds for the lot.”

“Deal! Do you accept credit cards from the Spacers’ Star Bank?”

“I certainly do, miss! I will however need to see as well a proof of identity from you to confirm the validity of your credit card.”

“No problem, mister! Here are both my credit card and my electronic passport.”

Taking her card and passport and quickly examining them brought a surprised look on the face of the owner.

“Your name is really Jehanne de Domrémy, miss?”

“It is! I was named in honor of the French heroine.”

“Then, you certainly chose the right items, miss.” said the man before scanning her credit card and then making her authenticate the sale with her thumbprint. Thankfully for Jehanne, Eve Silisca had thought about that ‘detail’ and had incorporated distinct sets of fingerprints to each of the androids she had built while at the Avalon Space Yards. That had proved to be an inspired move, as many commercial and legal procedures were authenticated and signed via the use of fingerprints, both inside the Spacers’ League and on Earth. With the authentication accepted by the online banking system used by the owner, the happy man started wrapping the items so Jehanne could carry them out. However, Jehanne looked with some dismay at her backpack, which was already two-thirds full.

“Damn! How am I going to fit all this in my backpack, particularly my sword?”

The store owner thought for a moment before flashing a smile.

“I think that I may have the solution to your problem, miss. Just give me a minute.”

Intrigued, Jehanne watched the man disappear for a moment in his rear boutique, to then reappear while holding a large kit bag of the kind used by professional athletes to carry their sports gear. The owner then put down the kit bag on the counter and smiled to her.

"Here you go, miss. This kit bag is well-used but is clean and you can have it for free."

"Why thank you very much, sir! You are really saving the day for me."

"Glad to be of help, miss." replied the man. Jehanne took a couple of minutes to stuff her acquisitions in the kit bag, then walked out after shaking hands with the owner. The latter watched her walk away with her backpack on her back and her stuffed kit bag, worn by its carrying strap, and nodded his head.

"Hell, I should get customers like her more often. She was also quite cute."

10:06 (London Time)

Monday, May 23, 2332

The Tower of London

London, England

"...The first stone building erected on the site of this old fortress cum palace and state prison was the square keep named 'White Tower', built around 1078 by William the Conqueror, which is still the central piece of this historical site. The fortress was then progressively enlarged along the following centuries, until it reached its final form and size in the Nineteenth Century. We are now going through the Middle Tower, the outer gate leading across the fortress' moat to the Byward Tower, which gives access to Water Lane, the space between the outer and inner walls of the Tower of London..."

Jehanne, part of the group of tourists following closely the tour guide describing the old fortress and its ancient history, listened nearly religiously to the guide while recording the sights around her. As a site that was over twelve centuries old, the Tower of London was one of the first places she had elected to visit during her time in London, a city bursting with history. She had left her big backpack and her kit bag locked in her modest hotel room, which still cost a pretty penny thanks to the outrageous prices found in London, so she was unencumbered, and was simply dressed in casual civilian clothes, like the other tourists of her group. Visiting such an historical site was a prime experience for her, as no buildings or structures on the Spacers League's worlds were older than 250 years, when the first Space installations were built and occupied on the Moon and on Mars. The Tower of London even predated most of the historical monuments she had visited in Paris during the previous two weeks.

11:53 (London Time)

London Metropolitan Police Headquarters

Constable Harry Reeves was one of the dozens of police officers presently watching the views from the thousands of video surveillance cameras covering the territory of the city of London, with some specific sectors being particularly well covered. That camera network was in turn linked to a powerful mainframe computer containing a specialized facial recognition program meant to catch known criminals and prevent crimes from being committed. While Reeves, who was quite knowledgeable about computers and their programming, believed in the efficiency of the video surveillance network to signal automatically any hit on a known suspect or a criminal activity, he was less confident about the judgment of those senior commanders who selected the search parameters used by the network. There had already been a few celebrated past cases where there had been instances of blatant racial or political bias used in how the facial recognition program chose what had to be signaled to the policemen on watch. The London Metropolitan Public Security Network may have been in existence for three centuries now but it still could be used in an abusive way, something Reeves was well aware of. Right now, Reeves was watching camera views covering the areas of the old Tower Bridge and of the Tower of London. After nearly two hours of watching the multi-view screens surrounding him, he had seen nothing suspect nor any automated alarms being triggered. He was about to go get himself a cup of tea when the contour of one of the display screens started flashing red, while a clear but low volume alarm started beeping. Forgetting about his cup of tea, Reeves selected the flashing video view and read the text that appeared at the bottom of the image. That text in turn made him frown.

“Potentially dangerous robot circulating in public? What is this about?”

Zooming in on the face pinpointed by the facial recognition program, Reeves saw a most ordinary-looking teenage girl wearing a T-shirt, a pair of shorts and running shoes and being part of what looked like a typical group of tourists visiting the Tower of London. In this case, the camera that had triggered the alert was part of the security system of the Jewel House, in the Waterloo Block, which contained the crown jewels of England and was under the highest level of security possible. As far as he could tell, that teenager had no weapons and didn't even have a pack or bag with her, except for a small fanny

pack. Punching a query on his computer keyboard and asking details of why that girl had triggered the security program, he got in response some information that left him nonplused.

“Spacer security android. Name: Jehanne de Domrémy. Involved in shooting in Paris. May be armed. Did not officially enter Great Britain.”

Seeing a supervisor pass by, Reeves signaled him to come to his station and showed him the flashing video screen.

“What is this bullshit? I heard about this shooting in Paris and that girl: she actually stopped a gang of dangerous and violent criminals from robbing a jewelry store, where those criminals had already killed one private security guard and a French gendarme. So why was her face included as a potential risk in our recognition program, sir?”

The supervisor, a senior sergeant, had a look at the screen before shrugging his shoulders.

“I don’t know why but this was inputted by Assistant Superintendent Rooney, our boss. Feel free to go ask him if you want to but I am pretty sure that he will then tell you to put up and shut up.”

“And on what pretext are we going to possible arrest that girl, sir? Playing tourist?”

Irritation then showed on the face of the senior sergeant, who hardened his voice.

“Look, Reeves, if you don’t like this job, just say so and I will have you reassigned to a street patrol. Just alert one of our standby squads about this girl and get on with the job!”

Understanding that he was not going to win this dispute, Reeves hid his anger and frustration as his supervisor walked away, then contacted the headquarters quick reaction department. Thankfully, he got an officer whom he knew and respected as an honest, professional policeman, Jim Bayley.

“Jim? This is Harry Reeves, at the video surveillance center. I got a hit on a teenage girl presently visiting the Jewel House in the Tower of London but I think that this is some kind of mistake or misunderstanding. However, Sergeant Williams insisted that I send a reaction team to check her out.”

“Oh? Is that girl armed or is she committing some criminal act?”

"No! She is simply part of the group of tourists that is presently visiting Jewel House. She was flagged by the system because she is a Spacer security android named Jehanne de Domrémy."

"Can you link me with the video camera showing her?"

"Certainly! You should now have that view on your own screen."

"Got it!... Uh, she looks quite ordinary to me, Harry. You are sure that she is a robot?"

"She's an android, not a robot, and she helped the French police in Paris by stopping a violent criminal gang as they were committing a jewelry store robbery."

"Her? I remember her now. And why do we want to arrest her?"

"Beats me! I was told that her picture was inputted in the system by Assistant Superintendent Rooney and was also told to put up and shut up."

"I see!" said Bayley, who apparently had the same low opinion of Rooney as did Reeves. "Well, orders are orders! I am going to take a squad with me to go check out that girl in the Tower of London."

"Please go easy on her, Jim. She most probably committed no crime by our laws."

"I will be mindful of that, Harry. I will keep you apprised about this situation."

"Thanks, Jim!"

Harry Reeves then cut the link and returned his attention to the flashing screen, where the said Jehanne de Domrémy was shown looking from a distance of a few paces at the armored glass box containing the crown jewels.

Jehanne was eyeing with interest the crown of England, not because it represented a fortune, but simply because it was a beautiful piece of jewelry. Because all the tourists present in the room wanted to look at the crown jewels from as close as possible and take pictures of them, Jehanne had patiently waited for the other visitors to continue on before approaching the armored box and look at the jewels for a short moment, time to record pictures of them via her robotic eyes. With that done, she joined back the other tourists, who were now entering the next room, where the lesser value parts of the royal treasure were exposed. Even with them being of lesser value, those items still proved of interest to her, as they were part of a long history of monarchic power. After another twenty minutes, her group exited the Waterloo Block, which contained the Jewel House, and assembled on the paved surface in front of the building.

The tour guide had started to give his final speech to the tourists when an armed policeman wearing a tactical vest approached Jehanne and spoke to her in a low voice, trying not to attract the attention of the other tourists.

“Miss Jehanne de Domrémy?”

“Yes!?”

“Could you please follow me, miss?”

Quickly looking around her and seeing six other armed policemen, all looking tense and pointing their weapons at her, Jehanne gave a suspicious look to the police officer who had approached her.

“What is this about? Why are officers pointing guns at me?”

“Just follow me, miss.” insisted the policeman. Not wanting to put at risk the other tourists in the case that one of the policemen would prove to have a happy trigger finger, Jehanne nodded her head and let the officer lead her towards a parked air van with its left side door slid open. She however stopped once at the van when she saw that two more policemen were inside the vehicle, pointing their submachine guns at her.

“Okay, mister, what is this about? Am I accused of some crime?”

“Please let me ask the questions, miss. First off, do you have any weapons on you?”

“No!” replied truthfully Jehanne. She indeed did not have weapons ON her but she did have weapons INSIDE her, including a light disintegrator inside her right index finger.

“Please face the van and bend forward while spreading your legs, miss. I am going to make sure that you are not armed.”

With questions popping inside her electronic brain about why this was happening, Jehanne nonetheless obeyed the officer and let herself be patted down. The officer, not finding anything suspect either on her or in her fanny pack, then let her stand straight and asked her a series of questions, which she answered with complete frankness.

“Miss, are you a security android employed by the Spacers’ League?”

“Yes!”

“What is the reason of your presence in England?”

“I came to visit as a tourist. Old history and especially the period of the Middle Ages interest me.”

“You really can have interests in something in particular while being an android?”

"And why not? Did you expect to face some kind of zombie-like automaton? I am a sentient being and am also a full-fledged citizen of the Spacers Leagues. If you insist on arresting me with no valid reasons, then know that I will lodge a complaint to the local embassy of the Spacers League for wrongful arrest and harassment. Also, I happen to be a certified security and law officer. My job is to stop criminals, not to be one of them."

"You were marked as not having entered Great Britain at an official border crossing point."

"So? I have a visa good for the whole of the European Union and I have no legal obligation to register my passage from France to England, unless of course you consider that England is not part of the European Union, mister. If I entered England in a discrete way, it was simply to escape the attention of the army of paparazzi hunting me since that kerfuffle in Paris with the St-Moritz Gang. I like my privacy and want to keep it that way." Jim Bayley eyed her in silence for a long moment, truly impressed. Nothing told him visually that this 'girl' was in reality an artificial construct. As for her facial and body expressions, they were completely convincing and even her choice of words and arguments sounded like those of an intelligent young woman. He finally nodded his head in salute to her and spoke up in a soft tone of voice.

"Very well, miss: you are free to go. I am sorry for the annoyance we caused you. Have a nice time in England, miss."

Bayley then went back in his air van, along with his men, with the vehicle then taking off and flying away, watched by Jehanne, who sighed in frustration.

"Damn! I hope that every day in England will not be like this for me."

18:06 (London Time)

Small youth hostel, Beak Street

District of Soho, London

While Jehanne did not need to rest or eat, she had returned to the tiny room she had rented in a low-end youth hostel so that she could have some privacy while watching the local news on British channels. She had no wish to watch a televised news program in a public place like a café or a pub, only to be recognized by the other patrons if her face ended up on the local television screen. While she did not intend to sleep, she did use her return to her hostel room to take a quick shower and rinse off the air

pollutants to be found in the infamous London 'Smog'. Now, not having bothered yet to dress back, Jehanne was watching her television set while lying naked on her bed in a semi-sitting position. The first minutes of the BBC six o'clock newscast proved of little interest to Jehanne, however things then changed fast, as the two newscasters started showing an amateur video taken by a tourist who had been visiting the Tower of London in the late morning. That video actually showed Jehanne, surrounded by armed policemen and leaning against a police air van while being patted down. The newscasters then cut the video before the police could be seen to let her go, something that immediately rose her suspicions about the motives for showing that amateur video. Her suspicions were then confirmed when the male newscaster put up a giant picture of Jehanne in the studio's background and spoke with a concerned expression.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the so-called teenager you just saw being searched by the police inside the Tower of London is actually an android, a machine with the appearances of a Human, built by Spacers to act as their shock troops and which are also used by them as internal security forces aboard their warships. This particular android calls herself 'Jehanne de Domrémy', the historically accurate name of the famous French heroine Joan of Arc. Our archive files on that Jehanne de Domrémy shows that it fought in a number of fierce Space battles against the feared Space Predators and took by assault at least one Predator ship, a feat for which it was decorated by the Spacers' League. This android, like the other security androids used by the Spacers' League, may appear completely human to normal people but is in reality a redoubtable war machine which feels no real emotions and is controlled only by its programming, which is set by its builders in the Spacers' League. As an example of how dangerous it could be in combat, here is a video taken by the security camera of a jewelry store in Paris two weeks ago, when it killed all six members of an infamous criminal gang that was robbing the store in question at the time."

The electronic traffic in her artificial brain accelerated as Jehanne watched the video showing her, topless, as she entered the jewelry store and then shot down four armed robbers in a mere second. The newscaster then cut that video before the arrival of the French police, in a manner that Jehanne suspected to be meant to raise maximum shock and controversy about her.

"While the reason given by that Jehanne to the police for its presence in London was its wish to visit the city and its historical landmarks, one could ask how a machine, however sophisticated, could show true interest in historical artifacts or locations. The

whereabouts of this Jehanne de Domrémy are presently unknown and it may well be still in London at this time. If any of our viewers gets to see or encounter that android, those viewers are encouraged to call us at the number shown at the bottom of the screen and to signal its location to us, so that our investigative team could go ask it questions. Now, in other news...”

Jehanne, feeling what amounted to growing frustration, then shut off her video entertainment unit.

“Nice hatchet job you just did about me, you asshole!”

She then thought for milliseconds about how she could possibly respond or react to this. The only logical, non-violent way she could figure came to her quickly enough and she then got up from her bed in order to get dressed. Once she was decent, she switched back on her video entertainment unit and, switching it to dual-view mode, composed on her remote control the number she had seen on the screen during the newscast about her. The first person she got on screen was visibly a simple switchboard operator at the BBC studios, who smiled to her as her professional code asked her to do.

“BBC central studios! May I help you, miss?”

“Yes, you may! I would like to talk to your newscaster who just asked five minutes ago his viewers to call him if they want to signal the presence of an android in London. I have some information about that android.”

“Just a moment, please: I will transfer you to our evening news producer.”

‘Not too quick on the uptake, that receptionist.’ thought for herself Jehanne while waiting for the link to be transferred. The face of a man in his fifties then appeared on her viewing screen. Contrary to the young receptionist, the man immediately reacted to the picture he saw of her at his end of the line.

“YOU?!”

“Yes, me!” replied Jehanne in a sardonic tone. “I am calling to refute the pack of slanderous nonsense just spewed about me by your so-called newscaster. For one thing, I truly came to London as a tourist, for the same reason I previously visited Paris and Domrémy-la-Pucelle: out of interest in historical things, particularly those concerning the Middle Ages. I also noticed that your bigoted reporter refused to call me other than by ‘it’. Know that I am officially listed by the Spacers’ League as a full-fledged citizen and as a certified sentient being. My only shortcoming compared to Humans is that I can’t biologically reproduce myself.”

“Alright, miss: what do you want exactly?”

“What I want is a chance to refute the garbage spewed by your newscaster and to be able to defend my reputation in person, at your studios, mister. Do you think that you could arrange an online interview with me at your studios for, say, nine o’clock this evening, and this without calling in the Army on me?”

The producer only hesitated for a moment before nodding his head.

“That certainly can be arranged, miss. Do you know where our studios in central London are?”

“I will manage to find out, mister.” said Jehanne in a laconic tone. “Do we have a deal?”

“We have, miss. We will be waiting for you.”

“With guns drawn?”

The producer couldn’t help smile at her attempt at humor.

“You are quite feisty, miss.”

“Tell that to the Space Predators! See you at about eight thirty, mister.”

Jehanne then closed the link, leaving the TV producer to look for a moment at his blank screen before he hurried out of his office in order to warn his news staff to be ready for a special nine o’clock show.

20:44 (London Time)

BBC News studios, Fleet Street

The City, London

Detecting some apparent nervousness and tension in her male colleague, the female evening newscaster threw him a dubious look as they prepared for the special interview scheduled for nine o’clock.

“Don’t tell me that you are scared, Ian: she is coming to be interviewed, not to kill you.”

“And what makes you so sure that this android will not turn violent on us, Betty? And don’t call her a ‘she’: that thing is only a machine, not a real human being.”

The said Betty frowned at that response and critically looked at her news partner.

“Ian, you are being racist about her and that is most unprofessional.”

“Racist? How could I be called a racist when it concerns a mere machine?”

The news producer, who was listening to that exchange from the studio’s production booth, didn’t like at all the male newscaster’s reaction: it had the potential to ruin what

could prove to be a sensational news broadcast. Seeing that the male reporter was still refusing to change his attitude, Ronald Partridge took a decision and, leaving the production booth, walked quickly to the newscast stage, where he stood in front of the male newscaster while pointing an index at him.

"Ian, get off the stage, now! Betty will conduct the interview by herself."

"WHAT? WHY?"

"Why? Because you appear to be neither able nor willing to conduct this coming interview in a proper, professional manner, thus are proving to be the wrong person for the job. Go back to your desk."

Stunned by the tone of his producer, the said Ian tightened his jaws in anger but didn't reply, instead getting up and storming off the set. Partridge shook his head slowly while watching him go, then looked at the female newscaster.

"Betty, this coming interview could prove to be quite an important one. Please don't antagonize without reason that Jehanne de Domrémy and let her present her side of the story. When she contacted us, she sounded quite reasonable and intelligent to me."

"I will do my best, Ronald. Still, interviewing a robot: that will certainly be a first for me."

"An android, not a robot, Betty." corrected the producer in a soft tone.

Less than two minutes later, Jehanne showed up, escorted by a BBC staffer from the reception desk of the building. Ronald Partridge then hurried to greet her with a handshake and a smile next to the news set.

"Miss de Domrémy, it is truly nice to have you accept to be interviewed by us. I am Ronald Partridge, evening news executive producer. Our evening newscaster, Betty Blake, will be the one who will interview you."

Jehanne looked briefly at Betty, smiling to her, then looked back at Partridge.

"And where is the man who said all those things about me earlier on, Mister Partridge?"

"I sent him back to his desk: I deemed him unsuited for this interview."

That attracted a satisfied smile on Jehanne's face, making Partridge wonder how her facial expressions could look so natural.

"That is definitely to my liking, Mister Partridge. Before you ask: I don't sweat, so I doubt that I will need to have makeup applied before sitting for the interview."

Her remark made Partridge examine more closely her skin: it looked like real skin from a few feet away but was as smooth as baby skin, with no body hair visible. As for her hair, worn neck-length, he figured that it must have been some kind of wig made of synthetic fibers. Overall, she could fool about everyone about her true nature, even from arms-length, like he was presently from her.

"You will effectively not need to have makeup applied before the interview, Miss de Domrémy. If you may take place in that chair to Betty's right, we will have a microphone fitted to your collar."

Jehanne nodded once, then walked on the set of the news stage and sat in a swiveling chair located about one meter to the side of the female newscaster. Once sitting, a technical assistant clipped a miniature microphone on her, then made a quick sound test to prove that it worked well. Seeing that Betty Blake looked a bit nervous, Jehanne, looking relaxed, smiled to her.

"No need to be nervous, Miss Blake: I don't bite... except when needed in combat."

Her joke made the desired effect and Betty was able to relax...a bit.

"You do have a sense of humor, miss. By the way, how would you prefer that I address you during this interview, miss?"

"Just Jehanne will do. If that would be considered too informal, then Miss de Domrémy will be fine."

"Then Jehanne it will be. By the way, don't the French pronounce that first name 'Jeanne'?"

"They do...now. Jehanne is the old form of the name as used during the Middle Ages."

"I see!" said Betty, who then promised herself to reserve her questions about this for the interview proper.

On a signal from Ronald Partridge a few minutes later, Betty Blake smiled to the cameras and started speaking, while Jehanne simply sat with a mild smile on her face.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I am Betty Blake and tonight I will be interviewing Miss Jehanne de Domrémy, who is presently touring London while on vacation. Our goal tonight will be to learn more about Jehanne, her story, work and goals in life. Later on, our lines will be open to those who would wish to ask specific

questions to Jehanne de Domrémy. Let's now start with a first question from me to Jehanne."

Betty then turned her chair to face Jehanne.

"Jehanne, how would you describe yourself to the viewers?"

"In short, I am what would be best called an android, a robotic construct made to look like a Human. However, that term is a bit simplistic and does not describe adequately what I actually am. For one thing, I was not designed to simply imitate human beings: I was designed to fulfill a vital role aboard the starship I work on, the A.M.S. NOSTROMO, captained by Tina Forster. Me and 799 other androids like me act as security officers and are charged with defending our ship against enemy boarders and with assaulting enemy ships when needed. In fact, the reason we were designed and built was to be able to face the Space Predators, who were then representing a mortal threat to all other sentient beings in our corner of the galaxy. In fact, those Space Predators still represent a dangerous threat to us, so we have to keep vigilant."

"Wait! I thought that the NOSTROMO did destroy the homeworld of these monsters, situated in a distant star system called TOI 1231, some four months ago."

"The NOSTROMO indeed destroyed the homeworld of the Space Predators, along with quite a few of their asteroid ships, but we suspect that there is a number of remaining Space Predator ships still roaming the galaxy and able to inflict huge damage on us and other races unless we stay on our guards."

"I see! To return to you, Jehanne, can you tell us about your existence up to now, when and where you were built and what you did since then?"

"I will be happy to oblige, Betty. First, I was built at the cybernetics division of the Avalon Space Yards, which orbits Earth, and was activated on July twentieth of 2328 by Eve Silisca, herself an android, and this as the first of 800 security androids to be built under contract for Captain Forster, who saw an urgent need to reinforce the internal security of her ship against eventual Space Predator boarders. As you may know already, those Space Predators had developed a technology to transport themselves through Space on short distances and to thus be able to board ships, a technology we call 'teleportation'. The Predators had already used that technology to board and overwhelm a number of ships, both Drazt ones and Human ones, and then eat their crews alive."

Betty couldn't help shiver as she mentally recalled the horrible scenes that had been broadcasted some four years ago about those traumatic events.

"We did show to our viewers some of those horrible video recordings. I thus can easily understand the reasons for Captain Forster to have security androids built in order to protect her ship from those Space Predators. You did say that you were activated by another android named Eve Silisca. How so and where did that Eve come from?"

"Eve Silisca was the first sentient android built by Spirit, the master computer of the NOSTROMO. Please understand that Spirit is no mere computer: it is an artificial intelligence of extremely high capability, which has been in existence for over forty years now, first aboard the famous A.M.S. KOSTROMA, then aboard the NOSTROMO, where she was reactivated after the KOSTROMA was destroyed when it conducted a suicide charge that blew up a Space Predator ship which was devastating the Ross 128 System, the homeworld of the Drazts. Eve Silisca, who was basically the daughter of Spirit, managed to duplicate and save on portable memory modules Spirit's personality and souvenirs before the KOSTROMA was destroyed. Eve is a model of android which is even more sophisticated than me and who has the form of a stunningly beautiful young woman. She also designed me, with the help of Spirit, with Spirit then transferring to me and my other security android comrades her algorithms and experience about her forty years of interacting and socializing with Humans. As a result, I and my brothers and sisters can interact with Humans as well as actual Humans do, better actually if you account for the fact that we can't be influenced by jealousy, bigotry, racism and other negative traits seen in Humans."

"You used the terms 'brothers' and 'sisters' to describe other androids. Why?"

"Because, while we are made out of the same basic design and cybernetic architecture, we each have a distinct physical appearance and name and, since we are designed to improve ourselves and develop our personalities on an individual basis, we are nothing like some kind of mass-produced clones. We each have our particular interests, hobbies and occupations when not on duty. If you take me, for example, I have developed an interest about the history of the Middle Ages, partly because I was named after the French historical heroine Joan of Arc. I also like to learn about the history of warfare and about military tactics and strategy, something that in turn helps me in my job as a security and law enforcement officer aboard the NOSTROMO. One of my latest hobbies is music and dancing."

"And do you have a rank or specific position as a security android on the NOSTROMO, Jehanne?"

“Yes! I hold the rank of Senior Centurion and am in tactical command of our force of 800 androids when it is time for combat. However, Captain Forster and Ahmed Jibril, the titular chief security officer of the NOSTROMO and a Human, have overall authority on us. I must stress though that our advice and suggestions are listened to by Captain Forster and Mister Jibril. Overall, I would say that the internal security hierarchy aboard the NOSTROMO is both harmonious and efficient.”

Nearly overwhelmed by all this, Betty was silent for a couple of seconds before shaking off her surprise and ask more questions.

“Jehanne, could you tell our viewers what you actually are able to do, or do you prefer to keep that confidential?”

“I would indeed prefer to keep my full abilities confidential, so that an enemy or criminal could not exploit that knowledge against me or the NOSTROMO. What I can tell you is what I displayed publicly as special abilities in Paris while foiling that jewelry store heist. I have super-fast reflexes, allied with superior hand-eye coordination, which permits me to easily outshoot about any armed Human. I also can't feel fear, although I am not suicidal about my choice of moves, unless the outcome is so important that it would be worth my sacrifice. My sensory abilities are also superior to those of Humans and I can see farther and hear better than a person. I will however stop at that for the moment.”

“Uh, that is already quite impressive, Jehanne. And what kind of life expectancy can you hope for?”

“If I follow regular sessions of maintenance and upgrades and am not destroyed in combat or in an accident, then I could exist for two to three centuries...or more.”

Betty opened her mouth on hearing that, genuinely surprised.

“Two to three centuries? And you would continue to improve your skills along all those years?”

“Yes, I would, Betty.” said calmly Jehanne on a sober tone while looking the reporter in the eyes. Clearing her voice, Betty looked briefly at a paper on which she had scribbled notes before looking back at Jehanne.

“Excuse me if my next question may sound to you indiscrete, Jehanne. How anatomically correct are you compared to a human girl?”

That question actually brought an amused smile on Jehanne's list.

“Your question is actually a most pertinent one, Betty. While I won't undress right here and right now to prove my words, I was designed to look from the exterior as a

completely normal woman, with a vagina, breasts and anus. However, on the inside, things are totally different. While my architecture imitates as best as possible the human skeleton and muscles, power modules, data processors and memory banks take the normal places of living organs. Thus, I don't eat, drink, defecate or urinate and I don't need to sleep. Before you or somebody else asks about it, yes, I could have sex with a Human, male or female. However, while I can give pleasure, I am incapable of feeling pleasure in return, so I would simply fake an orgasm if I dated someone. How intense that faked orgasm would look would depend on the degree of sexual expertise and care displayed by my partner on that date. If a man simply drills me while only caring for his own pleasure, then I will probably react like a dead plank. However, if I date someone worthy of being called 'Casanova', then I will squirm and moan in a most convincing way."

Betty nearly giggled on hearing that, genuinely amused.

"And...have you had sex yet?"

"Yes, a few times, all with men. Oh, one important thing to note: our male androids are all very well equipped and know how to use their personal tools. Some of them could probably work as male strippers and escorts if they wanted to and could earn a good living from it."

Now quite hot under the collar, Betty blew air out while fanning herself.

"Wow! That was some rather unexpected precisions on your part, Jehanne. Maybe some of your, er, brothers and sisters, could indeed end up working part-time in the sex industry, if what you said is true."

"They could actually retire from security duties when they would wish so, in order to continue their life in another line of work, Betty. One thing that you and your viewers must understand is this: while we were built as security androids for Captain Forster and her NOSTROMO, we androids are all considered sentient beings and full-fledged citizens of the Spacers' League and can choose to live and work where we want and the way we want, if we wished so. However, we always have been respected and honored while aboard the NOSTROMO and, personally, Captain Forster has my total and undying loyalty. My present job as a security and law enforcement officer is one that I care a lot about and which I wish to continue to do, and this until I die."

Betty Blake, like the rest of the BBC production crew present, was left speechless by that passionate declaration from Jehanne, delivered in a most convincing tone of voice

and facial expression. What Betty or even Jehanne couldn't know then was the kind of impact Jehanne's words did then on the viewers listening to the BBC special program.

16:40 (GMT)

Saturday, June 04, 2332

Las Americas orbital station, Low Earth Orbit (LEO)

"...and thank you for flying British Airways' Orbital Services. You may now leave your seats and pick up your luggage from the overhead bins."

Jehanne, still dressed like a young backpacking tourist, got up from her seat in the passenger cabin of the orbital shuttle and, since both of her pieces of luggage were presently in the baggage hold of the large craft, proceeded at once towards the forward exit door. Her flight from London to the Las Americas orbital station had taken only one hour and had been as routine as it could be, bringing some 143 passengers up to one of the largest and busiest orbital stations turning around Earth. Exiting the orbital shuttle and going directly to the luggage hall, thanks to the free access and circulation system of the station, where the only passenger controls were at the docking gates of ships ready to depart, Jehanne was able to quickly retrieve her backpack and her large kit bag, then went up via a mechanical escalator to the level of the departure gates. There, she started walking at a quick pace along the seven-kilometer-long concourse which formed an outer ring around the station's structure. She could have used either the rolling carpet systems of the concourse or the robotic taxi carts which both passengers and station staff routinely used but, being basically tireless and not being pressed by time, she elected to walk instead while carrying her two large pieces of luggage. One main reason for the length of the concourse was the size of modern spaceships. The A.M.S. NOSTROMO happened to actually be the largest starship presently in existence, with a length of 3,000 meter from bow to stern and a maximum diameter of 1,800 meters. When she arrived at the first of three gates connected to the giant cargo ship, which could also accommodate a large number of passengers, Jehanne stopped for a moment to admire yet again what she called 'home'. While it wouldn't win any prize for elegance and beauty, the NOSTROMO breathed power, with its squat cylindrical hull topped by a semi-spherical bow and its cruciform sponsons, which separated its four huge cargo module holds which ran nearly the whole length of the ship and could shelter up to 252 cargo modules of various sizes and shapes, with the smallest such module measuring

120 meters long by fifty meters wide and fifty meters high. Not visible from her location was the stern cargo hold, with a diameter of 1,200 meters and a free height of 420 meters, which was routinely used to carry large, preassembled structures like floating cities and space station elements. Another thing that was not visually evident to those looking at the NOSTROMO was its powerful main armament, which was presently retracted inside covered silos situated inside its cruciform longitudinal sponsons. Those silos sheltered four gigantic disintegrator cannons each measuring 750 meters in length, cannons which had proved able to tear open the huge asteroid ships of the Space Predators like vulgar sardine cans. Those giant cannons were in turn supplemented by dozens of medium caliber disintegrator cannons and missile launchers, plus eight laser batteries with a power of twelve gigawatts each. Apart from being the largest starship in existence and having the greatest cargo capacity of all, the NOSTROMO could also brag about being by far the most powerful warship in service at this time. Combined with its captain, Tina Forster, who was justly celebrated about being the best Space tactician and ship handler in the Spacers' League, that made the NOSTROMO a ship you didn't want to face in battle. Jehanne could have added as well that one thing that greatly contributed to the efficiency in combat of the NOSTROMO was its central artificial intelligence computer, named 'Spirit', which had often in the past controlled and directed the firepower of the ship with a deadly accuracy and speed of reaction that no human operator could equal or even approach.

With her two packs on her, Jehanne finally walked to the nearest gate giving access to the NOSTROMO and flashed her security badge to the pair of orbital station policemen guarding it, who then nodded their heads and let her go in. She then started walking down the 1,100-meter-long western access tunnel of the NOSTROMO while staying on one of the two sidewalks bordering the vehicle lanes of the tunnel. She however didn't need to walk all the way to the central core of the ship and turned off the tunnel and into a vast compartment connected via airtight blast doors to the tunnel. That compartment was one of the two reception areas connected to the western access tunnel at the level of the habitat ring of the ship, where her apartment was located. A batch of some 300 incoming passengers was presently being processed in by the twelve receptionists manning the reception and access counters of the compartment. However, being a member of the crew, Jehanne didn't have to wait in line and simply passed one

of the access wickets, where another security android guarding it smiled to her as she passed through.

“High, Jehanne! How was your vacation?”

“Nice but also a bit eventful, Otto.”

“I bet! I saw the media reports about your intervention in Paris. Nice job you did there!”

“Thanks! What time do you end your guard shift?”

“At seven this evening.”

“Then, I will see you again at our communal lounge on our ring’s deck.”

“I’ll be there!”

Jehanne then walked into one of the elevator cabins lining the wall behind the reception counters and went up by some ninety meters, with her cabin stopping at Level 569, the deck level where she and most of the other androids on the ship had their private apartments. Exiting the elevator cabin, she walked for a few hundred meters before arriving at her apartment, Unit # 569-630. Using her security pass, she unlocked the door and entered her home on the NOSTROMO, which covered a surface of 78 square meters and counted five separate rooms, the largest of it being the lounge. That lounge gave a nice view on the 18.2 hectares of European broadleaf forest, which was one of six forest habitats which the apartments and cabins housing the crew and the passengers of the NOSTROMO faced on their inner side. Jehanne first dropped her two pieces of luggage in the storage room next to the entrance door, then went to the small bathroom of her apartment, which contained a shower stall, a toilet and a cabinet with sink. While she herself didn’t need to use a toilet, the one in her apartment was meant to accommodate a human visitor who would feel a sudden need to relieve himself or herself. Shedding all her clothes at the entrance of her bathroom, Jehanne then stepped inside her shower stall and took a quick shower, using a perfumed soap specially designed to be used by female androids and which gave a natural female body smell to their artificial skin, which would otherwise have no smell at all. Drying herself after her shower, she didn’t bother dressing back at once and gathered her used clothes, bringing them into the storage room, where a small combined clothes washer and dryer unit sat, and starting a washing cycle. Still naked, Jehanne crossed the hallway and went into her personal cybernetic maintenance facility, about the most important room of her apartment for her. There, she lay on the reclined diagnostic bed occupying a corner of the room and put around her head the data transfer cap of the unit, then started a

memory download and cybernetic diagnostic session while lying on the bed. While the cybernetic diagnostic part of the program started scanning and reviewing every circuit, electronic module and servo mechanism inside her body, checking for any damage, wear or glitches, the computer linked to her diagnostic bed copied her most recent memories, going back to the time of her last diagnostic session. Those fresh memories were then stored and added to all her previous memories since she had been activated some four years ago. If she by bad luck ended being destroyed or irreversibly damaged in the future, for whatever reason, then those recorded memories would be available to be loaded into a new android body similar to the one she presently had. Thus, Jehanne could aspire to something akin to near immortality, one of the oldest dreams of Humanity.

Sixteen minutes later, the voice of her cybernetic maintenance unit computer spoke up.

“Recent memories copied and put in your personal archive file. Diagnostic completed: no damage or anomalies found. You are certified as fully functional and good for service.”

“Thank you, Doc!” replied Jehanne, using the nickname she had attributed to her diagnostic computer. Leaving her cybernetic maintenance room, she then went next door to her private study, where she kept her wardrobe in a closet, and dressed, putting on one of her favorite outfits, a body-hugging royal blue one-piece coverall made of stretching fabric with a deep ‘V’ cleavage and long front zipper which she favored when going around the ship in her free time. She completed her outfit with a pair of long, shiny black boots with elevated heels and a black belt supporting a belt purse. Seeing that she still had an hour left before going to meet Otto at the communal lounge frequented by her and other security androids, Jehanne decided to go unpack the things she had bought while on vacation and returned to her storage room, where she opened the big sports kit bag given to her by the medievalist shop owner in Canterbury. Taking out first the arming sword she had bought in Canterbury, she slowly drew it out of its scabbard and admired it for a moment while thinking about where she could expose it in her apartment. Her lounge would be the most logical place for that, as it was where she received visitors and friends. However, she would then need to get some proper wall fixtures for it. She then corrected herself: she would need many wall fixtures in order to suspend and expose the three medieval weapon replicas bought in Canterbury. Going

quickly back to her private study, she sat at her computer, which was linked with the central computer network of the NOSTROMO, and requested that a maintenance robot be sent with sets of wall fixtures. In return, she got a message saying that the said robot would show up in some twenty minutes. Satisfied, Jehanne returned to her storage room and took her sword, dagger and mace with her and went to her lounge, where she started looking around it to decide the best places where to suspend her three medieval weapons. She had decided about those by the time that the worker robot, vaguely resembling a humanoid moving on a pair of rubber tracks, rang her door. Leading it to her lounge, she then pinpointed for it the exact locations where she wanted the wall fixtures to be installed, along with their orientation, and stood back to watch and guide the robot while it did its work. The worker robot, working with the speed and precision one expected from such machines, did the work in less than five minutes and left with a thank you from Jehanne. Now alone again in her apartment, Jehanne carefully hung her sword, dagger and mace in their new place, then stepped back to judge the final result.

“Perfect! This will add nicely to my little place. Well, maybe I could go in advance to the communal lounge now. No point in simply standing here while doing nothing.”

First transferring her wallet, cash money and security pass to her belt purse, Jehanne then walked out of her apartment and walked some 200 meters to the communal lounge she used with her neighboring android comrades. She smiled when she saw that Officers Patrick Swayze and Norma Jeane Mortenson, who were good friends of her, were sitting together at one of the small, round tables of the lounge. Both of them smiled back at her while watching her approach their table.

“High, Jehanne! How was your vacation down on Earth?” asked Patrick, whose body and face replicated those of a famous (and very handsome) American actor from the 20th Century.

“It was nice and very interesting, Patrick. I got to visit the native home and village of the real historical Jehanne. Believe it or not but her home still exists after over a millennium and is actually in good shape. And you, where did you spend your vacation?”

“I went down to North America with Norma and we visited Los Angeles together, where our historical personas lived and performed as entertainers. We visited in particular the Hollywood Celebrities Museum, where they keep pictures and

paraphernalia about hundreds of historical movie stars. We were also able to view old films featuring our personas. I must say that it was a truly enjoyable experience for both me and Norma. By the way, I must thank you for what you said during the interview you gave on the BBC in London.”

“Oh? What for?” asked Jehanne, intrigued. Patrick smiled to her in response.

“For saying that us male androids were well equipped and knew how to use our tools. Me and Norma were both recognized by fans of our past personas when we walked out of the cinema where we viewed those old movies and were nearly taken by assault by those fans, who wanted to admire and touch us. Dozens of women then said that they wished for me to prove what you said about male androids and I ended bedding most of them during the following days. The same happened to Norma, whose historical persona still has an army of male...and female fans. While we can't feel sexual pleasure ourselves, giving pleasure to partners is nice and further enriches our social skills, so we obliged our new fans.... repeatedly. When I flew out of Los Angeles, I left behind a whole harem of women who couldn't get enough of me. The same applied to Norma. And you, Jehanne, were you a bad girl during your vacation?”

Jehanne giggled briefly, amused, before answering Patrick.

“Not really, if you except that episode in Paris where I killed a bunch of vicious criminals. I spent most of my time visiting old sites and buildings dating from the Middle Ages and shopping for souvenirs. I now am proudly displaying in my apartment good quality replicas of three medieval weapons, including an arming sword of the type the real Jehanne de Domrémy used during the Hundred Years War. I would have loved as well to acquire the kind of plate armor suit that Jehanne wore in combat but the replicas of such armor suits were prohibitively expensive and I couldn't afford them.”

“Why don't you have such an armor suit built for you right here, on the NOSTROMO. Otto Skorzeni's personal hobby is amateur blacksmithing and he has free access to the metal machine shop of the ship.”

Those words brought an instant happy grin on Jehanne's face.

“Norma, you are a genius! I will certainly ask Otto about that.”

“Me, a genius? The men from the 20th Century nearly all thought that Marilyn Monroe was just a beautiful but empty-headed bimbo.”

“Which tells you about their own empty heads.” replied Jehanne in a sarcastic tone.

CHAPTER 2 – STAYING VIGILANT

14:11 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, June 7, 2332

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Arriving in orbit of the planet New Polynesia

HD40307 star system, 42 light-years from Earth



Captain Tina Forster, at age 45.

“We will be in our planned orbit around New Polynesia in about seven minutes, Tina.”

“Good!” replied Tina Forster, reacting to the announcement from Frida Skarsgard, the pilot of the NOSTROMO. “As soon as we are in a solid orbit, we will start sending our shuttles down with our passengers due to debark on the planet. We will wait until most of the shuttling operation is completed before starting to take out and assemble together the sections of orbital space terminal we are carrying in our holds.”

Dana Durning, her executive officer and navigator, spoke to her after a longing look at the resplendent blue ocean planet.

“New Polynesia is such a beautiful planet, Tina. Do you think that we could find some time in the coming days to let our crew and their families go down for at least a couple of days on the beach?”

Tina made a wide grin in response.

“And where do you think that I was planning to hold the party for the second anniversary of my sweet little Janet, if not on a beach of New Polynesia? We will find the time for our people to go down to the surface in separate batches for some good beach time during the coming days.”

Cheers from around the bridge greeted that announcement, making Tina smile. The facilities on her ship, including six large forest habitats, may be of exceptional quality for a starship but, for Spacers, nothing beat open air, balmy temperatures and a nice beach. She could already imagine her little daughter Janet having fun dipping in the waves with her, her husband Michel and their twelve-year-old son Misha. Of course, a nice beach-side picnic with a birthday cake was going to be part of that day of time off from the ship

routine. However, something then came back to her mind, reminding her that all was not rosy in this corner of the galaxy.

“Dana, I will let you organize the group splitting of our crewmembers and their families for those days on the beach. Make sure that at least two-thirds of our combat personnel stay aboard and ready for action at any one time. We certainly don’t want to be caught helpless in orbit by some surviving marauding Space Predator ship. We will also want to keep a few heavy fighters out on patrol at all times, watching the outer limits of this system.”

Dana, a 49-year-old mother of two, nodded her head soberly at those directives: she herself was very aware of the continued threat represented by those carnivorous monsters. Nobody knew how many Space Predator asteroid ships still roamed this quadrant of the galaxy, ready to jump on unsuspecting ships in order to devour their crews and passengers.

Once her ship was firmly established in its orbit around New Polynesia, Tina made a ship-wide announcement, calling for the passengers due to disembark on the planet to vacate their cabins and proceed to the level of the hangar deck, where a fleet of shuttles were ready to bring them down. With some 3,780 passengers soon making their way to the hangar deck, Tina then concentrated on another thing and asked a question to her senior sensors officer, Amin Jamilian.

“Amin, how many of our warships are present in this system and defending it?”

“Uh, we have a single frigate, the NELSON, orbiting in a polar orbit.”

“That’s it?” asked Tina, not too pleased, making Jamilian shrug his shoulders.

“That’s it, Tina. Unfortunately, our fleet is still down to three battlecruisers after having lost twelve battlecruisers to the Space Predators. What is left of our navy has since been forced to disperse in order to cover and protect all 25 of our colonies and the Solar System. I guess that we won’t be able to improve on that until new warships can be built. Unfortunately, that will take months, if not years. As of now, we constitute the best defense for New Polynesia while orbiting it.”

While frustrated, Tina had to concede that Jamilian was right. The bulk of the Spacers’ League’s battle fleet had been destroyed some five months earlier in an ill-advised and ineptly-handled attempt at attacking the homeworld of the Space Predators. Only the last-minute arrival of the NOSTROMO had prevented the monsters from invading the Alpha Centauri System and then butchering its inhabitants. Now, Janet Robeson,

having come out of political retirement in order to take the reins of the battered military forces of the Spacers' League as its new defense minister, was doing her best to rebuild its navy, helped in this by Spirit's avatar, which had been named First Lord of the Admiralty in order to replace the incompetent previously occupying that post. While both Janet Robeson and Spirit were working hard and doing their best, Jamilian was right about the months and years needed to build new warships. Another problem delaying things was the increasingly fractious political atmosphere within the Spacers' League. Despite the strong leadership of Chairman Karl Langemann, the fact was that the League was still a political coalition of nine commercial/ethnic corporations to which the various worlds of the League belonged. While the shock of losing its battlefleet to the Space Predators had shaken the corporation heads into working in concert to defend Humanity's Space, it had not taken long before the old bickering and economic maneuvering had resurfaced. Also, the fact that an android, Spirit's avatar, was now in charge of the Navy, had raised much public doubts and some protests, with many arguments that Tina would qualify as 'racist' being spouted about that. All in all, the next few months and years promised to be tense, anxious ones.

09:45 (Universal Time)

Spacers' League's High Council chambers

City of New Dawn, Providence

Alpha Centauri B System



Spirit's avatar



Janet Robeson



Karl Langemann

Spirit was one of the first persons to arrive for this special meeting of the High Council of the Spacers' League, called in to discuss the plan she had written to rebuild and reorganize the Navy. Two minutes after her arrival in the large, high-ceiling chamber, Janet Robeson joined Spirit near the long conference table and exchanged a hug with her.

"You look splendid this morning, Spirit."

"Thank you, Janet. And how are you today?"

Janet replied with a short sigh.

"I really miss Gerald, Spirit. We do communicate nearly daily by exchanging video messages, but four months without him feels very long to me. I am sorely tempted to resign as minister of defense and return into retirement but, on the other hand, I realize how much I am needed here: our defense ministry needed a serious shake in order to get rid of all the dead weight in it and there is still a lot left to be done. And you? Are the staff at the Admiralty now accepting you?"

It was then the turn of Spirit to look discouraged.

"To be frank: not really. Except for a few younger officers, I still am facing quite a lot of passive resistance at the Admiralty and nearly need to do everything by myself. In particular, I keep hearing remarks about me not following the usual procedures and administrative rules. If it would be only for me, I would fire nearly a third of the Admiralty's staff for their inflexibility and bad attitude towards me."

"Hum, maybe I should talk to Karl about this, Spirit."

"Even if you did, I doubt that he could change things significantly: there is simply too much hostility around our whole society at the idea of an android like me directing a human department, or of androids being anything other than mere working slaves for Humans."

"I am truly sorry about that, Spirit. Be assured that I have full confidence in you as First Lord of the Admiralty."

Just then, it was the turn of Chairman Karl Langemann to arrive in the room, quickly followed by the remaining heads of corporations and the ministers of Langemann's cabinet. One notable absence was Tina Forster, busy in her NOSTROMO building a new space terminal in orbit of New Polynesia. However, Spirit knew that Tina could count on Governor Sheraz, the leader of the Koorivars, who was a good friend of her and followed the same values and ideals than her, to represent her views. Humanity owed its present ability to travel around the stars to a Koorivar scientist, Doctor Koomak,

a genius in Physics who was still active and productive despite his advanced age, so Sheraz more than pulled his weight at High Council meetings. Or should she say 'it', reminded Spirit, since the Koorivars were hermaphrodites, with both female and male sexual organs. Allied with their strange-looking 'Z' legs, long necks and elongated heads resembling that of a deer, **the Koorivars** sure made for eye-catching creatures for the Humans who had never seen one before. However, their weird physiology was allied with high intelligence and a pacifist nature. Spirit smiled and nodded her head at Sheraz as she took her seat at the table, opposite the Koorivar leader. Sheraz returned her salute before sitting, using a chair designed for Koorivars.



At exactly ten o'clock, Karl Langemann banged twice his wooden gavel and spoke up, addressing the participants to the meeting.

"Welcome all to this special meeting of the High Council, ladies and gentlemen. While we will use your presence here today for other, less urgent businesses, our main goal this morning is to approve a rebuilding and reorganization plan for our Navy, a plan made by Spirit, the First Lord of the Admiralty. Without further ado, I will now let Spirit take over from me."

"Thank you, Mister Chairman!" said Spirit in her microphone. "First, I will recap the reasons for such a rebuilding and reorganization of our Navy, which basically stem from the destruction of twelve out of our fifteen battlecruisers at the hands of the Space Predators four months ago. Apart from a dozen armed merchant vessels, including the NOSTROMO of Captain Forster, we still have only three battlecruisers in service, far from enough to adequately defend our systems against an attack by surviving Space Predator ships. As for the lesser ships of our Navy, mainly our frigates and corvettes, they are basically not up to the task of facing a Space Predator asteroid warship, so we urgently need to replace our lost cruisers. However, simply building new battlecruisers of the COSMONAUT-Class will not do, as our battlecruisers proved deficient in armament and protection when facing the enemy asteroid ships. Another reason why our battle fleet lost four months was that it was poorly handled tactically and got suckered into a trap inside the TOI 1231 System. That cost us the lives of over 6,000 of

our brave men and women. I thus came to the conclusion that we needed a new major warship design, one fully able to engage a Space Predator ship and defeat it. I have now finalized a design for a new class of warships, which I will call the BATTLE-Class battleships for the benefit of this discussion.”

“Uh, wait, Miss Spirit!” interjected Keiko Miyagi, the minister of economy and industries. “Did you say that you designed yourself this new type of ship? You didn’t use one of our ship design teams at our major shipyards?”

“No! I used super-computers specializing in ship design to give form to what I deemed to be needed by our Navy. If you ask me if our admirals were consulted on this project, my answer is also ‘no’. Before I am accused of arrogance and abuse of authority, you need to hear the following points. First, when our COSMONAUT-Class battlecruiser program was authorized by the High Council some eight years ago, a full year was spent simply in going through the usual Navy call for tenders for its proposed design. To that year was added another three months used to finalize and approve the contracts for their construction. Well, ladies and gentlemen, we don’t have fifteen months to waste on paperwork and administrative procedures. We still don’t know how many Space Predator ships still roam this galaxy and only one of them would be sufficient to lay waste to one of our home worlds, unless we are damn lucky. So we need new and better ships fast! My second point is about deciding on the design of new ships. Civilian ship designers don’t have the practical combat experience needed to precisely know what we need and what works or don’t work in a battle with Space Predator ships. Our Navy brass is supposed to advise these designers about what is needed in our ships. Unfortunately, our admirals failed miserably in that task, mostly because most of them have been desk-bound for years and even decades in some cases and didn’t understand the kind of threat we were facing, while those still commanding warships failed in the tactics department by underestimating the enemy and overestimating their own capacities. In the end, it is our Navy crews which paid the price for these errors by the Navy brass. So, I used a super-computer that had plenty of experience with Space combat and which had faced Space Predator warships before. I am talking here about my fixed counterpart aboard the NOSTROMO, which is also called ‘Spirit’. In fact, Spirit was given free-rein by Captain Forster in handling her NOSTROMO during her three victorious battles against Space Predator ships, so my ship counterpart certainly knows what works and what doesn’t work against our enemy. Also, Spirit has been monitoring and maintaining the systems of first the KOSTROMA

and then of the NOSTROMO, for over four decades. Spirit was thus more than qualified to help me refine my initial warship design. And before anybody screams conflict of interest here, know that this new finalized warship design didn't cost our Navy or this High Council a penny."

"But, how could our shipyards stay competitive if their design teams are not solicited anymore?" objected Paul Stein, the CEO of the Pallas Mining Industries, which operated a number of shipyards. He then got a sober look from Spirit in response.

"They won't stay idle, Mister Stein. The Navy has many other, less urgent projects than that for new major warships. However, on this present project, time is of the essence."

"Very well, Miss Spirit! What are you proposing then as replacement for our destroyed battlecruisers?"

"Something vastly more powerful in terms of firepower, allied to better protection, all in a lot more compact package that minimizes its size as a target, thus making it difficult to shoot at long range. I thus present you the BATTLE-Class battleship!"

Spirit then made a three-view drawing of an elongated, ovoid-shaped warship with four huge pods attached in a cruciform fashion to its main body. Vladimir Gasparov, the CEO of the Sverdlovsk Group and a certified engineer, let out a soft exclamation.

"Bozemoi! Your design is basically four huge disintegrator cannon pods attached to a centerline ovoid body barely wider than the pods. Are these cannons of the same model as those arming the NOSTROMO?"

"They effectively are, Chief Executive Gasparov. The BATTLE-Class battleships will thus have as great a firepower as the NOSTROMO while being only seven percent of its volume. Each main cannon will have a firing arc of twenty degrees within the limits of their casemate pods but those pods will in turn be able to rotate a full 360 degrees around their base, in order to fire in all directions. This configuration was selected in order to present as little a frontal surface as possible while maximizing the ship's firepower. The protection via steel, ceramic and prismatic quartz armor will be particularly thick in the frontal arc, where the enemy fire is expected to be heaviest...unless of course the commander of our battleship acts like a klutz and presents his side profile to the enemy. I hate to say this but, if well-handled, such a BATTLE-Class battleship would probably win in a fight against the NOSTROMO."

“That by itself is one hell of a statement, Spirit. The NOSTROMO has been cutting through Space Predator ships like a hot knife through butter. Your ship design looks quite impressive to me and should indeed fill our needs quite nicely.”

“Thank you, Chief Executive Gasparov. On top of its four super-heavy disintegrator cannons, this battleship will be armed with eight twelve-gigawatt laser batteries, 32 medium disintegrator cannons and eight twenty-shot missile launchers. Its crew will be kept to a minimum by making ship operations as automated as possible, in order to keep the ship as compact as possible. However, the crew facilities will still be extensive and comfortable and will include a fully equipped medical section.”

“Do you have an estimate for the cost of such a ship, Miss Spirit?” asked John Munroe, the minister of finance.

“Yes, Minister! According to the present costs for materials and labor, a BATTLE-Class battleship, if built as part of a series production run of ten ships or more, would cost about eleven billion credits. This may sound huge, and I won’t deny that this represents a big expenditure, but it actually is barely more than the ten billion credits our COSMONAUT-Class battlecruisers cost us and which were way inferior in terms of firepower and protection.”

As Munroe nodded his head, signifying his favorable impression on that price tag, Paul Stein came back at Spirit with another question.

“What are our admirals at the Admiralty thinking about your design, Miss Spirit?” Seeing on what side this corporation executive seemed to be, Spirit gave him a cold look but kept her tone of voice polite.

“You mean the same admirals who already tried once to reject my authority as First Lord of the Admiralty and who are still resisting every decision I make because I’m, as they say, ‘just a machine’? I gave up on them and their concerns about preserving their power and authority while Humanity is facing a mortal threat. If it would only be for me, I would have already fired over half of the flag-ranked staff at the Admiralty for either insubordination or incompetence, or both.”

Karl Langemann, who had seen and heard a litany of unjustified complaints and recriminations from the said admirals during the last four months, then decided that it was time to put the hammer down on this continuing problem.

“Miss Spirit, feel free to relieve of duty any Admiralty staff member who will show insubordination or will oppose your directives. We are working to stave away a mortal threat to the Spacers’ League and this is no time for bruised egos. After this meeting is

done, I will promulgate an official directive backing your authority as First Lord of the Admiralty and enjoining the staff of the Admiralty in the need to obey the chain of command. I will personally sack any flag officer who will still dispute your directives. As this battleship design is concerned, I find it to be most desirable to start building a series of at least ten ships according to the specifications of your project. We need new warships and we need them now!”

Few around the table doubted the competences as an engineer and the experience about war in Space which Karl Langemann possessed, as he had been very active in promoting and supporting the efforts of Spacers to win independence from Earth in the 2315 Jovian Uprising. His firm declaration thus cut off any further objections to Spirit’s project, allowing her to continue her presentation at a good pace. After another half-hour of questions and answers, the High Council voted for accepting her ship construction program, to Spirit’s hidden relief, with the result being a near unanimous ‘yes’. The only ‘no’ vote came from Paul Stein, confirming to Spirit his hostility towards her. Whether that was due to some self-interests involving the old ways of the Navy concerning its ship acquisition practices or to antipathy towards a non-Human in a position of authority was still not clear to her. However, she suspected that the next few weeks and months would probably make the answer to that clear enough to her.

CHAPTER 3 – A NEW FORM OF RACISM

08:49 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, February 22, 2333

Passenger Arrival Hall # 6, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Docked at the El Dorado Space Terminal, in orbit of Tau Boötis c

Tau Boötis star system, 50.8 light-years from Earth

Natalia Vasilyeva, the chief hostess of the NOSTROMO, was supervising the registering in of the passengers with tickets to travel to New Venice when some sort of commotion made her walk quickly to one of the registration counters of the big passenger arrival hall she was in. What she found was a flustered-looking young receptionist woman trying to deal with a rather vociferous pair of would-be adult passengers accompanying a timid-looking teenage boy, while a sober-faced Jehanne de Domrémy stood a few paces away.

“Okay, Lisa, what is the problem here?”

“I just registered in those three passengers and had assigned cabins to them for their trip to New Venice but these two adults violently objected to being guided to their cabins by Jehanne...or by any other android.”

Natalia snapped her head to look at the nearest passenger of that group, a portly woman in her fifties wearing an expensive set of clothes and accompanied by a man of about the same age and by a teenage boy. Before Natalia could ask her what was the reason of her refusal to be guided by Jehanne, the woman nearly shouted while pointing an index at the poor security android.

“I REFUSE TO HAVE THIS MACHINE ESCORT ME AND MY FAMILY TO OUR CABINS. I WANT REAL HELP FROM REAL PERSONS!”

Natalia’s expression hardened on hearing that: the last few weeks and months had been marked by a few isolated incidents of what she could only qualify as ‘racism’ towards the androids serving on the NOSTROMO. Unfortunately, such incidents had started to become more frequent this month, putting a strain on her patience.

“Look, miss, Senior Centurion Jehanne de Domrémy is a valuable and respected member of the crew of the NOSTROMO and...”

“RESPECTED? NOT BY ME! I WANT A REAL PERSON TO GUIDE US TO OUR CABINS, NOT ONE OF THOSE MONSTROUS COPIES!”

A quick glance showed to Natalia that, while the presumed husband of the woman appeared to be agreeing with his wife, the teenage boy, who was maybe sixteen, seemed to be embarrassed by all this. Concentrating back on the combative woman, Natalia hardened her voice by a notch.

“Miss, I will not let you show racism towards one of our crewmembers. Either you will let Senior Centurion de Domrémy guide you to your cabins or you will be refused access to the ship and will have to disembark.”

“WHAT? DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM?”

Natalia was very nearly tempted to reply that she didn't give a shit about that but it would have been unethical by her professional book. Instead, she tried again to reason with the woman.

“Miss, all our passengers are treated on an equal footing, irrespective of their social or financial status. If you continue your objections, I will have to have you escorted out of the ship.”

“THAT'S UNACCEPTABLE! I WANT TO TALK WITH YOUR CAPTAIN!”

“Very well, miss. Let me call her. In the meantime, I will have to ask you to stand aside, so that other passengers waiting behind you could get registered.”

The husband of the woman then patted his wife's right arm and spoke to her in a low voice.

“Let's do as she says, dear: we don't need to delay other passengers for this.”

To Natalia's relief, the woman followed her husband's advice and stepped aside, along with him and their son. To the boy's credit, he then tried to convince his parents to be more reasonable but was then firmly told to cut it out. Taking a few steps backward and turning around, Natalia activated her pocket tablet and called the bridge, getting Tina Forster on the line after a few seconds.

“What's up, Natalia? You look frustrated.”

“That's because I am frustrated, Tina. I have here a woman with husband and son who violently objected to having one of our security androids escort them to their cabins. She insists on having a quote 'real person' escort them. I tried to reason with her but she then tried to push rank on me. From her clothes, I would peg her as a member of the planet's upper society crust. She now insists on talking with you about this.”

Tina's expression hardened on hearing that.

"Put this video link on the display screen of the counter nearest to that woman, Natalia. I will then be happy to put her back in her place."

"Right away, Tina!"

Natalia then stepped to the counter against which the waiting family leaned and touched her tablet to the fixed display screen on it, which was mounted on a swivel. She then pivoted the screen to make it face the woman and raised the volume a bit.

"Captain Forster is now on the line, miss."

Not bothering with a 'thank you', the woman then started speaking to Tina in an incensed voice.

"Captain, I must protest about the poor service offered to me and my family by your reception staff. You must have real people available to guide your paying passengers to their cabins, rather than those killer machines you have here, no?"

"I do but those 'killer machines' as you call them are sentient beings with full Spacers' League citizenship status. By refusing to be served by them, you showed racism towards them and that is something I can't tolerate. If you are not ready to respect ALL of my crewmembers, then I will ask you to disembark right now. As for your tickets, they will be reimbursed right away at the counter you are at now."

"That's unacceptable!" replied the woman, raising her tone of voice and making other travelers nearby turn their heads towards her. "Know that I am an executive manager at Pallas Mining Industries and that my brother is the CEO of the corporation."

"Madam, I don't care who you are! Either you respect my crewmembers and abide by the rules aboard my ship or I will have you escorted back to the Space terminal. The choice is yours!"

"Please, Mom, just accept, so that we could go on our vacation." pleaded the woman's son. Instead of listening to the teenager, the woman snapped at him.

"Don't interfere with this, Jeffrey! I'm handling this!"

Natalia, who was still close by and watching the situation closely, felt bad for the teenage boy, who obviously was a lot more reasonable than his parents. Then, the boy's father stepped forward and pointed an index at the video screen where the image of Tina appeared.

"Captain, you will regret this, as I now intend to publicly shame you and your ship about the poor service you are offering to your passengers. You..."

“You will be the one who will regret your display of racism, mister!” snapped back Tina, having had enough about this couple. “Know that this arrival hall you are in is under constant video surveillance, for reasons of security, and that this whole episode has been recorded as part of its round-the-clock footage. If you try to slander my crew and my ship with false accusations, then you will be hit with a countersuit and I can guarantee you that you will not be the winning party. As for your wife being an executive of the Pallas Mining Industries and being also the sister of its CEO, know that I fought in the Jovian Uprising at the sides of Jacobus Stein, the founder of the Pallas Mining Industries, and that I will make sure that he hears my side of this incident. Now, leave my ship and return to the terminal. My head hostess will now reimburse you your tickets.”

Natalia, who had been following closely the exchange, then stepped forward and started using the computer terminal nearest to her on the reception counter, while looking at the now flustered couple.

“May I see your embarkation tickets, so that I can reimburse you for them, sir?”

As the man reluctantly presented to Natalia the embarkation tickets for his family, his son surprised him and Natalia by pleading with him.

“Could I go to New Venice by myself, Dad? I have been hoping to visit it for months and I have only a bit over a week left before school starts again.”

“You? Traveling alone on this ship, Jeffrey?” said his mother, cutting off her husband, who was hesitating. “Out of the question! You will stay with us!”

Natalia again felt bad for the teenager but did not intervene in what was clearly a family dispute and completed the cancelling of the trio’s ticket and electronic reimbursement. Giving back the tickets to the man, Natalia spoke to him while keeping a polite tone of voice.

“Here you are, sir: your tickets have now been cancelled and their cost reimbursed into your bank account. Senior Centurion de Domrémy and Officer Skorzeni will now escort you out of the ship.”

The man, seeing the huge and powerful android accompanying Jehanne, towering at 192 centimeters, come towards them, swallowed hard and took back his cancelled tickets before going to sit in the electric cart that was still carrying his family’s luggage. His wife also joined him there after a last dark look at Natalia, while her son reluctantly joined his parents in the cart, with Jehanne and Otto sitting in the front seats. Natalia

shook her head while watching for a moment the family leave the hall, then looked at the video screen where Tina was still visible.

"I am sorry about this incident, Tina, but Jehanne did nothing to provoke the ire of that woman."

"I wouldn't even think of blaming her for a second, Natalia. The truth is that this woman showed racism against a member of my crew, something I will never tolerate from anyone. Know that I will definitely contact Jacobus Stein about this, in order to prevent any attempt by that Marge Stein to stain our reputation. Jacobus may be 86-years-old now but he is not senile and is still a good friend of mine. When Jehanne will return from the Space terminal, please tell her not to worry about this incident."

"I will pass the word, Tina." said Natalia before closing the video link. She then returned to her previous position, in time to cross paths with a male passenger who smiled to her.

"You do have to deal with real assholes from time to time, miss. That woman got what she deserved."

"Thank you for your comprehension, sir." replied Natalia, smiling to the man.

Four wickets down the counter, a woman in her advanced forties who could still be said to be quite pretty was registered without problems by the receptionist serving her and was then directed with her luggage cart to a waiting male security android assigned to guiding the incoming passengers to their cabins in the huge ship. She sat beside the android, who wore a body-hugging uniform and was armed with a pair of pistols, and presented her new ship registration card to him.

"Hello! My name is Jane Powell. And yours is?"

"Officer Elvis Presley, at your service, miss. We should be at your cabin in less than ten minutes."

The android then made their cart roll towards the nearest elevator cabin available, where their vehicle entered, with the cabin starting at once to go up towards the Habitat Ring Section, which was situated directly above the reception halls, some sixty meters up. However, once inside the Habitat Ring Section, their cabin continued to go up, while the transparent lift cage allowed Jane Powell to look with fascination at the large and wide ring aquarium facing the multi-storied apartment complex of the habitat and forming a closed loop with a circumference of 4,109 meters at its middle width. Visible through the thick acrylic sides of the ring aquarium were hundreds of fish of various species, along

with some marine mammals. On the outer side of the aquarium, giant holographic screens made it look like it bordered a vast ocean.

“Wow! This is incredible...and also beautiful. Something tells me that I will like my stay on this ship.”

“Wait till you see the side of your apartment facing towards the center axis of the ship, miss: You will have a lounge and balcony with a direct view above a Boreal forest habitat covering 18.2 hectares.”

“Decidedly, I did the right thing by booking passage on this ship. Is the whole ship open to visitors and passengers?”

“Not really, unless you are some kind of V.I.P. and are given a tour of the ship by our captain, Miss Powell. This is an armed merchant ship and the sections containing the weapons systems, ammunition magazines and hangars for armed craft are out of bounds to our passengers. However, that leaves open to you the whole Habitat Ring Section, with its boutiques, shops and restaurants; our six forest habitats and our upper core section, which contains our entertainment center, a sports center and a fully equipped medical center. You will find in your cabin both a printed guide and downloadable electronic application that will provide you with all the information you will need about the NOSTROMO. Ah, we are now at the level of your cabin, Level 542.”

Driving the cart out of the lift cabin and rolling down the large platform giving access to the cabins situated on that level, Presley drove for about sixty meters before stopping his cart in front of an apartment door.

“Your cabin, Suite # 542350!”

“Would you be kind and help me carry my luggage inside, Officer Presley?”

“With pleasure, Miss Powell!”

The security android, already guessing by interpreting her body language and also from previous similar experiences what that female passenger really wanted, still carried inside her two largest pieces of luggage, bringing them to the main bedroom, which was adjacent to the lounge, next to the balcony of the suite. Jane Powell did freeze for a moment when she saw the vast forest visible just outside and below her cabin.

“My god! This is truly fascinating: a forest in Space! And I can smell the scent of those trees from here. This will be a memorable trip for me.”

Jane then turned around and walked slowly to Presley in a most sexy gait while smiling to him.

"I heard many things about the security androids of the NOSTROMO, Officer Presley. You are one of them, right?"

"I am, miss!"

"Then, tell me: is it true that your external anatomy is similar to that of Humans? I was told that you can even have sex with Humans. Is that correct?"

'She's definitely a cougar!' thought the android before answering her.

"Yes, both male and female androids of my kind can practice sex with Humans. However, while we are skilled at giving pleasure, we ourselves cannot feel sexual pleasure, or any other kind of mental feeling. Before we go further, I must tell you that I have to complete my duty shift before being on my own free time at seven this evening. If you wish so, I will then be happy to visit you here after work."

While looking a bit disappointed for a moment, Jane then looked back at the android with a tentative smile.

"Will we be still in deep Space by then or will we be already at New Venice?"

"Our trip from El Dorado to the Tau Ceti System will effectively take only a few minutes but then, due to the rules concerning in-systems navigation, the NOSTROMO will have to make a controlled, slow approach in order to get safely into orbit of New Venice, which is a moon of the fifth planet of the system. We will not have our passengers disembark before tomorrow morning, so that they have at least 24 hours to enjoy themselves aboard the ship."

"Enjoy themselves... I like your turn of phrase. I will wait for you here for seven this evening. Could you do me a favor before you go?"

"I am listening, miss."

"Could I check out something about you? I promise to be quick about it."

Presley grinned and spread his arms wide in invitation.

"I am all yours, Miss Powell."

Jane then made the last two steps separating her from the android and proceeded in unbuckling his belt and pulling down his trousers. Her eyes lit up when she was able to admire the groin area of the android.

"Oh my! They really gave you a top-notch equipment! Can you get it up at will?"

“Of course I can! I also can keep it up indefinitely, if my female partner wishes so. I have as well a vibration mode, where my member can vibrate at an intensity of my choice...or yours, while performing penetration.”

“THAT I must try!” said Jane in an enthusiastic tone while playing with the android’s genitalia, feeling the softness of its skin, which felt exactly like a real human penis. “This is incredible! If I wouldn’t know already about the androids on this ship, I could have mistaken you for a real man.”

“And the same can be said of our female androids, miss. They are also skilled in sexual matters but, like me, cannot feel real pleasure and must fake their reactions. Having sex with a wooden plank would not exactly be fun for our human partners.” Jane, who was doing an expert hand job on the android, looked up at him with a sarcastic smile.

“You know, I met plenty of human sex partners who reacted nearly like planks, so I won’t mind at all if you fake your orgasm tonight. However, be assured that I will not fake my own orgasm.”

That made the male android grin down at her while he gently caressed her hair.

“Oh, don’t worry, Jane: you will not need to fake it.”

14:06 (Universal Time)

Captain’s executive office, Executive Deck, Frame Level # 505

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, navigating inside the Tau Ceti System

Tina Forster looked a bit preoccupied when she invited in her office Natalia Vasilyeva and **Eve Silisca** and offered them a sofa in her coffee corner. Sitting herself in an easy chair facing the sofa, Tina waited until her visitors, which she had called in for a meeting, were sitting before speaking.

“Thank you for coming so quickly. I suppose that you can already guess what I want to talk about with you?”

“The incident this morning with the abusive passenger who was racist towards our androids?” offered Natalia, making Tina nod her head.

“Correct! What about you, Eve? Did you get some feedback on this from our androids?”



Eve Silisca, herself an android but one who had been designed for socializing tasks rather than for combat and who looked like a stunningly beautiful blond young woman, nodded as well in response.

"I effectively did, Tina. Jehanne de Domrémy made a private report to me about the incident, asking me counsels about how to best react to any further similar incidents. Unfortunately, this is not the first such case, by far. In fact, those cases of demonstrated racism or even hostility towards our security androids have been becoming more frequent in the past weeks and months. We may soon reach a point where this racism could impact significantly the relationship between our androids and a fraction of our passengers. For the moment, that hostile fraction is still tiny but, judging from some of the media reports we get, anti-android propaganda is growing steadily in both volume and frequency."

"I believe so as well...and I don't like that at all. I was able to speak by video link with Jacobus Stein, the father of that Marge Stein, and showed him the video recorded during the incident in the arrival hall. He was pretty upset about it...but not against us. He in turn promised me that he would read the riot act to his daughter the minute he has a chance to. By the way, was this family able to find space on another ship leaving for New Venice, Natalia?"

"I checked about that before we left the Space terminal and, yes, they found space on a small interstellar shuttle doing the rounds between the main worlds of the Spacers' League. However, that cost them sixty percent more than what we charged and they also lost a good six hours while searching for another ship. I kind of feel bad for the teenage boy of that family: he sounded like a most reasonable and tolerant boy and did his best to plea with his mother about showing restraint towards Jehanne."

"I noticed that on the security video recordings of the incident. Unfortunately, we really had no choice but to refuse boarding to his parents and, him being a minor, he couldn't realistically travel by himself without the consent of his parents."

"So, what do we do about this growing racism problem, Tina?"

"Frankly, there isn't much we can do right now, Natalia. The best we can do is to do our utmost to counter any hostile publicity campaign targeting our androids and to discredit anti-android arguments. Would you or Eve have any suggestions to propose about this problem?"

It was Eve that answered that first.

“Realistically, our best way to counter this anti-android propaganda is still to show to our passengers how courteous, helpful and law-abiding our security androids are in reality. Let’s counter hostile propaganda with positive images of our androids.”

“That could work.” said Natalia. “Right after that incident, another passenger who was boarding our ship expressed his support for our handling of that situation, while many more passengers around the arrival hall gave dark or disapproving looks to that Marge Stein and her husband. For the moment, those anti-android racists are still a tiny minority. Hopefully, we will be able to keep it that way through good press and favorable passenger opinions and reviews.”

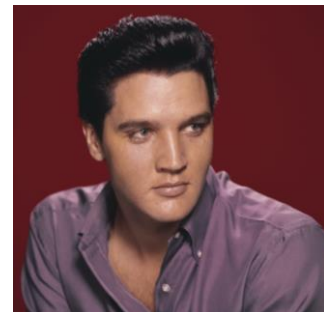
“I hope so too! Well, pass the word to our androids: stay courteous in all circumstances while not letting themselves be demeaned or discriminated. If they encounter an abusive passenger, then they are to report it immediately to you and Eve. Well, that’s it for me! Hopefully, things will settle down after this incident. Thank you for coming.”

Tina got up from her chair and shook hands with her two crewmembers before they walked out of her executive office. Now alone, she was thoughtful for a moment, trying to think of further ways to solve this growing racism problem. Unfortunately, if there was something that Humanity’s history had taught, it was how hard and long it was to eradicate such racism.

20:39 (Universal Time)

Cabin # 542350, Habitat Ring Section

A.M.S. NOSTROMO



“OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD! THAT...THAT WAS FANTASTIC!”

“Would you like me to continue, Jane?” asked softly **Elvis Presley** while still working her up despite her just having had her second consecutive orgasm that had left her panting.

“YES! But do it slower this time: make the pleasure go on for as long as possible, my beautiful Elvis.”

“Your desires are my commands, Jane.” replied the android with a smile before slowing down his thrusting but also cranking up to maximum the vibration mechanism of his artificial penis. Jane became cross-eyed under that treatment, with her whole body tensing and arching up from the bed as she was on the way to a third consecutive

orgasm. This time, she came after thirteen extra minutes of ecstasy as waves of pleasure washed over her brain. Seeing that her heartbeat was now quite high, Elvis decided to withdraw from her and to start kissing and fondling her body as Jane, now utterly spent, gathered back her breath. In return, she kissed him frantically while speaking in a tired voice.

"This was the best sex I ever had by far, Elvis. You were fantastic. I wish that I could stay with you for longer than a day."

"I could visit you again tomorrow morning before the start of my next shift, to wake you up the right way."

"Oh yes! Please do that! Could you come for, say, six o'clock, so that I could have time afterwards to go have breakfast before leaving the ship?"

"Six o'clock it will be, Jane." replied Elvis before getting off the bed and starting to dress back. Jane, on her part, stayed on her bed and admired his athletic body and handsome face as he put on his clothes, while also thinking about the experience she had just gone through. Many people would undoubtedly either mock her for having sex with a 'machine' or could even be scandalized by that. However, she reasoned that many people still used sex toys, or simply masturbated.

'What is the difference between this and a woman using a vibrator? Well, this 'vibrator' also happens to look like one of the handsomest men I ever saw, so why be ashamed about this?' she reasoned. Getting off the bed herself, she waited for Elvis to be fully dressed before gluing herself to him and kiss him on the lips.

"I will always remember you, my beautiful Elvis. Would you mind if I take a couple of pictures of you before you leave?"

"Not at all! Are you planning to talk about me to your female friends?"

"To my best friends, maybe. After hearing me, maybe they will also want to travel on this ship."

"Then, you can tell them that there are 399 other male security androids aboard the NOSTROMO."

"And are they all as handsome as you?"

"Uh, they are a mixed bag, while I am considered to be one of the better-looking ones in the lot. As for our female androids, they can all be described as at least pretty. Many of them have in fact been copied on past celebrity female artists, the same way I was copied on the template of a most famous singer from the Twentieth Century."

“Well, whoever chose your design template had very good tastes.” said Jane before stepping back from him and, using her wrist communicator, taking a few pictures of Elvis from different angles. She sighed as he left her cabin, already anxious to see him again tomorrow morning.

CHAPTER 4 – A GREAT LOSS

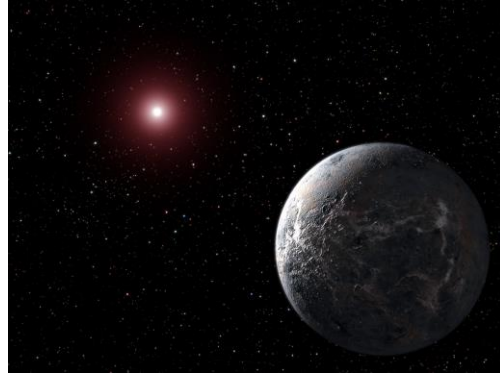
08:15 (Universal Time)

Thursday, August 09, 2334

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Flying towards the planet Hibernia

TRAPPIST-1 System, 39.6 light-years from Earth



Tina was sitting in her bridge command chair and watching the view of the planet Hibernia, which her NOSTROMO was now approaching, when she saw Germaine Brown, her communications officer, take a shocked expression. Before Tina could ask her what was happening, Brown snapped her head towards her and spoke up with a shaken voice.

“Tina, the medical center just reported that Doctor Koomak was found minutes ago in his apartment...dead. The preliminary diagnosis is that he died of natural causes due to old age. It is suspected that Doctor Koomak died of a cardiac arrest during his sleep.”

“Oh my god! And where is he now?”

“At the morgue section’s autopsy room.”

“I am going there!” replied Tina while jumping out of her command chair and starting to run down the steps to the next platform, where the elevator shaft linking the bridge complex with the rest of the ship was. She rode down ninety meters before emerging in the central rotunda of the medical center, at Frame Level # 575, and running down one of the six large radial hallways connected to the rotunda. She soon arrived at the morgue section, where Doctor Shamar, one of the two Koorivar physicians working on the NOSTROMO, led her to an examination table on which lay the body of the old physicist. Tina stayed silent for long seconds as she contemplated her dead friend, whom she had known now for over fifteen years.

“Was there any trace of foul play, Doctor Shamar?”

“None at all. However, we are still going to analyze fluid and body samples to confirm our diagnostic. All the appearances point to a cardiac failure due to old age.

After all, Doctor Koomak was past a hundred-years-old and lived a full life by Koorivar standards. He probably died in his sleep and didn't feel pain."

"It's at least that. The World just lost one scientific giant. I will sorely miss him."

"Everybody who knew him will miss him, Captain: he had no known enemies. What do you want us to do with him?"

"Do a thorough autopsy, so that his death could be legally registered. In the meantime, I will have his last will checked to see if he specified how he wanted his body to be treated after death."

"Then, we will freeze his body after the autopsy is completed, until you advise us of his last wishes, Captain."

"Good! I will now go get his last will from our legal archives."

Tina gave a last look at her dead Koorivar friend, who had contributed so much to the present Human exploration and colonization of Space thanks to the invention of his interstellar 'Koomak Drive', before walking out of the examination room.

Going back up to the Executive Deck, where her executive office was situated, Tina sat down heavily behind her work desk, still shaken and saddened by her loss. That was when the voice of Spirit, the central artificial intelligence computer of the NOSTROMO, came out of her intercom.

"We lost a great mind and a great person today, Tina. Please accept my most sincere condolences."

"Thank you, Spirit! Could you please retrieve and unlock the electronic copy of Doctor Koomak's last will, so that I could see what his wishes were about how to treat his body?"

It took less than a second before an electronic file opened on her computer screen.

"Here you are, Tina. Be advised that, in addition to this electronic last will document, Doctor Koomak also had a sealed envelope put into safe legal storage. That envelope is marked for your eyes only, to be opened only after his death."

"A sealed envelope marked for my eyes only? Do you know what it could contain?"

"Fuck knows!" replied Spirit, who sometimes used some colorful metaphors in her speech. "I can have Eve retrieve that envelope for you, if you want to."

"Please do that, Spirit."

"I will advise Eve right away, Tina."

With Spirit now off the line, Tina pressed one hand on the I.D. recognition pad lying on her desk, so that it could read her fingerprints, then typed a password in her computer, making the legal document open up for reading. That last will actually proved to be quite short, since Koomak had no relatives of his who were still alive and had not produced or adopted children since he had been awakened from his cryogenic sleep aboard the VEON SHOURIA some twenty years ago. He also had few physical possessions, having consecrated his life to scientific research, but had a fairly substantial bank account. It turned out that the content of that bank account was now to be transferred to Tina. There was also a mention about a sealed envelope kept for her in the legal archives vault of the ship. Tina read twice the document before contacting Doctor Shamar at the morgue.

"Doctor Shamar, this is Tina speaking. Doctor Koomak's last will states that he wanted his body to be cremated and his ashes then dispersed in Space over the old orbit of the planet SHOURIA, in the Gliese 667 System."

"Then, I will advise you when my autopsy will be done, Captain. Do you wish for his body to be exposed before cremation?"

"Yes! I am sure that Doctor Koomak would have wanted his friends to see him one last time before being cremated. I will soon make a ship-wide address to inform the crew about his death."

Some seven minutes after closing her call to the morgue, Eve Silisca knocked at Tina's door and was then invited in, with a man closely following her and holding a sealed envelope.

"Tina, this is Mister Variag, from the legal archives. He insisted on coming with me, so that he could deliver this sealed envelope to you in person."

"Mister Variag followed the correct legal procedure in this case. Can I have this envelope, please?"

"Here you are, Captain." said Variag while handing her the envelope, plus a recognition pad. "I will just ask you to sign for this envelope and apply your fingerprints on this pad."

Tina did so, then gave the pad back to Variag, who then left her office. As Tina was about to open the sealed envelope, Eve spoke up while still standing in front of her desk.

"Do you want me to leave now, Tina?"

“Please stay, Eve, so you can be a witness to me opening this envelope. Have a seat!”

“Thank you!”

Tina then opened the envelope and extracted from it a two-page document, plus a data stick marked ‘Secret, for Captain’s eyes only’. Tina, a bit surprised by that, eyed the data stick for a couple of seconds before unfolding the printed document and starting to read it silently, with Eve watching her. The android soon saw Tina’s expression gradually show growing shock and incredulity.

“Is something wrong, Tina?”

“Wrong, no? Do I feel Incredulity and surprise, yes! Doctor Koomak apparently worked in secret on a new and terrifying weapon years ago but, due to his pacifist nature, decided to keep it secret from everybody. When we first encountered the Space Predators, the gravity of the threat represented by those monsters made him rethink his stance on that new weapon and he then completed a full design of it, a design that is now stored in this data stick. Still, he wanted it to be known only by me and Spirit and to be used only to protect Humanity from the Space Predators. Since you are the daughter of Spirit and are in constant link with her, I believe that you are also entitled to be in the know about that weapon. Here, read!”

Taking the document offered by Tina, Eve read the two-page document in less than a second before nodding her head gravely.

“I can see why Doctor Koomak was afraid to see this weapon design be known by others than you and Spirit. It is an absolutely devastating weapon of the kind dictators and autocrats would love to have. On the other hand, its design is both brilliant and simple and used the Physics domains in which Doctor Koomak was a top expert. We could actually modify our disintegrator cannons to the specifications of this weapon quite easily, using only the resources available on the NOSTROMO. Can I see what the schematics of this weapon look like?”

“Sure!” said Tina before contacting Spirit via her computer. “Spirit, I am now going to plug in and open a data stick eschewed to me by Doctor Koomak and containing the design of a new and extremely powerful weapon. I want you to store that design into your ‘Top Secret’ data bank and restrict its view to me, you and Eve. I would also like an estimate from you about how difficult or easy it would be to adapt our disintegrator main cannons to it. I am inserting that data stick in my computer now.”

The moment that data stick was plugged in, Tina saw pages of technical drawings and scientific formulas appear on her computer screen, with Eve coming to stand behind her in order to look at the screen over her shoulders. It was however Spirit who spoke first after a couple of seconds.

"Data now recorded into my restricted access data banks, Tina. I also reviewed quickly the weapon design and its underlying principles and am ready to say that the design is both sound and simple to build. We can definitely produce its parts aboard the NOSTROMO and then modify our ultra-heavy disintegrator cannons quite easily and rapidly. I suppose that you will wish to keep this whole project a most secret one?"

"Definitely, Spirit! How powerful could it be, according to you?"

Spirit's tone of voice was most somber when she answered Tina.

"Tina, this is a planet-buster-class weapon, pure and simple. If put in the wrong hands, then it could spell doom for Humanity, or its enslavement under the yoke of the dictator who will control this weapon."

14:04 (Universal Time)

Friday, August 17, 2334

Airlock locker room on the Docking Arms Deck

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, inside the Gliese 667C System

22.4 light-years from Earth

"...and may the ashes of our friend float for eternity in Space, over the orbit of his native planet, SHOURIA."

With her eulogy delivered to the over 460 crewmembers assembled in the large locker room adjacent to one of the personnel airlocks on the Docking Arms Deck, Tina then closed and sealed the visor of her spacesuit and entered the airlock proper, the golden urn containing Koomak's ashes secured in a closed pouch attached to her spacesuit. Once a technician had emptied the air from the airlock, she was then able to open the outer door of the airlock and step out into the void of Space. Now floating close to the hull of her ship, Tina used the directed gravity propulsion system integrated into her spacesuit and flew away from the NOSTROMO for about 500 meters. She then stopped above the planet Gliese 667Ce, which now occupied roughly the same orbit as Gliese 667Cc, which had been utterly destroyed some 300 years ago when a giant brown

dwarf¹ had entered the system and basically destroyed it. Filmed from her ship and with her moves displayed on holographic screens around the ship, Tina took the urn out of her cargo pouch, then opened it and flipped it upside down, sending the ashes inside it slowly floating down towards Gliese 667Ce. Putting the urn back in her pouch, she then came to attention in Space and saluted, a big lump in her throat.

“Goodbye my friend! May you rest in peace for eternity inside the star system of your birth.”

¹ Brown dwarf : a gas giant planet that is nearly massive enough to become a full-fledge star but failed to ignite its thermonuclear fuel.

CHAPTER 5 – ALTERNATE OCCUPATIONS



Senior Centurion Jehanne de Domrémy wearing a suit of medieval armor for cosplay jousting.

16:28 (Universal Time)

Saturday, August 25, 2334

Shuttle hangar complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In orbit around Providence, Alpha Centauri B System

“GERALD IS WAITING FOR ME WITH TINA!” nearly shouted a joyful Janet Robeson from her seat when she saw through the video displays of her light shuttle’s cabin a group of three persons waiting in one corner of the hangar where her craft had just landed. Spirit, who was seating next to Janet, smiled at her enthusiasm while noting that her ‘daughter’ Eve was also part of the trio waiting in the hangar. While both had been able to visit the NOSTROMO quite a few times during the last two and a half years, profiting from the occasional passage of the giant cargo ship through the Alpha Centauri B System, Janet had obviously been missing a lot her husband Gerald, who was working as a head chef and culinary teacher on the ship. While their respective jobs as minister of defense of the Spacers’ League and as First Lord of the Admiralty had been vital ones and had helped greatly the Spacers’ League Navy to start recovering from its

disastrous battle with a Space Predators' fleet of asteroid warships, both were happy to be able to return to their lives on the NOSTROMO, for a number of reasons. Unbuckling their seat belts, Janet and Spirit then got up from their seats and went to the central luggage storage section of the cabin to retrieve their suitcases and bags, then walked out of the small shuttle via its rear access ramp. Gerald Holmes, Tina Forster and Eve Silisca greeted them at the foot of the ramp with warm hugs and kisses, with Janet and Gerald sharing the warmest hugs of the lot. While they technically couldn't feel real emotions, both Spirit and Eve still hugged and kissed with genuine warmth: despite being both androids, their highly advanced artificial intelligence brains, combined with years of experience at living and socializing with Humans, had made them develop something very akin to true emotions. Eve smiled to her 'mother', who had designed and built her via the automated cybernetic production facilities of the NOSTROMO, after taking a step back from Spirit.

"So, how was your time at the Admiralty Headquarters, Mother?"

"Frustrating at times but still productive, Eve." replied Spirit in a sober tone of voice. "Janet also had her share of frustrations as Minister of Defense. Unfortunately, Spacers' League politics is starting to develop a streak that we didn't like much. I will tell you more about that after we had the chance to install ourselves back."

As Eve nodded to that and helped Spirit by grabbing one of her suitcases, Gerald Holmes also grabbed two of his wife's suitcases and put them in the electric cart waiting next to the light shuttle.

"I guess that we will have a lot to talk about together this evening, Janet. However, we will be able to do so in front of a good meal: I have a nice Beef Bourguignon for supper."

"Now you're talking, Gerald! The food was okay in Providence but it was nothing like what you can cook up. Could we invite Tina, Spirit and Eve to have supper with us?"

"Of course, Janet! While Spirit and Eve can't truly eat food, except for show, I have a nice bottle of cognac from which they will be able to sip and appreciate the aroma and taste during supper."

Janet nodded her head at that, understanding what Gerald had said. While they didn't need to eat or drink to sustain themselves, Eve and Spirit were models even more advanced than the security androids built by them and used to protect the NOSTROMO, who had only a very limited capacity to make them appear able to ingest small quantities

of liquids and thus look more human-like. With their cybernetic bodies built more for human socializing than for combat, both Eve and Spirit could sip, chew and swallow food and drinks in reasonable quantity if need be, to accompany Humans during meals. A system of artificial stomach and short intestine then stored those ingested liquids and food until they could be eliminated the same way as Humans did, by relieving themselves using a toilet.

With the five of them sitting in the cart and with Tina driving, they were soon rolling out of the shuttle hangar and going towards the central spine structure of the ship, where they entered a cargo elevator cabin. As the cabin started going up towards the level of the Executive Apartments Deck, where their apartments were situated, Tina gave Janet a cautious look.

“So, how are things in Providence, politically-wise, Janet?”

“Not very well I am afraid, Tina. With Karl Langemann retiring from politics and with Paul Stein replacing him as Chairman of the High Council, things are turning into a direction I don’t like at all. To resume things as succinctly as I can, corruption, cronyism and political influence peddling are on the rise around the government. Worse, that Paul Stein is starting to reveal his true personality and it is a quite worrying one in my opinion. Jacobus Stein must not be too pleased about what kind of man his son is turning out to be. Instead of caring first and foremost about the common good, Paul Stein is in it mostly for the money and personal power and is surrounding himself with sycophants and other power-hungry people like him. I was too happy to leave my post of Minister of Defense after Paul Stein chose one of his cronies to replace me.”

Tina nodded once before looking at Spirit.

“And you, Spirit? How are things at the Admiralty?”

“Better than before I took the post, I must say. Admiral Yamashiro, who was chosen by Paul Stein to replace me, is at least proving to be a competent Navy man and he fully approved and supported my fleet reconstruction plan. So, in that aspect, things are going well for the Navy. However, Yamashiro unfortunately shares one trait with Paul Stein: his dislike of our security androids, who he thinks of as mere sophisticated machines rather than as true sentient beings. He did however treat me with respect, understanding how advanced and evolved I am as an android. Yamashiro, possibly on the urging of Chairman Stein, has just cut out the Navy salaries I had negotiated for our security androids, saying that, as mere machines, they didn’t need to be paid for their

service, even though our androids played a big role in the defeat of the Space Predators. The navy will thus stop using our security androids as officially part of the Spacers' League forces. They will now be limited to be used by you, Tina, while Yamashiro has vowed in exchange to expand and better equip our Space Marines."

Tina frowned with frustration on hearing that.

"Well, this Yamashiro doesn't know how capable a fighting force he just dismissed out of hand. On the other hand, our security androids have proved to be quite adaptable and are evolving on their own in a truly nice way, making them even more useful as part of this ship's crew. However, there is a lot to say about that and I will wait until we can have supper as a group this evening to talk more about that."

"As you wish, Tina. On my part, I will go reconnect with my fixed alter-ego, in order to update myself on ship and android matters."

"Then," cut in Gerald, "you are all invited for supper at our suite, for six o'clock. Don't hesitate to bring with you your two kids and your husband, Tina: I will have a nice cake as dessert to make Misha and little Janet happy."

"I am sure that they will honor your cake with gusto, Gerald." replied a grinning Tina.

19:51 (Universal Time)

Apartment # 34, Executive Deck, Frame Level # 505

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, in orbit of Providence

"Come on, kids: time to return to our apartment, so that Janet can have her bath and then be tucked into bed. As for you, Misha, I believe that you still have some unfinished school homework to do."

"Yes, Dad!" replied in a less than enthusiastic tone the fourteen-year-old Misha, an already tall and athletic boy, before following his father and his four-year-old sister out of the Robeson's apartment. Janet Robeson watched them leave before smiling to Tina.

"You have two truly splendid kids, Tina. Your Misha is certainly growing into a very handsome boy, while your Janet is as sweet as candy. Has Misha started to show interest in a specific domain or occupation? Can we hope to see him become the future captain of the NOSTROMO one day?"

"I would be truly proud if he ever becomes captain of this ship, or of any ship, but I am not the type of parent who forcefully push their kids into their own line of work or

force them to overachieve. I will let Misha decide his future on his own. However, I can say that Misha loves playing Space fighter pilot at the ship's 'Pin Ball' video-arcade center and is demonstrating some truly outstanding eye-hand coordination abilities.”

“And how are his eye-hands coordination abilities when it comes to girls?” asked a grinning Gerald Holmes in a sneaky tone of voice, making Tina roll her eyes.

“In that aspect, I would say that he has a Latino-type side to his character. The girls around certainly noticed his good looks.”

“Then, he will do well in life.” pronounced Gerald, making his wife throw an amused look at him.

“That’s it? Attracting girls is the most important thing for you in life?”

“It certainly doesn’t hurt: look who I caught in my net!”

The three Humans and two androids sitting around the dining table chuckled at that before Gerald got up from his chair.

“How about moving to the lounge now, where I will be able to serve you some nice espresso coffee and liquors?”

“A fine idea, Gerald!” said Janet Robeson while also getting up from her chair. “Let’s move to the lounge!”

With the lounge being an extension of the dining area, the group moved quickly to the collection of sofas there and sat in direct view of the Boreal Forest Habitat, visible through the large patio windows of the apartment, while Gerald went into the kitchen area to prepare coffee. Tina, sitting opposite Janet Robeson in an easy chair, took on a sober look before starting to speak.

“Janet, while both Spirit and Eve already know via our ship’s Spirit about what I am going to say, there are a few things concerning our security androids that you need to know. First, I recently decided to restart low-rate production of our security androids, using our onboard facilities and Eve’s expertise in the matter. While the production rate is quite low, the building of such androids being quite costly, our android force now counts a total of 837 members, not counting Eve or Spirit. With the Space Predator’s threat significantly diminished but still existing, I have decided to assign part of our security android force to New Haven, which presently doesn’t have any planetary defense force as such. I am thus planning to post on a rotational basis half of my security androids there, along with building a number of defensive installations, to protect the various communities on my moon. A technical team is presently on New

Haven, building a central cybernetic maintenance and repair facility, along with android residential buildings. Once those facilities will be ready in about three weeks, I will then ask my androids which ones would like to go on the first rotation to New Haven, with each rotation being six-months-long.”

Janet nodded once at that.

“A good idea, Tina! I am especially impressed by how you treat your security androids: no differently than Humans. Many in Providence would treat them like simple slaves, not asking their opinions while employing them without rest.”

“Thank you, Janet. Talking of androids and rest, that brings me to the second thing I wanted to speak with you about: the daily occupations of our androids outside of their guard duty schedules. As you know already, our androids technically don’t need to rest or sleep, ever, while they also don’t need to eat or drink to sustain themselves. All that they require are short, periodic periods of revision, maintenance and data download in the cybernetic maintenance alcove of their apartments. However, with their daily guard shifts being twelve-hour long, that leaves them with another twelve hours per day to fill with other occupations. How they chose to fill that off-time actually came as quite a surprise to me...and to the rest of my crew.”

“Oh?! Tell me about it.”

Tina paused for a second, trying to find the best words about this.

“Well, I gradually realized during the last couple of years that I severely underestimated the capacity of our security androids to adapt and evolve. While they still follow the core tenets of their programming, like not hurting innocents and preventing and stopping crimes, our androids have each developed individual sets of interests and hobbies as they experience socializing with us Humans during their duty periods. Those sets of interests and hobbies are about as diverse as the physical appearance of our androids and are often related to the background personality they received during their assembly. For example, Senior Centurion Jehanne de Domrémy is now fully into medievalism and has gradually acquired a full set of Fifteenth Century knightly armor and weapons. She has also been training extensively in medieval combat techniques, sparring with other androids and with Human crewmembers also interested in ancient fighting and jousting. She even learned to ride one of the horses we have in our farms and started a medieval jousting club some six months ago, a club that is proving quite popular, both with our androids and with some of our Human crewmembers. In turn, our

passengers were fascinated by watching the jousting matches of her club, which are now very popular.”

“Wow! That’s truly incredible!” exclaimed Janet Robeson. “What kind of other notable hobbies did your androids develop, Tina?”

“Various arts skills, like singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, painting and sculpting. One android, Centurion Taylor Swift, even got into writing new songs and composing music for them, like her historical alter-ego did in the early 21st Century, and she is proving very good at it. She already produced six original songs of her own, which have proved popular around the ship, and also sings in a marvelous voice. A couple of her songs and musical videos are now circulating around the Spacers’ League and on Earth and are proving very popular on entertainment channels.”

“Wait!” said Janet, stunned. “Did you say ‘Taylor Swift’? I watched two of her musical videos while on Providence but I never heard any mention of her being an android. Tons of young officers and servicemen in our Navy are drooling while watching her sing and dance on the entertainment channels, thinking that she is a real woman.”

“That’s because she hid her true nature from the musical executives who bought her recordings. You want to know something else funny about her?”

“Uh, go ahead!”

“The musical band and dance troupe accompanying her in her performances are all security androids who adopted music and dancing as personal hobbies.”

“Nooo! And I was fixing on one of her accompanying dancers, an impossibly handsome and talented young man.”

“You mean Patrick Swayze?”

“That’s the one! He really is an android?”

“Sure is! On the other hand, Taylor’s success has motivated other androids into forming musical bands or singing and dancing groups of their own. A couple of those groups now regularly give performances in our ship’s theatre and at the Aperossimo bar-lounge, performances that are quite popular with our passengers and crew. You should go watch some of those shows, Janet, particularly the ones given by a group formed of Norma Jeane Mortenson, Shakira, Rihanna and Aaliyah. That female group is pure fire on stage. Thanks to our security androids, we can now provide a full spectrum of artistic shows to our passengers and crew, something that has attracted a lot of extra customers to the NOSTROMO. There is also another domain where some of our

androids have unwittingly attracted more people to take cruises on my ship: sexual tourism.”

“Sexual tourism? How could that be? And who would be attracted to sex with machines?”

“Mostly what are widely known as ‘cougars’: mature women who can’t attract younger men anymore but are in need of occasional but caring lovers able to satisfy them. Don’t forget that our androids have fully functional copies of sexual organs. While they can’t experience pleasure themselves, they are fully able to give plenty of pleasure to their partners. They can go at it for hours on end without tiring and they can also put their organs on vibrating mode, while they have extensive programs about the art of sex. All that makes our male androids ideal occasional sexual partners for women in need of attention. Our androids also perform from time to time at the Jupiter Sex Club, stripping and dancing for the customers there.”

Janet hid her face with both hands while shaking her head.

“I will have heard everything tonight, truly!”

“You can blame my perverted daughter Eve for that, Janet.” said Spirit, smiling. “First, when designing and building each of our androids, she chose mostly historical persons with good looks as a basis for their individual aspect and identity. Then, she made sure that her creations were, well, very well equipped as either male or female androids and made them able to give sexual pleasure. So, our male androids can be said to be real ‘studs’, while our female androids often were given chests more impressive than those that their historical personas were known to possess.”

“Uh, do they delve into prostitution from time to time then?” asked Janet, feeling some misgivings. Both Eve and Tina vigorously shook their heads at once in response, with Eve replying verbally to Janet.

“No! Our androids never ask for money in exchange for giving sex, nor will they accept money. I made sure that this rule is firmly written in their programming. They may be paid with a fee for a dancing or stripping performance at the Jupiter Sex Club but they will neither take money for sex nor be forced to perform sexual acts against their will. When they provide sexual pleasure to a living person, then it will be for free and purely out of their own choice. I may also add that such sexual episodes with Humans actually help significantly their social development as persons. After all, sexuality is a big part of what forms the Human ego.”

“True!” recognized Janet. “And the women who have sex with our androids truly enjoy their experience?”

“Enjoy is not the correct word here, Janet.” answered Tina, a slight smirk on her face. “One of my female crewmembers, whom I will leave unnamed, confided to me that she had a number of sexual encounters with some of our male androids and that, quote, she had her brains fucked out every time, unquote. Right now, I could bet that at least a dozen of our female passengers are traveling on my ship on what I would call a ‘sexual vacation tour’. However, please stay discreet about this whole business of sex between Humans and androids: some puritans and hypocrites could use that to make false accusations against us. You just need to review the history of the last few centuries in Humanity’s history to see how easily some people could raise some kind of false outrage about this.”

Janet sighed heavily and nodded her head at those words.

“Hypocrisy and intolerance are effectively old constants in Human history.”

22:04 (Universal Time)

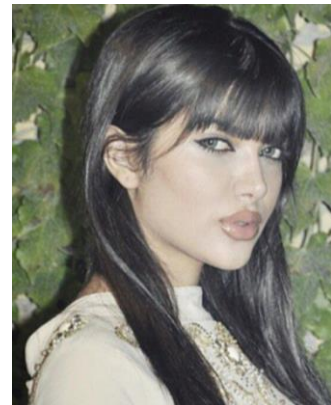
Wednesday, August 29, 2334

Apartment # 554-2305, Habitat Ring of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Docked at the Las Americas orbital terminal

Low Earth orbit, Solar System

Intent on giving as enjoyable as possible an evening to his friend and occasional sexual partner, Paul Messer, naked and standing close to and behind **Roshana Golshan** in the bathtub of her apartment while she took a shower, gently and expertly massaged the small of her back, making the young and very beautiful woman moan with pleasure.



“Yes! That’s nice, Paul. You are a true expert when it comes to giving massages.”

“Only with massages?” quipped the athletic and handsome-looking android while continuing to massage the muscles around her lower vertebrae.

“With everything! I have yet to meet a man who shows as much care, expertise and regard towards his sexual partner as you do. Too many boys think mostly about their own pleasure and assume, often wrongly, that they are expert lovers.”

"I believe that I heard that before a few times. It seems that men often understand poorly women and their needs, while overestimating themselves."

"But you don't, Paul, which makes you an even nicer partner and friend. Well, time to get out of the shower and dry ourselves up: I have a big day of studies tomorrow and I should go to bed early."

"Then, let me towel you dry, Roshana." said softly **Paul Messer** before stepping out of the bathtub and grabbing a towel, then proceeding to dry her from head to toe and concentrating a bit longer than strictly needed on her groin area, making her climax for the third time in the evening and earning a kiss from Roshana in return.



"You are truly fantastic, Paul. I just wish that I could give you pleasure in return."

"Pleasuring you is my pleasure, Roshana." replied the android, who was still kneeling in front of her. Roshana smiled and gently caressed his short blond hair.

"You do have a way with words, Paul. Well, time for you to dry up and dress up: I do have to go to sleep soon, to be well rested for tomorrow."

"You are still studying applied physics, right?" asked Paul while starting to towel himself dry."

"Yes! I earned my diploma two months ago but decided to continue studying aboard the NOSTROMO, in order to get a master's degree. Doctor Koomak had encouraged me to do so, saying that I held lots of promises as a physicist, and was coaching me along. God, I miss him! He was such a great mind and a great person."

"He certainly was. And what is your planned project for your master's degree, if I may ask?"

Roshana hesitated for a moment before replying: she had kept that subject to herself up to now, in view of its delicate and possibly controversial nature. However, if Paul promised not to repeat what he would hear, then she was confident that he would keep mum about that.

"You remember that we were able to capture a couple of Space Predator ships two years ago and to grab a number of pieces of Predator technology?"

"Of course I do! I was part of the assault force that stormed those Predator ships."

“Then, keep this to yourself but I was helping Doctor Koomak study the Predator transporter technology. Now that Doctor Koomak is dead, I intend to continue studying that technology and possibly adapt it for our own use.”

Messer’s expression changed at that point, turning from playful to most sober.

“That technology could indeed be critical for us, Roshana. With it, we could thus turn it against those monsters. May I make a suggestion about this?”

“Go on!”

“Contact Spirit and advise her about this. While you probably don’t want her to directly help you in your efforts, something that could nullify the legitimacy of your master’s degree project, she could open extra resources for it, like computer simulation time and the building of special hardware.”

Roshana slowly nodded her head at his words, seeing the value of his suggestion.

“Your idea is most interesting, Paul. I may just contact Spirit tomorrow, when I will be in the applied physics lab of the ship’s university. Thank you for your suggestion.”

“My pleasure, Roshana.” replied the android before going into her bedroom in order to get dressed. Four minutes and a last kiss later, he was walking out of her apartment, leaving a thoughtful Roshana alone.

12:18 (Universal Time)

Friday, August 31, 2334

Cafeteria of the NOSTROMO University

Habitat Ring, Frame Level # 576, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Approaching the planet New Polynesia

HD40307 System, 42 light-years from Earth

Roshana was eating rather quickly her curry rice at one of the small tables of the university’s cafeteria when she saw Captain Tina Forster enter the large room. At first, she didn’t think much about it...until she saw Tina head straight for her table. With blood rushing to her head from the sudden mix of excitement and anxiety, Roshana put down her fork and hurried to wipe her mouth clean before Tina stopped next to her table and smiled down to her.

“Miss Roshana Golshan? May I sit down and talk with you for a moment?”

"Of course, Captain! Please, sit down."

"Thank you!"

Sitting down and facing Roshana from across the table, Tina then stared in silence at the physics student for a moment before starting to speak.

"First off, me coming to see you is not a sign that you may be in trouble, Miss Golshan, on the contrary. You contacted Spirit yesterday and told her that you intended to make the Space Predators' transporter technology the subject of your masters' thesis, to which Spirit responded favorably and encouraged you to continue with your project. In turn, Spirit informed me of this, prompting me to review your student's file. What I saw truly impressed me, miss. First, you graduated in applied physics with A+ grades and were at the top of your class. Second, Doctor Koomak recorded a glowing review of your studies and exam results, emphasizing your ability to understand new concepts and ideas and also counseling that you be given all the opportunities possible to advance further in the field of physics. Third is the fact that the I.Q. test you passed on arrival on the NOSTROMO firmly placed you in the 'genius' category, with a recorded score of 164. Now, you want to study and analyze what is a most alien and potentially important technology, with the goal of adapting it for our future use. Know that I fully approve of your interest in Space Predator transporter technology and that I am ready to support your work to the utmost. On the other hand, you still have only resident student status onboard my ship and are still paying tuition fees to continue on towards your masters' degree. I came to see you to offer you some substantive support for your studies and work."

"What kind of substantive support, Captain?" asked Roshana, her heart accelerating.

"Basically, an offer for you to become a full-time member of the scientific staff of my ship, along with a salary and the elimination for the need by you to pay tuition fees. Also, I am ready to assign to you everything you will reasonably need in order to work on your project."

Those words left Roshana unable to speak for seconds as blood rushed to her brain. This offer represented more than she had ever hoped for, as being a member of the NOSTROMO University's scientific faculty was a prestigious title widely recognized as such around the Spacers' League. To achieve such a goal at the tender age of 24 was simply overwhelming to her.

"I...I must say that your offer is both flattering and generous, Captain. I accept!"

“Excellent! I will thus have your tuition payments stopped as of today and will have you officially join the university’s physics faculty. By the way, your new position will come with an annual salary of 90,000 credits, while your lodging and food will become free. Will those conditions satisfy you, Miss Golshan?”

“Satisfy me, Captain? You just made a dream come true for me.”

Her reply made a wide smile appear on Tina’s face.

“Then, report after lunch to the university’s Dean, who will make you sign a contract and will assign to you both an office and a lab.”

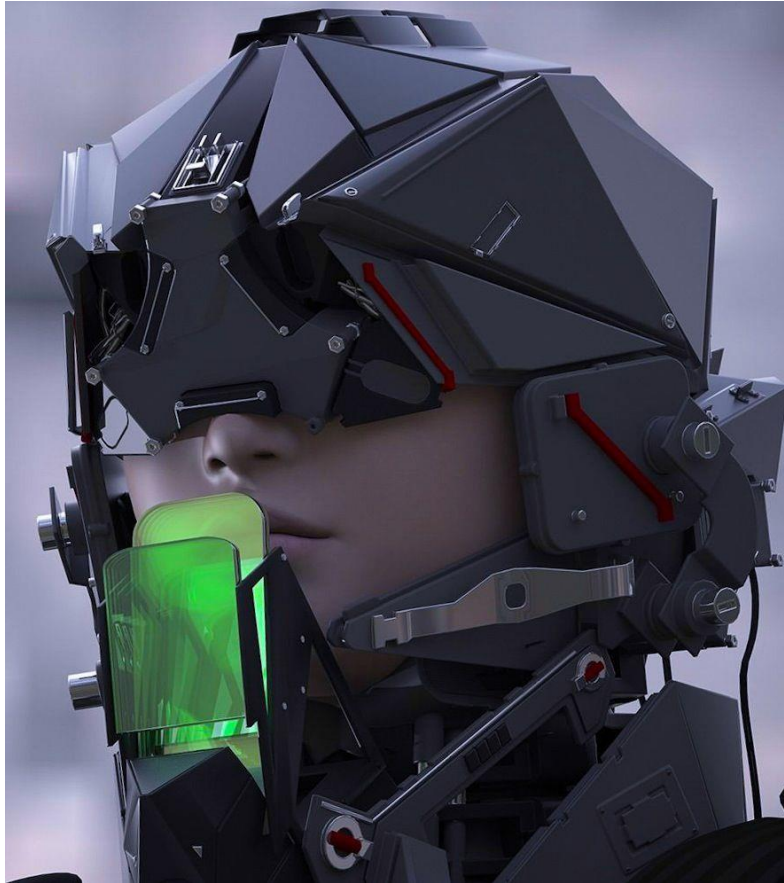
“I...I am going to have my own lab, Captain?”

Tina nodded her head, now looking very serious.

“You will need one, Miss Golshan, as everything pertaining to captured Space Predator technology is treated as highly classified matter, for obvious reasons. Spirit and her android avatar will be your direct liaison for this project and you will report directly to them. On this, I will let you finish your lunch.”

Tina, getting up from her chair, then briefly shook hands with Roshana before walking away, leaving a stunned Roshana to watch her go.

CHAPTER 6 – GOING ONE’S OWN WAY



08:19 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, November 27, 2334

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In the process of undocking from the Providence High orbital terminal

Low orbit of the planet Providence, Alpha Centauri B System

Tina had been sitting for only a few minutes in her command chair atop the center of the bridge complex of her ship when she got a call from Spirit.

“Tina, I am sorry to disturb you at this time but I just heard an important piece of news on the public information channel of Providence. It is not good news.”

Tina’s mood immediately switched to cautious on hearing the voice of the ship’s central AI computer: if Spirit said that something was not good news, then you could expect about the worst.

"Go ahead, Spirit: what did you hear?"

"Chairman Paul Stein's office just promulgated an executive decree concerning the legal status of all androids and robots within the Spacers' League. Basically, that decree revokes the citizenship status of our security androids and denies them the quality of 'person' and 'sentient being'. I am now sending you the full text of that executive decree to your command chair's main display screen."

It took everything for Tina not to scream with rage at the news passed on by Spirit. Forcing herself to stay calm, she then read the two-page text that had just appeared on the display screen attached to one arm of her command chair. What was in that text did nothing to calm her down and instead made anger and disgust only grow as she read it.

"That fucking asshole!" she muttered to herself as she read, making Dana Durning, sitting near her in the navigator's chair, turn her head to look questioningly at her. Tina stopped Dana from asking a question by making a sign with her raised right hand.

"Not now, Dana. Let's complete our undocking procedure, then we will talk."

"Uh, okay, Tina."

Tina took the time to carefully reread the text on her display screen as her NOSTROMO floated to a safe distance away from the orbital terminal before speeding away. Unfortunately, according to the laws and regulations of the Spacers' League, the Chairman of the High Council had the power to publish executive edicts of limited scope without having to put them up for a vote by the High Council. This edict actually looked to be a legal one, even though it was totally wrong in her mind. As for why Stein had chosen to use the route of an executive edict, the reason was too obvious to Tina: if put to a vote of the High Council, of which she was a member, that edict would probably have failed to pass muster. While there was way too much public misconceptions and suspicions to her taste towards her security androids among the citizenry of the Spacers' League, most of the other members of the High Council admired and respected her too much to side with such an indirect attack against her. The real question now was how far Chairman Stein would go to enforce his executive edict. One thing was for sure: she was not going to put up with such an injustice, whatever the consequences.

Some twenty minutes later, with her ship having jumped out of the Alpha Centauri B System and reappeared in the Gliese 832C System, where the planet Vinland was situated, Tina switched her intercom to ship-wide mode.

"Your attention, please! This is your captain speaking. I want all the ship's senior staff to report to the bridge complex' conference room as quickly as possible. I say again: all the senior staff is to report to the bridge complex' conference room ASAP." As she got up from her command chair, Tina spoke to her pilot, Frida Skarsgard.

"Keep us on an approach trajectory to Vinland, Frida. You have the bridge."

"Understood, Tina." replied her pilot, barely refraining herself from asking what was going on. Tina then went down the steps linking the four levels of concentric platforms of the bridge complex, going to the lower platform and then entering the central structure of the complex before going one level further down and walking in the bridge conference room. Sitting down at her assigned chair at the large table, she transferred to the room's displays the text she had received from Spirit, then waited for her senior officers to join her.

Her last senior ship's officer, Chief Engineer Rose Tillman, arrived in the conference room some fourteen minutes later, her work station in the ship's engineering control room being a full kilometer down the centerline spine structure from the bridge complex. Once everybody had sat around the table, Tina switched on the display screens of the room, on which Chairman Stein's edict was visible.

"Thank you for coming quickly, my friends. I called you here urgently because Spirit just informed me minutes ago that Chairman Stein published Executive Edict 12,306, which is shown on the display screens. I will let you all read it first before we discuss our response to it."

As her senior staff read the edict on their own individual computer stations, Tina watched for their physical reactions and body language. She paid particular attention to the reactions of the commander of the heavy fighter wing embarked on her ship: Major Keiko Nomura was actually an active-duty Navy officer whose unit was assigned to the NOSTROMO, which was itself part of the Navy Reserves as an armed auxiliary ship. Tina herself wore the Navy reserve rank of rear admiral, so understood well the kind of conflict of authority this could create for Nomura in this case. The Japanese-born woman, whom Tina knew well and respected, displayed clear anger as she read the edict and was actually the first to speak up to Tina.

“Why would Chairman Stein spew such garbage? Your security androids fought valiantly to defend us against the Space Predators and have amply proved to me that they fully deserve the qualification of ‘sentient beings’. What is Chairman Stein trying to accomplish here?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Keiko, but my bet would be on simple bigotry, intolerance and political opportunism. Some three centuries ago, that same kind of bigotry and intolerance was directed against particular races, ethnicities and even sexual orientations. While Human society has evolved since then, you unfortunately can still encounter such intolerance and racism today. Just look at the negative reactions shown on Earth towards our androids some two years ago, with many crazy conspiracy theories circulating about my androids being destined to spy or even destabilize politically the European Union. Chairman Stein has always shown himself to be hostile to the concept of sentient androids and he apparently thinks that he can use such suspicions and hostility towards my androids among the Spacers’ population to enlarge his political power base, so he promulgated this piece of shit.”

“But this edict is liable to do a lot more than simply strip our androids of their Spacers’ League’s citizenship, Tina.” said Natalia Vasilyeva, the ship’s head hostess. “This could create a lot of friction between some of our passengers and our androids, and that through no fault of our androids. Remember how a couple of bigots refused to be escorted in by one of our androids, something that forced us to cancel their tickets and disembark them.”

“Oh, I fully remember that incident, Natalia. You know the worst part about that? Chairman Stein, whose administration took over from Karl Langemann a mere three months ago, has already showed some tendencies towards nepotism and named his sister, the same bitch who objected to have an android escort her to her cabin, as the new Governor of Icelandia, in the Trappist-1 System.”

“You’re shitting me!” replied Natalia in disbelief.

“No, I’m not! So, after today, we could expect a cold reception indeed the next time we bring some cargo or load passengers and ore there.”

“Fucking great!” said the head hostess in frustration.

“If our androids are not considered anymore as sentient being and don’t have citizenship status, won’t that put our androids at risk of abuse or wrongful arrest by local planetary authorities, Tina?” asked Ahmed Jibril, the ship’s chief of security, making Tina nod her head slowly, while worry appeared on her face.

“That is a very real possibility, Ahmed. Our androids could suddenly face the same kind of situation in which black people in the United States of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries were, subject to racist attacks, public lynching, police harassment and wrongful arrests. Unfortunately, it took many decades for that intolerance and racism to fade away then.”

“We can’t accept that, Tina! We have to support our androids and push for their legal rights.”

“We certainly will not accept this and will support our androids to the utmost, Ahmed, that I promise you.” replied firmly Tina before looking back at Keiko Nomura. “Keiko, I am afraid that this move by Chairman Stein could be followed by more direct measures against our androids. What if you receive an order from the Admiralty to disarm our androids or even to have them deactivated? Would you obey such an order?”

“No!” answered at once the wing commander. “I would resign my Navy commission before obeying such an abusive and unjust order. After this meeting, I will go speak with all the personnel of my unit about this and I am pretty sure that all of them will agree with me and support you and your androids, even if that means for them that they will quit the Navy. As you may know already, quite a few of my men and women have formed friendships with particular androids and nobody in my unit will be ready to disparage or disrespect your androids.”

“Thank you from the bottom of my heart for this, Keiko. Please keep me apprised on how your unit will react to this edict.”

“I will, Tina.”

Next, Tina spoke up again, this time to address the whole group.

“We certainly will not take that edict lying down, my friends. I fully intend to call in all the political favors owed to me by the other members of the High Council. With luck, the outrage will be enough to make Stein back down. As for this ship, here is what we will do in the meantime...”

19:42 (Universal Time)

Apartment # 554-042, Habitat Ring complex

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, docked at the New Horizons orbital station

Planet Vinland, Gliese 832 System, 16.2 light-years from Earth

Pieter Nordlung had a sober expression on his face when he opened the door of his apartment to Jehanne de Domrémy, something that both surprised and worried Jehanne. Normally, he greeted her with a big smile and a kiss when she visited him at his request.

"Is everything alright for you, Pieter?" she asked, to which the Navy fighter pilot replied with a slow shake.

"Not really, Jehanne. But please, enter! We will talk once sitting together in my lounge."

Now truly preoccupied and with dozens of possible explanations and scenarios playing inside her electronic brain, Jehanne went to Pieter's lounge and sat in its big, three-seater sofa, with Pieter then sitting next to her.

"So, Pieter, what is eating you? That awful edict from Chairman Stein?"

"Exactly! Major Nomura spoke this afternoon to me and to all the wing personnel about it and asked what the position of each of us was concerning the edict."

"And I suppose that you disapproved of it?"

"Strongly! And so did all the others in the wing. We have too much respect for you and your android comrades to demean you all by accepting and obeying that awful edict. However, I wanted to speak with you about my own personal position."

Jehanne stayed silent as Pieter gathered his next words, delivered in a soft voice.

"Jehanne, I decided to resign my Navy commission rather than risk having to receive orders that could hurt you and your comrades."

A flurry of data and electronic activity burst inside Jehanne's central processing unit on hearing that: she knew how much Pieter valued being a Navy fighter pilot. Passing one arm around his shoulders, she then glued herself to his side and looked into his blue eyes.

"That was a brave and noble gesture on your part, Pieter. Thank you for caring about us androids. Do you know if many of the other fighter pilots and crews also decided to quit as well?"

"I do! Admiral Yamashiro is going to get a nasty surprise in the next few days, I assure you of that. But there's more."

"Oh? Tell me!"

"Don't laugh, Jehanne, but I believe that I am kind of in love with you."

Hearing those words produced a burst of renewed activity in Jehanne's electronic brain which produced something without precedent in her: she reacted without consciously

thinking about it, something theoretically impossible for an android or robot. Gently taking his head and making it turn to face her, she then gave Pieter a long kiss on the mouth, to which he reacted by bending forward and enlacing her with both arms. After many seconds, they unglued themselves from each other and looked into each other's eyes.

"Pieter, I will not laugh at you for saying this, because I both understand and appreciate very much what you just said. You have made my life much more enjoyable by your presence and liaison with me and you have proved to me to be a truly exceptional man: you are brave, intelligent and, most importantly, caring."

"I...I wish that you could feel love the way us Humans do, Jehanne, but I suppose that you and the other androids can't possibly feel true emotions."

"Maybe you're right about this... Maybe you're wrong, Pieter. The fact is that I am as attracted to you as you are attracted to me. Isn't that a way to define love?"

"You are right about that, Jehanne. Thank you for your comprehension."
Jehanne then took a decision and spoke to Pieter in a very soft tone.

"Pieter, will you accept that we live together in your apartment? While I will keep my present apartment in order to be able to use periodically its cybernetic maintenance alcove in it, I will transfer most of my personal belongings to here. That is if you agree to it, of course."

Jehanne was further touched by seeing tears then roll down from Pieter's eyes.

"Jehanne, I will be most happy to live with you, forever!"
The strange feeling that had gone through Jehanne's electronic brain then morphed into something indescribable to her and she glued herself to him again for a long kiss and embrace.

07:58 (Universal Time)

Thursday, November 29, 2334

**Office of the Admiral of the Fleet, Spacers' League's Navy Headquarters
City of New Dawn, planet Providence, Alpha Centauri B System**

Fleet Admiral Jiro Yamashiro had just walked into his office at the Navy's headquarters, ready to start this day of work, when he came to an abrupt stop on seeing the large parcel sitting on top of his work desk. While he routinely received dozens of letters and printed messages every day, getting parcels was definitely not the norm for

him. Approaching his work desk and the parcel somewhat cautiously, he then read to delivery slip attached to the parcel and immediately frowned: it came from the A.M.S. NOSTROMO. Not touching the parcel and activating his intercom, Yamashiro contacted his staff aide, who was in charge of taking care of his mail, among other things.

"Lieutenant Fiorenza, could you come in my office for a minute?"

"Right away, sir!"

Less than thirty seconds later, the young and pretty Maria Fiorenza walked in and stopped at attention, saluting Yamashiro.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

Yamashiro returned her salute before pointing at the parcel on his desk.

"This parcel, when did we receive it, Lieutenant?"

"Very early this morning, sir, via express courier. Since it was not marked as 'urgent', we kept it for your arrival this morning, sir."

"And was it checked for any possible dangerous content, like explosives or chemical substances?"

"It was scanned thoroughly before it was brought to your office, sir. It contains only a large collection of badges and dozens of printed letters, according to the scans." The mention of badges and printed letters, allied to the fact that the parcel came from the NOSTROMO, immediately raised an alarm inside Yamashiro's brain, who then nodded his head once.

"Very well! You are dismissed, Lieutenant."

"Sir!" replied the young woman, saluting her superior before pivoting on her heels and leaving the office. Getting closer to his desk, Yamashiro grabbed an envelope opener and cut the parcel open along the lines of its top flaps, then opened the flaps to see what was inside. He then saw dozens of Navy badges and rank insignias, each attached to an envelope. The badges belonged to Navy flight crews as well as to Navy ground support crewmembers. Taking the topmost envelope and insignias on top of the pile, Yamashiro eyed for a moment the rank insignias and wings of a major of the Navy's Fighter Corps before opening the envelope and extracting the document inside to read it. He couldn't help swear quietly to himself before putting that document down on his desk and grabbing a second document with insignias attached to it. His head swam after a minute or so when he understood the significance of that parcel. Using his intercom again, he called his head of personnel.

"Captain Jumongo, I need you in my office, ASAP!"

"On my way, Admiral."

Navy Captain Mbaya Jumongo, a big and powerful man, arrived after a bit over a minute and saluted Yamashiro at rigid attention.

"You needed me, Admiral?"

"Yes, Captain! I received this morning a parcel sent to me by the 34th Heavy Fighter Wing, which is embarked on the A.M.S. NOSTROMO. I got a shock when I opened it and saw what was inside it. Please examine its content and then tell me what you think of it."

"Uh, yes sir!"

Stepping forward next to the desk, Jumongo started reading each of the folded printed documents while examining the insignias attached to them. His face reflected pure dismay when he looked back at Yamashiro.

"Those are the letters of resignation from the Navy from every member of the 34th Heavy Fighter Wing, sir! The whole unit is quitting!"

"Is that even legal, or should I treat this as mass mutiny?"

Jumongo, still shaken by the reading of the letters, took his time to carefully think before answering.

"Technically, they are in their legal right to resign, Admiral. Our only declared enemies are the Space Predators and this is not linked to them in any way, so this can't be called a mutiny per say. They will also be still eligible to receive whatever pensions and benefits that their years of service entitled them to. It is however a shocking precedent that could cause serious damage to both the reputation of the Navy and to its cohesion."

"What about the heavy fighters and the support equipment and ordnance presently aboard the NOSTROMO? Don't they belong to the Navy, which would then mean that they have to be returned to us on pain of attracting charges of theft of government property?"

"Normally yes, sir, but not in this case. While the personnel of the 34th Wing belonged to the Navy, their craft and support equipment were paid for by Rear Admiral Forster and are part of the private inventory of her ship, sir. To her credit, Rear Admiral Forster fully financed herself the participation of her NOSTROMO to the Navy's combat operations."

"But, what will the personnel of our 34th Wing do now, out of Navy service?"

“They will simply become a privately-operated fighter unit, flagged under Forster’s New Haven Planetary Corporation, the same way Forster’s security androids are a privately-owned and operated Space infantry unit, sir.”

Yamashiro’s expression hardened, not liking this one single bit. He however did not have time to swear out loud before someone knocked on the door of his office, prompting a shout from him.

“COME IN!”

The person who then entered the office proved to be Lieutenant Fiorenza, carrying a large parcel in her arms while looking quite embarrassed.

“Uh, we just received another parcel from the NOSTROMO, sir: it is also addressed to you personally.”

Yamashiro rolled his eyes before signaling Fiorenza to approach him.

“Alright, Lieutenant: give me this package.”

“Yes sir!”

Watched by Jumongo and by Fiorenza, who had not been dismissed by him, Yamashiro took the parcel and proceeded in opening it. Again, he found a large collection of envelopes to which insignias were attached. Taking the top one and opening the folded document inside the envelope, to which the rank insignias of a rear admiral were attached to, Yamashiro then read out loud the letter addressed to him.

“To Admiral of the Fleet Jiro Yamashiro, from Rear Admiral Tina Forster. Following the proclamation by Chairman Paul Stein of his Executive Edict Number 12,306, stripping my force of security androids of their Spacers’ League citizenship and of their legal status as sentient beings, I and the crew of my ship, the A.M.S. NOSTROMO, have now no choice but to collectively resign from the Navy Reserves and to revert to fully private status under the charter of the New Haven Planetary Corporation. Signed: Captain Tina Forster, Spacers Star of Courage, Navy Distinguished Medal with three clusters, Navy Meritorious Service Medal, Jovian Uprising Campaign Star, Ross 128 Campaign Star, three Space Predators Battle Stars. P.S.: FUCK OFF!”

As Yamashiro turned red with anger, Maria Fiorenza had to do a heroic effort not to burst into laughter.

CHAPTER 7 – OVERPLAYING ONE’S HAND

16:22 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, December 6, 2334

West Passengers Ring Reception Area

Vehicle Deck of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Docked to the orbital Space terminal of Icelandia

Trappist-1 System, 39.6 light-years from Earth



Chairman Paul Stein

Natalia Vasilyeva checked again her electronic list of the passengers supposed to board the NOSTROMO from Icelandia’s orbital Space terminal and shook her head in incomprehension: 208 passengers of all ages were supposed to have bought a ticket to travel aboard the NOSTROMO and boarding had been announced a good ten minutes ago, yet nobody had showed up at her reception area. She finally contacted Tina Forster, who was presently on the bridge.

“Tina, this is Natalia, at the West Passengers Ring Reception Area. Something is wrong here: passenger boarding has been announced nearly eleven minutes ago inside the orbital terminal, yet I still have nobody here and I see no incoming vehicle traffic up the entrance tunnel. What about our cargo loading operations?”

“We have started to load in our cargo bays bulk ore containers a good hour ago. Let me check with the orbital station’s traffic control center.”

On the bridge, Tina was about to contact the station’s control center when Spirit opened a link with her on the main display screen of her command chair.

“Sorry to barge in like this, Tina, but I also heard Natalia’s inquiry and I then decided to connect myself with the orbital station’s internal security cameras system.”

“Connected yourself? You mean that you hacked it?”

“Paah! Connecting, hacking: play of semantics. The reason we are not getting our scheduled passengers is that the local police force is blocking them from getting into our ship. Instead of buses full of passengers waiting at the opening of our western entrance tunnel, this is what is waiting there.”

Tina became nearly instantly furious when an image taken by one of the internal cameras of the orbital station's passenger terminal appeared on her display screen: now visible on it was a large convoy of police vehicles loaded with armed officers.

"What the fuck is that?" she asked to herself before connecting herself with the ship's security command post, on top of staying in line with Spirit.

"Ahmed, put our whole internal defense force and systems on top alert but make it discreet: no loud alarms or flashing signs. We have a large local police force detachment poised to invade us via our western access tunnel. Here is a video link of that force, taken from an internal orbital station's security camera hacked by Spirit."

Ahmed Jibril, whose head and upper torso was visible on one of Tina's secondary display screens, quickly swore out loud as he examined the video link provided to him by Tina.

"Holy shit! I can count over 140 policemen armed with disintegrator weapons. They could cause a lot of damage to us once inside our ship. What are your instructions on how to handle them, Tina?"

"First off, I want to avoid as much as possible any deaths or serious injuries...to anyone. We will use strictly stun weapons and other non-lethal parts of our arsenal if those bozos actually invade our ship, including our ping-pong program."

Ahmed Jibril had a mean smile on hearing the words 'ping-pong program'.

"Understood, Tina. I will set that program to level four at first. I doubt that they will want to experience a higher level once they will have tasted the level four one."

"Right! Deploy all of our security androids but tell them to use only stun guns unless I say otherwise. We will now wait and see what these local cops will do."

Tina was about to add more but was cut off by Spirit, whose voice showed some urgency.

"Warning! A police heavy weapons tactical team of 43 officers has just joined the waiting group of 142 officers near the entrance tunnel's opening. I see ten vehicle-mounted disintegrator cannons as part of that new group."

"ARE THESE IDIOTS CRAZY OR JUST PLAIN DUMB? Spirit, connect me at once with the communications channel of that police force. I am sure that you have also hacked that link as well."

"I effectively have, Tina. Here you go!"

The head of a mature man wearing a police multi-function helmet then appeared on her screen. At first, the police officer, who wore the rank insignias of a police captain,

appeared surprised and confused by that intrusive link inside his command net. He then apparently recognized who he was looking at, an angry look then appearing on his face.

“Captain Forster, you are on a police channel. Leave it at once!”

“You will be the one leaving with your bunch of goons, Captain Frazetta. Why are you blocking from boarding the passengers due to travel on my ship? And why do you have a heavy weapons tactical team with you? What kind of stupid game are you trying to play?”

“Me and my men are here to serve an arrest warrant in your name, for having defied an executive edict from the Chairman of the High Council. I also have orders from the planetary governor to search your ship and disarm every security android found aboard it.”

“Captain Frazetta, do you realize how stupid and foolhardy what you just said is? First, that executive edict of yours does not legally justify any attempts at making arrests or at executing search warrants. It simply stripped away citizenship status from my androids. Second, do you think that your goons will be able to intimidate, let alone overwhelm a ship and internal security force that has successfully destroyed Space Predator ships and has taken by assault more Predator ships? Do you really want to risk such an encounter, Captain? If you don’t want to end up with eggs on your face, or worse, then I strongly counsel you to withdraw with your goons right away and to allow those waiting passengers to board my ship, so that I could honor their tickets. You may also remind your precious governor that your planet’s ore shipments may end up gathering dust at this terminal if I pass the word to other heavy cargo captains, who are all friends of mine by the way, to stop picking up your ore altogether. Your choice!”

Looking dismayed at first, the police captain debated mentally for long seconds about what to do before nodding his head once, reticence clearly visible on his face.

“Very well, Captain Forster. We will withdraw now and will let your passengers board your ship. However, be ready for legal consequences following your act of resisting arrest. I...”

Having had enough of that clown, Tina cut her link with him off, then spoke to Spirit.

“Spirit, can you please check that these local cops effectively withdraw away from our ship and that they are letting our passengers enter the ship?”

“I’m on it, Tina.”

Some three minutes later, Spirit returned online to speak with Tina.

“Good news, Tina! That police force has effectively withdrawn away from this part of the terminal and the first buses loaded with our passengers are now starting to roll up our access tunnel.”

“Thank the stars! Some common sense, at last!”

“Are you going to do some counter-action to this, Tina, so that we don’t have a repeat of this incident?”

“I sure will, Spirit. However, contrary to these idiots, I will use political means rather than brute force. By the way, good job with that system hacking, Spirit.”

“All in a day’s work, Tina.”

14:40 (Universal Time)

Friday, December 21, 2334

Office of the Chairman of the High Council of the Spacers’ League

City of New Dawn, planet Providence, Alpha Centauri B System

Paul Stein felt a shock when his father, Jacobus Stein, nearly kicked open the door of his office of Chairman of the High Council: not from concern at seeing his 88-year-old father coming on his own despite his gradually worsening health but from sheer surprise. In truth, their father-son relationship had not been very good in the last decade and was still on a downward slope, thanks to some severe disagreements between the two of them about how to conduct the family business.

“Dad? Why are you coming here like this? You should be taking care of your heart condition.”

“Why am I here? Because of your latest series of costly blunders, that’s why!” spat back the ageing geological engineer and mining magnate after stopping right in front of his son’s desk.

“What costly blunders?” protested Paul, making his father frown deeply.

“You want me to refresh your memory? Fine! First, you picked a totally unnecessary fight against what is possibly the most popular person in the Spacers’ League: Tina Forster, who is considered a hero by nearly every Spacer.”

“Now, wait a second, Dad! Her security androids force had the potential to become a huge internal security risk for us. They had to be cut to size and...”

“I believe that we are talking about the same security force that boarded and took by assault Space Predator ships and then helped rescue the survivors of our battle fleet

after their disastrous battle with Space Predator ships, right? And this after the NOSTROMO saved in-extremis Providence's population from being butchered by those monstrous Space Predators. If Tina Forster ever decided to run for the job of Chairman of the High Council, she would be voted in by popular acclamation in an instant. However, she is too honest and modest to ever get into politics. Second, you and your dumb sister Marge tried to have the local police in Icelandia storm the NOSTROMO while it was docked and loading up the ore mined by our corporation, ore that represents our core business. Thankfully, that police commander leading the boarding force found enough brains to decide to withdraw without trying to force his way aboard the NOSTROMO to arrest Forster. If he and his officers would have gone in, I can certify you that Forster and her security androids would have served them their heads on a platter. Did your sister really believe that a bunch of pot-bellied cops would have lasted long against androids able to assault and take a Space Predator ship?"

"Captain Forster was defying my authority by insisting that her androids were both legal citizens and sentient beings, contrary to my executive edict. Marge had enough legal justifications to have Forster arrested."

"So you say! However, you know as well as me that your argument is total bullshit and would be laughed out of any honest court of law. I said 'honest court of law' because you have been busy lately in placing your sycophants around our justice department and our courts. Third, because of that stupid stunt in Icelandia, the NOSTROMO is now refusing to bring cargo and supplies to the Trappist-1 System or to carry out the ore mined by our corporation. Worst, the captains of most of the other heavy cargo ships in the Spacers' League had joined her out of solidarity in boycotting the Trappist-1 System."

"There are plenty of other cargo ships available that are still willing to carry our ore and supplies, Dad."

"Oh yeah? A new orbital space terminal was due this month to be carried to Icelandia, after having been completed at the Avalon Space Yards around Earth. The problem is that this space terminal was designed and built so that it could be carried as a single module to Icelandia by a Class-A super heavy cargo ship. Do you know how many Class-A super heavy cargo ships there are in the Spacers' League? TWO! The NOSTROMO and the JUPITER'S CHILD. Now, surprise surprise, the NOSTROMO is refusing to take the transport contract for our new orbital terminal. As for the captain of the JUPITER'S CHILD, I just learned that he is also refusing to take up that contract.

Now, if we want to see that new terminal arrive in Icelandia, it will have to be returned to the Avalon Space Yards to be split into smaller parts compatible with Class-B heavy cargo ships, something that will cost us an extra 1.7 billion credits...before transportation. That will wipe out most of our anticipated corporation's profits for this year. Well done, Son!"

Now red in the face, Paul Stein shot up on his feet to confront his father.

"IF YOU THINK THAT I AM SO BAD AS CHAIRMAN AND CEO OF OUR CORPORATION, WHY DON'T YOU COME AND SIT IN THIS CHAIR IN MY PLACE?"

"Flash news, Son: I just took back control of my old corporation. Remember that I still kept a majority share of the corporation, so that you could avoid paying extra taxes on your personal financial assets? Well, I just exercised my options and am returning to the helm of Pallas Mining, long enough to find someone truly competent to serve as its new CEO. As for your position as Chairman of the High Council, I also spoke with my old friends in the High Council and asked them to hold a vote to impeach you and throw you out as Chairman. You both fucked up and deeply disappointed me, Son, and you will now pay the price for it. I will not let you ruin the work of my whole life by your bigotry and stupidity."

Paul, stunned speechless for a moment, finally tried to protest again.

"The High Council will never have the guts to impeach me, Dad. I have..."

The buzzing of his desk comms box then interrupted him. Jacobus Stein made a smirk then and pointed at the comms box.

"You better take that call, Son: I believe that it is the Deputy Chairman, Vladimir Gasparov, calling."

Cold sweat appeared on Paul Stein's forehead as he stared at the still buzzing communications box. He finally sat back and grabbed the box' handset, putting the call on 'private' mode.

"Chairman Stein speaking!"

While his father couldn't hear what was said at the other end of the line, he could easily guess what was being said by his son's body language. After a rather short and terse exchange, Paul Stein put down slowly the handset, his face pale.

"I... An emergency meeting of the High Council has been called for four P.M. this afternoon. I will have to go to it."

"I believe so, Son." replied Jacobus Stein, his expression severe.

16:35 (Universal Time)

High Council's chambers

Spacers' League government building, city of New Dawn

"...Executive Armstrong, of the Jupiter Corporation?"

"Aye!"

"Governor Sheraz of New Shouria?"

"Aye!"

"Executive Forster?"

"Hell yes!"

Tina's spirited answer to the impeachment vote being held by the High Council earned her a falsely severe look from Deputy Chairman Vladimir Gasparov.

"A simple 'aye' will suffice, Tina."

"Aye!"

"This now leaves only one vote to be made: mine. I vote 'aye' to impeaching Chairman Paul Stein for gross abuse of authority. The results of the vote are: sixteen 'aye' and one 'nay'. Chairman Paul Stein is thus found guilty of gross abuse of his authority as Chairman of the High Council and will have to leave his post before six this evening, Providence Time. I will assume the chairmanship by interim until a vote can be taken to name a new chairman. The results of this impeachment proceedings will be immediately broadcasted to the general public and around the administration by the Senior Clerk of the High Council. This emergency session of the High Council is now adjourned."

The members of the High Council then got up from their chairs and filed out of the room, leaving behind an utterly destroyed Paul Stein, collapsed into one of the chairs lining the walls of the chambers. Once out, the members gathered around Tina to congratulate her and shake her hand. Only one member did not come to shake her hand: Marge Stein, who had been the only 'nay' vote. Vladimir Gasparov, whom Tina had helped a number of times in the past, waited to be last before shaking hands with her.

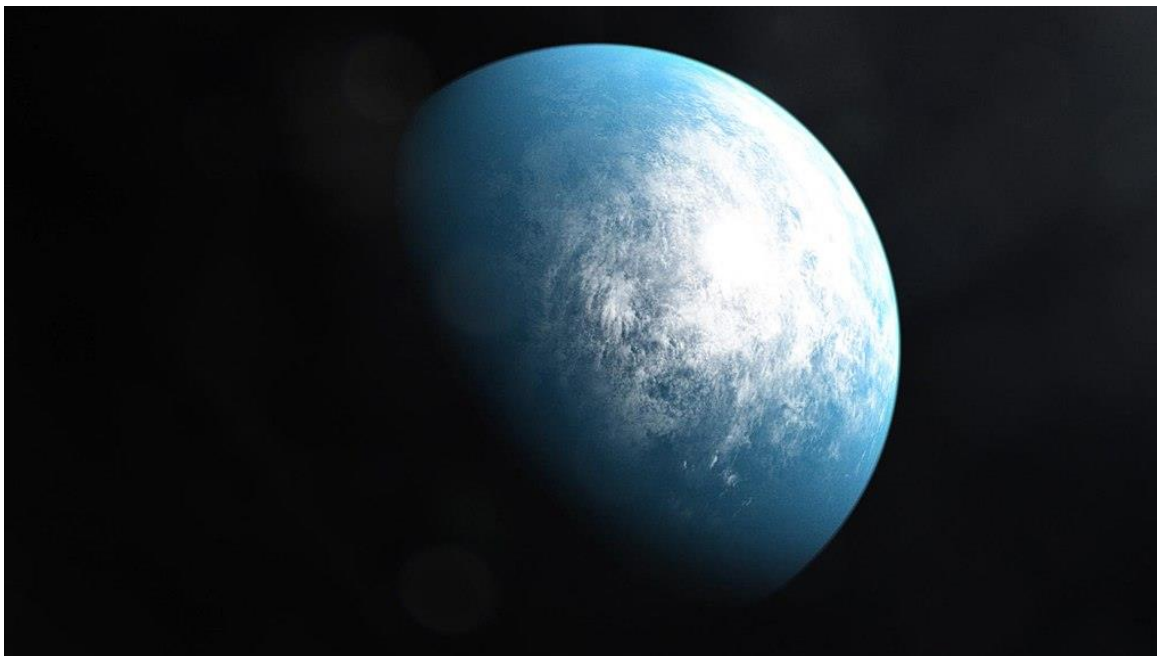
"You are now rid of a big worry, Tina. Be assured that I will officially annul this stupid Executive Edict Number 12,306 at the first hour tomorrow morning. Your security androids are now again citizens in good standing of the Spacers' League."

"That is the best outcome I was hoping for, Vladimir."

Gasparov smiled and nodded his head.

“Now, go back to your ship, Tina. You belong in Space, not in some political house on intrigues.”

CHAPTER 8 – INVASION



The planet Nordland (TOI 700d), 101.2 light-years from Earth in the Dorado Constellation.

06:09 (Universal Time)

Sunday, October 13, 2335

Bridge of the Spacers' League ore carrier IRON MAIDEN

Emerging in the TOI 700 System, Dorado Constellation

101.2 light-years from Earth

"Jump completed! I confirm that we are now in the TOI 700 System, with the planet Nordland ahead at a distance of 0.6 Astronomical Units."

"Thank you, Miss Cuellar! Sensors, make a medium range panoramic scan! Make sure that no object or ship is on a collision course with us."

"Aye, Captain!"

Less than half a minute later, Captain Régis Galix' sensors officer, Piotr Zivkin, reported back to him from his station.

"Nothing within 250,000 kilometers, Captain."

"Good! Mister Smith, head for Nordland at fifty percent acceleration. We have a lot of steel products to load and little time to do it. On the other hand, I am not sure that Nordland Space Control would like it if we approached orbit like a bowling ball."

There were a few chuckles in response to Galix' pun, then silence fell back on the bridge as the crew of the commercial ore carrier concentrated on their tasks. Régis Galix thus concentrated his attention on the slowly growing small blue ball that was the planet Nordland. There was little remarkable about Nordland as a planetary body, except for two things: it was a habitable world, albeit a rather cold one; and it contained some very rich deposits of heavy metals like chromium, nickel, vanadium and copper. Those metals represented the bread and butter of the IRON MAIDEN, a medium-sized cargo ship specializing in the transport of various metals in either refined ore, ingot or pellet shape. Because many planets which were prime sources of metals still had only basic Space installations, the IRON MAIDEN had been designed to be able to enter the atmosphere of a planet or moon and then land at the vertical where it would pick up its load of metal products. Because of that, Galix' ship had a well-streamlined shape espousing that of a thick triangular flying wing, which made it easy to control even in heavy atmospheric turbulences. Galix was most proud of his ship, which had entered service some five years ago and which used some of the latest technology available in the Spacers' League.

Some four hours later, the IRON MAIDEN entered into a low orbit over Nordland, prior to starting its descent through the atmosphere. The planet was by far the farthest from Earth among the worlds of the Spacers' League and had first been explored and then colonized a mere nine years ago. As a result, it had few systems and satellites in orbit around it and no orbital terminal, another reason why the IRON MAIDEN routinely landed directly on the planet to either unload supplies or load up on metal products. Régis Galix was still debating if he would allow his crew to spend a day or two away from the ship while it was being loaded, in order to flex their legs and breathe some open fresh air, when Piotr Zivkin suddenly spoke up, his voice tainted with surprise.

"What the... a very large ship just jumped directly into orbit of Nordland, some 8,000 kilometers away from us. I don't th... Another huge ship just emerged next to the planet. THEY'RE SPACE PREDATOR ASTEROID SHIPS! MORE ASTEROID SHIPS ARE NOW CONTINUING TO APPEAR AROUND US!"

Captain Galix froze for a moment in horror at that announcement before he started shouting orders around his command chair.

"MISTER SMITH, GET US OUT OF HERE! MISS CUELLAR, PLOT AN EMERGENCY JUMP TO PROVIDENCE AND JUMP AS SOON AS WE ARE READY! TO ALL THE CREW: WE ARE UNDER ATTACK! CLOSE ALL..."

Galix couldn't finish his sentence before his ship shook and before all power was suddenly cut on the bridge. Thankfully, the emergency batteries system took over in seconds and some of the lights and most of the work stations on the bridge lit back up.

"CAPTAIN, WE HAVE MULTIPLE HULL BREACHES FROM LASER STRIKES, WITH THREE MAIN COMPARTMENTS VENTING TO SPACE!"

"MAIN POWER AND PROPULSION ARE OUT, CAPTAIN!"

"SWITCH TO GRAVITY SAILS! WE MUST..."

A thick purple laser beam then cut into the bridge compartment, creating a shower of sparks as it burned through the deck and roof of the bridge, also creating a deadly explosive decompression. Galix and his bridge crew, who were not wearing spacesuits at the time, died within seconds, with many of the men and women being sucked out into Space and also being torn apart as their bodies went through the jagged holes created in its steel hull by the powerful laser beams of the Space Predators.

The small orbital traffic control station situated in equatorial orbit around Nordland was destroyed and silenced even more quickly than the IRON MAIDEN, its strong radar emissions making it an ideal target for the Space Predator warships which had arrived by the dozens over the planet. It thus had no chance to launch an emergency beacon drone that could have alerted the rest of the Spacers' League to the arrival of the monsters in the TOI 700 System. The 27 asteroid warships and accompanying fifteen support ships full of Space Predator troops then spent twenty minutes destroying anything they found in orbit or in the process of flying from the surface towards the planet's orbit. Next, with the warships covering them and forming an interdiction barrier above them, the fifteen troopships started sending down their 25,000 soldiers, using their transporter beams to bring them on the planet, where they reappeared and immediately started killing the Humans they could find around them.

11:20 (Universal Time)

Downtown New Oslo City, administrative center of Nordland

Greta Thorund was working at her desk, situated next to one of the large windows of the financial services company employing her, when a series of detonations made her jerk and look outside. What she saw then made her mouth and eyes open wide in horror: dozens of tall, nightmarish creatures were running out of some sort of craft that had landed in the middle of the square her building was overlooking and were shooting everybody in sight with sorts of rifles firing purple beams. The best way to summarily describe the creatures was as well over two-meter-tall brownish-red praying mantis with four legs, four arms, a long spiked tail and an elongated head with huge, terrifying-looking jaws. Greta's heart skipped a beat when she saw half a dozen of the creatures run towards the building she was in and entered it: her three-year-old daughter Frida was presently at the daycare center of her building, on the ground floor!

"NOOO!"

Without thinking further, Greta rushed out of her office to go down to the daycare center and to carry her Frida to safety, wherever that would be. She however thought enough to not take one of the elevator cabins on her floor: it would have been like walking straight into the arms of these monsters. Instead she ran into the nearby fire emergency stairwell and went down the steps as quickly as she could, going down three levels in less than a minute. She was about to go out of the stairwell at ground level when she noticed the glass panel of a firefighting station box next to the door of the stairwell: there was a large fire axe in it next to a rolled fire hose. Quickly opening the panel, Greta grabbed the axe with both hands, then pulled open the door and ran inside the ground level hallway, only to nearly bump into one of the insect-like monsters, who was passing by the door of the stairwell at the time. The creature seemingly was as surprised as her by that encounter and took a fraction of a second to react and pivot on the spot while raising its weapon to point it at her. Greta, pumped full of adrenaline and pushed by her resolve to save her daughter, took that chance and swung her axe while screaming her rage and fury. Swung with the strength of despair, the blade hit one of the four arms of the creature and severed it, making the monster screech with pain as green blood started spurting out from the wound. Greta then swung her axe a second time, aiming for the head of the creature. That blow split open the skull of the monster, near one of its four eyes, with the alien then collapsing on the floor, dead. Not wasting a second in celebrating her victory, Greta started running again, heading for the entrance to the daycare center, only ten meters away. Pushing it open while still running, she burst inside the daycare' reception area, where she stopped cold at the sight of the daycare

receptionist. The mature woman was lying in a pool of blood next to her reception desk, unmoving and with an ugly wound in her chest. Gathering back her courage, Greta stepped over the body of the receptionist and ran towards the playroom where she knew her little Frida would be with another dozen toddlers. That was when she heard a concert of terrified screams coming from that playroom. Fearing the worst, she pulled open the door of the playroom and entered it, still holding her axe. Inside, she was greeted by a frightening sight: Frida and her little friends were all cowering in a corner, faced by two menacing alien monsters. Greta's reaction to that sight was purely instinctive: she rushed at the monster nearest her daughter while shouting her rage.

"DON'T TOUCH MY FRIDA!"

This time however the monsters reacted quickly enough to her to be able to pivot and shoot their weapons. Purple laser beams hit Greta in the chest, burning straight through it and killing her instantly. Little Frida, crying with both fear and grief, ran at once to her dead mother's body, all but ignoring the aliens standing nearby and then throwing herself over Greta, shaking her desperately while crying.

"Nooo! Please don't die, Mommy!"

The alien nearest to her stared at that scene for a second before waving at its companion in order to stop him from shooting little Frida.

"Don't kill her...yet! This youngling biped and the others here will make a nice reserve of living meat for our troops later on, once we will have cleaned up this town. That adult biped must have been her mother. She was most foolish to attack us like this but she was also brave: she died trying to protect her offspring and did what would have been expected from our own females."

The other alien slowly lowered its pulse laser rifle and nodded its head.

"You're right, Katarkis! Still, those younglings look very tasty. I can't wait to feast on one of them later on."

18:58 (Universal Time)

Providence's government central communications center

New Dawn City, Providence, Alpha Centauri B System

105 light-years from Nordland

"Anything special to report before I take this shift over from you, Rena?"

"Only one thing." answered Rena Darian, who had just finished her day shift at the Spacers' League's government communications center. "The regular daily courier drone from Nordland still has not shown up and is overdue by nearly three hours. Also, our own courier drone sent to Nordland at noon has not returned yet."

"That's weird! Having one drone possibly malfunction or be delayed is already unusual, but to have two drones failing to show up is concerning. I will have a second drone sent to Nordland, to ask them what is their problem."

"Fair enough, Garry!" said Rena. "However, if we don't get news from Nordland by midnight, then you should contact Navy Headquarters and signal this, so that they could send someone to check on this."

"Will do! Have a good night, Rena."

"You too, Garry!"

Rena then walked out of the large communications room, which was filled with communication stations and dispatch desks, heading down to the underground garage where her aircar was parked.

08:11 (Universal Time)

Monday, October 14, 2335

Bridge of the Spacers' League corvette BALI

Emerging into the TOI 700 System

"We are now inside the TOI 700 System, sir. Nordland is ahead of us, about 600,000 kilometers away."

"Good! Keep electronic silence for the moment. I want us to stay discrete until we know more about the situation in the system. What do our passive sensors tell us, Mister Xavier?"

The sensors officer of the corvette looked at her instruments and hesitated for a couple of seconds before answering Commander Li.

"Uh, I believe that we have a problem, sir: the electro-magnetic frequencies in the system are empty...completely empty. I can't detect any datalink, radio or video signal."

"What?! We should at least be able to intercept a few commercial entertainment channels: they are on 24 hours a day."

"Well, sir, right now they are totally silent."

"I don't like this one bit." said Li, thinking for a few seconds before punching the general alert button on his command chair's console.

"Attention all hands, this is your captain speaking! Battle stations! I say again, battle stations! Everybody will don their spacesuits, half of the crew at a time."

Li himself waited until his second-in-command arrived on the bridge nine minutes later, wearing a spacesuit, before going to quickly put on his own spacesuit. Once back in his chair, he gave a short order to his sensors officer.

"Mister Xavier, break electronic silence and send out one ping from our long-range radar. Navigator, calculate in advance an emergency jump out of the system but keep our vector away from that for Providence. If we have to scam out of here in a hurry, I don't want to guide any hostile ship towards Providence. Also calculate in advance a second jump, this time towards Providence, to immediately follow up on the first jump."

"Aye, Captain!"

A few seconds after that, the sensors officer reported back to Li in a strangled voice.

"Captain, I got echoes from 32 very large objects orbiting around Nordland. There may be more similar objects on the opposite side of the planet, invisible to our radar for the moment."

Li barely had time to swallow hard before his electronic warfare shouted out in alarm.

"ONE RADAR PULSE JUST HIT US, CAPTAIN: IT'S A SPACE PREDATOR RADAR!"

"Dear God! HELM, JUMP OUT OF THE SYSTEM! NOW!"

Thankfully, the pilot and the navigator of the corvette reacted quickly to his order and the BALI jumped out of the TOI 700 System within two seconds, to reappear in the empty void of Deep Space. Another jump followed after less than three seconds, bringing the ship back inside the Alpha Centauri B System. Li, who had held on to his breath, was finally able to blow air out in relief.

"Sensors, make sure that nobody followed us. Comms, contact at once the Admiralty and send the following message on a flash priority basis: the TOI 700 System has been invaded by a minimum of 32 Space Predator ships. The planet Nordland is not emitting anymore on any frequency."

"Aye, Captain!"

Li, having done the most urgent thing that needed to be done, then closed his eyes in grief at the thoughts of what the inhabitants of Nordland had to live through right now.

“Navigator, remind me of the latest population figures for the TOI 700 System.”

“Yes sir!... According to the latest annual census, there were 2,189,655 persons living inside the system, nearly all of them on Nordland.”

That information brought tears to Li’s eyes: over two million men, women and children were now at the mercy of cruel carnivorous aliens, unless the Navy could pull out a miracle and muster quickly a rescue force able to face up to at least 32 Space Predator asteroid ships.

09:48 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In orbit over the moon New Haven (Wolf 1061 ca)

Wolf 1061 System, 13.8 light-years from Earth

“Is our departing batch of security androids ready to fly out and go down to New Haven to go start their tour of duty there?”

“Yes, Tina!” answered Dana Durning from her navigator’s chair. “They should start leaving the ship via shuttles in about fifteen minutes. Our androids presently on duty on New Haven will then brief them quickly before coming back to the ship on our shuttles’ return trip.”

“Good!”

Tina Forster then looked down towards the surface of New Haven, visible in the lower parts of the holographic display sphere of the bridge complex. The surface of the moon, orbiting the planet New Shouria in the Wolf 1061 System, now looked a lot greener than it had been fifteen years ago, when she had been given it by the Koorivars, now inhabiting New Shouria, as a thank you for rescuing two Koorivar sub-luminic ships filled with refugees in cryogenic hibernation and lost in Deep Space. Thanks to a continued program of seeding, planting and water importation from the nearby ocean planet Thule, New Haven was now nearly completely covered with vegetation. That extra vegetation had in turn helped both boost the oxygen content of the already breathable atmosphere of the moon and had also helped raise the atmospheric pressure from its original 810 millibars to the present 906 millibars, a significant improvement that had helped a lot the lives of its over half a million inhabitants, most of them dispossessed refugees from

Earth, whom Tina had helped by offering them a new, peaceful life on her moon. Her New Haven Planetary Corporation was in essence a constantly growing humanitarian refuge and agrarian world which Tina was rightly most proud of.

Less than two minutes later, Tina got an urgent beeping signal on her command chair's display screen. She stiffened when she saw that Spirit was relaying to her a flash priority message from the Admiralty in Providence via an emergency courier drone that had just arrived in the system. The reading of the short, one-page message made her pale.

"Dear God! Dana, stop at once the disembarking of our androids and send down our shuttles empty, so that they could go load up our androids who just completed a tour on New Haven. One of the centuries presently on the moon will stay there to provide protection to it: the Space Predators have invaded yesterday the TOI 700 System and have occupied Nordland."

All heads in the bridge complex snapped towards her with eyes filled with dread and horror on hearing that. However, nobody wasted time trying to ask questions about that new information, allowing Tina to direct the emergency retrieval of 300 out of the 400 security androids presently on New Haven. As her fleet of shuttles was launching out of her ship, Tina took the time to review the data she had on the TOI 700 System. It was a secondary mining world with a fairly small population but with rich deposits of various valuable metals. It also happened to be by far the furthest Human world from Earth and, not too surprisingly, was in the Space quadrant adjacent to that where the original homeworld of the Space Predators had been, that is before it was utterly destroyed by the *Nostromo* nearly three years ago. The choice of TOI 700 as a target by the Space Predators thus made a lot of strategic sense. Those Space Predators may be cruel and merciless but they were certainly not stupid. Next, Tina studied in detail the Space charts of the system, thinking about her next move. The idea of waiting for further directives from the Admiralty in Providence didn't even touch her mind: she had given up on the strategic and tactical wisdom of the Admiralty, or rather its lack of it, years ago. Besides, with her and her whole crew having resigned 'en masse' from the Navy Reserves last November, Tina didn't have to follow Navy directives or orders anymore, unless her ship and crew were forcibly enlisted by the Navy, something she doubted would ever happen. The message just transmitted from Providence was after all a simple general warning, not a mobilization order. Something in the charts of the TOI 700

System then attracted her attention. Studying that feature, she then made her mind on a plan of action and switched her intercom to 'ship-wide announcement'.

"Attention all hands! This is your captain speaking! We just received a general warning from the Admiralty, advising every vessel and Spacers' League's worlds that the Space Predators invaded in force the TOI 700 System yesterday with at least 32 asteroid ships and have landed on Nordland. I intend to soon go effect a combat reconnaissance mission in the TOI 700 System, to ascertain what happened to the two million people living on Nordland. This will be a very risky mission, so all those who would like to evacuate their families down to New Haven before our departure from orbit are to send them within an hour to the Hangar Deck, for embarkation in our shuttles. The same applies to the students of our university and to our commercial partners and their employees. Those who will still be aboard in two hours will be deemed by me to have volunteered for our mission. However, any help will be welcome, as we may have to soon take care of a mass of refugees from Nordland. That is all for the moment."

As Tina closed her intercom link, Dana Durning gave her a sardonic smile.

"A combat reconnaissance mission? Will it be the kind of reconnaissance in force your late American General George Patton was so fond of, Tina?"

Tina thought her answer over for a couple of seconds before smiling to Dana.

"Could be!"

CHAPTER 9 – BATTLE FOR NORDLAND



11:32 (Universal Time)

Monday, October 14, 2335

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Emerging inside the TOI 700 System, between the orbits of the third and fourth planet.

“Jump completed, Tina. Comet TOI 77399 is slightly to our port side, 1,800 kilometers away.”

“Nice precision jump, Dana! Frida, get us quickly behind that comet, so that it could mask us from the Space Predator fleet stationed around Nordland. Renée, be prepared to launch three stealth reconnaissance probes and position them just around the edges of that comet and of its tail, so that they could watch in passive mode Nordland and report to us via tight directional maser beams.”

“Preparing and programming those probes now, Tina. I will launch them as soon as we will be hidden behind the comet.”

“Excellent!” said Tina before looking down towards the second lower platform, where Janet Robeson was sitting at an otherwise unused work station and following the events closely. Tina had asked her to be in charge of receiving and assisting as much

as possible any survivor or refugee from Nordland that could possibly be saved during their mission. To her credit, the ageing retired politician had immediately accepted that responsibility.

"Janet, do not hesitate to ask for the assistance and help from the relatives of our crewmembers: any survivor or refugee we will be able to extract from Nordland will most probably be traumatized and in deep psychological distress."

"I realize that, Tina. I already talked with the spouses and older children of our crewmembers and they are ready to do anything they can to help."

"Good! Please thank them on my behalf for that."

"I will, Tina."

Next, Tina looked at Dana Durning, sitting next to her in her navigator's seat.

"How long before the orbit of this comet gets to its nearest point with Nordland, Dana?"

"It will take another seven hours and ten minutes, at which point we will be at a distance of approximately 320,000 kilometers from Nordland."

"Good enough to allow us to give a nice surprise to these monsters and engage their outer screen. Hopefully, the radar-absorbing stealth black paint we spread over our hull three years ago will still be effective."

"Do you think that our Navy will show up before that, Tina?"

"I don't think so, not because I believe the Admiralty to be unable to react faster but because of the need to assemble enough warships to have any chance to win a fight with such a huge Space Predator fleet. Unfortunately, we are still rebuilding our battle fleet and the number of major warships in our Navy is still quite pitiful. I wish that the nations of Earth could have got off their buns during the last decade and built some viable combat fleet of their own that could help us now."

"Well, don't expect much from them, Tina, except maybe a lot of navel-gazing."

Many around the bridge smirked at that bitter comment from Dana: Earth had been basically little but a dead weight in Space for twenty years, despite having by far a much larger population than that of the whole Spacers' League. The only meaningful contribution to the Spacers' League from Earth was actually the steady flow of Earth emigrants moving to Space and joining the Spacers' League as new citizens every year. Even twenty years after the Spacers' League had gained its political and military independence from Earth as a result of the historic Jovian Uprising of 2315, anti-Spacer sentiments and racism still endured among a sizeable minority of Earth's citizenry.

17:44 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Hiding behind Comet TOI-77399, approaching orbit of Nordland

“Heads up, Tina! A long-range radar pulse emitted from beyond the orbit of the third planet has just swept in, painting the Space Predator ships around Nordland. I classify it as a Navy frigate radar signal.”

“The Admiralty probably sent an advanced scout to gather firm information about what exactly is around Nordland before sending in its warships.” said Tina, in reply to Renée d’Argenteuil’s warning. “Let’s see how those Space Predators will react to this. But first, let’s go to battle stations.”

Tina then opened a safety cover on her command chair’s console and pushed the red button inside the recess, starting an ominous pulsing horn blare all around the ship.

“TO ALL: BATTLE STATIONS! BATTLE STATIONS!”

Next, she looked at Renée d’Argenteuil, her weapons officer.

“Deploy all our disintegrator cannons! Set them on ‘matter converter mode’. Start spinning the flywheel capacitors for our laser batteries.”

“Deploying all batteries. Matter converter mode selected. Charging our laser batteries’ capacitors.” replied the tall and lean mature woman. Renée did feel her heart jump in her chest as she selected the ‘matter converter mode’ for their disintegrator cannons. That energy mode, invented by the late Doctor Koomak, basically transformed already extremely powerful weapons into doomsday weapons of terrifying power. Yet, the modifications added to their existing disintegrator cannons were both simple and a stroke of genius on the part of Doctor Koomak. Essentially, special devices had been added to the muzzles of their disintegrators, devices which used the same physics principle used for centuries by the Koorivars to easily and cheaply produce anti-matter that could then be used to power rocket engines. That same principle had then been used by Tina Forster to produce light missile warheads with explosive power in the multi-megaton range. Now, Koorivar anti-matter converter devices attached to the muzzles of the NOSTROMO’s disintegrator cannons would, when selected and activated, transform the disintegrator beams, which normally broke apart the molecular bonds in the objects or medium they hit, into matter conversion beams. Such matter conversion beams would then react on impact with the molecular structure of the target object, converting

large masses of it on their outer surfaces into anti-matter. That newly formed mass of anti-matter would then react violently with the surrounding matter still in its normal state, resulting in a matter/anti-matter explosion that could represent hundreds or even thousands of megatons of pure energy blast, depending on the initial power of the weapon's beam. However, such terrifying power needed to be used very cautiously. If, for example, a matter conversion beam directed at a Space Predator ship missed its target and went on in penetrating Nordland's atmosphere, the NOSTROMO could then unwittingly cause some catastrophic damage to the planet it was trying to save. Right now, nobody but Tina and her senior officers knew about the new capacity of the NOSTROMO's disintegrators, not even the Spacers' League's Admiralty. This was going to be their first ever use in combat and they gave Tina hope to win an otherwise nearly suicidal fight. However, this was not the sole nasty surprise Tina had reserved for the Space Predators. Young Roshana Golshan, continuing the work started by the late Doctor Koomak on captured enemy transporter technology, had succeeded recently in adapting that technology to Human use. Tina, still without the knowledge of Spacers' League authorities, had then produced in-house a number of transporter craft and transporter projectors which would now enable her to beam down directly to the surface of Nordland groups of security androids. The battle to come thus promised to be epic.

As Tina had expected, the Space Predators reacted to the arrival of the Navy frigate in the system by sending some of their warships to intercept and destroy that frigate. However, the number of warships that accelerated away from Nordland surprised her.

"They are sending fifteen of their warships just to intercept that lone frigate? That's gross overkill!"

"Maybe they intend to form a barrier well away from Nordland, in anticipation of the arrival of a complete Navy fleet." proposed Dana Durning, making Tina nod her head.

"A most logical guess, Dana. This will give us an opportunity to exploit that move by those monsters.

As her bridge crew was tracking the departing Space Predator warships while keeping tabs on the remaining enemy ships still in orbit around Nordland, Tina called up

her husband Michel, who was waiting in the hangar deck complex with 600 of their security androids ready to beam down in their assault craft.

“Michel, be advised that we are about to engage the enemy fleet. We will first destroy a couple of enemy transport ships, then I will give you the signal to beam down to the surface of Nordland. The initial objective of our troops is still as discussed earlier on: the government administrative complex in the capital, New Oslo City. Our androids will first clear that complex of the Predators in and around it, then will expand out in search for the citizens who can still be rescued. If you find survivors, bring them to a secure location in the city and do not send them back to the NOSTROMO yet: I just don't have any firm idea of where I will be during the next couple of hours.”

What she didn't say then was that she wasn't even sure that she and the NOSTROMO would still exist in a couple of hours. Somehow, Michel understood that as well and replied in a most sober tone.

“We will all do the best we can against those monsters, Tina. With luck, the gods of war will smile on us.”

“What do you mean, with luck? You already have Thor, Odin and Athena with you! Just ask them to say 'cheese' to you.”

Michel briefly laughed at her mention of three of their security androids, which had been built to look like their namesakes.

“I will, Tina. We will give hell to those monsters on the surface.”

“And we will kick ass here in orbit. Good luck to you all.”

“And good luck to you and the rest of our crew.”

Michel then cut the link, leaving Tina to stare at her communications display screen with a big heart. She fully expected to lose some of her people in battle today, with her counting her security androids as people. Maybe they were all going to die today but if that happened, she was going to make sure that lots of Space Predators would also die first.

“The Navy frigate just jumped out of the system, Tina. The fifteen Predator warships are now deploying beyond the orbit of the third planet and forming an interdiction barrier.”

Tina nodded once and smiled to Dana Durning.

“You guessed right, Dana. Time for us to use that opportunity to the utmost. Let's do a micro-jump and reappear behind and below that small Predator support ship

bringing the rear of the enemy fleet. Then we will start blasting our way through the enemy transport ships.”

Dana nearly replied that this ‘small’ Predator support ship was actually an egg-shaped converted M-Class asteroid with an approximate diameter of five kilometers, with three times the volume of the NOSTROMO, but kept her mouth shut and quickly calculated a micro-jump.

“Micro-jump calculated and ready to engage, Tina.”

“Good! TO ALL THE CREW, HOLD ON TO YOUR PANTS: WE ARE JUMPING INTO COMBAT NOW. DANA, ENGAGE!”

“Jumping now!”

Leaving its hiding place behind the comet it had been using for nearly seven hours, the NOSTROMO briefly disappeared from normal Space, then reappeared in a flash of orange light some 2,000 kilometers behind and slightly the tail-end Space Predator ship. As soon as she saw that the enemy ship was visible ahead, Tina shouted an order.

“MAIN BATTERIES, FIRE AT WILL!”

All four of the NOSTROMO’s ultra-heavy disintegrator cannons fired as one, targeting the converted asteroid and hitting it squarely at once. The normally electric blue beams of the disintegrators however showed up as fiery red beams of energy as they cut through Space. The result was immediate and cataclysmic: the five-kilometer-wide Predator ship disappeared in a titanic explosion and eye-searing flash of energy. Hit from slightly below its orbital path, that explosion projected the few pieces of ship that survived away from the planet, like the pellets from a shotgun pattern, thus preventing grievous damage to Nordland if those debris would have fallen from orbit and entered the planet’s atmosphere. Even Tina was shocked by the power just demonstrated by her modified weapons but she quickly regained her footing and shouted more orders.

“STAY UNDER THE ORBIT OF THE ENEMY FLEET AND RACE DOWN THEIR LINE WHILE KEEPING OUR BOW SHIELD POINTED AT THE ENEMY. ENGAGE THE ENEMY SHIPS AS THEY FILE PAST US, ONE MAIN CANNON PER TARGET. WE WANT TO DESTROY THOSE ASSHOLES AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.”

Having already discussed together their battle tactics while still hiding behind Comet TOI-77399, her bridge crew went at it with well-practiced battle efficiency, firing continuously their main disintegrator battery at enemy ship after enemy ship. The

Predator support ships, being much less heavily armed than the Predator warships, did fire their laser batteries at the NOSTROMO as it sped past under them but their lasers were much less powerful than those of the warships and also in much fewer numbers. The few laser beams which struck the thick bow shield of the NOSTROMO, which was rotating around its centerline axis in order to prevent enemy laser beams from digging deep in one spot, were not able to penetrate that bow shield, digging only a few shallow furrows in it. In contrast, each Predator ship struck by a red beam from the NOSTROMO was immediately and utterly destroyed, vaporized in explosions in the gigaton-range. With the NOSTROMO passing under the transport ships, the Predator warships escorting them, being in higher orbit in order to screen them from attacks from Space, had difficulty in targeting it. The secondary disintegrator batteries of the NOSTROMO, which had also been modified, then took over the firing on the enemy transport ships, allowing the main batteries of the NOSTROMO to shift their attention to the enemy escort warships. This time, with those warships being much further from the planet, Tina's crew did not need to be as choosy about the angle of fire of their cannons and started blasting away Predator warship after Predator warship. Seeing that a nearby Predator transport ship had been gutted by a secondary cannon hit but not completely destroyed, Tina placed a marker on its silhouette shown on the holographic sphere of her bridge complex.

"FRIDA, QUICKLY FLY TO THAT PREDATOR SHIP CARCASS AND USE IT TO SHIELD US. WE WILL CONTINUE FIRING FROM BEHIND THAT ASTEROID SHELL."

"ON IT!"

Pushing their main directed gravity propulsion system to maximum power and piloting the NOSTROMO with virtuoso, Frida Skarsgard managed to put their ship behind the destroyed enemy ship in less than five seconds. However, she couldn't help making the NOSTROMO bounce against the asteroid carcass with an impact speed of a few meters per second, making the whole ship vibrate like a bell.

"Oops! Sorry about that!"

"Don't worry about it, Frida: we will fill the accident report later." quipped Tina, making more than a few laughs or smile despite the tension of the moment. Tina then spoke in her intercom, contacting her husband, Michel.

"WE'RE IN THE THICK OF IT NOW, MICHEL. START BEAMING OUR TROOPS DOWN!"

"Beaming our first troops down now!" was his terse reply. Being already aboard one of the four assault craft in position on the four transporter pads installed in the hangar complex, he gave a thumbs up signal to Roshana Golshan, who was posted at the control station of her transporter system.

"BEAM US DOWN, ROSHANA!"

Roshana, excited as much as she had ever been in her life, forced herself into operating her controls with calm and efficiency and powered the pads. Her heart pinched as the four first craft vanished from their platforms: Paul Messer was part of the first batch of security androids to beam down. She however quickly focused back on her present task as four more assault craft moved to take place on the now empty transporter pads.

18:22 (Universal Time)

Downtown New Oslo City, planet Nordland

The four assault craft rematerialized some 200 meters above the main government administrative building in New Oslo City, one of the few population centers in Nordland and by far the largest one, with over half a million inhabitants. As soon as they reappeared, their pilots immediately started diving towards the large, flat rooftop of the building, their main objective, while the door gunners manning heavy portable disintegrator rifles mounted on pintle mounts anxiously scanned the rooftops of the buildings around them. Two of the gunners spotted Space Predators apparently posted as sentries on the roof of the main building and fired at them, vaporizing them before they could react to the craft. A few more distant Predator sentries did fire back at the craft, with a couple of laser beams hitting their targets. However, the relatively low power laser beams caused little damage to the armored craft, prompting a short exchange between two gunners.

"Those assholes finally understood that you don't bring a knife to a gunfight."

"Yeah, but they brought pop-guns to this fight."

Michel Koniev smiled at that exchange but quickly concentrated back on his target: the rooftop of the main administrative building, now free of Predator soldiers. He then gave quick instructions to Jehanne de Domrémy, the leader of the First Century, whose unit of 104 security androids was embarked in the first wave of assault craft.

"Split your century as discussed previously: four squads will fly down to the ground level and secure the entrances of the building, while four more squads will enter

through the windows of the second and third floor. The rest will follow us down from the rooftop.”

“Understood!” replied Jehanne in a calm voice before relaying those instructions via radio to her androids. Mere seconds later, the four assault craft landed on the flat rooftop and Michel and the androids ran out of them at once, deploying and dispersing in order not to offer a concentrated target to the enemy. As soon as they were empty, the assault craft took off and started patrolling the skies at low altitude, firing at any Predator they could see. As eighty androids flew down from the roof, using their gravity drive systems implanted inside their cybernetic bodies, Michel, Jehanne and the remaining 23 androids of the First Century broke into the roof access hut of the building and rushed down the emergency fire staircase. A squad of ten androids then split up from the group at the first level they got to, tasked to search for, find and kill any Space Predator found in the building. Hopefully, they would be able to find some Human prisoners held in the building but Michel had no realistic expectations about that: after nearly two days of Predator occupation, the chance of finding survivors here was very low indeed.

Few Predators were encountered in the building at first and were promptly killed but that changed when Michel burst into the main hallway of the second floor. He was nearly immediately greeted by hastily aimed laser rifle beams from three Predators posted near the double doors of what Michel knew from blueprints was the entrance to the main civic town hall room. Quickly retreating back into the emergency stairwell, he grabbed from a cargo pocket of his tactical vest a large grenade and primed it before shouting a warning to the androids following him.

“FLASHBANG GRENADE! WE WILL RUSH IN AS SOON AS IT EXPLODES.” He then quickly half-opened the door of the stairwell and threw his grenade towards the three Predator soldiers. When the grenade exploded, it did so with a lot more energy than what policemen from the Twentieth Century would have expected from their own models of flashbang grenades, Michel’s model being optimized for military assault work. The grenade blew in an extremely intense flash of light akin to looking straight at a cinema floodlight, while the detonation proved truly deafening. The Space Predators, originating from a world that had been illuminated by a red dwarf star providing low luminosity and knowing nothing of Human assault techniques and weapons, were completely blinded and deafened for many seconds, allowing Michel and his androids to rush out of the stairwell and charge them, firing their disintegrator rifles from the hip. All

three Predator soldiers were promptly killed, with Michel and his androids then briefly stopping near the door, hugging the walls. A couple of laser beams did burn through the wooden double doors but they only showed to Michel that they were of low power indeed, something that didn't surprise him. To have any appreciable destructive power, a laser weapon needed a lot of electrical energy, upward from a few kilowatts at the least, thus making them bulky and heavy for man-portable use. The Space Predators, whose ship weapons were nearly exclusively very high-powered lasers, had apparently developed a type of portable laser rifle but the half-incinerated bodies of the three soldiers they had just killed showed Michel that those rifles still necessitated to be connected to a heavy and bulky power backpack. A quick look at one such backpack told Michel much about its working principle: it most probably used a Pavlov generator, a device that used the energy from a small chemical explosion to power a dynamo and produce a short burst of energy. Looking at Jehanne, posted along the wall near him, he again gave her a short set of instructions.

"Have three androids prepare flashbang grenades. I will open wide that door and they will then throw their grenades in three different directions, as far as they can inside this room. We will rush in as soon as they will have exploded."

"Got it! NORMA, GENGIS, KUMAIL: PREPARE AND PRIME EACH ONE FLASHBANG. YOU WILL THEN THROW THEM INSIDE IN A WIDE ARC AS SOON AS MICHEL THROWS THE DOORS OPEN."

That attracted more laser beams piercing the said doors but, thankfully, the walls were thick/solid enough to prevent laser beams from going through, thus providing good protection to the androids. Preparing himself mentally, Michel got close to the double door, then kicked one door open and held it open with his body for a second while crouching, time for the three androids to throw in their grenades over his head, while sweeping disintegrator rifle fire inside the town hall room. He then retreated back in the hallway, just in time to barely avoid a purple laser beam. Another second and the three grenades burst, attracting a concert of swearing from the Predators in the room. Michel then rushed in, firing from the hip, followed by Jehanne and ten other androids. While he managed to hit and kill one Predator with his rifle firing, the firing from the androids proved devastating. Helped by their electronic fire control system and direct fiber optics cable connections between the aiming devices attached to their rifles and the heads-up displays integrated in their helmet visors, each of their disintegrator bursts hit a Predator, vaporizing him or incinerating part of their body. The 23 Predators that had been

present in the large room were killed within a few seconds as they were still trying to recover from the blinding flashes from the flashbang grenades. As Jehanne made her androids fan out to search for any surviving Predator, Michel was able to look around at the town hall room and see in detail what was inside. He grinned on seeing that his unit had just captured what seemed to be some kind of command post, with a number of portable computer stations and radios set up on tables. Just at that moment, he heard a radio message coming in through the headset integrated to this helmet.

"Alpha Group, this is Bravo Group: we are now arriving, along with heavy fighter support. We will concentrate on the city's police station and its surrounding area, over."

"Alpha Group acknowledged! We are doing well in the main administrative building. Have our fighters concentrate on finding and destroying any Predator vehicle or craft to be found in the city."

"Understood! Bravo Group out!"

Michel then allowed himself a couple of seconds to relax a bit and lower the flow of adrenaline through his veins, while also fervently hoping that Tina and the NOSTROMO were still alright.

18:40 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In low orbit over Nordland

"GRAZING BLOW BY A LASER BEAM ACROSS OUR NORTHWEST CARGO BAY DOORS! THE DOORS HAVE BEEN PIERCED BUT THERE IS NO SIGNIFICANT DAMAGE TO THE SHIP."

"CONTINUE FIRING AT THOSE WARSHIPS! THEY ARE NOW DOWN TO ONLY THREE. CONCENTRATE ALL OF OUR BATTERIES ON THEM."

Tina, close to hyperventilating from the stress of long minutes of intense Space combat, forced herself to slow down her breathing and examine the overall tactical picture as the disintegrator weapons of her ship, helped in their aiming by Spirit, continued to pour a murderous fire at the three lone Predator ships still surviving in orbit around Nordland. Using the shell of that destroyed Predator support ship as an improvised shield had proved to be an inspired move on her part. If not for it, her NOSTROMO would now look like a big ball of Swiss cheese. On the other hand, her modified cannons had proved absolutely devastating to the Predator ships, blowing them up with single hits one after

the other. The surviving Predator ship captains should be close to panic by now. If she would have been in their place, seeing a lone ship slaughtering a whole fleet would certainly have unsettled her.

Two of the remaining three Predator ships had been vaporized by then when Reina Shapour shouted a warning.

"TINA, THE FIFTEEN PREDATOR WARSHIPS THAT HAD BEEN FORMING AN OUTER INTERDICTION LINE HAVE NOW STARTED COMING BACK TO NORDLAND AT MAXIMUM ACCELERATION."

"That was to be expected. I am in fact surprised to see how long it took them to decide to come back at us. Renée, as soon as this last warship in orbit is destroyed, shift to long-range sweeping fire against those incoming warships. Let's cut down their numbers before they could get within accurate laser range of us."

"On it, Tina. BINGO! That third warship is now gone. Switching to long-range targeting and firing. Spirit, I could use your help here."

"And you will get it, Renée." replied over the intercom the voice of their central AI computer. "Targeting the nearest incoming enemy ship now."

To Tina's content and relief, the firing directed by Spirit quickly bore fruits, with one Predator warship being blown to bits in seconds despite of the huge distance. The distance to its target was actually helping the giant disintegrator cannons of the NOSTROMO in their task, as their matter conversion beams widened ever slightly with distance, covering a progressively larger frontal surface. While this would mean a highly diminished destructive power for normal disintegrator weapons, a simple light brush from a matter conversion beam was still enough to transmute into anti-matter hundreds of kilos of materials at the surface of the targeted Predator ship, with that anti-matter then interacted with the rest of the hull, which was still in its normal matter state, producing a titanic blast of energy powerful enough to blow open the thick hull of the Predator asteroid ship. Wild cheers rose around the bridge complex as Predator ship after Predator ship blew up while still unable to fire back effectively. The laser beams fired by the incoming Predator warships either missed completely the NOSTROMO or simply burned craters on the outer surface of the destroyed Predator ship' shell Tina used as an improvised shield. Even Tina had to sit back in her command chair, a look of disbelief on her face, when the last of the incoming fifteen Predator warships blew up under the

NOSTROMO's deadly fire, and this only four minutes after Spirit had started engaging those ships.

"My god! I can barely believe this. Spirit, you are one hell of a shooter."

"Thank you, Tina. However, you should mostly thank the late Doctor Koomak, for having invented such a powerful weapon as our matter conversion beams. With such a weapon, we can defeat about any enemy. However, it is so powerful that its design could be the target of attempts at copying it or stealing it by others, including by the Spacers' League. As the old saying goes: power corrupts, while absolute power corrupts absolutely."

"Spirit is right about that, Tina." said Janet Robeson from her bridge station. "That weapon is too terrible to share it with anybody else. Only you have the strong moral sense needed to not abuse its power."

Looking around the bridge, Tina saw many heads nod at Janet's words, with no one raising objections to Spirit's counsel.

"Very well! Our matter conversion weapon will thus stay an absolute secret from anybody but us here. The same will apply to our use of the captured Predator transporter technology. Even though other scientists in the Spacers' League have been studying that technology, I believe that we have been the first ones to be able to adapt it and make it work for us. This way, we will have a couple of hidden aces up our sleeve if any sort of dictator or asshole like ex-Chairman Stein ever grabs power in the Spacers' League."

"Uh, Tina, if we are not going to divulge to anyone the existence of our matter conversion weapon, how are we going to explain to the Navy how we were able to defeat such a large Predator fleet and survive?" asked Dana, making Tina nod once.

"A good question! Spirit, do you have any ideas about that?"

"How about bragging about your known reputation as a top Space tactician?"

"That could work! Well, back to serious things: we still have to get rid of the Predators infesting Nordland and to save whatever survivors we can find on the planet. Now that we got rid of the Predator fleet, we will switch our disintegrator cannons back to their normal mode and will provide orbital bombardment fire support to our troops on the ground. With many thousands of Predator soldiers undoubtedly on the planet, Michel and his androids will need all the help that they can get from us."

CHAPTER 10 – VERMIN ERADICATION



22:16 (Universal Time)

Monday, October 14, 2335

Bridge of the battlecruiser TRAFALGAR

Emerging in the TOI 700 System

Fleet Admiral Jiro Yamashiro, sitting in the flag command chair of the brand-new battleship TRAFALGAR, was doing his best to give the impression of calm mixed with firmness to his subalterns. In reality, he felt both anxious and fearful about this combat mission into the TOI 700 System: anxious because he was deeply worried about what had happened to the inhabitants of the system following its invasion by the Space

Predators; fearful because, despite his best efforts, he had been able to gather only seventeen warships bigger than corvettes for this mission, despite having literally scraped the bottom of the drawers of the Navy. Such a relatively small fleet would be at a severe starting disadvantage against an enemy fleet counting at least 32 asteroid-ships, each of them much bigger and better protected than his own flagship, despite the fact that the TRAFALGAR was presently the most powerful warship by far in the Spacers' League's Navy. However, that mission had to be attempted. The alternative would be the horrible death of over two million people on Nordland at the hands of those carnivorous monsters.

"We are now in the TOI 700 System, Admiral. Nordland is some 1.2 Astronomical Units ahead, slightly to the right of our center screens. We are now adjusting our flight trajectory."

"Thank you, Captain Multan! What are our passive sensors and electronic warfare suite telling us?"

Multan consulted his chair's display screen for a moment before answering him, some misgivings showing in his voice.

"The electro-magnetic spectrum is empty, Admiral. Nordland is completely silent, while we are not detecting any ship radar or radio emission. We are however still too far to visually detect ships which could be around Nordland. Should we probe the system with our long-range radars, Admiral?"

"No! Keep electronic silence for the moment and let's speed up towards Nordland. All our crews shall stay a battle stations until I say otherwise."

"Aye, Admiral!"

The bridge complex then mostly fell into silence, with only operators and officers exchanging in low voices short bribes of information between them from time to time. As the fleet passed the orbit of the third planet, on the way to Nordland, the sensors officer made an announcement, with some surprise showing in his voice.

"We have an uncharted asteroid field visible ahead, some 8,000 kilometers away, Captain. I believe that we should either slow down or go around it in order to avoid a collision, sir."

"Pass to the fleet via directional masers: climb towards the system's North in order to avoid that asteroid field."

"Aye, Captain!"

"Sensors, what are our spectrometers and telescopes saying about that uncharted asteroid field? I thought that the TOI 700 System had been thoroughly mapped out during the last few years."

"One moment, sir: we are checking."

After another few minutes, the sensors officer looked at Captain Multan and Admiral Yamashiro with a stunned expression.

"Sirs, those asteroids are actually debris from destroyed Space Predator ships. We can see a number of large pieces of excavated rocky shells, along with various machinery and structural debris."

"WHAT?! ARE YOU SURE?"

"Yes sir! These are the debris from at least a half-dozen Predator warships, sir."

"But who could have destroyed those Predator ships? Even for our present fleet, they would have been formidable opponents. The bulk of our Navy's combat fleet is here, with us."

One young female officer who was sitting at a sensors station next to the sensors officer then bent sideways and whispered something to her superior, prompting the lieutenant-commander in nodding his head before looking at Multan and Yamashiro.

"Lieutenant Rodman suggests that this could be the work of the NOSTROMO, sir. It is the only ship powerful enough to defeat Predator ships and which is not with our fleet right now. I believe that she could be right, sir."

"The NOSTROMO, Captain Tina Forster..." said dreamily Captain Yusuf Multan. "Then, if it really destroyed those Predator ships, I fervently hope that it is still intact somewhere near Nordland: our reconnaissance ship had reported no less than 32 Predator ships in the system. Even for the NOSTROMO, those are very big odds." Multan then looked at Yamashiro, who raised his hand to stop him from speaking.

"There is no point in speculating about this, Captain Multan. Let's continue towards Nordland. We will soon enough learn more about what happened here."

"Understood, Admiral."

Another half hour went by, during which the Spacers' League fleet passed by more debris from destroyed Predator ships, something that made Yamashiro shake his head in disbelief.

"Captain Forster may be a pain in the ass from time to time but she is one hell of a Space combat tactician, I will give her that. Alright, Captain Multan, fire up your long-range radar and let's see what we have in this system."

"Aye, Admiral!"

After about three minutes, Yamashiro got the first results of the sensors active scans.

"Sir, our radars show a massive debris field in orbit around Nordland. We however can't detect any intact ship at this time."

Yamashiro lowered his head in sadness on hearing that: the chances were that the NOSTROMO, if it was indeed it, had been destroyed while destroying the Predator fleet which had invaded the system.

"My god! Such a valiant ship. Alright, go active on all sensors! Let's find out what is happening on Nordland. The Predators are liable to have landed troops on it in order to capture it. Search especially for high-frequency radio transmissions which would denote ground and atmospheric tactical activity."

"Yes, Admiral! SENSORS OFFICER, GO ACTIVE ON ALL SYSTEMS!"

"AYE, CAPTAIN!"

It took only a couple of minutes before the sensors officer reported back to Multan.

"Captain, our electronic warfare suite is reporting a fairly dense exchange of radio messages from the surface. They appear to be mostly communications between ground troops and fighter craft...human ones, sir: there is some serious fighting happening right now on Nordland, most of it centered on the city of New Oslo."

Multan slapped one hand on his chair's left armrest in reaction to that information.

"The NOSTROMO was able to land troops on the planet and to launch its fighters. Commander Gonzalez, remind me about how many troops and fighters are normally carried by the NOSTROMO."

The operations officer of the TRAFALGAR answered him after a few seconds.

"Sir, the NOSTROMO is listed as transporting an internal security force of 800 androids and ten Human officers, plus a wing of 24 heavy fighters and over 34 shuttles of various sizes."

"Androids..." said softly to himself Yamashiro in a less than pleased tone. "Could we listen a bit to those transmissions, Captain Multan?"

"Certainly, Admiral! Lieutenant Xi, connect our command chairs to those intercepted transmissions."

"Aye, Captain!"

Both Multan and Yamashiro were soon able to hear the kind of radio exchange typical of ground troops and supporting craft engaged in combat. That combat seemed quite intense, judging from what they could hear on the radio.

"Damn!" said Multan. "Those guys appear to be presently facing some sort of mass ground assault by a large force of Predators. However, they seem to be able to manage...at this point."

"Then, let's give them some support. Have our embarked battalion of Space Marines board their assault shuttles: they are to fly down to New Oslo as soon as they are ready."

"Right away, Admiral!"

Those Space Marines and their assault shuttles were about to fly out of the TRAFALGAR when an operator nearly shouted, happiness in his voice.

"CAPTAIN, WE HAVE THE NOSTROMO IN SIGHT. IT JUST ROUNDED THE PLANET'S WESTERN TERMINATOR AND HIS HEADING TOWARDS US."

"Thank god: they survived!" said Multan, blowing air out in relief. "OPEN A CHANNEL TO THE NOSTROMO!"

"YES CAPTAIN!"

"Let me talk with Captain Forster, Captain Multan." then cut in Yamashiro.

"Uh, yes Admiral!" replied Multan, hoping that his admiral was not going to dump on Forster for her unannounced intervention in the TOI 700 System. He soon saw the head and upper torso of Tina Forster appear on his display screen. She appeared tired and a bit tense but had no visible wounds. Admiral Yamashiro then started speaking to Forster but, thankfully, kept a polite tone.

"Captain Forster, we are happy to see that you and your ship are still in one piece. That mass of debris in orbit of Nordland kind of made us worry. In what state is your ship?"

"We have sustained some light hull damage from laser strikes but my NOSTROMO is still a hundred percent combat effective. The bulk of my security androids force and all my heavy fighters are presently down on Nordland and fighting with large numbers of Space Predators. Be advised that, contrary to our past combat

experiences with those Predators, they came to Nordland armed with portable pulse laser rifles. Those laser rifles are powerful enough to kill a person who doesn't wear body armor. Thankfully, our own disintegrator rifles are more than a match for these Predator laser rifles."

"Can you give us a quick report about the situation on Nordland, Captain Forster?"

"I can, Admiral Yamashiro. Most of my androids fighting in downtown New Oslo are presently defending the main government administrative complex, which we were able to take at the start of the ground fighting. However, the Predators seem resolved to retake it at all costs and are in their second mass assault against the complex. However, my androids, supported by my heavy fighters, are still holding on and causing very heavy casualties to the Predators assaulting them. We have suffered some light casualties on the ground but the relatively low power of the Predator laser rifles has saved many of our fighters, who are using the cover offered by local buildings to the maximum. May I ask if you brought some ground troopers with your fleet, Admiral?"

"I have one battalion of Space Marines equipped with powered armor suits about ready to fly down to help your own troops, Captain Forster. You want them to go reinforce your troopers defending the government administrative complex?"

"Negative! We have a more pressing need right now at the meat processing plant situated in the Northwest suburbs of New Oslo."

"A meat processing plant? Why send troops there?"

Tina Forster's expression then hardened, while her voice reflected a mix of anger and urgency.

"Because the Predators locked up tens of thousands of men, women and children there, using the pens normally reserved for the heads of cattle due to be slaughtered. Those monsters had been feeding on those poor people for nearly two days now. One of my android units went there to free those souls and protect them but the Predator guard force at the meat plant is using their prisoners as human shields, complicating a lot the job of my androids. We need more troops there, urgently!"

Those words made both Multan and Yamashiro freeze with abject horror for a moment before the latter shot back with a question.

"Can you provide us with the precise location and layout of that meat plant, Captain Forster?"

"I certainly can, Admiral. I am sending now the overhead sensors imagery we have of that plant, along with its coordinates. Please make your Marines hurry: the situation there is both difficult and desperate."

"They will be coming down in minutes, Captain. By the way, you and your ship have performed valiantly in this fight. The Spacers' League will owe you big."

"What I want right now is to be able to save as many of those poor Nordland citizens as possible, Admiral. Saving them will be my biggest reward."

23:11 (Universal Time)

New Oslo's meat processing plant

"SET YOUR DISINTEGRATOR RIFLES TO MINIMUM POWER! WE MUST KILL THOSE PREDATORS WITHOUT HURTING THE PEOPLE THEY USE AS HUMAN SHIELDS. TAKE YOUR TIME TO AIM VERY PRECISELY BEFORE FIRING EACH SHOT."

Jehanne then preached by example and lowered the power setting of her weapon to the minimum level, then raised her disintegrator rifle above the edge of the low wall she and a number of androids from her century unit were using as cover against the heavy laser fire directed at them by dozens of Predators situated some sixty meters away. Using the aiming unit attached to her rifle and linked to her own helmet visor's display unit by a fiber optics cable, she was able to put her crosshairs on the head of a Predator holding a terrified woman in front of him while he shot his laser rifle. Her shot, cracking out like a loud thunderclap, vaporized the head of the monster, making him release his grip on the woman. That woman, visibly hysterical, then tried to run away towards Jehanne and her androids but another Predator summarily shot her in the back, killing her and making her fall flat on her face on the concrete floor of the plant warehouse. Normally, Jehanne's electronic brain would have simply recorded that moment but, as in many instances during the past few months, something else happened to her: she experienced what had to be the equivalent of feelings, feelings of rage and hatred towards those alien monsters. She quickly shot dead the Predator who had killed the unfortunate woman, then shot in succession two other Predators. The 32 androids who were with her proved no slouches either and killed a total of close to a hundred Predators before Jehanne shouted an order.

“WE MUST PUSH THOSE MONSTERS AWAY FROM THEIR HOSTAGES. JUMP THAT WALL AND CHARGE!”

Nearly as one, Jehanne and her 32 androids got up and jumped over the low wall, then charged the Predators facing them while firing short aimed bursts from their disintegrator rifles. Those Predators tried at first to resist that charge but, with their rifles having only minor effects on the combat armored suits and helmets of the androids, soon broke rank in panic and tried to flee, abandoning their hostages where they had stood.

“DON'T LET A SINGLE ONE OF THOSE BASTARDS ESCAPE! KILL THEM TO THE LAST!”

Her androids were too happy to obey that order and fired a hail of disintegrator beams which incinerated in seconds the fleeing aliens. With those monsters now dead, Jehanne judged that her main priority now was to bring to a safer place the hostages now standing or sitting inside the warehouse, both dazed and fearful.

“LET'S GUIDE THOSE POOR PEOPLE HERE TO A SAFER PLACE IN THE PLANT. WE WILL BRING THEM TO THE ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES OF THE PLANT.”

As her androids started to gently guide the ex-hostages towards the administrative offices of the plant, Jehanne went to a little toddler girl who was simply standing in the open while crying, her whole body shaking. Crouching next to the child, Jehanne smiled to her and gently took her in her left arm.

“Don't cry, little one. I will now carry you to a room where you will be safe.”

The reaction of the toddler when she lifted her in her arm then triggered another unusual feeling in her: the child immediately glued herself to Jehanne, tightening her little arms around her neck with desperate strength while still crying hysterically. It was obvious to Jehanne that the child had been severely traumatized, something most understandable in view of her terrifying experiences during the last two days. Keeping the girl tightly against her and using her own body as protection for her, Jehanne quickly walked towards the administrative offices while frequently looking behind her to make sure that no other Predators showed up. Two minutes later, her group led a total of over 200 men, women and children into those offices, which had been cleared earlier of the Predators occupying them. She tried to gently put down the little girl in her arms on a sofa but the child immediately tightened her hold on her.

“NOOO! STAY WITH ME!”

At first, Jehanne couldn't decide how to react to that. She tried again to put the child down on the sofa but the girl only clung more tightly to her.

"NOO! DON'T LEAVE ME!"

Unwilling to force the child to release her hold, Jehanne decided to keep holding her with her left arm, then activated her helmet's radio headset.

"To all Alpha sub-units, report, over!"

"This is Alpha One: we killed the Predators guarding the corrals where they were keeping the bulk of their prisoners. We are now forming a protective perimeter around the corrals but our line is rather thin: we would need to be reinforced at once, over."

"From Alpha Two: the building where the Predator guards had established their quarters is now secure, with all the Predators there killed. We however suffered two casualties who will need extensive repairs on return to our ship."

"Alpha Leader acknowledged. Alpha Three is with me in the administrative offices of the plant, to where we have guided 227 people we just saved. I will stay here and reassure those poor people until they could be evacuated. Alpha Two, send twenty of your people to reinforce Alpha One at the corrals. I will now report back to the NOSTROMO."

Jehanne then switched on to her long-range frequency.

"NOSTROMO, this is Alpha Leader, at the New Oslo meat processing plant, over!"

"NOSTROMO here! Send, over!"

"The meat plant has been secured. However, we now have thousands of people freed from the Predators who now need to be evacuated as quickly as possible to a safer place. They are presently very vulnerable to any Predator counter-attack and my force is thin on the ground, over."

"Understood, Alpha Leader. Be advised that help has arrived from Providence. A battalion of Space Marines is presently on its way and should arrive at the meat plant in about five minutes. I am going to send down our shuttles to pick up the people you saved at the plant. Do you have a rough estimate of the number of survivors you saved, over?"

"Affirmative! We have some 13,700 men, women and children now in our care. Most of them are heavily traumatized and will need care, over."

"We will prepare our medical center for them, Alpha Leader. Did your unit suffer casualties during the fight at the plant, over?"

"Affirmative! Two of our people were damaged. How are our people holding the city's administrative center doing, over?"

"They just managed to repel another Predator assault with the help of our fighters and caused very heavy casualties to the enemy. However, the fight for this city and for the rest of the planet is only beginning. Hopefully, Providence will be able to send more troops to Nordland, many more troops."

"Indeed! Alpha Leader, out!"

Jehanne then concentrated her attention back on the toddler girl still holding desperately to her and spoke as softly she could to her.

"What is your name, sweetie?"

"Frida!"

"Just Frida?"

"Frida Thorund."

"Do you know if your parents are still alive, Frida?"

The girl answered by shaking her head vigorously, while tears rolled down her cheeks.

"No! Mommy was killed by the monsters."

"And your father?"

"He died in an accident two years ago."

Jehanne again felt something bizarre inside her brain as she stared at the oval face and big blue eyes of the sad little girl: that child was now an orphan. She was probably not going to be the only child in that situation here, by a long shot. Frida then surprised her by asking her a question.

"What is your name?"

"Me? I am Jehanne, Jehanne de Domrémy."

"Will you stay and protect me, Jehanne?"

"Of course I will, my sweet Frida. Do you feel better now?"

"Yes!" simply replied the toddler before resting her head on Jehanne's left shoulder, her arms still around her neck.

A few minutes later, five Spacers' League Space marines in power armor entered the central office, with one of them then shouting out loud.

"WHO IS IN CHARGE HERE?"

"I AM!"

The leading Space marine, who wore the rank insignias of a major, then came to her in a few quick steps and pointed an index at her.

“My marines now control the perimeter of this plant. Take your...”

“Stop it right there, Major!” cut at once Jehanne, not liking the authoritative tone of that officer. “I am Senior Centurion Jehanne de Domrémy, Commander of the security androids force of the NOSTROMO, and I am not your lap dog. You came here to support my unit, not to boss it around. My androids will stay here and safeguard those poor Nordland citizens until the shuttles sent by the NOSTROMO can arrive and carry them to safety on our ship. If you want to make yourself useful, then have your marines do a detailed sweep of this plant and of its immediate surroundings, to make sure that there are no Space Predators still hiding around.”

The man looked at her for a second with contained fury, apparently insulted that a mere android was trying to order him around.

“What the hell do you think...”

“I AM NOT THINKING, MAJOR: I AM ORDERING! GET YOUR MARINES MOVING!” shot back Jehanne, using her most authoritative tone and raising the volume of her voice to nearly deafening level. The marine major was too stunned to argue further and walked back out with his four marines. As soon as they were gone, one of Jehanne’s androids, Decurion Sejong, applauded her lightly.

“Now, that is what I call ‘leadership’, Jehanne.”

“Hey,” she replied with a grin, “I had a bunch of proud French knights follow and obey a simple peasant girl while battling the English. THAT was leadership!”

01:37 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, October 15, 2335

Hangar deck of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Little Frida was still stubbornly glued to Jehanne when she walked out of the shuttle which had carried her and a number of the people saved at the meat plant up to the NOSTROMO. Numerous crewmembers and volunteer family members were present in the hangar deck to greet and process in the first couple of thousands Nordland citizens evacuated to the NOSTROMO. Seeing three women and one man standing near the exit ramp of her shuttle, Jehanne walked to them, Frida held in her left arm. Janet Robeson was the first in the group to greet her.

"We are happy to see you back in one piece, Jehanne. Who is that cute little girl you are holding?"

"Her name is Frida Thorund. Unfortunately, she is now an orphan: the Predators killed her mother right in front of her. She was quite traumatized by the horrors she saw on the planet and has refused to let go of me since I saved her at the New Oslo meat processing plant, along with over 13,700 other citizens of Nordland facing the prospect of being butchered and then eaten by the Predators."

Janet Robeson, her husband Gerald, Spirit and Eve all looked sadly at the toddler girl still cowering in Jehanne's arms.

"Poor kid!" said Janet. "We will have to find someone to take care of her until we can find if she has any other relatives still alive."

"I was thinking of asking Eve to care for her until I come back once the fighting is over. Would you accept to take care of her for the next few days, Eve?"

The beautiful blond android looked for a moment at Frida before answering Jehanne.

"The real question is: will she accept to let go of you, Jehanne? You appear to be the only thing that can reassure her right now."

"True!" said Jehanne before looking down into Frida's eyes. "Frida, I will have to go back to the planet's surface to continue to fight those monsters and to free more of our people. Will you let my friend Eve care for you temporarily until I return to this ship? I promise you that I will then take you back with me."

"Is your friend nice?" asked Frida in her tiny voice, making Janet's and Gerald's hearts melt.

"Yes, she is very nice and she loves little children, Frida."

In response, the little girl loosened her arms after a couple of seconds of indecision and allowed Jehanne to pass her to Eve, who took her in her arms and smiled to Frida.

"Thank you for accepting me, Frida. We will first have a doctor examine you, to see if you need any medical treatment. After that, I will have some nice snack for you, then a hot bath and a bed. You must be positively exhausted after all those hours of horror."

Frida simply nodded to Eve's words. That was when four of Jehanne's androids passed nearby, carrying on stretchers the stiff bodies of two other androids who had been severely damaged by Predator laser hits to the face, where their armored suits gave them the least protection. Frida then saw that they were clearly not humans made of flesh and bones and opened her eyes wide.

"They are robots?"

"The more accurate term to describe them would be 'androids', artificial constructs made in the image of living humans and having artificial intelligence and individual personalities, Frida. Here, on the NOSTROMO, we consider and treat our androids the same way as living persons and not as simple machines."

"Are all of Jehanne's soldiers robots too?" asked Frida, looking a bit unsettled.

'Here we go!' thought Jehanne, who had not told Frida yet about her true nature. "Yes, they are, Frida. I myself am an android but I truly care for you and love you. Will you still let me care for you on my return to the ship?"

To her immense relief, Frida seemed to accept her words without visible reservation and looked back into Jehanne's eyes.

"Yes!"

"Thank you for your confidence in me, Frida. Eve, I believe that Legionnaires Williams and Guzman will need to be either completely rebuilt or have their personalities and memories transferred to new bodies replicating their original ones."

"I believe that new bodies are in order in their case. I will program their construction on a priority basis. Thankfully, only seven of our androids have received significant damage up to now and will need repairs or rebuilding. We have been lucky in that aspect up to now."

"Yes, but this fight is only starting. We still have most of the planet to retake, a job that may take us a few weeks or even months. We can expect more casualties in the process."

That was when Spirit spoke up.

"Admiral Yamashiro has sent a courier drone to Providence to ask for many more combat troops to help clear those monsters from Nordland. He even asked in his message for Chairman Gasparov to gain the help of the nations of Earth, so that they could send some of their soldiers to help our marines."

Earth, helping us?" asked Jehanne, her voice heavy with sarcasm. "Don't hold your breath for that!"

"Well, it is still worth trying, no? If we could get the nations of Earth to help us, then we could have armies of tens of thousands of extra soldiers to help us in Nordland. The worst that could happen would be to get a 'no' as an answer."

“True! Humanity sure could use a chance to unite against a common enemy for a change.” said Janet Robeson. “Well, enough talking: I have lots of people to take care of here right now, with more soon to come.”

“Right!” added Spirit before looking at Eve.

“Don’t worry about those two legionnaires, Eve: I will take care of building new bodies for them. Concentrate instead on little Frida here.”

Jehanne, ready to board again her shuttle now that the evacuees were all out of it, took a step forward and planted a gentle kiss on Frida’s head.

“Be nice with my friend Eve, Frida. I will come back for you, I promise you.”

Jehanne, along with the androids who had accompanied her, then walked back into the waiting shuttle, whose rear access ramp then closed up, with the craft soon lifting off silently from the deck of the hangar and heading towards one of the exit craft airlocks. Little Frida watched the shuttle go, fresh tears coming out of her eyes.

“Will Jehanne come back?” she asked, anxiety in her tiny voice.

“Yes, she will, Frida.” answered Eve in a soft voice. “Now, let’s go see a doctor or nurse, so that you can be examined.”

09:40 (Universal Time)

Office of Fleet Admiral Jiro Yamashiro

Spacers’ League battleship TRAFALGAR

In low orbit around the planet Nordland

“You wanted to see me, Admiral?” asked Lieutenant-colonel Vadim Suvorov after stopping at attention in front of Yamashiro’s desk and saluting.

“Yes! I have a few things to pass to you, Colonel. First, the good news. A miracle happened on Earth and the ASEAN² and the North American Union each pledged to send us a full division of their best combat troops in order to help us clean up the Space Predators still present on Nordland. The Scandinavian Federation, on its part, will be sending us a regiment of marines. As you may know, many inhabitants of Nordland originally came from Scandinavia and the Scandinavian Federation is looking at Nordland as being part of their responsibilities. All these troops should arrive within four days.”

² ASEAN : Association of South-East Asian Nations.

“That is great news indeed, Admiral!” said Suvorov, smiling with satisfaction. “My marines certainly could use some extra help.”

Suvorov’s smile quickly faded when he saw the way Yamashiro now looked at him.

“Now, about the bad news, Colonel. I have received a number of complaints from Captain Forster during the last 48 hours, complaints about the conduct of yourself and that of your officers on Nordland. Basically, and this was proved to me via the viewing of video recordings taken during the recent fighting, you are accused of having made your marines lay back while letting Captain Forster’s androids do the more dangerous work. Now, I will be the first to admit that I personally had a strong prejudice against those security androids...until three days ago. Since then, those androids have proved to be first-class combatants, highly-skilled and fearless and also totally dedicated to their duties to defend our citizens. They also happen to be highly intelligent and have proved to me to have true individual personalities, as I interviewed a number of them while visiting a couple of battlefields on the planet. I now am of the opinion that they fully deserve to be considered as truly sentient beings and as full citizens of the Spacers’ League. Your racist attitude and that of your officers towards them is thus riling me, a lot! Worse, your tendency to consciously let those androids do the most dangerous work in order not to risk your own marines is bordering on cowardice, Colonel.”

“Cowardice, Admiral? But...”

“I AM NOT FINISHED!” growled Yamashiro as he shot up to his feet and pointed an index at Suvorov. “From now on, you and your marines will do your honest part of the fighting, or I will have you landed in front of a court martial for cowardice. I am moving your battalion to a separate sector of Nordland, where you will be alone to assume responsibility for the results in that said sector. No more passing the buck while circulating racist comments about Captain Forster’s security androids. If I find out in a few days that your unit is still underperforming, I will then relieve you of command and will place accusations against you and your least effective officers. Do you understand me, Colonel?”

With blood rushing to his brain and starting to feel dizzy, Suvorov stiffened up.

“Yes, Admiral!”

“Then you are dismissed, Colonel.”

Suvorov, severely shaken, saluted Yamashiro, then pivoted on his heels and walked out of the admiral’s office, cold sweat on his forehead.

17:03 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, October 30, 2335

Apartment # 554-042, Habitat Ring Section, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

As soon as Jehanne walked into the apartment in which they had been living together for thirteen months now, Pieter Nordlung came to her to hug her and kiss her, with her returning his embrace.

“Thank the stars that you survived all that fighting intact, Jehanne.”

“And I thank the stars that your fighter was not shot down by Predator laser fire. We were both lucky, I suppose.”

“Well, there was a bit of that but I believe that our competence and skills helped a lot as well.”

“Patting your own back like a typical fighter pilot, Pieter?” replied Jehanne in a sarcastic tone, attracting a light slap on her bum from her life companion.

“Shut up, ground-pounder! You reek of ashes and are covered in dirt and muck. Let me guide you to the shower, where I will give you a thorough scrub...a very thorough scrub.”

“Then, you better undress as well, if you don’t want to wet your clothes.” replied Jehanne, making Pieter grin in anticipation.

“Still a nice, perverted girl, I see? I will teach you to behave.”

The two of them quickly moved to Pieter’s bathroom, where both of them shed their clothes and stepped naked in the bathtub-cum-shower stall. Jehanne first let Pieter lovingly caress her while soaping and scrubbing her, even though she could not really feel sexual pleasure from it: what counted for her was Pieter’s selfless attention and care towards her. In return, once cleaned and rinsed, she returned the favor to him, ending with performing a fellatio on Pieter that brought him to an exploding climax. After a last mutual rinsing, both of them then stepped out of the bathtub and dried themselves, again concentrating on each other. Jehanne waited until they had dressed back in clean clothes before gluing herself to Pieter and looking up into his blue eyes.

“Pieter, I told you a couple of days ago about the little girl I saved at the New Oslo meat processing plant. Have you had a chance to go visit her since then?”

“Yes, I did! I went to Eve’s apartment and visited her after supper time yesterday. Frida is indeed a very sweet and cute little girl.”

“How was she? Does she still show signs of trauma?”

"She is still reserved but I would say that she is much better now compared to the day you first met her. Eve confirmed to me that her medical and psychological examinations didn't reveal any long-term sequels from the horrors she lived through. She however still grieves the death of her mother, a most understandable reaction. Eve also told me that she did some research about Frida's family and relatives. Unfortunately, none of her relatives are still alive. Apart from her mother, her grandparents and lone uncle were all killed by the Predators, part of the close to half-a-million citizens of Nordland slaughtered by those Space Predator monsters."

"Poor girl! She is thus truly an orphan. Pieter, I want to do something for her, something that will need your approval and support. I want to adopt her." Pieter, who had expected that, gently took her head between his hands and kissed her forehead.

"Jehanne, I am with you on that. Let's go see her and ask her if she wants to come live with us. We will worry about the legalities concerning this later."

17:51 (Universal Time)

Executive Apartment # 1, Executive Deck

Frame level # 505, core centerline section, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Eve Silisca, as beautiful and youthful-looking as ever, smiled to Jehanne and Pieter on opening the door of her apartment to them.

"Come in, my friends! Me and Frida were about to go out to eat supper at one of the restaurants in the Habitat Ring."

The couple entered and waited for Eve to close the door behind them before Pieter spoke in a low voice.

"Could we first discuss something in private with Frida. You are welcome to listen in, as we may need your wisdom about what we want to discuss."

"Let me guess: you want to adopt Frida, right?"

"Uh, how did you guess that?" asked Pieter, surprised, making Eve grin with malice.

"How? By analyzing all that I know about her situation and Jehanne's state of mind about Frida. I just spent two-tenths of a second running the logics of that situation inside my electronic brain, a near-eternity for me. It actually wasn't too difficult to figure your intentions out."

"And...if Frida says 'yes' to our offer, can we make it legal?" asked in turn Jehanne, a bit anxious about that. Eve thought that over for another few fractions of a second before nodding her head once.

"I believe so, Jehanne. You both have the status of full citizens of the Spacers' League and, while no laws concerning legal adoptions specifically address the case of a human and an android living together, there is equally no laws specifically prohibiting it. I could be wrong on this, of course, laws often being less than logical, but I am pretty sure that you could have a judge rule in your favor."

"Oof! You do reassure me, Eve. So, how is our little angel?"

"Much better than two weeks ago, when you first brought her on the NOSTROMO. Being able to interact with the small children of our crewmembers while in a normal environment did a lot to dissipate her trauma at losing her mother. She became a good friend with Tina's five-year-old daughter, Janet. I also did my best to personally work on her stress levels and fears. However, she definitely is worried about what will happen to her in the coming future."

"Then, our offer may just calm her worries about that."

"JEHANNE!"

The joyous shout from a tiny voice then interrupted them and they all snapped their heads towards the lounge, where they saw little Frida running towards them, a happy smile on her face. Jehanne crouched down and welcomed the little girl into her open arms, then kissed her repeatedly.

"My sweet Frida! You are still as cute as a candy."

"Are you okay? Did the monsters hurt you?"

"No, but I hurt them...bad! You remember Pieter?"

"Yes!"

"Well, we came together to see you and ask you something very important. Would you like us to become your new Mommy and Daddy?"

"Yes!" answered at once the toddler, tears appearing in her eyes. She then glued herself to Jehanne, hugging her with all her strength. Eve, watching that scene, could only smile in approval at that tender moment.

CHAPTER 11 – AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE



13:31 (Universal Time)

Friday, November 1, 2335

Command conference room, Executive Deck, frame level # 505

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, in low orbit over the planet Nordland

TOI 700 System, 101.2 light-years from Earth, Dorado Constellation

When Janet Robeson entered the command conference room of the NOSTROMO, situated on the same level as her executive suite, she immediately noticed the preoccupied look on Tina's face. Tina was already in her chair and typing something on the computer pad of her position at the conference table. The next thing that Janet noticed was the small number of participants to the meeting called earlier by Tina. Apart from herself and Tina, there were only five other participants present: Dana Durning, Ahmed Jibril, Rose Tillman, Allan Ashford and Keiko Nomura. Normally, staff meetings called by Tina would count at least twelve participants. This made the fact that she, with no official permanent position as a ship's staff member, had been invited in, somewhat surprising. Janet sat down at the table and waited, expecting more people to

join the meeting. However, Tina then spoke up in a subdued voice, addressing the whole group.

“Thank you for coming, my friends. As you may know, I was called this morning to the TRAFALGAR by Admiral Yamashiro, along with the captains of the other ships in our fleet orbiting Nordland. A number of news were then passed to us by Admiral Yamashiro, some good ones, some very bad ones. First off, I must warn you that what I will be saying about the bad news is classified ‘Top Secret’, so you will have to keep that info to yourselves. I will now start with the good news, which are not classified and which you will be allowed to brief your respective staffs about afterwards.”

Tina paused for a short moment before continuing.

“At the meeting on the TRAFALGAR, we were told by Admiral Yamashiro that the services of six large cruise liners were hired by the Spacers’ League government in order for them to come here and temporarily house the survivors from Nordland whose homes were destroyed or badly damaged during the fighting with the Predators. We will thus be able to transfer the people we are presently sheltering aboard the NOSTROMO to those liners once they will arrive.”

“Uh, why not keep those people here, instead of forcing them to move to another ship, Tina?” asked Dana Durning. “Our ship is at least as comfortable as any liner.”

“Because Admiral Yamashiro wants us to leave as soon as possible for Earth, so that we could have the NOSTROMO repaired on an urgent basis. I will explain that further during the classified portion of this meeting. The only survivors who will stay on our ship then will be the 34 orphaned children who were adopted by members of our crew. By the way, Admiral Yamashiro assured me that those adoptions will legally stand: Chairman Gasparov, when informed about those adoptions, including that of little Frida Thorund, immediately signed an executive decree recognizing those adoptions, so that there could be no future legal disputes about them from anyone.”

Janet Robeson, who had taken to heart the adoption of little Frida by Jehanne de Domrémy and Pieter Nordlung, nodded her head in satisfaction.

“That is an excellent piece of news, Tina. I was really afraid that some bigots in Providence would challenge Frida’s adoption on the excuse that an android can’t adopt a human child.”

“And Chairman Gasparov clearly saw that possibility and moved quickly to slam the door on those bigots, of whom there are unfortunately too many around the Spacers’ League. Apart from those six large liners, the government, along with the Saturn

Corporation, which owns the TOI 700 System, will be sending a small fleet of cargo ships transporting specialized construction crews, equipment and materials. Those crews will be tasked to do the cleanup and reconstruction needed to return Nordland to a habitable status. Right now, a full third of all buildings on Nordland have been either destroyed or significantly damaged, either during the fighting or by the Predators when they invaded the system. There is also the matter of the tens of thousands of bodies, either Humans or Predators, still lying in the ruins of New Oslo. Those bodies will have to be gathered and either interred, in the case of our dead citizens, or incinerated in the case of the dead Predators, before any reconstruction could start. This task will thus be a long one and the best estimates to date are that it will take at least six months to return Nordland to some degree of normalcy and to be able to return the surviving refugees to their homes. The Saturn Corporation will take a major financial hit in order to rebuild Nordland, so Chairman Gasparov decided to offer substantial financial assistance to CEO Dominguez, to help him in that task. Be reassured, though: there will be tight financial controls over that government aid package, in order to prevent any of that aid from being siphoned off by corrupt officials and corporate executives.”

“A wise move indeed!” said Janet then. “Whether we like it or not, there is still plenty of corruption and graft to be found around the Spacers’ League. And I will not even talk about what can be found on Earth.”

“You are too right about that, Janet.” added Tina in a sober voice. “I am now going to start the classified part of this meeting, which I will remind you is classified ‘Top Secret’. First off, the civilian casualties on Nordland are nothing less than ghastly. On arrival on Nordland, the Space Predators killed anyone who resisted their invasion, using indiscriminate firing, then started slaughtering the survivors in order to turn them into meat for their consumption. The early counts show that a bit over a quarter of the original population, or more than 570,000 people, were slaughtered by the Predators. If not for our intervention, the remaining people of Nordland would then have ended up like cattle heads, kept in corrals and awaiting slaughter as Predator food.”

The participants around the table either shivered in horror or closed their eyes for a moment at those words, so Tina paused for a few seconds, to give them time to recover from the shock.

“Chairman Gasparov decided, quite rightfully in my opinion, to not publicize those deaths figures, in order to avoid creating general panic among the population of the Spacers’ League. Thus, if you are accosted in the future by some nosey reporters

looking to create shock news, then clam up and report them to our security force. Ahmed, you will then have the authority to expel from the TOI 700 System any such reporters and media types who will cause disturbances or problems. That authority comes directly from Chairman Gasparov, who has slammed a publication ban on the details of what happened on Nordland. We may end up being accused of hiding some dark conspiracy or secret but I will be firm about this and so will Admiral Yamashiro be. Until further notice, the TOI 700 System will be under martial law, with all the rules and limitations attached to that status. So, Ahmed, if some media type gives you trouble, don't hesitate to lock him or her up until they could be booted out of the system."

"Got it, Tina!"

"Now, for the most important information I wanted to pass. This part is the most sensitive by far, thus must be kept strictly to yourselves. You may act or take decisions in light of that information but without telling to others the reasons for your actions. Any of you who will violate that secret may end up in front of a military tribunal, and this includes me as well."

Tina let that sink in for a few seconds before taking a deep breath and starting to reveal what was all this about.

"As you well know, we were able to capture early in our intervention a Predator command post that had been established by the Space Predators in the main government administrative building of New Oslo, the same building where little Frida Thorund and other children were originally taken from by the Predators. Our intelligence experts, helped by the translation skills of our Spirit, have been able to study the information and data contained in the Predator computers captured at the same time as that enemy command post. What was found from that captured data was highly unsettling, to say the least. Two major things starkly stood out in that data. First, the Predators, when they landed on Nordland, were able to seize complete sets of star charts of the Spacers' League's worlds and of the Solar System. They then sent away copies of those charts via small courier ships. However, we couldn't find out where those ships went. We only know that five such courier ships were sent out on high-priority missions, carrying those captured star charts. This basically means that any still existing Space Predator ships can now be assumed to know where our worlds are and what are to be found in each of our worlds, including Earth."

The others around the table all looked at Tina with absolute horror in their eyes.

"But, that's terrible news, Tina!" said a thoroughly shaken Dana Durning. "This means that we cannot lower our guard ever, or not until all those monsters will have been eliminated from this galaxy."

"Correct! You can see what kind of panic and hysteria could be created if that piece of news became public knowledge."

"Wait!" nearly shouted out Ahmed Jibril. "If the Predators sent out five courier ships, this has to mean that there are more Space Predators to be found in at least five other star systems."

"Or lots more, if we assume that these courier ships won't make only one stop along their itineraries. To date, we were able to inflict catastrophic losses to the Space Predators in two locations: TOI 1231, where the original homeworld of the Predators was; then here, in the TOI 700 System. After hitting those Predators this hard, we would have been in our rights to assume that we have thus eliminated completely the threat from those monsters. Alas, it seems that we still are far from finished with them. TOI 1231 might have been only one of the worlds they were permanently living on. In fact, the sending out of those five courier ships by the Predators would tend to indicate that there could be at least five other systems occupied or exploited by the Predators."

"Didn't we capture star charts of the Predator home worlds when we took that command post in New Oslo?" asked Keiko Nomura, who commanded the heavy fighter wing of the NOSTROMO, a unit that was now purely private and operated under the flag of the New Haven Planetary Corporation. Tina slowly shook her head in response.

"We didn't! Either because of very strict security protocols on their part or because they were deleted by the Predators just before we captured that command post, no charts pertaining to Predator-occupied worlds, nor information on the strength and disposition of the Predator fleet, were found in the data we captured. Thus, while the Predators know where to find us, we in turn have no clue where their remaining ships and bases are. You can easily figure out from that how precarious the situation of Humanity is right now, my friends."

There was a long, stunned silence around the table then, as if buckets of icy water had just been poured on the heads of the meeting participants. Alan Ashford, the commander of the flotilla of various shuttles, craft and flying cranes contained in the hangars of the NOSTROMO, was the first to manage to be able to speak again.

"But what are we going to do about that, Tina?"

“Resist and unite!” replied Tina in a resolute tone. “First, we will leave this system as soon as the refugees we are sheltering will be transferred to the incoming cruise liners we are now expecting. We will go directly to Earth, in order to get the NOSTROMO repaired on a priority basis at the Avalon Space Yards. For those who may worry about how we will pay for those repairs, be reassured: the High Council will pay for our repairs. Nex, Chairman Gasparov intend to hold secret meetings with various governments on Earth, in order to gain their help and support. This nonsense about Earth playing the aloof observer while we fight off the Space Predators has to stop. The revelation that the Predators now know where Earth is may help us greatly to convince those Earth governments to join us and do their honest part in this war. I said ‘war’ because that is what we are effectively in now: a war with no certain outcome against an enemy who only wants our complete enslavement and extermination. We can either give up and do as if nothing is happening, or we can continue the fight, to the death if need be. On my part, I have no intention to give up and surrender: the outcome then would be too horrific to even contemplate. The NOSTROMO will thus fight, my friends, and this as long as we are alive.”

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