



**NOSTROMO
LOST IN TIME**

By

MICHEL POULIN

NOSTROMO

LOST IN TIME

A SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL

BY

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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 UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is a sequel to my NOSTROMO ON THE PROWL and is the ninth novel in the Kostroma Series. It is continuing the adventures in Space of Captain Tina Forster and of her mighty cargo ship NOSTROMO and her crew. The year is 2337 and Humanity, despite having won a series of crucial battles against the carnivorous Space Predators, is still facing a mortal threat from them. Tina Forster and her ship thus have to stay vigilant, for the sake of the whole of Humanity.

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A MARS ODYSSEY
THE MAIN BATTLE TANK – STILL RELEVANT OR IN NEED OF EVOLUTION

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CHAPTER 1 – BACK AT WORK



11:04 (Universal Time)

Saturday, January 16, 2337

Small craft hangar complex, frame level 1,070

Super-heavy Armed Merchant Ship NOSTROMO

In low orbit of planet Asiana (XO-1c), in the XO-1 System

536 light years from Earth, Coroneae Borealis Constellation

When **Tina Forster** disembarked from her personal yacht **FRIENDSHIP**, closely followed by her personal bodyguard, Security Officer Stacy Keibler, she was met at the foot of her yacht's access ramp by her husband, **Michel Koniev**, who asked her at once a question in an anxious tone.

"So, how did it go at the meeting of the Spacers' League's High Council on Providence, Tina?"

"Better than expected, Michel. The majority of the High Council members accepted my explanation about why I hid from them the existence of our matter converter cannons."



"A majority but not all of them?" said Michel, a bit dismayed by that answer, making Tina nod her head and smirk.

"Yup! Two members from the Pallas Mining Industries Consortium voted against me, while Minister of Defense Cardona voted 'abstain'. To her credit, Chairman Mercier fired Cardona right after the meeting and temporarily assumed his duties. At least now we know who our enemies in the High Council are."

Her answer made Michel show frustration then.

"The Pallas Consortium, again! Too bad that Jacobus Stein is now too old to continue heading it. He always was a decent, honest friend to us but his children and many of his associates have proven to be mostly bigoted, power-hungry and greedy individuals."

"Well, the present CEO of the Pallas Mining Industries Consortium, Michael Kendrik, who was chosen by Jacobus Stein to succeed his no-good son Paul, did vote to support me. Kendrik was also not pleased at all at seeing two of his subordinate systems' governors vote against me and to have a third one hesitate before voting 'yea'. Unfortunately, I doubt that Kendrik fully grasps how much of a vipers' nest he has under him right now. I also suspect that Paul Stein, despite having been voted out as Chairman of the Spacers League three years ago and being officially disgraced, is secretly scheming against us with various Pallas high-level executives and systems governors. What I am most afraid of now is that, with the Spacers League now in possession of the design sketches of our matter converter cannon, Paul Stein and his allies would get their hands on a number of our new cannons. If that ever happens, then I just can't dismiss the possibility that those Pallas assholes would use those cannons, either to blackmail the High Council or to destroy their opponents, in which case we would end up with a fratricidal war within the Spacers League."

"Great! As if we didn't have enough to worry about already because of those monstrous Space Predators. We may have inflicted a number of stinging defeats on those carnivorous monsters but we still don't know where the rest of their fleet of asteroid ships is and, especially, where their remaining home worlds are. As long as we will not have eliminated them completely, they will continue to constitute a grave threat to Humanity and to the other sentient races in this sector of the galaxy. Talking of other sentient races, what do you make of the fact that the Vorlaks proved willing to accept our help to save their world?"

"I must say that I was myself surprised by their willingness to cooperate with my ships in the defense of Voronkia. It shows you that the old saying that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' seems to hold around the galaxy. Overall, I am now confident that they have learned their lessons and will keep to themselves on Voronkia."

"I hope that you are right about that, Tina, for the sake of the Hoshis of Hyanesu, who are living next door to Voronkia and who were once being under constant attack and occupation by the Vorlaks. How long will we keep a force of security androids and of Mobile Robotic Gun Systems on Hyanesu as a local defense force?"

"With the Space Predators soundly defeated in the Gliese 581 System and the Vorlaks apparently having become reasonable, I think that the sole continued presence in orbit of the Spacers League battle station MJOLNIR will be sufficient to ensure the safety of the Hoshis on Hyanesu. However, I prefer to confer with our command staff before taking a decision on the future deployment of our force of security androids and MRGSs."

"Agreed! Well, let's go back to our suite, where our little Janet is anxiously waiting for you."

Tina smiled at the mention of their six-year-old daughter.

"I myself can't wait to hug and kiss her, Michel."

Tina then turned to look at her tall bodyguard.

"Since we are now safely aboard my ship, you are free to return to your ship routine, Stacy. Thank you again for your services on Providence."

"It was my pleasure, Tina." replied Stacy Keibler, who then walked away from the couple in order to return to her apartment in the Habitat Ring Complex of the huge cargo ship.

Walking to the ship's central core spine, made of a sixty-meter-diameter armored tube extending vertically through the forward half of the 3,000-meter-long giant cargo ship, **Stacy Keibler** entered the core's rotunda, her single suitcase in one hand, then went to one of the lifts lining the inner core wall of the rotunda and called a cabin. A few seconds later, a cabin stopped at her level and Stacy entered it as soon as its doors slid open. Once inside, she punched in the number 580, which was the frame level number of the ship's forest habitats and of the ship's administrative center. On the NOSTROMO, as in the late KOSTROMA, the floor levels



were indicated by the distance in meters between the forward tip of the massive bow shield dome of the ship and the said floor level. In this case, it meant that her cabin traveled up by 490 meters before stopping at the level of the ship's administrative center. Walking out of the lift's cabin, Stacy crossed the fifteen-meter-wide central rotunda hallway and walked down its western hallway, passing by the ship's firefighting center, the banking center, the customer services offices and the telecommunications services center before arriving at the western airlock of the core section. Since the ship was not on any alert status, the armored doors of that airlock were open, letting dozens of people circulate freely in and out of the core section. Walking down the 500-meter-long gallery leading to the Habitat Ring section, where her apartment was located, she looked alternatively to her left and right through the large transparent armored windows of the communication gallery. Stacy was able to see some of the animals and birds living inside the Tropical Forest Habitat and the Temperate Rain Forest Habitat, which were separated from each other by the partition walls of the gallery, each of which covered 18.2 hectares of vegetation and contained hundreds of trees. Halfway to the Habitat Ring, Stacy passed by a family of ASEAN¹ citizens who had stopped to look at a big porcupine which was lazily walking through the temperate rain forest, near the gallery's partition wall. Right now, a large part of the 26,000 Asian passengers the NOSTROMO had brought from Earth to the XO-1 System was still aboard, waiting for the installation on the planet's surface of the hundreds of prefabricated modules and elements carried by the giant cargo ship to be completed before disembarking. Once ready to receive its first colonists, the planet Asiana would then become the first Human star system to be inhabited by citizens from Earth rather than from the Spacers League. By colonizing Asiana with the help of Tina's corporation, the ASEAN was hoping to relieve the longstanding excess population and limited resources pressures it had been enduring for over 260 years now.

Stacy finally entered the Habitat Ring Complex via the large armored airlock linking it with the communication gallery coming from the centerline core section. She then turned right along the Main Promenade, sandwiched between the twenty-story-high habitat complex proper and the giant ring aquarium which ran along the outer side of the section. That aquarium had a circumference of 4,110 meters, was fifty meters-wide, had

¹ ASEAN: Association of South-East Asian Nations.

a maximum depth of twenty meters and sheltered a wide variety of marine life visible through its thick transparent inner wall. As for its outer wall, it was made of a giant continuous holographic display screen covering its whole surface, a screen on which a variety of vistas could be displayed. Right now, its lower, submerged section showed an apparently limitless deep sea, while its upper section showed the surface of Asiana and the black of the surrounding deep Space.

Eventually arriving at the nearest lift from her apartment and entering its cabin, Stacy went up three levels and exited on Level 570, on which her apartment and those of most of the other security androids were situated. First passing by a large open-air lounge-patio used by the resident security androids, she finally arrived at the door of her apartment, numbered 570-216, and unlocked it with her magnetic security pass, then entered what was her personal space on this ship, a ten meter by four-meter apartment with four rooms: a living room; a cybernetics maintenance alcove and weapons vault; a private study cum workshop and storage room and a small bathroom. There was no kitchen or dining room, as security androids, while able to ingest food and liquids if need be, didn't need to eat or drink to survive. Their limited ability to take in food and drinks was meant strictly for social purposes, so that they could mingle with Humans and act like them, thus attracting less attention from those who still looked with hostility or suspicion at security androids like Stacy, who had been built as a security force for the New Haven Corporation. Unfortunately, such ill-will was still too frequent around the Spacers League, despite the stellar service accomplished in combat by Stacy and her android comrades. One had equated that hostility to the old forms of racism which had been too common on Earth during past centuries and which still existed in a number of places. The one thing her apartment had in place of a kitchen and dining room was a small counter with a compact refrigerator, a sink, a microwave oven and a coffee machine, all meant for her to be able to receive a human guest in her small apartment. Another feature meant to help her receive a human guest was a large sofa in her living room which could unfold into a wide bed. While Stacy did not need to sleep, ever, androids like her were able to have sex with Humans, since they had anatomically correct and functioning sexual organs, if you excepted the biological ability to reproduce. Since security androids could not have real 'feelings', they had to fake pleasure when having sex with Humans. However, the contrary was not true. As one man had told her once, she could really 'fuck the brains out' of a man...or of a woman. Male-like androids

were equally able to please Human partners and had become very popular with a certain class of middle-aged female passengers commonly called 'Cougars'. Many of those women in fact often booked passage on the NOSTROMO just to be able to enjoy some first-rate sex with male androids, who were very well endowed by average human standards and were experts at using their attributes, on top of being able to keep it up indefinitely. The small bathroom attached to her apartment was also meant mostly for human guests but the shower stall was one feature Stacy used often, in order to wash off any grime or dust particles collected during work. A special type of soap meant for androids also helped give a more natural human scent to her artificial skin. All in all, someone would have to be quite perceptive in order to see that she was not a real woman.

Her first move once inside her apartment was to drop off her suitcase in her private study cum workshop/storage room, where she quickly unpacked it and hanged or shelved her things in her storage and clothes locker. Then she sat at her computer station and reported herself as having returned to normal duties after going to Providence with Tina Forster. The response she got from her superior and commander of the First Security Legion, Chief Centurion Jehanne De Domrémy, pleased her, telling her that she was on her own time until tomorrow morning, when she was going to fly out on a patrol around Asiana in the heavy fighter in which she was the copilot. The question for her now was how to occupy the time between now and tomorrow morning. Closing her computer and getting up on her feet, she walked out of her private study and into her living room, where she cycled through the small airlock between her apartment and its small, five-meter square balcony overlooking the temperate rain forest habitat bordering her section of the Habitat Ring. There, she took in a deep breath, inhaling the various smells from the trees and vegetation, which were then instantly analyzed by her olfactive sensors. Somehow, that often seemed to stimulate her thought process. In the present case, it decided her to watch an old martial arts action movie on her video entertainment unit. Stacy was an expert practitioner of unarmed combat and martial arts in her free time and the past decades and centuries had seen countless such movies being produced, some good, some bad and some average ones. Thankfully, copies of those old films have been constantly remade in the succession of electronic formats used during the past centuries. What interested her in those old movies was not the acting per say rather than the fighting techniques and moves employed. Sitting in her

sofa facing her entertainment unit, she called up the vast selection of old films available in the NOSTROMO's video library and ended up selecting a 20th Century movie featuring a Chinese-American actor and martial artist named Bruce Lee. One of the security androids on the NOSTROMO happened to have been designed and built to be an avatar of that same Bruce Lee and had been programmed to practice the same martial arts moves than the historical Bruce Lee. Stacy was thus going to be able to practice in the future with that other android the moves she was going to view in this old movie today.

12:56 (Universal Time)

Executive Apartment # 3, Level 505

Centerline core section of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

"You already have to go work again, Mommy? But you arrived from Providence less than two hours ago and this is Saturday. Can't you stay longer with me?"

In response to her six-year-old daughter Janet, Tina crouched in front of her, an understanding smile on her lips, while gently holding Janet's head with both hands.

"I know that you missed me, sweetie, and I very much appreciate that. However, as captain of this ship and owner of the New Haven corporation, I have responsibilities towards all of us, including about our collective security and welfare, and I can't neglect those responsibilities. However, the meeting I am going to should not go on for very long and I promise you that I will be back with you well before supper time. Will that do, Janet?"

The young girl, still showing some disappointment, did nod her head slowly at Tina's question.

"I understand, Mommy, but please come back as quickly as you can."

"I promise!" said Tina before kissing her daughter on her forehead. She then walked out of the family's suite, her attaché case in one hand, and headed towards the nearby command conference room of her ship, which was situated on the same level as her suite. Entering her **command conference room** after a short walk, she found that most of those invited to the



meeting were already sitting around the conference table. The sole person still missing, Chief Engineer Rose Tillman, actually entered the room a mere ten seconds after Tina. Waiting until Rose was seated, Tina then spoke to the eight members of her command group, to which she had recently added Janet Robeson, the now retired ex-Chairman of the High Council of the Spacers League, who now bore the title of 'political advisor' of her corporation.

"Thank you for coming, my friends. I asked you to assemble so that I could brief you on how the last meeting of the High Council went and on what reactions I got to my request to keep the use of our matter converter cannon strictly to fight the Space Predators and other eventual major threats to Humanity and to other races allied with us. Basically, my reasons to keep our super weapon secret were generally well accepted by all, including by Chairman Mercier. Where things went partly downhill was when the High Council held a vote about pledging the non-use of our matter converter cannon against Human ships, groups and star systems. All the members voted to honor that pledge, all except Governor Berman of El Dorado and Governor Kim Dae Wo of Mu who voted 'nay', and Minister of Defense Juan Cardona, who abstained. While the vote of the High Council was in my favor, the fact that two planet governors who are executives of the Pallas Mining Industries refused to pledge to use our super weapon only in the defense of Humanity is in my mind very worrying. As you know too well, we have had our share of problems in the past with the Pallas Mining Industries and with its ex-chairman Paul Stein, who was also for a time Chairman of the High Council before being ousted for abusing his authority and showing blatant discrimination against us and our security androids."

There were nods to that around the table, including from Chief Centurion Jehanne de Domrémy, the first security android to have been activated some eight and a half years ago and the senior commander of their security android force. She and the other security androids had seen their status of full citizens of the Spacers League temporarily taken away on order of then Chairman Paul Stein, while instances of anti-android racism and discrimination had been experienced on star systems controlled by the Pallas Mining Industries. It had taken the angry reaction of Jacobus Stein, the aging founder of the Pallas Mining Industries and a good friend of Tina Forster, to clean up that stinky state of affair. Tina then continued on.

"Now, I had a private conversation with Chairman Jeanne Mercier after that High Council meeting, during which she pledged to me that only ships of the Spacers

League's Navy will be retrofitted with our new weapon and that no corporation or star system's local defense force would get it. She even told me that she intended our Navy ships to enforce that rule by conducting spot checks of any ships suspected of being illegally armed with matter converter cannons. In view of the refusal by two Pallas Mining Industries executives to honor the pledge taken by the other members of the High Council, I suspect that our Navy will be mostly checking out ships belonging to the Pallas Mining Industries, a measure I wholly support. So, hopefully, this will not result in serious problems for us in the future."

"May I disagree with that assessment of yours, Tina?" said at once Janet Robeson, a still solid eighty-year-old woman with an iron character. "While I have officially retired from active politics after many decades of service, I still follow closely the state of politics around the Spacers League and on Earth and I am alarmed by the way anti-android propaganda and lies are still circulating around the systems controlled by the Pallas Mining Industries. Worse, a lot of that propaganda and lies emanates from local government officials who are still sympathetic to Paul Stein and his lackeys. If that corporation would have its ways, we and the New Haven Corporation would be booted out of the Spacers League and our security androids would then be legally considered as nothing more than simple robots with no individual legal rights."

"But Michael Kendrick, the CEO of the Pallas Mining Industries, voted in favor of my pledge, Janet. He also looked angry when Berman and Kim voted against it."

"Tina, I do not doubt the honesty and moral rectitude of CEO Kendrick. The problem is that I heard quite a few rumors about him being the target of a campaign meant to oust him as CEO of his corporation. Some of those rumors even mention the possibility of Paul Stein being returned to power as the next chairman and CEO of the Pallas Mining Industries. In addition to those rumors, the most recent opinion polls on Mu, El Dorado and in the Trappist-1 System show that many in their populations are still hostile to or suspicious of our security androids. Worse, those poll results continue to go up, despite the heroic deeds of our androids and of our crews against the Space Predators."

"But that's utter nonsense, Janet!" protested at once Winnie Zambela, the financial officer of the NOSTROMO and the person in charge of its commercial dealings and contracts. "How could intelligent people believe such hogwash proffered against our androids?"

Janet Robeson replied to that with a pinched smile.

“As Tina said herself a number of times while quoting an ancient movie, ‘never underestimate the predictability of stupidity’, Winnie. Humanity may have advanced tremendously in terms of science and technology but it still counts many morons and gullible idiots in its midst. If all Humans would show intelligence and common sense while dealing with each other, then racism and wars would have disappeared centuries ago.”

There was a moment of awkward silence following those words, with Ahmed Jibril, the chief of security on the NOSTROMO, asked a question in a hesitant tone.

“So, what do we do about that now?”

It was again Janet Robeson who answered that.

“In terms of the security of our ship, crew, androids and corporation as a whole, we should let the Spacers League Navy take care of enforcing this new rule about our matter converter cannon. In commercial terms, we should become very cautious with our dealings with the Pallas Mining Industries and during any visit or transit stops at one of their worlds. Specifically, our security androids should avoid visiting or disembarking on those worlds, in order to avoid possible incidents of harassment or discrimination. I have no doubts that they could easily defend themselves from direct physical attacks but I would be more worried about the extra hostile propaganda which could be generated by any incident.”

The android avatar of **SPIRIT**, the central artificial intelligence computer of the NOSTROMO, was the next one to speak up.

“There is one thing that we should do about this situation, right now, which concerns the HD 138525 System. As you all know, it was mapped by one of our heavy fighters while it was searching for the missing prospector ship GOLDEN NUGGET. That system is within the direct sector of responsibility of our corporation and has next to no lifeforms in it due to its young age as a star system, so was quickly recognized by the High Council as belonging to the New Haven Corporation. While it harbors no lifeforms other than microbes, that system holds some very rich metal ore deposits on two of its moons and in its asteroid belt. Since we don’t have ourselves the equipment and resources needed to fully exploit such extra mineral riches, we opened competitive bids with a number of corporations which could be interested in leasing from us the rights to mining those deposits. The Pallas Mining Industries was one of the corporations which stated its interest in leasing those mining rights from us.



In view of the obvious hostility demonstrated towards us by the Pallas Mining Industries executives, I would suggest that we withdraw our offer to the Pallas Mining Industries and instead concentrate on the bids offered by the Ceres Consortium and by the Vesta Corporation, two entities which have proven to be dependable friends of ours.”

Heads nodded around the table at that suggestion, with a smiling Tina supporting it verbally.

“An excellent suggestion, SPIRIT. Anybody against that? No? Then we will do so. Winnie, please advise the executives at the Ceres Consortium and at the Vesta corporation of this before advising the following day the Pallas Mining Industries of our decision. If the latter asks why we did this, simply tell them that we lost confidence in their dependability as a potential customer.”

“I am sure that they will love that, Tina.” replied Winnie Zambela in a sarcastic tone.

CHAPTER 2 – A NEW CREWMEMBER

09:09 (Universal Time)

Thursday, February 4, 2337

Small craft hangar complex, Frame Level 1070

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, in orbit of planet Asiana

XO-1 System, 536 light years from Earth



“Alright, people, we have now arrived on the A.M.S. NOSTROMO, your new home. Follow me out of the shuttle and form up in double file outside, so that I could guide you to your quarters.”

One of the 200 newly-built security androids who had just traveled from the Avalon Space Yards in the passenger shuttle, a beautiful young blonde named **Greta Norstrom**, got up from her seat and grabbed her kit bag from its overhead rack, then followed the other androids out of the shuttle. Once on the deck of the hangar complex, next to the centerline core spine of the ship, Greta took place into the double line of androids forming up next to their passenger shuttle, while nine persons watched on from near one of the airlocks of the core spine. Greta recognized among those nine persons the captain of the ship, Tina Forster, plus her chief of security, Ahmed Jibril. The seven others, which included Chief Centurion Jehanne De Domrémy and the android avatar of SPIRIT, the central AI computer of the NOSTROMO, were all androids. Once the 200 newly-arrived security androids were lined up, Tina Forster stepped to a position ten meters in front of them with Ahmed Jibril and Jehanne De Domrémy. Looking first up and down the group of security androids, Forster then spoke up in a strong, clear voice, using a friendly tone.

“Welcome aboard the NOSTROMO, my friends. As you may know already, I am Tina Forster, captain and owner of this ship and also the owner of the New Haven Corporation. You are now members of a big family dedicated to the promotion of good, prosperous lives in peace and security for all among the stars. As security androids, your main goal will be to ensure that peace and security prevails. However, you are also to profit from our collective good life and prosperity, by engaging in off-duty hobbies and occupations of your own choice and by socializing with the rest of our community. Be

assured that you will always be fully respected as true sentient beings and valued fellow crewmembers on this ship and on New Haven. Now, unfortunately, some people among the population of the Spacers League still refuse to recognize you as sentient beings and would treat you like simple servants or, worse, like slaves. If you encounter such people, stay polite but ignore them and always act like the full citizens of the Spacers League that you are. In that, I promise you that I will always defend and support your individual rights. If you ever need help, counsel or support in anything, then talk to your immediate superiors, who will then pass on your message to me and my command staff. With this said, I will now let Chief Centurion De Domrémy tell you how things will go from now on.”

Jehanne De Domrémy, a small but stoutly built and young-looking female android, then took one step forward before speaking up.

“Again, welcome aboard the NOSTROMO, my friends. You will now be led to the level of the forest habitats, around which are the accommodations for both our crew and our passengers, where you will be given individual cabins. Since the original cabins built for our androids around the outer Habitat Ring Complex are fully occupied, more cabins dedicated for our newer androids have been recently built at the same level, but on the interior perimeter of the forest habitats, along the outer surface of the centerline core section. Those new cabins are of the same design and dimensions as the original cabins and also enjoy a direct view on our forest habitats, so you will be living in conditions as agreeable as the rest of us and of our passengers. Once you will have dropped your kit in your personal cabins, we will then take a couple of hours to administratively process you in as new crewmembers, issue you customized spacesuits and individual weapons and brief you on ship’s rules and procedures. Then you will be given the rest of the day off to mingle around, talk with veteran androids and buy civilian clothes of your choice in the various stores and commerces to be found aboard our ship. Use that time as well to start thinking about what kind of hobby or secondary occupation you will wish to practice during your off-duty time. I strongly counsel you to seek the advice and experience of our veteran androids while thinking about that choice: the options available are both numerous and varied. You may want to delve into arts or sciences, practice martial arts skills, work part-time as repair and maintenance technicians or even work in animal husbandry or hydroponic gardens work. As I said, the options are many and you may at first be undecided about what you would like to do when off duty, so take your time, seek



advice and explore your options carefully before you take a decision. This is a most important matter, both for you and for our community as a whole, as your off-duty occupations will further add to both your enjoyment of life aboard this ship and to the welfare and cohesion of our community. For example, I myself chose to study and practice the old martial arts of the European Middle Ages and Renaissance eras, something that had been made attractive to me due to my original programming as an avatar of the historical French heroine Joan of Arc. However, our more recent batches of security androids built differ from the first batches produced in a major way, programming-wise. The first 900 androids produced, which included me, were modeled as avatars of past, historically known persons, with the skills and general personalities of those historical characters programmed into the individual physical aspect and personality profiles of those historical persons. In contrast, the 3,200 androids which followed them and which you are part of were built as what I would call 'generic individuals'. While all different from each other in terms of external appearances and names and with similar combat and technical skills and programming, your individual personality traits were not set on specific personality types. Rather, you represent what I would call 'Mister and Miss Anybody' in terms of what you will find as average Spacers League citizens appearances and You are thus not bound to some arbitrarily chosen historical personality. You will thus be free to become the kind of person you wish, the same way a Human citizen of the Spacers League builds his or her character, career and life as he or she grows, gets educated and makes choices about their lives. Again, this choice to be made is not a light one and will be a major factor in how much you will enjoy your lives and contribute to our community. Take all the time you will need to weigh that decision and don't hesitate to explore the various options which may look attractive to you. When you will feel ready to take that decision, then go talk to Eve Silisca, who designed and programmed our security androids, or SPIRIT, who is the guide to all of us androids on this ship, who will counsel you and help you make a final choice about what you want to become. While protecting and defending our people and this ship will always be your priority task in life, it does not mean that it will prevent you from enjoying a constructive occupation or hobby during your off-duty time."

Jehanne then signaled to the other androids behind her to come forward before continuing.

"Now, as you know already, our security android force has already distinguished itself many times in combat against the monstrous threat of the Space Predators. In the

process, our androids gained valuable combat experience and honed their combat skills to a very high level. In order to spread that combat experience and skills among all of us, the combat veterans among us have gradually been redistributed among the ten cohorts of our legion, so that they could command and support you as either senior centurions, centurions or decurions. As a result of that reshuffling, the ranks of our original centuries are now less than full. You will thus be dispersed after this among our centuries in order to fill up those voids in our ranks. I am now going to broadcast electronically to you the list of unit assignments for your group. After you will have received it and will know to which century to report, you will then form up around your new unit leaders, who will then lead and guide you during the day as you are being processed in.”

Greta, who had been listening carefully to all this, then received and recorded via the radio and data transmission unit built into her body the electronic file broadcasted by Jehanne De Domrémy. She thus learned in less than a second that she was now part of the First Contubernia² of the Third Century of Centurion Ragnar Lothbrok, itself part of the First Cohort of Senior Centurion Shaka Zulu. She also learned at the same time which apartment had been assigned to her: Apartment 560-062C, with a view on the Temperate Broadleaf Forest Habitat. She then broke rank, like the other androids around her, in order to go to her centurion, a stoutly built and muscular android sporting a medium-length beard and moustache and a bald head. She was quickly joined around Lothbrok by 28 other new androids. The centurion, wearing the dark grey interior service uniform of the NOSTROMO's security force, looked and smiled at the androids now forming a semi-circle around him.

“Welcome all to the Third Century, my friends. I am Centurion Ragnar Lothbrok, your commander. Later on, you will be able to meet with the members of the contubernias you will be part of but, first, I will now lead you up to your assigned apartments. Once you will have been able to drop off your kit, I will then guide you through the ship's administrative 'in' processing. After that will be your meetings with your respective contubernias. Again, you are here as much to learn and to grow as a person as you are here to serve and protect. The long-standing members of my century are all highly experienced veterans who have seen a lot in the last seven to eight years, so feel free to ask them as many questions as you would like during those meetings and

² Contubernia : Roman Army sub-unit of eight legionnaires led by a decurion. There were ten contubernias in a century, with six centuries per cohort and ten cohorts in a legion.

to seek their advice on any subject which may be of interest to you. Yes, Legionnaire Nguyen?”

One of the new androids, who had raised a hand to ask a question, then spoke while keeping the volume of his voice fairly low.

“Centurion, we were told repeatedly that we will be respected and valued on this ship as much as its Human crewmembers and passengers. Is that truly a fact?”

“It is!” answered in a sober tone Ragnar Lothbrok. “We are both admired and respected by the people of this ship due to our valor in combat and to our continued courteous and helpful conduct while serving aboard this ship. Many of us are also nearly adulated because of our musical or entertainment performances while working on our hobbies or secondary occupations. You may also find that many passengers will show a sexual interest in you because of our vaunted sexual performances. However, don’t forget that you are sentient individuals free to choose what you do when on your own time. You are no sex slaves for Humans and I will expect you all to exercise good judgment and reasonable restraint in that respect. With that said, know that 23 of us have married human members of the crew, with two of us also now raising children who were made orphans by the Space Predators. Even more of us have established long-term relationships with human life partners. Any more questions? Then, follow me to the elevator cabins of the core rotunda.”

Greta, like the 28 other new members of the Third Century, followed Lothbrok inside the nearby central core spine column of the ship, entering it via a protective airlock and then getting into a large cargo lift cabin. There were no words exchanged while the cabin went up for a few seconds, to then stop at Level 560 in the main forward core section of the ship. Since Greta had already the complete deck plans of the NOSTROMO as part of her downloaded database, she was not surprised when her group had to cross the perimeter of a big soccer and football field stadium able to sit over 3,000 spectators while heading towards the recently-built android quarters situated along the external walls of the core section. Arriving at one of the six airlocks connecting the core section with the wheel spoke-like galleries separating the six forest habitats of the ship, Lothbrok entered it but immediately turned left once in it and used an airtight sliding door to enter a long, four-meter-wide hallway along which a series of doors lined its right side. Lothbrok waited until all 29 new androids had stepped inside the hallway before talking again.

“We are now on on Level 560-C, in the inner android quarters section, where you will be lodged. I will now wait here for you to go drop your personal kits in your assigned apartments and take a couple of minutes to explore it. Then, we will go as a group down to the ship’s administrative center, on Level 580 of the Core Section, to start your ‘in’ clearances. You may go to your cabins now.”

Greta obeyed at once and started walking at a brisk pace along the hallway, to arrive after some sixty meters at the door marked ‘560-062-C’. Reading first the small notice which had been left on the display screen of the entrance control panel of the door, she then put her right hand flat on the identity recognition pad of the panel. In the case of Humans, that panel would then read the fingerprints of the person at the door in order to determine if that person had the legitimate right to access the apartment. In the case of an android like her, that pad would read instead the tiny individual chip embedded in her right-hand palm. The door, which was an airtight sliding type door, then opened and she was able to step inside her apartment. Dropping first her kit bag and service helmet in the closet next to the entrance, she then quickly toured her small apartment, which measured ten meters by four meters and was comprised of a small bathroom with a shower stall, a toilet and a sink counter, a private study cum cybernetic diagnostic and maintenance corner and a living room. At the right-side end of the apartment was a small airlock connecting the living room with a balcony giving an open-air view on the trees of a temperate broadleaf forest. A large sofa facing a video entertainment unit in the living room also doubled as a fold-out bed. Overall, Greta was more than satisfied by all this and didn’t lose time by lingering inside, walking out of her apartment and returning to where Ragnar Lothbrok was waiting. Soon, all the androids of their group were back around their centurion, who then led them back inside the central core section in order to go down to the level of the ship’s administrative center.

Once down on Level 580, Lothbrok led his new androids around, first going to the ship’s security center, where they were officially registered as members of the ship’s security force, then to the adjacent weapons vault, where they were each issued with a heavy disintegrator rifle with combined stun gun unit, a heavy combined disintegrator-stun pistol, a riot baton and a large combat/utility knife. From there, the group visited the spacesuits section, where they were each fitted with a combat spacesuit specifically designed for security androids. Since androids didn’t need to breathe air and could resist to more extreme variations of pressure and temperature than Humans could,

those spacesuits were a lot more compact and lighter than the standard spacesuits used by living beings. However, those same spacesuits also came with armored vests and leg and arms protectors which incorporated a protective anti-laser surface of prismatic quartz armor fixed to plates of titanium armor. The visit to that section took a good hour, since those spacesuits needed to be fitted to each android's specific body dimensions. Their final visit was to the ship's bank, where the new androids were able to open an electronic banking account and to receive a first official pay. Greta looked at the electronic banking card given to her and which stated that she now had a balance of 3,000 credits in her account, then looked at Lothbrok.

"Centurion, my account has a balance of 3,000 credits in it. I thought that our monthly salary was much less than that."

"That is because, on top of your first initial monthly pay of 1,500 credits, you also received a supplementary one-time allotment of 1,500 credits provided to you in order to allow you to go shop for some civilian off-duty clothes in the stores around the ship. If you prefer to wait until you will have decided which hobby or secondary occupation you will choose for your off-duty time before buying the bulk of your civilian clothes, that is fine with me, but buy at least one or two informal outfits today. Don't worry about buying any work-related clothes, though: those will all be provided for free to you."

"Is our salary equal to that of human security officers, Centurion?" asked one of the new androids of the group, making Lothbrok nod his head once.

"Yes! Your salary as a security officer on the NOSTROMO is the same as that of a single, unmarried human security officer with no children in his or her charge. As for when you will have chosen which hobby or secondary occupation, you will then again be paid the same for that occupation as a single, entry-level human worker. Since you won't need to spend money on things which the various things Humans usually buy, like food at restaurants and alcoholic beverages, you may find that your respective bank accounts will fatten quite rapidly, unless of course your chosen hobby or secondary occupation involves a lot of spending on special items. In my case, since my main hobby is medieval blade fighting reenactment, I spend most of my money on new blade weapons and pieces of old-style pieces of medieval armor."

"But what if the hobby or occupation I choose doesn't imply large personal expenses, Centurion?" asked Greta. "Letting large sums dormant in my bank account sounds wasteful to me."

Lothbrok let a slight smile appear on his lips on hearing her question.

“Then, you can do like many of us do, Legionnaire Norstrom: donate what you consider as excess money to your needs to some charitable fund, or help financially a cause of your choice, like the Nordland Orphans Help Fund, dedicated to support the thousands of young children who were orphaned by the murderous attack on Nordland by the Space Predators some sixteen months ago. Our own legion commander, Chief Centurion Jehanne De Domrémy, adopted a little orphan girl after rescuing her and other inhabitants on Nordland. As for Captain Forster, she is spending a lot of her personal revenues to improve constantly the facilities on New Haven which are used to house and employ the victims of wars and natural disasters on Earth, victims which she helps by offering them a new home on New Haven. There are also other charity organizations dedicated to helping the poorer and more destitute people on Earth. Sadly, the needs on Earth and around the Spacers League are many, Legionnaire Norstrom, while the means available are finite. However, be careful not to fall into excessive charity: you will still need at least some money to buy and maintain a reasonable civilian wardrobe.”

“I understand, Centurion.”

Once everybody had been able to open a personal bank account, Lothbrok raised his voice to address his group of androids in the hallway.

“Now that your ‘in’ clearances are done, I will ask you to go back to your apartments, where you will drop off your new kit and will lock up your heavy rifles. However, keep your pistols and batons with you: we never know when some emergency could be declared onboard. Once back together, I will then lead you to one of the lounges of the Habitat Ring Complex reserved for the use of our androids, where you will be able to meet your other comrades of the Third Century. There, I will strongly counsel you again to freely talk with them and ask for their counsels and comments about what you could do aboard the NOSTROMO on your off-duty time. I will wait for you at the same spot as before on Level 560. Go!”

Greta was already thinking about the kind of questions she was going to ask to her legionnaire comrades as she started walking towards the central rotunda in order to get back up to Level 560.

Forty minutes later, their group arrived at one of the open-air lounges situated on Level 570 of the Habitat Ring Complex, where Ragnar Lothbrok led his 29 new androids

to a group of eight tables with chairs occupied by 51 other androids dressed in civilian clothes.

“Legionnaires, meet your comrades from the Third Century. I will first designate for you the decurions who will be your direct leaders, then you will all be free to talk between yourselves. First, you have Decurion Lee Marvin, leader of the First Contubernia...”

Greta and Nguyen Quan Trang approached at once the table where the said Lee Marvin was sitting. The decurion was a tall, very manly-looking android with a square jaw and he at once exchanged handshakes with his two new legionnaires, followed in this by his five other androids.

“Welcome to the First Contubernia of the Third Century. I am Decurion Lee Marvin and these are Legionnaires Bat Masterson, Boudicca, Norma Jeane Mortenson, Keiko Kitagawa and Jean Paul Belmondo.”

“They call me ‘Bébel’.” said Belmondo while shaking hands with Greta.

“And I am Greta Norstrom. I have not yet had the time to earn a nickname.”

“It will come fast enough, Greta, especially with your looks, which should attract Human males to you by the bucket load.”

“Oh yes!” agreed Norma Jeane Mortenson, a very pretty young redhead who was a good ten centimeters shorter than Greta. “For Human males, pretty girls are like magnets.”

“Human females also can be quite hungry sexually,” added Belmondo, “although they show a bit more restraint when on the hunt for sexual partners.”

“My! Should I expect male advances from left and right?”

“You bet! Sex is a big thing in most Humans, at least those who are still under the age of fifty. However, remember that we are not their servants and that we make our own choices.”

“Right! So, we were advised by Centurion Lothbrok to seek your advice about what kind of hobby or secondary occupation we could individually adopt for our off-duty time. Any suggestions or advice?” asked Greta while taking one of the empty chairs around the large table, which could sit ten persons.

“Yeah: don’t go for being a professional musician, dancer or singer.” said Norma Jeane Mortenson. “the entertainment niche on the NOSTROMO is presently saturated with androids, unless you are ready and willing to become a topless waitress at the Jupiter Sex Club. Even there, the place is nearly awash with female waitresses and

entertainers, both of the Human and android kind. I myself am one of the star singers and dancers of the group 'The Fabulous Five'."

"On the other hand," said Lee Marvin, "there is always a demand for more technical help, in order to deal with both routine maintenance and repairs around the NOSTROMO. Most people don't realize how truly gigantic our ship is or how many systems of all kinds there are around it which need periodic checking and maintenance. We have thousands of specialized maintenance robots aboard but even they aren't enough by themselves, while extra robots are quite costly and themselves need maintenance and occasional repair work."

"Now, that could interest me." said Nguyen Quan Tran. "I am already programmed to be able to do robotic and electronic diagnostic repair work. With a few extra programs and datafiles on electronic repair, I could help our electronic and robotic maintenance teams during my off-duty times."

"There you go!" exclaimed with a smile Lee Marvin before looking at Greta. "And you, Greta? What would interest you?"

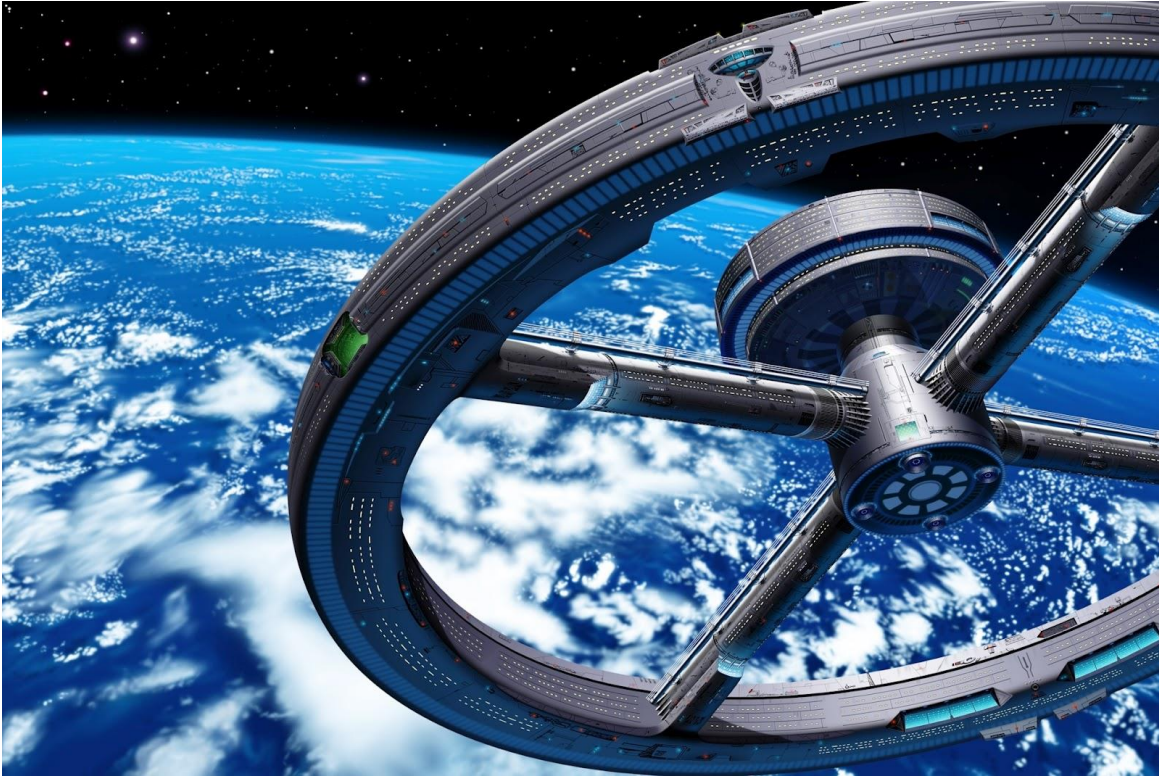
"I frankly don't know yet, Decurion. While I was also programmed to be able to do some robotic and electronic repair work, I have no special attraction towards that kind of work. However, I do confess that Human nature intrigues me: I find their behavior, as well as their mannerisms, to be often unpredictable or even surprising. I also find how their biological functions work to be surprisingly complex, while an element of what could be called compassion or care for others was incorporated in my programming."

"Then, what about becoming a nurse or a paramedic?" suggested Keiko Kitagawa. "A few of our androids have taken that specialty and they seem to find that line of work quite satisfying. I myself work as a Geisha, a traditional Japanese hostess, at the Kyoto Gardens Sushi Bar, and I still keep seeing new things and behaviors nearly every day. Humans come with a dizzying variety of characters, personalities and even physical and health conditions and working as a nurse or paramedic should prove to be a challenging and also rewarding type of work."

Greta thought that over for a very long half second before nodding her head.

"That sounds interesting indeed. I will definitely have to explore that avenue during the next few days and weeks."

CHAPTER 3 – RESCUE WORK



The EUROPA orbital terminal in low Earth orbit.

03:14 (Universal Time)

Friday, March 12, 2337

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In low Earth orbit, Solar System

Renée d'Argenteuil, the NOSTROMO's weapons officer and customary night watch bridge commander, watched intently on the bridge sphere's holographic display surface the approach of a surface-to-orbit cargo transporter loaded with more materiel and supplies for the planet Asiana and its new ASEAN colony. While the first batch of 26,000 colonists were now established on Asiana and were continuing the construction and planting work there, many more colonists, along with millions of tons of extra materiel and equipment, still needed to be transported from Earth to Asiana, some 536 light years away in the XO-1 System. The ASEAN community on Earth was pinning a lot of hope on the colonization of Asiana, which promised to relieve the population pressure and problems of dwindling resources suffered for over 300 years by the countries which

were members of the ASEAN, which comprised a good quarter of the Earth's population. It thus was investing heavily in that project, in which the assistance of the NOSTROMO held a crucial role. The XO-1 System and its second planet, XO-1c, now named Asiana, had in fact been mapped for the first time by one of the heavy fighters of the NOSTROMO and had been subsequently registered by the Spacers League's Space Registrar Office as officially being the property of the New Haven Corporation. Tina Forster, in alliance with the Ceres Consortium and the Vesta Corporation, had then offered to lease the XO-1 System to the ASEAN, so that it could build a colony on its second planet, with the intent of eventually outright sell it once the ASEAN would be firmly established on Asiana and would have become a new member of the Spacers League. However, not everybody on Earth or in the Spacers League had been happy on learning about that project. On Earth, jealousy and cries of 'preferential treatment' had come from nations and groups of nations, notably the European Union, which had hoped to have been offered the XO-1 System in place of the ASEAN. However, the hostility and inertia shown in the past by those countries had made Tina reject their pleas outright. In the Spacers League, the Pallas Mining Industries, always ready to expand its assets, had made fruitless attempts at gaining ownership of the XO-1 System or to at the least gain the mining rights there, but had been firmly rebuffed by the High Council. In some five years, if all went well, there was going to be over 24 million citizens of the ASEAN living on Asiana and exploiting vast surfaces of hydroponic gardens, along with the mineral deposits on its moon and in the system's asteroid belt. Another five years more and Asiana should be able to declare itself as self-sufficient from Earth. This project thus would fulfill one of the goals cherished by Tina Forster and other visionaries in the Spacers League: to expand Humanity into a prosperous and peaceful Space community across this quadrant of the Milky Way Galaxy.

The cargo transporter was now only a few minutes from docking with the NOSTROMO when Anwar Duharto, one of the sensors and communications specialists of the NOSTROMO, stiffened in his station's chair as he listened to an incoming transmission. He then pivoted his chair around to face Renée, who was sitting in the command chair normally occupied by Tina Forster.

"Renée, we are now getting a general call for help from the EUROPA Orbital Terminal: they have fire onboard and can't control it. They are calling for the assistance

of anyone able to quickly intervene in order to evacuate the people presently on the terminal.”

“Damn! Internal fire is about the worst thing that could happen aboard a spaceship or a Space station. Try to get more details about the situation on EUROPA, notably the number of people to be evacuated and where they have assembled in the station. In the meantime, I will put our emergency services on full alert and will inform Tina of this.”

“Understood, Renée.”

As Duharto spoke on the radio with the EUROPA station, Renée called via the ship’s intercom system the ship’s medical center, located some 85 meters below the bridge sphere, where she got a quick answer from the center’s emergency dispatcher.

“Medical Center’s dispatch, Nurse Romanova speaking!”

“This is d’Argenteuil, on the bridge: the EUROPA Space terminal has declared an emergency due to an internal fire and is asking for all the help it can get. Go to full alert and mobilize at once all your rescue and medical personnel. I will provide you with more details about that situation once I will get extra information from EUROPA.”

Renée’s second call was to Tina Forster’s suite, waking up a still sleeping Tina, who answered in a groggy voice.

“Tina speaking! What’s up?”

“The EUROPA Orbital Terminal is suffering an uncontrolled internal fire and has asked for help. I already alerted our medical center and ordered it to fully mobilize its personnel. I am still waiting for further details from EUROPA on their situation. I was planning next to alert our shuttle pilots, so that we could quickly be ready to launch them towards EUROPA.”

“Do that!” said Tina, who was now fully awake. “Have all our available rescue and paramedic teams board our shuttles and launch them as they become ready to fly out. I will be up on the bridge in less than five minutes.”

“Understood, Tina.” said Renée, who then switched one of her communications channels to the frequency of the orbital distress network, in order to hear who else was responding to the call for help from the EUROPA terminal. That station was easily one of the oldest orbital installations still turning around Earth and she had heard plenty of stories about its ageing systems and poor maintenance record. In truth, the European Union, which owned the terminal and was exploiting it for all its worth, was said to have been quite sparing in its maintenance of the orbital terminal and, if under the authority of

the Spacers League instead of under that of the European Union, would probably have been closed for multiple security violations or forced to effect repairs and improvements in order to stay open. Renée shook her head at those thoughts: Space was no place to be stingy about security or maintenance.

03:17 (Universal Time)

Emergency Medical Response Teams Duty Center

Medical Center of the NOSTROMO, Level 575

Having run to her individual equipment locker, Greta Norstrom hurried to put on as quickly as she could her customized light spacesuit, proving in the process to be much faster than her human colleagues. Only Tom Hanks, an android who had taken like her the specialty of combat paramedic, was proving as fast as she was. Hanks was however a much more experience android than her, having participated in four battles against the Space Predators, including the rescue of the battered remains of the Spacers League battle squadron, which had fallen into a Space Predator trap some five years ago and had only been saved in extremis by the quick response of the NOSTROMO. Both Greta and Tom, now fully suited up and carrying their medical supply bags, then went on a common accord to the adjacent vast storage room where emergency medical equipment and supplies were stored. There, they grabbed one of the hundreds of sealed anti-gravity rescue capsules stored in their special racks, activating it before sliding it out of its storage rack. That capsule, able to contain one person while still compact enough to go through opened hatches and doors, could be pressurized and sealed, to be able to carry a patient across the vacuum of Space. It also was equipped with a full panoply of life support and monitoring equipment and was fireproofed. With its anti-gravity field activated, it floated by itself above the deck, making it dead easy to move it around. With Tom leading and holding the handle at one extremity of the capsule and with Greta holding the aft handle, the pair ran with their capsule to the nearest lift in the central rotunda of the Core Section and entered its cabin, where Tom punched the number for the small craft hangar complex. When they arrived at the level of the hangar complex and ran with their capsule out into the terminal's craft circulation deck, they found one shuttle already out of its individual hangar and parked near the core rotunda.

"Nice!" said Tom Hanks at the sight of the waiting shuttle. "That's what I call a quick response indeed. Let's go in at once."

Following him and still holding her end of the rescue capsule, Greta ran with him to the opened aft access ramp of the shuttle, a wedge-shaped craft some twenty meters in length by twelve meters in width and nine meters in height. Once inside, they secured their capsule in the cargo bay before going forward to the cockpit of the craft, where they found the pilot and copilot sitting at their piloting stations. Maria Sharapova and William Windsor, both androids and the pilot and copilot of the shuttle, looked up and back at them when they entered the cockpit section, with Sharapova then speaking to them.

"We just got an update about the situation on the EUROPA station: things are really bad there and we will need to hurry to go help them. As soon as we will have a few more paramedics onboard we will fly out to the EUROPA station. You brought a rescue capsule with you?"

"Yes, we did!" replied Tom Hanks. "I saw Weatherly and Weiss close behind us, also with a capsule. They should be here very soon."

"Good! How many paramedics were present at the response team duty center?"

"Only seven, three of them Humans. You may know that we don't exactly have a ton of paramedics and nurses as part of the ship's medical staff. It will take some precious minutes before we could muster more personnel for this emergency."

"Then, we will fly out as soon as the other pair of paramedics and their capsule are onboard: I see another shuttle now coming out of its hangar: it will be able to carry the next paramedic teams to show up."

Just as Sharapova said that, Magdalena Weiss, an android combat paramedic with the looks of a young and pretty Semitic woman, appeared in the door of the cockpit.

"Me and Michael Weatherly are now inside with our capsule."

"Excellent! We can now fly out to the EUROPA station."

"Wait!" suddenly said Greta Norstrom, having thought about something. "Let's take with us a couple of the firefighting robots stationed nearby on this terminal's deck."

Both Hanks and Sharapova smiled at her suggestion, obviously liking it: the firefighting robots of the NOSTROMO, specially designed to combat fires aboard spaceships, could fly around in either Space or inside a ship or station, were nearly impervious to fire and were armed with highly effective cryogenic nitrogen gas extinguishers.

"A great idea! Go get the two nearest firefighting robots and bring them inside our shuttle."

Before Greta could take one step, she was stopped by a datalink transmission from 'GUARDIAN', one of the sub-AI computers of SPIRIT which was tasked with the control of the internal security systems of the NOSTROMO.

"No need for that, Legionnaire Norstrom: two firefighting robots are already heading towards your shuttle and should roll aboard in about nine seconds."

"Very well, GUARDIAN." replied Sharapova, using her own datalink system, before speaking to the three paramedics standing in the cockpit. "Alright, go take your seats and buckle up, people."

Greta. Tom and Magdalena then ran back in the cargo bay, where they sat next to Michael Wetherley, who was also an android paramedic, and buckled up their safety harnesses. As they were doing that, two compact robots painted in bright orange and red flew inside by the aft access ramp, which then closed up behind them. Seconds later, the shuttle started moving, entering one of the two craft inner airlocks of the complex. Once cycled through the airlock, the shuttle started flying down the 620-meter-long tunnel leading to open Space, which had a cross-section of 200 meters by 180 meters, to finally emerge outside of the ship through a set of opened armored sliding doors. As soon as her shuttle was in outer Space, Maria glanced at her positional Space chart display and veered hard right towards the position of the EUROPA Orbital Terminal, then switched on the intercom linking her to her passengers in the cargo bay.

"We are now out and on our way to EUROPA. We should be there in approximately eleven minutes."

She next spoke to her copilot, William Windsor.

"William, contact the control center of the EUROPA Orbital Terminal, tell them we are coming and ask them where we will be needed the most."

"On it!... EUROPA Control, this is Rescue Team Alpha, from the NOSTROMO. We should be at your location in eleven minutes. We need to know where you will need us most for us to disembark our paramedics and load up your people in need of rescue, over."

To William's dismay, he had to repeat his message four times before getting a response.

"Rescue Team Alpha, this is EUROPA Control. Most of our people are presently boarding our lifeboats but we have a number of people trapped by fire on the lower decks of our southwest quadrant. The nearest docking station to that area is our Number Four Docking Station. We will now have its signal beacons flash intermittent red in order to help you find it."

“Thank you, EUROPA Control. Could you have someone familiar with your station’s layout wait for us at that docking station, so that he or she could guide us around once inside, over?”

The response William then got was both a delayed one and, when given, was done with clear embarrassment in the tone of voice of his interlocutor, who was a woman.

“I’m afraid that we don’t have anyone available there, Rescue Team Alpha: I am alone in the control center, over.”

“Alone? Where are the other controllers?”

“They already left in a small shuttle a few minutes ago, over.”

Despite both being androids, William and Maria reflexively looked at each other for a short moment, taking in that damning piece of news. William then came back on the radio.

“Understood, EUROPA Control. We will manage by ourselves. Just advise your survivors trapped in your southwest sector to get as close as possible to your Docking Station Four.”

“Will do!”

With that radio conversation now over, William used their long-range optical camera to locate the big space station in the black of Space.

“I see the station, Maria. We are still too far to see the beacon lights of its Number Four Docking Station but I will advise you as soon as I see them.”

“Deal!” simply said Maria while pushing ahead at best speed.

Some four minutes later, William spoke again.

“I can now see the blinking beacon lights of Number Four Docking Station. I can also see the glow of extensive internal fires through the observation bays aboard EUROPA. This is not good. The oxygen aboard is going to be all consumed quickly by those flames. Then, when the oxygen will have all burned away, we will see the flames die out.”

“...Along with the people inside.” added Maria. “We will have to act quickly in order to save these people. To the paramedics in the cargo bay: we can see extensive fires inside the station. You better seal your spacesuits before entering it.”

“We acknowledge that.” was the answer from Tom Hanks. Maria then started her approach to the station, keeping her speed as high as possible without risking a collision. Three minutes later, her shuttle came to a stop against the docking station

marked by blinking red lights. A large flexible adaptor clamp then extended itself, gluing itself around the side airlock of the shuttle with the help of magnets. A force field completed the air integrity of the link, with compressed air then filling that space while a telescopic bridge deployed itself from the station. The four paramedics on the shuttle, led by Tom Hanks, rushed in with their two rescue capsules and two firefighting robots as soon as the side door of their shuttle opened up. Inside, they found a relatively small compartment with an airtight door that gave access to the station proper. When Tom opened that door, he was nearly trampled by a panicked crowd of about seventy people wanting to run inside the shuttle. Only his strength as an android made him able to withstand the push from that crowd.

“STOP PUSHING AND CALM DOWN, PEOPLE! BE ORDERLY AND YOU WILL BE ABLE TO EVACUATE SAFELY. I SAID CALM DOWN!”

He finally had to push back quite brutally a fat man in his fifties who was doing the most pushing, making him fall hard on his bum.

“I SAID CALM DOWN! Michael, Magdalena, give your capsule to Greta and stay here to organize this evacuation. Me and Greta will push further inside with our capsules.”

“Got it!”

With Greta taking hold of their second rescue capsule and with the two firefighting robots following closely behind, Tom headed towards a bank of elevators visible in the back of the room he was in. Thankfully, there was a large electronic display board next to these elevators, with a color deck display of the various areas of the station and the ubiquitous ‘you are here’ arrow indicating where he was presently. Tom looked at it for a few seconds, recording its details inside his electronic database before calling the station’s control center via the intercom system next to the display board.

“Control room, this is Rescue Team Alpha. We are now inside of your station and the people present near the docking station are now boarding our shuttle. Do you have wounded people or other people in danger in other parts of your station?”

“There are a group of some twenty people, some wounded, three decks above you, in an observation lounge. They are however trapped there by fire and can’t use the lifts or the emergency staircases to come to you.”

“We will see if we can get through to them, miss. What about your own situation?”

There was a moment of hesitation before the poor woman answered him.

"I am trapped by fire inside the control room. If I open the doors of the lifts or of the staircases to leave, I will then let in the flames and the smoke."

"I will go get her with one firefighting robot, Tom. Take the other robot with you and go get those people upstairs." said at once Greta. "That woman deserves to live."

"Agreed! Good luck on your side, Greta. I will get Michael and Magdalena to follow me as soon as the people in the boarding lounge will all be aboard our shuttle. Take a few seconds to record the information on this display board, then go."

Greta did as Tom had told her and was soon running along a long passageway leading to the center of the station, dragging behind her the floating rescue capsule and followed by her firefighting robot. The situation suddenly went from bad to worse when all the lights suddenly went out, while the artificial gravity around the station failed, probably thanks to the station's main power generators shutting down because of the fires. Thankfully, an android like her could easily move and navigate in such conditions with the help of her built-in gravity drive system and the infrared sensors linked to her eyes. She also lit the frontal lamp of her spacesuit helmet for good measure and flew on, floating with her rescue capsule a meter above the deck of the passageway. Getting after a couple minutes to a point below the station's control room, Greta then entered a stairwell that would lead her up to the control room, ignoring a nearby bank of lifts and thus obeying a very old but still most relevant safety rule: in case of fire, don't use the elevators! However, as soon as she was inside that stairwell, she was enveloped with thick black smoke which was filling the whole stairwell. Her spacesuit sensors immediately analyzed that smoke and found it to be from burning hydrocarbons...and very toxic. That smoke was also quite hot. An unprotected Human would collapse and die within seconds if it would inhale that smoke. Thankfully, even without her spacesuit, Greta could function within such smoke, with the only consequence being her artificial skin being blackened by soot particles. With her spacesuit on, she risked little, thus started flying upwards inside the stairwell, her capsule and robot still behind her. Six levels up, she stopped at the level of the station's control room, which was marked by an indication panel on the door at that level. Before opening it, she however spoke on her radio to the woman inside the control room.

"Control room, I am now at your level, inside the emergency stairwell connected to your room. The stairwell is however filled with toxic smoke but I have a rescue

capsule with me and a firefighting robot. Do you have a spacesuit or oxygen mask with you, over?"

"Negative! The adjacent locker room where my spacesuit is stored is presently filled with smoke and thus inaccessible to me. What should we do now?"

"What we will do is that, at my signal, you will take a deep breath and hold it in while crouching down. I will then open the door of the stairwell and rush to you, then will put you in my rescue capsule and seal you in. Finally, I will bring you to my shuttle while you are safely inside my capsule, which is fire resistant and airtight."

"Thank God for your help, miss. I will be near the stations next to the north side external viewing bays."

"I copy that. On my count, take a breath and hold it in, miss. Three...two...one...breathe!"

As soon as she said that, Greta threw the door of the stairwell open and rushed inside, immediately turning towards the northern side of the station while dragging her capsule. Thick black smoke immediately started filling the large control room but Greta had time to get to the woman sitting on the deck near the observation bays before the first plumes of smoke started to fill that part of the control room. Opening quickly her rescue capsule's transparent top half, she then guided the woman inside it and made her lay down on her back, then closed and sealed it. By then, the visibility around the control room was next to zero, while the ambient temperature was rising quickly, it already being around 120 degrees Celsius. Dragging behind her her capsule and its precious occupant, Greta flew back towards the stairwell she had used to come up to the control room. She was about to enter the stairwell when the whole station shook, while Greta heard the rumble of a distant but powerful explosion. Ignoring that, she entered the stairwell and started to fly down with her capsule and her robot, to return to the deck level where she had entered the stairwell. Flying out of the stairwell and into the long passageway, Greta felt another, closer explosion, with what looked like a wall of fire traveling down the passageway towards her. Her instant reaction was to push her gravity drive unit to the maximum while sending an electronic order to her firefighting robot.

'Unit 232, spray a wide cone of cryogenic nitrogen gas at that coming fireball: cool it down!'

'Executing order!' answered the robot, who stopped in mid-air and pivoted 180 degrees, then sprayed a wide cone of cryogenic nitrogen gas across the whole cross-

section of the passageway. At first, that spray apparently had little effect but, as the robot sprayed in continuous mode, that wall of fire soon turned into a simple tempest of thick black smoke. Greta took full advantage of that and covered the whole 400-meter-long passageway in mere seconds, braking only at the last moment when close to the door giving access to the boarding lounge of Number Four Docking Station. She and her robot actually beat the incoming cloud of black smoke to the door and managed to get inside the lounge and to close the door before the smoke could enter through that door. Her next move was to bring her capsule inside the waiting shuttle, where she opened it and let the woman she had saved out of the rescue capsule.

"You are now safely aboard our shuttle and will soon be flown to my ship, the NOSTROMO. I will now have to go back in to go help my comrades save other people in danger."

"Bless you, miss! What is your name, so that I can thank you properly later on?"

"Greta Norstrom, Legionnaire Greta Norstrom."

The eyes of the woman then opened wide with surprise.

"You...you are an android?"

"Yes, I am, like my companions. I now have to go. Be safe, miss."

Greta then left again the shuttle with her rescue capsule, joining up with her firefighting robot and heading up to rejoin her other three comrades. William Windsor, who was helping calm down and reassure the survivors now filling the cargo bay of the shuttle, then guided the woman to a seat that was still unoccupied and sat her in it.

"Have you suffered any wounds, miss? Do you need any treatment, or maybe water?"

"Some water will be nice, thank you, sir."

As William went to get a bottle of water for her, the woman shrank in her seat, retroactively hit by the incredible stress she had just lived through, and started to sob: so many persons she knew had just died on the EUROPA station, including two of her best friends.

07:41 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In low Earth orbit, near the burned-out hulk of the EUROPA Station

“What a tragedy! A tragedy that could have been avoided completely if standard safety rules had been followed aboard the EUROPA Station.” said Tina, shaking her head as she finished reading the latest report from her rescue teams and medical personnel. One picture in particular in that report, along with the data accompanying it, both distressed her and made her most angry: it showed a burned-up passenger lounge on the EUROPA Station but the truly horrible thing about that picture was the more than 300 charred bodies literally covering a good half of its deck, each dead body partly lying on top of other bodies, like dominos having fallen over each other. Tina had once seen a picture somewhat similar to this: it was a historical picture from the year 1944, taken during World War 2 and showing a passageway in an American aircraft carrier that had been hit by a Japanese suicide aircraft. That hit had ignited the already damaged gasoline fuel pipes of the ship, creating a firestorm which had swept the inside of that carrier. The picture taken later of that passageway showed its deck literally carpeted with the blackened bodies of dozens of American aviators who had been caught by that firestorm while rushing out of their squadron ready room. Now, nearly 400 years later, she had to look at an even more horrible picture, this time of dead innocent civilians instead of military men, and this because a bunch of maintenance cost-cutting irresponsible imbeciles had decided to cut corners and to ignore the most basic safety rules in force in the Spacers League. She finally managed to take her eyes off that picture and looked at her second-in-command, Dana Durning, who was standing next to her near Tina’s command chair.

“At least 592 confirmed dead by now, plus 227 wounded persons, many of them gravely burned, and possibly dozens more people still missing on that station, all that because the pumps and pipes between the hydrocarbons downloading docking stations and the hydrocarbons storage tanks had not been inspected or maintained properly for years. I could kill those responsible for this.”

“And that casualty count would have been even higher if not for the quick reaction and dedication of our rescue teams, Tina. However, what really pisses me off is the fact that most of the crew of that station, starting with its central control room technicians, simply fled the station, leaving their passengers and transiting ship crews to fend for themselves in that inferno. Only one of those technicians stayed at her post and would have died if not for the actions of one of our combat paramedics. I hope that those fleeing cowards will pay for abandoning their posts like this.”

"They will, Dana, they will, that I am sure of. This disaster is already raising outrage all around Earth and around the Spacers League and heads will roll for this. Those arrogant assholes of the European High Council better not try to do a coverup about this: that would only worsen their case."

"they may not be the only ones responsible for this, Tina. I was told that the EUROPA Station had a maintenance contract with the Pallas Mining Industries, which regularly brought in loads of hydrocarbons, for the pumping and piping systems used on the station to offload and store liquid hydrocarbons."

That brought fresh anger on Tina's face as she stared with disbelief at Dana.

"People from the Spacers League would ignore like this the most elementary rules about preventative maintenance in Space?"

"Hey, as they often say: everything to make an extra credit."

Tina shook her head angrily before she could manage to calm down a bit.

"Alright, let's manage something we can control ourselves. How is our medical center doing with all these wounded people from the Europa station? And did we suffer any casualties among our own rescue teams?"

"Thankfully, all of our people...and android paramedics, came out of this intact, if you except the psychological shock of seeing so many burn casualties in one place. While our medical center is now at its maximum capacity, the help of our security androids, who all have at least basic first aid skills, is making a huge difference, allowing our doctors and nurses to concentrate on the more serious cases. As for the intact survivors we picked up from their lifeboats, they have been lodged temporarily in our emergency quarters on Level 535, pending their transfer to Earth's surface."

"Then I think that I will go pay a visit to those poor souls in our medical center and in our emergency quarters. Alert me if any accident investigation team shows up from Earth to inspect what is left of the EUROPA Station."

"Will do, Tina."

Her head still filled with horrible pictures and numbers, Tina climbed down the stairs from the upper command platform of the bridge sphere and went to the next lower level, where she used a lift cabin to go down to the ship's medical center, situated like the bridge sphere in the centerline core section. Once on that level, she walked to the nursing station monitoring the 46 primary patients' rooms, where she found Chief-Nurse

Wei Ling discussing a case with another nurse. Both women cut their conversation short on seeing their captain approach them, with Wei Ling nodding her head to Tina.

“Are you here to visit our patients, Captain?”

“I am, as long as they are well enough to speak. If not, I will simply look at them in passing.”

“I am afraid that many of the 227 wounded we received have been horribly burned or had their lungs damaged by smoke and are under heavy anesthesia or getting oxygen...or both. Your visit may well be limited to passing by their beds.”

Tina digested that info before asking Ling another question.

“And what have we done with the bodies of the victims we took from the station?”

“Unfortunately, our morgue was way too small for so many bodies, so Doctor Perez decided to use the ice surface of the hockey rink in the sports complex to line up the body bags, until they could be repatriated by their relatives.”

“By the stars! And have we been able to identify all of those victims?”

The chief-nurse sadly shook her head at that question.

“Very few of those poor souls have been identified to date, Captain. The flames which killed them were so intense that they burned or melted any identity piece they could have carried. It will take a long process of genetic and forensic work to identify them all.”

Tina lowered her head at those words, struck hard by the horror of the situation. She had seen battle casualties on warships before, many times, but this was a preventable accident which had killed hundreds of innocent civilians.

“Very well! Could you accompany me as I tour our patients?”

“Of course, Captain. Follow me!”

The next forty minutes or so were most painful to Tina as she passed by dozens of medical beds in which a man, woman or child lay, often unconscious from doses of painkillers and nearly all covered with bandages. Her eyes filled with tears and she couldn't help sob quietly when she looked at a small baby covered with bandages and crying inside a medical crib.

“That...that baby: do we know if its parents survived?”

“We are not sure about that, Captain. However, our rescue teams found the baby under the burned-up body of a young woman who was probably its mother. That

woman is part of those still anonymous bodies lined up on our ice rink. As for its father or even possible siblings, the piles of bodies surrounding the dead woman comprised many men, women and children of varied ages. The probabilities are that this baby is now an orphan.”

Renewed tears came to Tina’s eyes and she had to turn away, taking the time to regain a bit of self-control before looking again at the chief-nurse.

“I will not take more of your precious time, Chief-Nurse. I will now go visit the dead lined up on our ice rink.”

“Be advised that we enrolled the students of our class in forensic science to start the work of identifying those bodies, Captain. We had to, since our lone forensic expert would have been overwhelmed by so much work.”

“That was the correct decision to take in the circumstances, Chief-Nurse Ling. I will try to get some extra medical help from Earth to assist your staff as quickly as possible.”

On that, Tina walked away, heading back to the central rotunda of the Core Spine, where she took a lift to go up to the level of the ship’s sport complex, then went to the Hockey rink, with its rows of bleachers surrounding its oval ice surface. She involuntarily posed on seeing the nearly 600 black plastic body bags lined up on the ice and nearly covering the whole surface of the rink. One mature man and a dozen teenagers or young adults wearing white lab suits, rubber gloves and masks were slowly going around the body bags, opening one bag at a time and then doing some examination of the body inside while taking notes on electronic pads and taking pictures of the remains. Tina started crying again when she saw that over one third of the bags contained small bodies which could only be those of children, toddlers or even infants.

It took Tina long minutes to at least partly recover from her sadness and shock. Taking a last look at the long lines of black body bags, she then decided on her next move and headed again towards the Core Section’s central rotunda. However, instead of using a lift, she used a stairwell to go up by one level, ending in one of the decks used as emergency quarters for large numbers of refugees or short trip travelers. Today, some 183 survivors from the EUROPA Station occupied a section of the quarters on this deck, which could accommodate up to 7,500 persons in tight but more than acceptable facilities. Consulting on her electronic notepad the reports from her rescue teams on the EUROPA station disaster, plus a listing of the survivors now occupying the emergency

quarters, Tina followed in succession two corridors before arriving at the door of one of the five meter by five-meter partitioned cubicles making up the emergency quarters. Each of those cubicles were in turn designated as 'family unit' and could house up to six occupants provided with three double bunk beds, a small bathroom with a shower, toilet and sink, and a tiny lounge cum storage room. There were also other types of cubicles dedicated to eating and food preparation for the occupants of the quarters, who could also use the buffet restaurants in the Habitat Ring and central core section if their numbers permitted to do so. Mindful of respecting the intimacy of the occupants of this cubicle, Tina rang the buzzard next to the sliding door and waited. A woman's voice answered her through the door's intercom after about ten seconds.

"Yes, who is it?"

"I am Captain Tina Forster, owner and commander of this ship. I came to speak with a Miss Emma Blunt."

"That's me!" replied the female voice before the door was opened from the inside, showing to Tina a woman in her mid-thirties. She was of average height, was a bit overweight and sported medium-length brown hair and had brown eyes. While fair-looking, she was not what you would call a true beauty. Taking one step forward, Tina smiled to the woman and shook hands with her.

"I am honored to meet you, Miss Blunt: you were one of the true heroes of today's tragedy."

"But I only did my duty, Captain Forster." protested meekly Emma Blunt, attracting a dismissive gesture from Tina.

"Doing your duty under stress and threat of death is one way which defines a hero, miss. Could we discuss together in private?"

"Sure! Please come in!"

The woman chuckled briefly after saying those three last words.

"It feels a bit weird to inviting in the owner of the place you are in."

"Aah, but privacy always should be respected, for everyone."

"True! Let's sit at the table in the lounge."

Since the lounge was the first room beyond the entrance door, Tina only needed to take three steps before sitting at a rectangular table which could sit six persons, with Emma Blunt sitting opposite her. The latter then spoke first.

"So, what would you discuss about, Captain?"

"The whole incident on the EUROPA Station. But first, how are you doing?"

Emma lowered her head at that question, being still clearly emotional about that subject.

“Physically, I am fine. However, the horrors I saw and lived through earlier this morning will probably cause me nightmares for a long time to come.”

“I completely understand that, Miss Blunt. You would not be truly human if you felt nothing about witnessing such awful things. If you ever need psychological help about this, don’t hesitate to come and see one of our mental health specialists.”

“I know and am thankful for that, Captain. So, what else do you want to discuss about?”

Tina measured carefully her words before answering Emma.

“Miss, you were the only worker at the station’s central control room who stayed at your post during the whole incident, until you were saved by one of my paramedics. I know that you already were interviewed by one of my security specialists about the incident but I would like to precise with you the events at the start of the incident and following it, up to the time when your coworkers abandoned their posts.”

“My coworkers...”said in disdainful tone Emma Blunt. “While they were reasonably competent, their main goal was to make the station function at the least cost possible, since higher profits from the station’s operations meant extra premiums for them. While I would accept raises, I never let money affect my professional judgment about how I did my work and reported various equipment or systems failures or shortcomings. That in turn put me in the black book of the head manager of the station, Sergei Vlassov, who characterized me as a troublemaker and froze my advancement in order to punish me for my so-called ‘attitude’.”

“And that Vlassov, when did he leave the station and how?”

“He was the first to leave, using our duty shuttle, right after the initial first series of explosions and fires. The other controllers on duty with me then hurried to follow him and leave in that shuttle with him. I implored them to stay and help me to try controlling the situation but none of them listened to me.”

“Did they leave before or after the first lifeboats loaded with station occupants and passengers were launched into Space?”

“Before.” answered Emma, shocking and angering Tina.

“But that is clearly abandonment of post and neglectful endangerment of passengers, according to the laws of the Spacers League. I know that you worked under the authority of the European Union but, by all accounts, those controllers should face heavy prison sentences.”

“And I still hope that they will face such sentences, Captain. Unfortunately, the European Union doesn’t work the way the Spacers League does. I was left alone to direct and initiate the evacuation of the station’s occupants, calling by public address speakers for the passengers and staff to go at once to the lifeboat stations and be ready for evacuation. Unfortunately for too many of those passengers, things went downhill much faster than even I anticipated.”

“Uh, what do you mean exactly by ‘faster than even anticipated’, miss? Did you have reasons to forecast trouble on the station?”

“I had plenty of reasons to forecast trouble, Captain.” replied in a bitter tone the British woman. “I had repeatedly informed Vlassov and my direct supervisor, Anthony Verdi, the man in charge of the station’s maintenance, that cracks had formed on a number of pipes used to transport liquid methane between the pumps at the docking stations used to pump out the hydrocarbons arriving by spaceships and our storage tanks. I also signaled to them that a number of valves had experienced fleeting signs of failures and that they should be replaced, or at the least repaired. The answer I got from both of them was that there was no money available to do such repairs at this time. I then insisted that not repairing those pipes and valves could lead to some catastrophic failures which could cause grave fires on the station. However, they ignored me and did nothing about it.”

“Did you put your warnings in written reports as well as in your verbal reports, miss?”

“Yes, I did, many times, Captain. However, I later discovered that my electronic reports were either modified or were outright erased from our maintenance logs.”

Now seriously pissed on hearing all this, Tina made a note on her electronic notepad, then looked back up at Emma Blunt.

“Going to the moment when the whole incident started, tell me what exactly happened then, miss.”

“It unfortunately happened the way I had warned Vlassov and Verdi that it could happen. One of the electronically-actuated valves along a pipe used to transfer liquid methane between our various hydrocarbons storage tanks failed while some liquid methane was being pumped around. In turn, that caused an instant overpressure in one pipe, which then burst open, letting out thousands of liters of liquid methane into our pumping room. That liquid methane quickly evaporated due to the high ambient temperature in that room, with the methane vapors then entering our ventilation systems

and quickly spreading through our station. At one point, some source of heat or a spark ignited that methane-oxygen gaseous mix, causing a titanic fuel-air explosives detonation and a firestorm which spread at once through over a quarter of the station's internal volume. Most of the people on the station never had a chance to evacuate before being incinerated by the firestorms circulating via our ventilation shafts. That was when Vlassov and the other workers in the control room decided to flee, leaving me alone in the control room."

Tina, who had been recording Emma's answers on her electronic notepad, nodded her head in understanding: her claimed sequence of events all made good, solid sense in technical terms and easily explained why so many people had died so quickly. What was less than easy to understand and accept was the level of carelessness and incompetence her story painted about her coworkers.

"I was told that there was some kind of maintenance contract signed between your station and the Pallas Mining Industries, contract which involved your pumping and piping systems for hydrocarbons. Is there any truth about that?"

"I can't say much about that, as I was not privy to the details about our maintenance work contracts. I however can tell you that, on at least two occasions during the last twelve month, a technical team from the Pallas Mining Industries did pay a visit to our station and inspected our pumping systems. What they found, reported or worked on then is unknown to me."

Tina made another note on her pad, then asked Emma a last question.

"Do you have anything else which you would like to tell me now, or would you have any request to make to me, miss?"

"I do!" answered at once the woman. "I have reasons to believe that the owners of the station and Sergei Vlassov will try to retaliate against me for testifying about the events at the station. I have no confidence about the honesty in the European Union officials in charge of our Space program and this disaster made me ashamed of being an E.U. citizen. I thus request asylum protection from the Spacers League and would like to become a citizen of the New Haven Corporation. I am done working for incompetent or corrupt bosses."

Tina nodded once, then spoke out loud, but not towards Blunt.

"SPIRIT, be ready to record Miss Emma Blunt as a new citizen of New Haven and as a new crewmember aboard the NOSTROMO."

A female voice coming out of Tina's notepad then was clearly heard by Emma.

“Miss Emma Blunt, this is SPIRIT, the central artificial intelligence computer of this ship. Do you wish formally to become a citizen of the New Haven Corporation and of the Spacers League and to become a crewmember of the NOSTROMO?”

“I do!” answered Emma, her heart suddenly accelerating.

“Then, as of now, you are so, with the full rights and protections enjoyed by a citizen of the Spacers League. The European Union would now need to ask for your extradition if it ever tries to get at you. Be assured that you will then benefit from our full protection, both legal and physical. Congratulations, Miss Blunt.”

Emma felt her head swim and she had sweat suddenly appear on her forehead as she realized the extent of what had just happened to her.

“My God! I never expected that my request would be accepted and processed this quickly, Captain.”

“You fully deserved this, Miss Blunt.” replied a smiling Tina. “Let me guide you now down to our administrative center, where all this will be formalized on paper and electronically and where we will provide you with an apartment and a joining premium, so that you could go buy for yourself a new wardrobe.”

14:30 (Universal Time)

Saturday, March 13, 2337

Craft circulation deck of the small craft hangar complex

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, in low Earth orbit near the EUROPA Station

Tina, backed by her ship’s head hostess, Natalia Vasilyeva, and by Eve Silisca, SPIRIT’s android daughter and the ship’s assistant hostess, was waiting near the central spine column when the small European Union shuttle landed smoothly on the steel tarmac of the small craft hangar complex. Standing some distance away but fully armed and ready to react to anything were two security androids in ship’s interior uniforms. A total of two women and nine men soon got out of the shuttle through its aft access ramp, then walked towards Tina, Natalia and Eve. One of the two women of the newcomers, who was in the lead, stopped one step in front of Tina, who offered her hand for a shake.

“Welcome aboard the A.M.S. NOSTROMO, miss. I am Tina Forster, captain and owner of this ship.”

“And my name is Antonia Carlotti, Chairwoman of the European Union Parliament’s Space Affairs Committee, here to investigate the disaster which struck the

EUROPA Station. My technical assistant, Engineer Gerhardt Grundig, is on my right, while my judicial assistant, Chief Inspector Marco Santos, is on my left. Also with me are eight specialists and criminal forensic experts who will help us do our investigation. I must say from the start that your ship is a mightily impressive one, Captain Forster.”

“And I am mightily proud of it, Chairwoman Carlotti. If you will follow me, I will now lead you to your quarters in these waiting electric carts. My crewmembers will take care of transporting your luggage and equipment to those quarters.”

With a cargo handling team quickly loading the visitors’ luggage on two anti-gravity luggage carts, Tina sat at the controls of one of the five waiting carts and started to roll towards the core spine rotunda of the complex, with Carlotti at her side.

“You may be interested to know that my crew has already conducted a non-intrusive visual inspection of the EUROPA Station, both to look for any missing person in it and to start investigating the causes of the fires which consumed the station. We also have for you the list of the persons who were saved from the station, along with their medical status. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the 592 bodies we found inside the station were so badly burned up that we were not able to identify them. It will take extensive DNA testing, cross-checked with the DNA of living relatives, to eventually identify all those poor souls.”

Carlotti, along with her assistants, seemed suitably touched by Tina’s information, something that was the minimum Tina had expected of them as a reaction. In truth, she had no great illusions about how serious or honest this E.U. delegation would be about its investigation. She fully expected that politics was going to play a large role in it and that it would at least try to reject the responsibility of this disaster on someone else than the E.U. itself. Tina thus decided to test at once Carlotti’s honesty as the five carts entered a cargo lift cabin.

“By the way, a shuttle from the station, which departed EUROPA shortly after the first series of internal explosions, was tracked by us as it flew down towards Western Europe and then landed in a suburb of Brussels. That shuttle was transporting the personnel of the station’s control center which was on duty at the time of the incident, leaving a lone junior controller in charge of managing the ongoing disaster. Were the occupants of that shuttle questioned on arrival in Brussels, Chairwoman Carlotti?”

Tina didn’t miss the fact that Carlotti then reacted in a much different way than Grundig and Santos did to her words. While Grundig and Santos both snapped their heads

towards Tina, clear surprise on their faces, Carlotti seemed to have anticipated that question and answered it in a dismissive tone.

"I am not aware of anything concerning such a shuttle, Captain Forster. Your information must be erroneous."

'You lying fucking bitch!' thought Tina while keeping a straight face.

"Then, maybe this would be something that you would like to investigate about, Chairwoman Carlotti."

"Maybe." simply said the Italian woman, cementing the low opinion Tina was now forming about her. The trip upwards to the level of the Forest Habitats was mostly spent in silence, with Tina only explaining to her visitors where they were going. Once up on the Level 580, they left the lift and rolled through the ship's administrative center, then entered the Western Gallery leading to the Habitat Ring Complex, which was flanked on the left by the Tropical Forest Habitat and on the right by the Temperate Rain Forest Habitat. What Tina didn't say as her stunned visitors stared at the Giant Sequoia trees and Coastal Douglas Fir trees of the Temperate Rain Forest Habitat, which could attain a height of ninety meters, was that she had selected for her guests cabins giving a view of the Temperate Rain Forest Habitat, in order to impress and humble them a bit. If the Europeans were ready to lie and play dirty politics about the EUROPA Station tragedy, then she didn't see a problem in herself using some psychological tricks on them.

Getting to the Habitat Ring Complex, Tina turned her cart to the right and on the Main Promenade, dominated along its sides by the outer aquarium ring on the left and by the habitat complex on the right. Using a large lift cabin to get up to Level 506 of the residential complex, she then rolled a further 200 meters and finally stopped in front of a sliding door set in a wall which included many other similar doors and a number of windows giving a view towards the aquarium ring and its holographic background surface.

"Here you are, Chairwoman Carlotti. This passenger cabin, along with the two adjacent cabins, will be yours for the next four days."

"Why only four days, Captain Forster? Our investigation will certainly take much longer than that."

"That's because I will have to leave for the XO-1 System, some 536 light years away, in five days, in order to transport over 110,000 ASEAN citizens and four million

tons of cargo and supplies to that system, which is in the process of being colonized in the name of the ASEAN. Surely, you must have heard about that colonization project, Chairwoman Carlotti?”

“Er, yes, I did.”

“Then, I am sure that your government will be able to arrange some alternate orbital lodging for your team by then. In the meantime, you are welcome to have your meals at one of our cafeterias for free or, if you prefer, try some of our restaurants, where you will however have to pay for your meals. If your team will need any data we collected from the EUROPA Station, or any extra equipment, don't be afraid to ask. The one thing I will insist on is that you advise me or my staff if you wish to interview someone aboard my ship, including the people rescued from the station, as I want to ensure that no one will face harassment or abuse of any kind.”

Carlotti stiffened at once, offended by Tina's choice of words.

“Those people are mostly European Union citizens: we have the right to conduct interviews of them in order to advance our investigation, Captain Forster.”

In return, she got a no-nonsense stare from Tina, who replied in a rather cold tone of voice.

“Chairwoman Carlotti, those poor people just lived through Hell, literally, and are still under medical treatment or supervision. I will not allow them to be further traumatized. May I remind you that there are a lot of nebulous and suspicious circumstances concerning the disaster which happened on your orbital station, including indications that its maintenance was botched in order to save money. So, please excuse me if I look at the motives of your commission of inquiry with some skepticism. Again, if you need anything during your stay on my ship, just ask. Miss Silisca, my assistant head hostess, will now show you your cabins, so that you can install yourselves. Have a good day, Chairwoman Carlotti.”

Before Carlotti could protest further, Tina walked away, leaving the Italian woman and her team with a smiling Eve Silisca, who pointed at the nearest cabin door.

“The three cabins allotted to your team are all four-bedroom models and are part of our V.I.P. section. This cabin will be yours and will also lodge three members of your choice from your team. If you will now follow me.”

Containing her anger, Carlotti signaled to Gerhardt Grundig and Marco Santos to follow her inside the designated cabin, where Eve Silisca quickly made them tour it.

“The two other cabins assigned to your team are similar to this one, Chairwoman. Two of its four bedrooms have a direct view on our Temperate Rain Forest Habitat, while the two other bedrooms face the Aquarium Ring and the Main Promenade. Each bedroom has its own private bathroom, plus there is a small washroom next to the entrance. Our passenger cabins don’t have a kitchen or dining room proper, as our passengers normally go eat in our cafeterias and restaurants, but there is a small kitchenette with a refrigerator, a microwave oven and a coffee machine, which will allow you to prepare yourselves snacks and hot beverages. You can also bring some takeout food to your cabin, to be eaten as snacks or light meals, and store it in this refrigerator. The living room measures six meters by four meters and has a table that can sit six persons, where you will be able to hold meetings and discussions. Each of the bedrooms also have a work desk and computer which will allow you to work in privacy. Finally, there is a small airlock over there which will give you access to the balcony of your cabin.”

“Why have an airlock there, miss?” asked Marco Santos.

“All of our cabins and apartments facing our forest habitats have airlocks to access their balconies, in order to prevent an explosive decompression within the forest habitat, either from battle damage or catastrophic collision, from also affecting our accommodation units. Considering the thickness and depth of our bow shield, any such decompression inside our forest habitats is highly unlikely to happen but it is always better to play it safe when in Space.”

“And what would it take to penetrate your bow shield, miss?” asked in turn Gerhardt Grundig.

“No less than a direct hit by a nuclear device, or a direct collision with a sizeable asteroid travelling at high speed, mister. Our bow shield was able to sustain repeated hits from Space Predators’ ships heavy laser batteries during past battles.”

Grundig nodded his head, suitably impressed.

“I must say that your ship has quite a fierce reputation as a combat ship, miss.”

“Thank you, sir. If you have no more questions, I will leave you, so that you can install yourselves.”

Eve then walked out of the cabin, leaving Carlotti alone in the living room with Grundig and Santos. The chairwoman exploded with indignation as soon as the door closed behind Eve.

“The arrogance of those Spacers! The EUROPA Station belonged to us, not to them, and we have every right to investigate this disaster the way we deem fit.”

Grundig looked at her with clear misgiving.

“Excuse me, Chairwoman: the station may have been ours but the extent and circumstances in which it was ravaged by this sudden disaster, along with the horrific number of casualties which ensued, give those Spacers some legitimate reasons to suspect that irregularities or even outright neglect were involved in the making of this tragedy. Furthermore, you may have denied knowledge about this shuttle Captain Forster alluded to earlier but I fail to understand why she would have invented that detail, especially if she has the radar tracking recordings to prove her words.”

“Gerhardt has a point here, Chairwoman.” jumped in Marco Santos. “I personally reviewed the list of the survivors from this accident before leaving Brussels and noticed that seven of the operators and managers of the station’s control room were listed as survivors on the list compiled by your committee, but did not appear on the list sent from the NOSTROMO. That discrepancy would tend in my opinion to support Captain Forster’s claim that those managers fled the station aboard a shuttle after the first explosions and fires, then landed in Brussels. Now, if you were ready to ignore or deny that detail, know that I am not. Over a thousand of our citizens either died or were wounded in this catastrophe and I fully intend to get to the bottom of things in this affair.”

“Remember who is in charge of this investigation team, Chief-Inspector Santos.” replied at once Carlotti, bringing a cold expression on the police officer’s face.

“Should I infer from this threat from you that you are trying to hide or sweep under the rug pertinent evidence or facts about this disaster, Chairwoman Carlotti? If so, then I will be obliged to investigate your own links with the EUROPA Station. And don’t threaten to have me fired, for that would only blow up any scandal about this disaster, which is already at the top of the reports on Euro News. Minister of Justice Lecomte has full confidence in me and you can be assured that she would raise a stink if you tried to remove me from this investigation team. So, what is the deal here?”

Carlotti, realizing that Santos was not bluffing, contained her rage as best she could and took a deep breath before answering him.

“Fine! You may look at whatever evidence you may wish to pursue, but know that President Dieudonné has my back.”

Santos nearly scoffed at that, while Grundig looked crossly at the chairwoman: President Dieudonné was far from popular these days in the eyes of the European public and

many rumors already circulated about him being implicated in a number of affairs of corruption. Carlotti's latest statement could only confirm in the eyes of the two investigators that something fishy was going on with this disaster. Santos' next move was to go to one of the bedrooms, where he told his aides to bring in his suitcases and equipment bags. As they did so, Santos took out his personal laptop, which was equipped with an encryption device. Plugging it to the ship's communications network, he then sent a quick but succinct report addressed to Justice Minister Suzanne Lecomte, asking her to have the claimed arrival of a shuttle from the EUROPA Station investigated and have its occupants questioned. What he couldn't know or even suspect as he closed down his laptop computer after sending his report was that SPIRIT had already managed to break the encryption code he had used. While SPIRIT was normally not allowed to spy on electronic transmissions to and from passengers of the NOSTROMO, this was no normal case and it had received the tacit approval of Tina Forster for this.

08:44 (Universal Time)

Sunday, March 14, 2337

Chairwoman Carlotti's cabin (Cabin 506-322)

Level 506, Northwest quadrant of the Habitat Ring Complex

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, in low Earth orbit near the EUROPA Station

Antonia Carlotti's smile of satisfaction at seeing Emma Blunt entering her cabin with Eve Silisca was quickly erased when she saw that Blunt was wearing the standard interior coverall worn by the crewmembers of the NOSTROMO. Her displeasure grew when she saw that Eve Silisca stayed, instead of leaving Blunt alone with Antonia and with Marco Santos and Gerhardt Grundig.

"Why are you staying, Miss Silisca?" asked in a caustic tone the chairwoman, attracting a polite but firm answer from Eve.

"Orders from Captain Forster, Chairwoman Carlotti: crewmembers of our ship are to be accompanied by me when interviewed by you or by members of your investigative team."

"Her, a crewmember of your ship? What are you talking about? She's a European citizen and is under our judicial authority."

"Not anymore, Madam Chairwoman." said Emma Blunt. "What I saw on the EUROPA Station disgusted me and convinced me to become a registered New Haven

and Spacers League citizen. I have now been part of the crew of this ship for nearly two days now.”

While Carlotti choked up on that answer, Gerhardt Grundig hurried to ask Emma a question in a neutral tone.

“Could you tell us what you saw on the EUROPA Station which prompted you to take such a drastic decision, Miss Blunt?”

“I can and I will, mister.”

Carlotti tried to interject at this point but was silenced at once by a warning look from Chief-Inspector Santos, allowing Emma to continue.

“Basically, during the past year, I warned my direct supervisor, Engineer Anthony Verdi, who was responsible for general maintenance aboard the station, that a number of pipes and valves in our hydrocarbons transfer system were either defective or showed cracks. I then counseled him to either have those repaired or replaced with new parts but he ignored my advice. When I complained to the station manager, Sergei Vlassov, about this, he told me to shut up and mind my own business. Since I was just a junior technician and was way outranked in the station, I continued to monitor those systems as best I could. Then, in the early morning of Friday, at around two forty, a huge explosion immediately followed by a firestorm which propagated around via our ventilation ducts, shook the whole station. That explosion came from the hydrocarbons pumping systems room, where I had earlier signaled faulty valves and cracked pipes. The firestorm travelling through our ventilation ducts killed nearly at once most of our passengers, who were in a boarding lounge some 200 meters away from the pumping room in question. We were unable to suppress the fires then or to contain the toxic smoke generated by the flames. That was when Manager Vlassov, Engineer Verdi and six other control room employees fled in panic and flew out of the station aboard our duty shuttle, leaving me alone in the control room. I did my best then to direct our people towards the lifeboat stations and to call for help but it was already too late for most of the occupants of the station, who either burned alive or were asphyxiated by the toxic smoke. I was ready to die myself when a paramedic from the NOSTROMO was able to get to me with a rescue capsule and saved me. I was then carried to their shuttle, in which over a hundred other survivors had already been led to by other rescue paramedics. Later, I was interviewed by Captain Forster, who then granted me at my request New Haven citizenship and offered me a position as part of her crew.”

"Are you saying all this in order to return the favor from her of offering you a new job, Miss Blunt?" asked Antonia Carlotti, her tone severe. Emma Blunt returned her cold look as he replied to her in an indignant tone.

"No, I am not! I am simply telling the truth. The fact that my supervisors on the station fled aboard a shuttle right after the start of the disaster should be proof enough of what I just said."

"That story about your superiors fleeing in a shuttle is unproven, miss, and..."

"It has been proven, Chairwoman." interjected Marco Santos, making Carlotti look at him in shock and anger. Santos then continued on, staring hard into Carlotti's eyes. "Yesterday, I asked my criminal department to investigate this claim about a shuttle having arrived in Brussels from the EUROPA Station. My department found out that such a shuttle had indeed landed earlier, then rounded up its occupants and questioned them. You will be interested to know that those occupants were all engineers or managers who were supposed to be on duty in the station's central control room at the time of the initial explosion. Their interrogation, along with a quick investigation of their financial dealings, revealed that they had been engaged in a corrupt scheme in which they took substantial bribes from the Pallas Mining Industries in exchange for ignoring the lack of proper maintenance done under contract by the Pallas Mining Industries. That lack of maintenance allowed that company to save tens of thousands of credits in work and parts. Those fleeing engineers and managers have subsequently been placed under arrest on charges of corruption, professional neglect causing death and abandonment of post during a declared emergency. My criminal department is now deepening its investigation in this matter, in order to find who at Pallas Mining Industries was involved with this corruption scheme, this with the assistance of the Spacers League Justice Department. The fact that you, Chairwoman Carlotti, tried to deny this business of a fleeing shuttle makes you in my mind a suspect in this affair. Know that Minister Lecomte is due to talk with Prime Minister Honnig about your possible involvement in all this. Don't be surprised if you are recalled to Brussels in the next hours or days."

Ignoring Carlotti, who was frozen speechless, from then on, Santos then smiled to Emma Blunt.

"Would you be ready to write and sign a deposition about all this, Miss Blunt?"

"With pleasure, sir." happily replied Emma.

Less than six hours after that ‘interview’, Tina was able to watch the E.U. shuttle fly out of her ship, with Antonia Carlotti aboard and under arrest, being escorted back to Brussels by two E.U. police detectives.

“Well, that was fast. That’s a nice change from the past, when the governments of Earth took weeks and months to take any decisive action about anything.”

“Like they say,” added Janet Robeson, who was sitting in the observer’s chair on the top command platform of the bridge sphere, “Karma’s a bitch!”

20:12 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, March 31, 2337

Residence of Jacobus Stein

California City, planet of El Dorado (Tau Boötis Ae)

Tau Boötis System, 50.8 light years from Earth

The 91-year-old man, who had been watching the latest news on his video entertainment unit, angrily threw down on the carpet of his lounge the fistful of cashew nuts he had been about to eat. Jacobus Stein was now utterly furious, and for good reasons. The company he had worked so hard to form over fifty years ago, Pallas Mining Industries, was now racked by a nasty corruption scandal following the tragedy of the EUROPA Station, in the Solar System, with the results that the public shares of the company were now crumbling on the financial markets. The operations of the company, in particular those of the hydrocarbons extraction and processing operations on Hibernia, in the Trappist-1 System, where now under official Spacers League criminal investigation for rampant fraud, corruption and influence trafficking with the European Union. While Jacobus Stein had nothing to do with all this, having retired as CEO of the Pallas Mining Industries over ten years ago, one of his sons was now directly implicated in this scandal, while the work of a lifetime for Jacobus was in the process of turning into dust. Smashing his fist repeatedly over the armrest of his easy chair while overtaken by rage, the old man suddenly felt a sharp, agonizing pain in his chest and froze, one hand going to his heart and his mouth left open but unable to speak. Overwhelmed by a massive stroke, Jacobus Stein then fell out of his chair and on the carpet, still unable to speak. None of his servants heard him or suspected anything as he died in seconds in his lounge, utterly alone in his last moments.

CHAPTER 4 – PROTECTING ONE’S OWN WORLD



New Haven (Wolf 1061ca)

09:01 (Universal Time)

Friday, June 11, 2337

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Arriving in low orbit over New Haven (Wolf 1061ca)

13.8 light years from Earth

Tina, sitting in her command chair on the bridge of her ship, smiled with contentment as the NOSTROMO was entering a low orbit over the large moon of New Shouria, the second planet of the Wolf 1061 System. She had received that moon, named by her 'New Haven', as a gift from the grateful Koorivars, for finding and rescuing their two missing refugee ships lost in Space for hundreds of years with their cargo of tens of thousands of Koorivars in deep cryogenic sleep. With that small but most habitable world, she had then created her New Haven Corporation, a recognized member of the Spacers League, with the main goal of turning it into a new home for thousands of impoverished and destitute unfortunate men, women and children victims of the droughts, famines, natural disasters and wars still afflicting Earth. Most of those unfortunate people had come from either Africa, Asia or the Middle East, picked up from refugee camps on Earth by Tina and her ship and then brought to New Haven, where they found new homes, caring community services, good jobs involving mostly food

production and, most importantly, peace and justice. Incorporated into the Spacers League in 2320, New Haven was an eco-friendly agrarian and pastoral world dedicated to refugee resettlement, with a minimum of heavy industries and mining operations on its surface. New Haven also exploited a flourishing tourism industry aimed towards the Spacers who wanted to see and visit pristine, unpolluted nature on a peaceful world. A bit over a million people now populated New Haven, living the kind of simple, peaceful life they had wished they had when on Earth. While the NOSTROMO was Tina's true home, New Haven was the second home for her and her family when she wanted to spend some quiet vacation time. To say that Tina was proud of her accomplishments on New Haven would have been a severe understatement. Now, she was returning to it with her ship in order to bring in a load of supplies and extra materiel, so that she could further improve her world.

The NOSTROMO's pilot, Frida Skarsgard, was still in the process of entering the ship into low orbit when Amin Jamilian, the sensors officer on duty on the bridge, spoke up, alarm in his voice.

"CAPTAIN, WE ARE RECEIVING A SYSTEM-WIDE ALERT MESSAGE FROM THE KOORIVAR LONG-RANGE DETECTION NETWORK: MULTIPLE ASTEROID SHIPS HAVE STARTED TO APPEAR AT THE FRINGE OF THE UPPER EASTERN QUADRANT OF THE SYSTEM."

Freezing for a short moment on hearing that terrifying piece of news, Tina then forced herself into action.

"CALL THE SHIP TO BATTLE STATIONS! MISTER JAMILIAN, CAN YOU GIVE ME MORE DETAILS ON THIS?"

"I am now getting a string of data from the Koorivar surveillance network, Captain. I'm now passing it to you and to our weapons fire control stations."

Her heart now beating faster, Tina looked at one of the small display screens attached to the armrests of her command chair and reviewed quickly the string of data now filling quickly the screen. The Koorivars, after establishing in 2320 their new home on Wolf 1061c and naming it 'New Shouria', had put in position six years later a sophisticated and extensive Space surveillance and long-range detection network around the edges of the Wolf 1061 System. The Koorivars, an eminently pacifist race, had not done this with some military purpose in mind but simply to alert themselves to any possible threat from asteroids or other celestial bodies which could enter the system and put in danger their

new home planet. Their original homeworld, Gliese 667Cd, which had been known to the Koorivars as 'Shouria' and had been situated 22 light years from Earth, had been destroyed in the year 1959, some 378 years ago, by a wandering brown dwarf³ which had come from Outer Space. The Koorivars had then been able just before the impact with that brown dwarf to launch three ships loaded with tens of thousands of refugees in cryogenic hibernation. One of those three ships, named VEON SHOURIA, had then flown to the Solar System at sub-luminic speed, taking some 301 years before arriving in the Solar System. Due to ageing and malfunctioning guidance and control systems, the VEON SHOURIA had landed on the dwarf planet Eris, situated at the outer confines of the Solar System, in the year 2260, where it was then buried into the methane ice mantle of the planet. The KOSTROMA, then Tina's ship, had discovered the VEON SHOURIA in 2317 and had freed it from its icy tomb, allowing Humanity to meet for the first time an intelligent extra-terrestrial alien race. That had in turn launched Humanity into its present interstellar adventure. Now, the detection system put in place by the Koorivars was showing the continuing arrival at the edge of the Wolf 1061 System of what could only be Space Predators asteroid ships, with 29 such ships already in the system and with more coming in at a rapid rate. Those Space Predator ships were in essence M-class metallic asteroids which had been gutted of most of its mass to create empty nickel-iron shells with very thick, tough hulls. Those nickel-iron shells were then equipped with propulsion, power and armament systems to turn them into starships, each measuring many kilometers in length and maximum diameter. The Space Predators, giant mantis-like carnivorous beings, used those asteroid ships to roam the Galaxy and find preys, which they then ate. Tina's first encounter with the Space Predators, some nine years ago in the Ross 128 System, had ended in a costly victory for her, with her KOSTROMA being evacuated before making a suicide charge at the Space Predator ship attacking the Drazts of Ross 128b, destroying it in a titanic impact. At first, the Space Predators' asteroid ships had appeared nearly invincible, inflicting cruel losses to the Spacers League Navy, but new weapons and new tactics had changed that picture in favor of Humanity in a fight often spearheaded by Tina and her new ship, the NOSTROMO. On the other hand, vulnerabilities and shortcomings in

³ Brown dwarf: A massive gas giant planet which missed becoming a full-fledged star by only a small margin. Such brown dwarves are dark celestial bodies, making them very difficult to detect from long distance, and some of them are known to wander through the galaxy by themselves, unattached to any star.

Space Predators' technology had revealed themselves, improving the chances of victory for Humanity. Notably, the sole heavy armament carried by the asteroid ships were very high-power lasers, with no missile armament. Also, the Space Predator ships seemed incapable of doing the kind of Space warp micro-jumps which Human ships could do thanks to their Koomak Drives. Those Koomak Drives had allowed Human ships and even missiles to jump very close to asteroid ships, penetrating their protective force shields and making possible direct hits on them. Another weakness was the inability of the Space Predators' force shields to stop disintegrator beams. When coupled with the new matter-converter muzzle adaptors invented by the late Doctor Koomak, the Human disintegrator cannons were now able to make mincemeat of the asteroid ships. However, an armed Human ship had to be present in a system in order to stop or at least slow down a Space Predator invasion fleet. Right now, the main weakness of the Spacers League was the limited numbers of warships left in its Navy after suffering a series of catastrophic defeats, defeats partly caused by incompetent tactical handling by its admirals. That numerical weakness was now at play again, with no Navy warship present at this time in the Wolf 1061 System. That left only the NOSTROMO as an armed ship able to oppose that incoming invasion fleet. That would have to change, and quickly.

"Amin, prepare a courier drone, to be sent as quickly as possible to Navy Headquarters in Providence with the following message: large Space Predator fleet emerging in the Wolf 1061 System. Need help ASAP⁴!"

"On it!"

Tina then analyzed quickly the picture she was getting from the Koorivar surveillance network, in order to decide how best to react to this enemy attack as the battle alarm horn sounded throughout her ship. Deciding on a battle plan in seconds, she was about to issue orders around the bridge when Anwar Duharto, one of the two communications specialists presently on duty in the bridge, spoke up.

"Captain, we are receiving a transmission from the Koorivar ship VEON SHOURIA. I'm passing it to your command chair."

"Thank you, Mister Duharto." said Tina before switching one of her chair electronic panels to that transmission link. She smiled with genuine happiness on

⁴ ASAP: As Soon As Possible.

recognizing the Koorivar who then appeared on her screen, sitting in the command chair of his ship.

“Shanandar, my old friend! You were on New Shouria with your ship?”

“I was, Tina, along with the SHUNDAR. We were on the surface to unload some new construction modules and materiel but I am now in the process of taking off after receiving that warning from our detection network. We are ready to help you defend the system against those monsters. What would you like us to do in support of your ship?”

Tina thought that over quickly, reminding herself of what the Koorivar ships could do...and not do. Being eternal pacifists, the Koorivars had at first no armament whatsoever on their ships. However, the apparition of the Space Predators threat had quickly forced them to reassess their posture. Counseled by Tina, they had then accepted to arm their ships but had given the responsibility on how to use and aim their new weapons to the central artificial intelligence of their computers, which had very close capabilities to those of the NOSTROMO's own central computer, SPIRIT. In fact, SPIRIT could be said to be a close friend of those Koorivar ship computers, named SHANYA, SHEONA and SHIRY. With the Koorivar three main starships now armed with both disintegrator cannons with matter-converter muzzle adaptors and with missiles equipped with Koomak Drive generators, which allowed them to effect micro-jumps, those ships were now potent defensive assets when controlled by their central computers while in combat.

“I am preparing to send a courier drone to Providence, to ask for the help of our Navy. However, our three ships will have to block the path to New Shouria and New Haven to that invasion fleet until our Navy ships could arrive. How many Koorivar security androids do you now have on New Shouria to defend its surface?”

Shanandar made a smirk on Tina mentioning those Koorivar-looking security androids: it had taken some cajoling from both Tina and Shanandar to make Governor Sheraz accept the presence of armed androids on New Shouria and aboard Koorivar starships.

“We presently have a grand total of 64 security androids on duty on the planet, plus have a security contingent of twelve androids on each of our three main starships. We also have anti-teleportation jammers around our surface installations on New Shouria, but Governor Sheraz is still resisting my counsels about getting some of your intimidating MRGSs.”

“Well, that's better than nothing, my friend. What I propose to do is for my NOSTROMO to make a micro-jump within the system, in order to take an ambush

position on one flank of the arriving enemy fleet. That would normally leave our two worlds vulnerable but, with your VEON SHOURIA and the SHUNDAR, we now have something to form a second defensive line halfway to the emergence point of that enemy fleet. If any enemy ship breaks through me, then deal with them with long-range missile fire but withdraw if need be closer to our worlds in order to avoid any close combat, where the Space Predator heavy laser batteries would cut your two ships to shreds. Even if I manage to destroy by myself the enemy fleet, the resulting Space debris will then still constitute mortal threats to both of our worlds. Your job then will be to destroy or reduce to manageable small chunks those asteroid debris with your disintegrator cannons, before they could bombard our worlds. As a third, final defensive line, I am going to send to the surface of New Shouria three full cohorts of my security androids, totaling some 1,500 androids and 36 MRGSs, plus an additional 48 MRGSs, in order to help for its defense if the enemy ever gets to the planet. On my side, I already have close to 500 security androids and fifty MRGSs on New Haven as its standing security force. I will keep my remaining 800 security androids on the NOSTROMO as a backup force against boardings.”

Shanandar nodded once his deer-like head to that.

“Sounds like a plan, Tina. Good luck and give those monsters Hell.”

“I always do, Shanandar. Good luck to you as well, my friend.”

Tina then closed that link and switched on to the ship’s intercom system, calling the commander of her android force, Jehanne De Domrémy.

“Jehanne, this is Tina. A Space Predator invasion fleet has started to appear at the fringe of the system. I am going to jump forward to an ambush position, while the Koorivar ships VEON SHOURIA and SHUNDAR will form a second Space defensive line. I want you to send three cohorts and a total of 84 MRGSs to the surface of New Shouria, to help defend it from any Space Predator attempt at landing there. Our present security force on New Haven will stay there in defensive positions around our settlements. The remaining 800 androids from the First to the Ninth Centuries inclusively will stay aboard the NOSTROMO as an anti-boarding force and possibly as our own boarding force if things go really well for us. Put Shaka in charge of the force to be sent to New Shouria but stay aboard yourself: I will want my most battle-experienced androids and commanders for any anti-boarding fighting. As well, send out most of our assault barges to New Shouria but keep twelve of them aboard the NOSTROMO, just in case.”

"Understood, Captain. I am going to issue the required orders now to my legion."

Now reassured about that aspect of the incoming battle, Tina then heard Amin Jamilian give her some news.

"Captain, our courier drone has been launched and just jumped out of the system."

"Excellent! Hopefully, Navy Headquarters will take off its led shoes for a change and will react with celerity."

Quite a few smirks and eye rolls greeted her pious wish: up to now, the Spacers League Navy had proven to be everything but quick-acting. Next, Tina designated with an electronic pen a specific point among the system's main asteroid belt, a point situated a bit to one side of the probable path of advance of the Space Predator fleet towards New Shouria. Her biggest worry right now was that her enemies would show some tactical savvy for a change and split their forces into multiple sub-fleets, thus forcing her to choose between what sub-fleet to attack. Thankfully, up to now the Space Predators had proven to be more like impetuous charging Polish Hussars than like disciplined Roman legionnaires. She then passed on more orders, first talking to her duty navigator.

"Reena, once our troopers will have left the ship, effect a micro-jump to the point I just designated. We will go hide behind one of the larger asteroids of the main belt and will wait in ambush there. Renée, once in ambush position, you will deploy three reconnaissance and fire control drones to widely separated positions behind small asteroids, with their datalink unidirectional antennas pointed at us. I want to be able to stay in complete passive mode while still able to direct missile fire via target line-of-sight triangulation from our drones. We will unmask our ship only once the most dangerous enemy ships will have been neutralized. Our heavy fighter squadron will fly out once we will be in ambush position but will stay behind cover, ready to react to any split in the enemy force which could possibly try to flank us."

"Got it, Tina! Our fighter crews are already scrambling to board their craft."

"Good!" simply said Tina before sitting back in her command chair and trying to relax as much as possible before the start of what promised to be an epic battle. With over 83 asteroid ships having already arrived in the Wolf 1061 System and with more still coming in, this was definitely not going to be a cake walk.

Jehanne De Domrémy, acting with utmost celerity and efficiency, had her force of assault shuttles and MRGSs out and heading towards nearby New Shouria after a mere fourteen minutes, which allowed Tina to then have her ship jump to a position behind the large asteroid she had chosen as a cover and shield for her ship. Thankfully, the enemy commander had apparently decided to wait until his own fleet had jumped into the system before moving, so that it could then advance as one solid wedge. The last Space Predator ship to jump in then proved to be of truly monstrous size, making Tina utter an exclamation.

“By the stars! This thing is even bigger than the flagship of the fleet which tried to attack the Gliese 581 System six months ago. It must measure over forty kilometers in length, with a diameter about as large.”

“Our preliminary estimates of its size are that it is a nearly round asteroid some 41 kilometers in diameter, Tina.” said Renée d’Argenteuil, Tina’s weapons officer. “If it has a consequently thick iron-nickel hull crust, then even our missiles with anti-matter warheads may have trouble piercing it.”

“But building such gigantic asteroid ships must represent a stupendous amount of effort in terms of work and resources. I doubt that the Space Predators could build more than a handful of ships like this one and the flagship we met around Gliese 581. This looks like these monsters are scrapping the proverbial bottom of their drawers for this attack.”

“I believe so, Tina. The fact that they are attacking our system, which is one of the least populated one among the Spacers League’s systems, means to me that they realized that our ship is their most dangerous opponent and that they must destroy in priority our homeworld, even if that means temporarily ignoring the Solar System.”

“Gee! You may be right about that, Renée, but you certainly aren’t reassuring me with this right now.”

“Don’t worry, Tina: we will cut them to size quickly enough. From their mass attack approach, it seems that they still haven’t learned much from their previous defeats.”

“That’s because we didn’t let any of their attacking ships survive to bring back their lessons to their home commanders. We will thus try as much as possible to make a clean sweep among those monstrous bastards. How far from us do you estimate that their path of advance will make them pass by us?”

"About 200,000 kilometers from our cover asteroid, Tina. Their chances of detecting us at such a distance will be minimal, while they will still be well within effective range of our missiles. Our heavy fighter squadron is now flying out and taking waiting positions around us while staying behind our covering asteroid."

"Excellent! Now we only need to wait for the enemy to walk into our trap. SENSORS, MAKE SURE THAT NO OTHER ENEMY SHIPS TRY TO FLANK US OR TAKE US IN THE REAR."

"Aye, Captain!"

The next few minutes on the bridge were quiet but tense ones, as its crew anxiously followed the path of the advancing enemy fleet. Then, Renée d'Argenteuil spoke up with incredible calm, showing her to be a true combat veteran.

"The bulk of the enemy fleet has now passed by us and is still within optimum effective range of our missiles. There are no signs that the enemy has detected us or is even suspecting our presence. They are more like charging bulls eyeing a red flag ahead of them."

"Then, fire a full ship missile barrage when ready. Target as many individual ships as you can but reserve at least four missiles for that big turd in the rear of the pack."

"Aye, Captain!"

Less than one minute later, d'Argenteuil spoke again.

"Missiles fired! We now have 160 missiles on the way."

"Reload our silos at once. Tell our fighters to still wait."

Another twenty seconds passed, then Tina was able to see on the inner holographic display surface of the bridge sphere the flashes of intense white light from multiple anti-matter explosions illuminating the opposite side of the asteroid her ship was hiding behind. Then, what looked like a laser work display of red beams fired past the asteroid masking the NOSTROMO exploded, many actually burning the edges of that asteroid.

"It looks like those Space Predators did not like the menu we just served them." commented Renée in a stoic tone of voice.

"Too bad if they don't like it: we have only one item on the menu for lunch. Evaluate the damage quickly and select targets for our second salvo."

"Aye!" simply said d'Argenteuil, who then worked in silence over her fire control console for another minute or so. Then she made a remark, some surprise in her voice.

“Tina, I am now better able to evaluate the size and composition of the enemy fleet, or rather what’s left of it. From a starting count of 133 ships of all sizes, an unusual proportion of those ships appeared to have been either support or transport ships, rather than warships proper. Furthermore, that plethora of support ships appeared to have poorly resisted to our missiles, with the 91 lesser ships having been destroyed outright by single hits. Of the remaining 42 ships, all but sixteen of them, including that big potato, have survived and are still apparently operational, as they are now shooting their lasers at us. The 26 other ships still in one piece but not shooting now appear to be non-combat effective but are still able to navigate. We never saw such a large ratio of support ship to warship before in any attacking Space Predator fleet, Tina. Why is it so now?”

Tina had to think that one over but, before she could answer Renée, the voice of SPIRIT came up on the intercom.

“Tina, I believe that I would have a possible explanation for this. Basically, this may represent the last gasp of the Space Predators. This fleet may well have been all that was left of their fleet, and possibly of their race. Those numerous, smaller support ships may well have been hastily built transport ships for the survivors of their race, while New Shouria and New Haven may have been for them a last occasion to collect large reserves of meat before they went in search of a new homeworld. That huge asteroid ship may also be more like a large refugee ship than like a warship. If we succeed in totally destroying this Space Predator fleet, then we just may succeed in getting rid of this threat for good.”

SPIRIT’s assessment left Tina and her bridge crew stunned for a moment as they realized that their central computer could well be right about this. Tina nodded once while watching the continuing rain of laser beam fire targeting the asteroid shielding her ship.

“Damn! This would be very nice indeed if you were proven right, SPIRIT. Renée, target four more missiles on that giant asteroid ship, plus two more missiles against each of the remaining enemy ships still firing at us. Fire only one missile per ship still sailing but not firing. We will reserve the rest of our missiles for any ship that survives our second salvo.”

Instead of again playing her fire control console, d’Argenteuil made a slight smile and spoke up, addressing their central computer.

"SPIRIT, you came up with that proposed explanation. You may have the honor to target and fire our second salvo."

"Why, thank you, Renée." replied SPIRIT in a suave tone of voice which made more than one crewmember on the bridge chuckle. "Missiles programmed... Launching 61 missiles now."

After another twenty seconds, a second concert of bright flashes of white light again illuminated the opposite side of their protective asteroid. This time, all enemy laser fire seemed to stop for good, raising Tina's hopes for a quick victory with no casualties on her side.

"Sensors, what do our reconnaissance drones see now? What is left of the enemy fleet?"

As he reviewed his sensors' images and data, a steadily widening smile appeared on Amin Jamilian's face.

"Captain, there is nothing left of the enemy fleet but debris. The only Predator ship still in one piece is that giant asteroid ship...and it is in the process of turning around, possibly to flee."

"Oh no it won't!" exclaimed at once Tina, fired up. "To our heavy fighters: charge out from your present cover and start cleaning up what remains of the enemy ships, then stay behind to ensure the continued protection of the system against any possible second enemy force. The NOSTROMO will now pursue that giant asteroid ship and make sure that it doesn't survive this battle. Reena, be prepared to record the jump vector of that giant asteroid ship and to calculate its intended destination. Frida, fly us around our lucky cover asteroid and go in pursuit of that remaining enemy ship. Renée, use our giant disintegrator cannons and fire them in matter-converter mode: let's devastate the outer hull of that big turd."

"With pleasure, Tina."

As twelve MAMBA-Class heavy fighters rushed like sharks towards a piece of bleeding meat, the NOSTROMO finally unmasked itself and accelerated towards the large debris field created by the destruction of the Space Predators' fleet. Its four super-heavy disintegrator cannons, each nearly 700-meter-long, then pointed at the now fleeing Predator flagship and started firing red energy beams at it. Each hit then caused a huge, blinding explosion caused by the transmutation of some of the nickel-iron crust forming its hull into anti-matter, with an equal mass of matter and anti-matter then

annihilating themselves in blasts each equivalent to over 300 megatons. The heavy laser batteries which may have survived up to now in the aft section of the Predator ship were quickly destroyed, along with any external sensors located in that same section. Clearly desperate by now, the giant asteroid ship hastily jumped out of the Wolf 1061 System, disappearing from view and prompting an immediate command from Tina to Reena Shapour.

“Calculate its destination and jump, Reena!”

Helped tremendously by STARCHILD, the sub-unit of SPIRIT dedicated to astrophysics studies and navigation, Reena worked as quickly as humanly possible, entering new coordinates and punching the ‘jump’ button after a mere six seconds.

“JUMPING NOW!”

An orange flash of light briefly bathed the whole of the bridge when the bow Koomak Drive generator of the ship was powered. Then, Tina was able to look at the outer edge of a totally new star system. Thankfully, she was also able to see the tiny shape of the enemy asteroid ship dead ahead, far away but still in her weapons sights.

“Renée, fire at will! Reena, where are we now?”

“Uh, one moment please, Captain... We now seem to be at the edge of the Avior System, in the constellation of Carina, 633 light years from Earth. We just covered some 670 light years in one jump, Tina. I believe that the enemy is trying to escape us by outdistancing our own jump capacity.”

“Nice try but it won’t help them: they have no idea of the limits of what our ship can do. Frida, push our propulsion to maximum: get us closer to that big bastard, so that Renée can better tan his hide.”

“Too late! He just jumped again!”

“Reena, stay on his trail!”

The poor Reena had no time to answer back to that, too busy to calculate the enemy’s trajectory. After nine seconds, she pushed again her ‘jump’ button, creating another orange flash that was brighter than the first one. When they were able to see their new surroundings, Tina was able to spot a nearby F8-type bright white star...but no enemy ship.

“Shit! Where is that bastard now? I don’t see it.”

“I HAVE HIM ON MY ELECTRONIC WARFARE CONSOLE, TINA.” Nearly shouted Anwar Duharto. “HE MADE THE MISTAKE OF POWERING ITS LONG-RANGE RADAR IN ORDER TO SEE IF WE ARE STILL AFTER HIM.”

"You can run but you can't hide, buster." said Tina in a sarcastic tone. "Pass its location vector to Frida. Reena, where did he lead us to this time?"

"The star we now see is Wezen, a star in the constellation of Canis Major. It is 1,787 light years from Earth, meaning that we just jumped a whopping 1,200 light years. This is a record for any Spacers League ship's jump."

"Well, the prize I want for breaking that record is that bastard's skin. Frida, make a micro-jump: let's appear right into their face."

"With pleasure, Tina."

A very brief orange flash permeated again the bridge but, this time, the enemy ship was clearly visible on their holographic screens, only some 6,000 kilometers away.

"Nice jump, Frida! Renée, slap that bastard around."

"With pleasure, Tina."

A powerful salvo from their super-heavy disintegrator cannons then blasted the surface of the enemy asteroid ship, taking out its last functioning laser batteries. Now utterly defenseless and with its protective force shields collapsed, the enemy commander did the only thing he still could do: he fled by jumping away yet again. Reena, who was expecting that, immediately extrapolated its direction and power range of its jump, punching her own 'jump' button after only six seconds.

"JUMPING NOW!"

If that was possible, the flash of orange light proved even more intense than the preceding one, with the NOSTROMO ending in a star system in which throned a hot blue B5-type star. Tina made a ferocious smile on seeing the enemy ship still in sight, dead ahead of her ship.

"I told you that you wouldn't be able to escape, you murderous bastards. Time for you to die."

Her words were punctuated by a new salvo from her super-heavy battery, which managed to finally breach the hull of the enemy ship in its aft section. Air and debris blew out of the asteroid ship as Reena announced their new location.

"Captain, we are now in the Aludra System of the Canis Major Constellation, some 3,182 light years from Earth. We just jumped through some 1,300 light years. I doubt that we could jump farther than that in one shot. Hopefully, the enemy will also be unable to exceed its last jump, especially since he just sustained some serious dama...SHIT! HE JUST JUMPED AGAIN!"

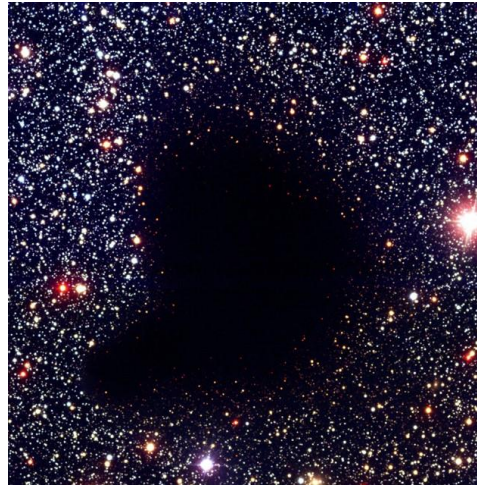
"I have to give an 'A' for effort to that bastard. Calculate his course and jump and follow him, Reena."

"That will be a bit dicey, Tina: we are getting at the fringes of our well-mapped star charts."

"Well, we will be able to play the Space explorers...after we blow that asshole to bits."

"Alright, here we go: jumping now!"

When they reemerged into normal Space, they saw the enemy ship ahead, trailing debris. They also saw one of the most bizarre sight they had even seen in Deep Space: what looked like a huge bean-shaped black, completely obscure, bag sitting in the middle of a dense field of stars. Even Tina was left to stare at it with some incomprehension. The voice of SPIRIT, sounding urgent, then came out of the bridge's loudspeakers.



"WARNING! INTENSE GRAVITY FIELD AHEAD! WE ARE HEADING TOWARDS AN UNCHARTED BLACK HOLE."

"SHIT! FRIDA, VEER NINETY DEGREES TO PORT! PUSH OUR PROPULSION TO MAXIMUM. REENA, JUMP US OUT OF HERE AS QUICKLY AS YOU CAN!"

"TO WHERE?"

"ANYWHERE BUT HERE!"

On the command bridge of the Space Predator ship, Queen Stilka calmly looked with resignation at the twin viewing screens showing both the nearby black hole, which had been charted out by her race hundreds of years ago, and the devilish Human ship which had caused so many catastrophic losses to her race. The attack on what the Humans called the Wolf 1061 System had been the last gambit by her race to stave imminent extinction through mass famine by raiding what was supposed to have been a near defenseless star system with millions of creatures to feed on. Then, her fleet and what remained of her subjects would have gone away to search for a safer region of the Galaxy to use as a feeding ground. Alas, that cursed Human ship named the

NOSTROMO had been there and had ambushed her ships, massacring them and slaughtering their crews and the twelve million Predators they carried. Now, she was left with a single, badly damaged and defenseless ship which was now carrying the last 1,200,000 Predators still in existence. Now knowing that she and her last subjects would not survive this day, she had decided to at the least to drag her enemy with her in a final death act. As her ship got closer and closer to the black hole hidden inside the dark nebula, she started to see her bridge starting to deform, as if it was a ball of soft rubber being pulled by one side while being held by the opposite side. Then everything went dark for her.

On the bridge of the NOSTROMO, Tina anxiously watched on as her crew desperately tried to fly their ship out of trouble, with the loud whining of the propulsion core and intense shaking as a background. Then, to Tina's relief, a glow of light burst around her, marking a Space jump. She didn't really notice then that that burst of light was of a strange orange-green color instead of being of pure orange color.

CHAPTER 5 – WHERE ARE WE?



The nebula surrounding the red hypergiant star VY Canis Majoris, 3,900 light years from Earth.

11:33 (Universal Time according to ship's clocks)

Friday, June 11, 2337 (Theoretical Date)

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Somewhere around the Canis Majoris Constellation

Approximately 3,900 light years from Earth

“To all ship’s departments, this is the Captain. Do a visual check with all your personnel and start a thorough check of all systems. Repair at once any damage found.”

Tina then switched off her ship intercom system and looked at Reena Shapour, who was frantically working her navigation station.

“Talk to me, Reena. Where are we?”

“That is actually easy to answer, Tina.” replied the ethnic-Iranian woman born on Titan, one of the moons of Saturn. She placed an electronic red circle around a large nebula that was clearly visible on the holographic sphere. “We are close to VY Canis Majoris, a variable red hypergiant star which is about the largest star in our galaxy and which is situated 3,900 light years from Earth. I am now working up a more precise location for us, so that we could jump back towards Spacers League Space. Where do you want us to go from here?”

“First, I will wait to see if we sustained any damage or injuries from that black hole encounter, Reena.”

“I noticed that the flash of light during our jump was of an unusual color, Tina. Somehow, that last jump didn’t feel normal.”

“Maybe the gravitational pull from that black hole caused some kind of doppler shift which distorted our vision. We will have time to wonder about that after we will have checked out our people and our ship.”

Renée d’Argenteuil was next to speak with Tina from her weapons station.

“I believe that this asteroid ship we were chasing can now be scratched as destroyed by that uncharted black hole. It was much closer than us to the black hole and was still heading towards it despite it being plainly visible. My feeling is that those Predators felt they were doomed and tried to sucker us in and destroy us, using that black hole.”

“I believe so as well, Renée. This could indicate that we were dealing with the last remnants of those monstrous bastards, who made a last attempt at revenge.”

“I certainly hope so, Tina.”

Tina then stayed quiet in her command chair for the next hour while receiving and compiling the reports from her various ship departments. Thankful, no casualties were declared and only very minor damage from the encounter with the black hole was found...except for a report from her navigator, who came to her command chair with worry on her face.

“Tina, there is something wrong with our star charts in STARCHILD’s databanks. While they are still there and apparently intact, there are slight discrepancies between

the positions listed in our star charts and the actual observations I just made of known stars.”

“How many of the star positions listed in our charts show discrepancies and by how much?”

“All of them!” answered Reena, making Tina stiffen in her chair. “The discrepancies are at most of a couple of degrees but they are across the board. Furthermore, I couldn’t find a common pattern to those discrepancies: they all differ from each other. STARCHILD is presently in the process of running a complete check and diagnostic of its databank and circuits.”

“Can we still navigate around safely, Reena?”

“To a point and in manual mode only, Tina. I can aim visually for the star we want to go to and enter a distance slightly smaller than what is listed in our charts, in order to avoid possible collisions due to wrong distance set for our jump. That will result in us appearing a bit short of our intended destination but we can then compensate by following up with a micro-jump.”

“That sounds safe enough to me, Reena. Proceed as you just told me and plot a course via multiple jumps towards the Solar System. Maybe the results of our first jumps will help us understand the cause of those discrepancies. We will do our first jump back towards Earth as soon as all the checks will have been completed.”

“Understood, Tina.”

As Reena returned to her navigation station, Tina sat against the back of her command chair, analyzing that new problem. Even if the discrepancies in the star charts proved infinitesimal, it still constituted a most serious problem for her and a danger for her ship. Without precise navigation around Space, the risks of collisions with asteroids, planetoids and other celestial bodies were worrisome. Then, she got another anomaly report, this time from SPIRIT.

“Tina, I have a report from FIXER, my maintenance AI sub-system, that our ship’s clocks are not synchronized between them anymore. Their settings now differ depending on their locations around the ship. Those differences are infinitesimal but are still unprecedented. Basically, the atomic clocks incorporated into our systems near the stern now show a time slower by a few microseconds than the time shown by the clocks situated near the bow. This is, according to my analysis, the result of our passage near that uncharted black hole. As we were trying to escape it, our bow was subjected to a slightly less strong gravity pull than our stern. As you must know from your knowledge in

basic relativistic physics, time is affected by gravity. In this case, the gravity pull of that black hole affected our atomic clocks by slowing down our clocks near our stern. In turn, this may explain why our star charts do not correspond anymore to our present astronomical observations.”

“How so?” asked Tina, starting to have a bad feeling about this.

“The only explanation linking those two anomalies is time. You know that, when you use printed maps on Earth in conjunction with a magnetic compass, you must take into account the date of those maps and then add or subtract the difference in magnetic pole displacement between the date of the map and the date on which you use that map. Well, in the case of our star charts, their recorded locations correspond to the locations of those stars as known in the year 2337. What we now see around us are stars as they were located in a different time. To put it bluntly, this close brush with the black hole made us travel back in time, Tina.”

CHAPTER 6 – WHEN ARE WE?

Time and date unknown

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Near the VY Canis Majoris red Hypergiant star nebula

Constellation of Canis Majoris, 3,900 light years from Earth



Tina was left stunned speechless for long seconds by SPIRIT's announcement before she could speak hesitantly.

"Are...are you sure, SPIRIT? And how could you say that we went back in time instead of going towards the future?"

"I am sure, although I can't say yet by how much we went back in time. As for the direction of our temporal travel, I can use the general direction the stars around us were going in 2337 to deduce that they are presently in positions predating the year 2337. We are definitely in the past, Tina."

Tina swallowed hard, her head swimming a bit, before asking another question to SPIRIT.

"And by how much do you estimate we went back in time?"

"I truly couldn't say by now, Tina. There is no known precedent to this incident and our knowledge of the past locations of the stars around Earth is very imprecise, the more so as we look further away. With us now being 3,900 light years from Earth, any guess on my part would only be that, a guess. However, in view of how close we got from that black hole and of how massive it was, chances are that we are at least a few hundred years or even a few millenniums in the past. Our only way to know for sure would be for us to go to Earth and observe what is happening on its surface."

"What about finding a way to return to our time period, SPIRIT?"

"It is way too early to speculate about that, Tina. What we need to do now is to go to Earth, then establish as precisely as possible the time and date we are in. Only then will we be able to try to find a way home. One thing which I would strongly counsel against would be to try passing near that black hole again in order to reverse its effect. This is the bitter reality, not some cheap science-fiction movie script."

Tina passed a shaking hand on her forehead in order to wipe away the cold sweat on it.

“Very well. We will start on our way to the Solar System, using a series of jumps. In view of the stress my poor ship has just gone through, we will limit each of our jumps to no more than 400 light years. This will allow us multiple opportunities to readjust our star charts while we are on our way.”

“I concur, Tina. Hang on: I am sure that we will find a way to go back to our time period.”

“Thanks, SPIRIT.” said Tina before cutting that link. She then stayed silent and thoughtful for a moment before taking a decision and opening her ship-wide announcement system.

“Attention all hands, this is your captain! I want the principal officers and department heads to assemble in the command conference room for an urgent meeting. Thank you for your attention.”

With that said, she then spoke to Reena Shapour, who had returned to her navigation station.

“Reena, start plotting a course towards the Solar System, using a succession of ten jumps and calculating a good safety margin in terms of distances and headings. Let’s try not to jump into a star by accident. Once you will have calculated those jumps, join me in the command conference room.”

“Will do, Tina.”

Tina then got up from her command chair and left the command platform, then the bridge sphere, going to the ship’s command conference room, on the level of the executive residences.

Some 23 minutes, Tina faced her command staff and departmental heads around the command conference table. While still quite shaken by the reality of their situation, she did her best to keep a brave face and a steady voice as she addressed them.

“My friends, we are now facing an unprecedented and critical situation. We are now 3,900 light years from home, near the nebula of VY Canis Majoris. Normally, going home would not be a real problem, except for one factor revealed to me by SPIRIT: our passage near that black hole threw us back in time by an unknown number of years, possibly millenniums.”

A mix of consternation and shock, punctuated by a few horrified exclamations, greeted her announcement. Tina waited for relative quiet to come back before continuing.

"I will now let SPIRIT resume in her words what probably happened to us. SPIRIT..."

The android avatar of their AI central computer, who was part of the ship's command staff, then spoke for a couple minutes, enumerating the facts supporting her assessment of them having traveled back in time by possibly many centuries or even millenniums. Overall, while shocked by all this, the staff members did seem to believe and accept her reasoning. That was when Tina jumped in the conversation again.

"Now, you are probably wondering what we will do in order to be able to return to our proper time period or, if we can't go back to the year 2337, about what we will do then. First, let me say that I have no intentions of simply giving up and resign myself into staying in the past. We will try everything possible before I will even contemplate giving up. I don't yet know how we will do it but we WILL return home! Second, if we indeed find out once back in the Solar System that we are in the past, I am resolved for us to avoid at all cost to do anything that could modify history in any way, shape or form. We may be lost in the past but we will do nothing that could erase our families, friends and the worlds we know by changing history. You all have watched enough science-fiction movies or read books about what kind of chaos a time traveler or time travelers could create by intervening in past historical periods. If we have to go down to the surface of the Earth in order to ascertain the precise date we are in, then we will do it in the most cautious and restrained way possible. If we have to do so, then we will go in, get the info we need, then go out, period! This is dead serious, people: the history of Humanity is now in our hands. Yes, Lester?"

Lester Barnaby, who was the head of the entertainment department of the ship, a department that was made quite important in view of the mass of passengers often traveling on the NOSTROMO, cleared his throat before speaking.

"I fully agree with you about not doing anything to risk changing history, Tina, but we could use this occasion to remotely study and record from orbit or from high altitude, using reconnaissance drones, what is happening on Earth. This may be a very unfortunate situation we are now into but it is also an unprecedented one and a golden opportunity to record some priceless documentation and films concerning past periods of Humanity's history. For example, if we stumble on the period of the Roman Empire and witness from orbit a major battle or event of the past, why not take the time to watch and record what we will see from orbit? After all, it will most probably take a lot of time for us

to study how to get back to the future once we will have established in what year we are in.”

“I would second Lester’s suggestion, Tina.” said Professor Samuel Shmelling, the head of the history department of the NOSTROMO’s university, an institute of learning which had a stellar reputation across the Spacers League and which was also highly sought after by would-be students. “Not using fully such a golden opportunity in a safe way would be utterly derelict on our part.”

Tina thought that over for a few seconds before nodding her head.

“Agreed! However, any action which could even remotely affect the integrity of history will have to be vetted in advance by me. Anything else?”

To her surprise, it was Jehanne De Domrémy who raised one hand to speak.

“Yes, Jehanne?”

“First, let me say that I agree with you about the necessity for us not to risk the integrity of history as we know it by some inconsiderate direct contact with past inhabitants of Earth. With that said, I must remind all of you around this table that precise calendars did not exist in many historical periods of Earth. My hobby of medieval jousting and fighting reenactment showed me that the various nations, kingdoms or empires of the past all used different calendars, some of which bore little resemblance to what we would consider a proper calendar. Since we won’t be able to ascertain the date we are in simply by listening to some inexistant radio broadcast, and this along the vast majority of our history, we may then have no choice but to send someone or a small group on the surface, a group able to blend in and converse in the local language in order to ask an apparently anodyne question, like ‘what is the date today?’. Without wanting to brag about this, my androids who were programmed with the general knowledge of specific historical persons would be the perfect ones to conduct such discreet surface reconnaissance. I myself can speak Old French and Latin, know the customs and rules of the Middle Ages and could mingle around as a simple farm girl. Many of my androids are similarly well equipped to mingle in specific historical periods. By our nature as security androids, we would also be a lot safer from attacks than any of our Human crewmembers.”

“I also agree with that, Captain.” interjected Shmelling. Many of Jehanne’s androids modeled on historical personalities do actually teach history classes in my department and are at least as knowledgeable about history as any Human professional historian. I must also say that mingling around a crowd of people in the distant past is a

lot riskier than many people would think. One wrong word, one foreign-sounding accent or one badly interpreted gesture or sign could be enough to get a stranger in trouble in many places in the past. Even your gender or ethnic look could trigger hostility or suspicion. Add to that the factor of multiplicity of religions in the past, with their ingrained bias, intolerance and often hateful dogmas and you end up with a very dangerous social environment. The people of the past may have been ignorant but that didn't mean that they were stupid, so underestimating them would be a grave mistake on our part. Jehanne and her androids would indeed be perfect if we ever needed to send a discrete reconnaissance party on the surface of past Earth."

"Alright, I buy that but we will still send such reconnaissance parties only if absolutely necessary. We will soon start on our way back to the Solar System, where we will then better be able to assess our situation. While we will be traveling through Space, I want our physics department to seriously study our encounter with that black hole and to come up with the help of SPIRIT with a practical way for us to go back to our time period."

Janet Robeson, present in her capacity as Tina's political counselor, then reminded everybody about something not mentioned yet.

"What about the 966 passengers who came aboard as tourists intending to visit New Haven, Tina? I fully understand that you didn't have a chance to make them disembark on New Haven before the Space Predators showed up without warning, but they may well panic on hearing that they are now stuck in the past with us."

"I will say two things to them, Janet. First, I am truly sorry that they are now stuck with us in this trap. Second, you can tell them that I haven't given up on finding a way to go back to the 24th Century, far from it."

Lester Barnaby then made a proposition in a joking tone, trying to lighten up the atmosphere.

"Hey, maybe we should organize some guided tours of ancient cities for them." Tina smiled at that and pointed a finger at Lester as others shook their heads in amusement or made facepalms.

"As my husband Michel would say to you on that: Nyet! On this, I declare this meeting over."

Time and date still unknown**(Three days and sixteen hours since the encounter with the black hole)****Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO****Arriving in the Solar System**

Tina, sitting in her command chair on the bridge, looked anxiously at what was ahead of her ship, now that they had just completed their tenth jump. Those jumps had not been stress-free, far from it, with the first three in particular revealing how badly out of alignment with the ship's star charts the actual star positions were. The first jump had in fact led the NOSTROMO to an uncomfortably close distance from the red dwarf sun it had been targeting as destination. Fortunately, this hard-earned experience had helped Reena Shapour and SPIRIT to better extrapolate by how much and in which direction the stars of today differed with their positions registered in 2337. As a result, this last jump to the Solar System had been nearly spot-on with the position predicted by SPIRIT and Reena. However, those reviewed star plots had also revealed approximately how much this present time was off from the year 2337. The best estimates from the astrophysics experts of the NOSTROMO and from SPIRIT were now that the black hole must have projected the ship by at least 2,000 years into the past. Tina thus had no hope anymore of finding a modern Earth on arrival in the Solar System. That was confirmed quickly enough by Anwar Duharto, at the main sensors station, who reported verbally to Tina a minute after their arrival on the fringes of the system.

"Captain, the electro-magnetic spectrum around the Solar System is totally empty. I detect no radio or radar signals coming from within the system. The Solar System is electronically silent. Also, the surveillance station that was around Pluto in 2337 is nowhere in sight. This is definitely not the 24th Century."

"I expected this much, Mister Duharto. We now have to establish how far exactly in the past we ended up. Reena, do a micro-jump to close to Earth. Frida, you will then adopt a low polar orbit around Earth. I want to have all our ship instruments and sensors be able to scan the entirety of the planet in as much detail as possible. All the data and images from our sensors will from now on be recorded in a special databank. Let's collect and preserve as much historical information as we can while trying to escape from this time trap."

"Aye, Captain!"

“The only ones enjoying this moment must be the staff and students of our history department.” muttered Tina to herself as she eyed the small yellow dot of the Sun as seen from near Pluto. A brief flash of orange light then permeated the bridge for a fraction of a second, following which Tina was able to look at planet Earth, now nearly filling the holographic screens of the bridge. Her pilot, Frida Skarsgard, then placed the NOSTROMO in a low polar orbit at the outer edge of Earth’s atmosphere, in order to give the best definition possible to their batteries of cameras, spectroscopes, radars, thermal viewers and magnetic detectors. As they were starting to overfly Earth, Tina noticed that no artificial lights were visible in the parts presently in the night zone. This was definitely a primitive, non-technology Humanity. Her heart sank a bit at this hard fact: despite nearly four days of scientific discussions and theorizing, the astrophysics team of the NOSTROMO was still no nearer to finding a quick way to return to the 24th Century. The only known theoretical way to travel back to the future would be to use the old relativistic theory which said that, by traveling at a speed near that of light, they would then see time slow down and nearly stop inside the ship, making its occupants sense only days passing, while Earth would see years and even decades pass by. There was however a big problem with that ‘solution’: getting this close to the speed of light by thrust propulsion power alone meant that their engines would need to function at maximum power continuously in order to overcome the relativistic increase in mass the ship would experience as it would approach the speed of light. This would result in turn in the NOSTROMO running out of fuel for its power generators well before arriving into the 24th Century. As for finding a source of cryogenic deuterium-tritium thermonuclear fuel in any period before the 22nd Century, good luck to that! It would be like someone attempting a long-distance rally in an all-terrain car in the Antiquity, only to run out of gas in a place where no gas stations existed yet. Tina also had another reason to feel despondent: her son Misha, who had been close to his eighteenth year, had been the copilot aboard one of the heavy fighters which she had to leave behind in the Wolf 1061 System. While she knew that Misha should be safe there and then, the idea of being separated from him for good was a most painful one.

Some two hours later, as the NOSTROMO was passing over Europe, Anwar Duharto’s voice took her out of her funk.

“Captain, we are now passing over the location of Rome, in Italy. There is actually a large city on that spot, an antique one.”

“Quick! Alert our history department about it and ask them to do their best to identify in which century we are now in, using the features of the Rome we are now overflying.”

“On it, Captain.”

While waiting for a word from her history experts, Tina avidly examined the picture her high-resolution cameras gave of that ancient Rome. It definitely was not the modern Rome she had visited a few times in the 24th Century. As she was still looking at the images of the old Rome, she got a call from Professor Shmelling.

“Captain, this is Shmelling: we just had a look at the Rome we just overflew. We also were able to look at other cities visible in both Italy and Greece and can now give you an approximation on the year we are in.”

“Go on!” said Tina, her heart accelerating.

“Basically, what was our biggest clue was Athens, in Greece. According to history, the Persians invaded the region of the Attic in the year 480 B.C.E.⁵ and sacked Athens, then left to go fight the Greek fleet at Salamis. After the Persians had been defeated and left Greece, the Athenians rebuilt their city, including the temple of the Parthenon on the Acropolis. That reconstruction took many years but was eventually completed around the year 460 B.C.E., give or take a few years. Well, in the overhead imagery of Athens and of Greece we just recorded, the Parthenon had clearly been devastated by fire but was actively being restored, with hundreds of workers around it. Also, the famous city of Sparta is still up and intact. All this makes me believe that we presently are around the second half of the Fifth Century B.C.E., with my bet being on the period 475 to 465 B.C.E., approximately. I could have a more precise year for you once we will have had a chance to view more cities around the Earth.”

“That is already of great help, Professor. Make sure that you inform SPIRIT and our astrophysics team of this, so that they could use that data to better understand our trip back in time. Again, thank you for that information, Professor.”

“It was a pleasure, Captain.”

Closing that link, Tina then sat back, thoughtful: so, they basically had travelled back in time by a total of approximately 2,800 years. Now, it was up to her astrophysicists and to SPIRIT to find a way to travel forward in the future by 28 centuries.

⁵ B.C.E.: Before the Common Era, i.e. before Year One of the Christian calendar.

15:09 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, June 15, 2337

Astroport of Camelot, administrative center of the moon New Haven

Wolf 1061 System, 13.8 light years from Earth

When 17-year-old Misha Koniev-Forster disembarked with the rest of the crew from their MAMBA-Class heavy fighter, the RISING STAR, he found their squadron leader, Major Keiko Nomura, waiting for them on the tarmac of the astroport of Camelot, their new and hopefully temporary base. The flare of hope Misha felt on seeing Nomura was quickly extinguished when he saw the somber expression on her face. Still, he came to attention in front of her while saluting her, imitating his crewmates. Nomura returned their salute, then spoke first, addressing the pilot, Sylvie Montreux.

“How was your patrol, Sylvie?”

“Routine, Major: nothing special to report.”

Nomura nodded her head once, then looked at the whole crew.

“If you were waiting for news about the NOSTROMO, then I am afraid that I have to tell you that it is still missing. However, it could simply have sustained some damage in combat that is delaying its return to this system. We should all keep our hopes up about its eventual return. You may now go back to the squadron operations center to fill your patrol report and rest. Mister Koniev, please stay for a moment with me.”

The five other members of the heavy fighter crew saluted Nomura again, then walked away, leaving her alone with young Misha.

“At ease, Misha! While I will again urge you to keep your hopes up about the eventual return of the NOSTROMO, a few political realities are now catching up with us.”

“Political realities, Major?”

“Yes! As you know well, your mother is the founder and sole owner of the New Haven Corporation, which includes her ship, the NOSTROMO, our fleet of commercial shuttles and this moon. In her testament, she named in order of precedence her husband, then you, then your young sister Janet, as successors to her in case of death. That successor would in turn inherit all of her possessions and assets, as well as the control of her corporation as its new CEO. While she is still only missing, certain things need to be taken care of as a matter of routine, in order to continue administering the New Haven Corporation in her absence. Her public testament stated that Piotr Romanski, the present governor of New Haven and Tina’s past financial and commercial

agent, would help administer the corporation until she either returns or until she is officially declared dead. Mister Romanski will thus take on the role of acting CEO for the time being, but he stated to me that he will inform you about any important development concerning the corporation and will seek your approval before taking any major decision. As you know, Piotr Romanski is a man of great integrity in whom your mother had complete confidence.”

“I know him well and also have full confidence in him, Major. I am completely at ease in letting him direct and administer the corporation for the time being, until my family returns.”

Keiko was satisfied to see that Misha had not given up yet and nodded once.

“Good! However, Piotr has warned me that some in the Spacers League are already starting to eye New Haven as a potential prize to add to their assets. He however is vowing to keep any vultures at bay but is also saying that you may soon have to defend your ownership of the corporation at the High Council. Unfortunately, politics can still be dirty business, even in this century.”

“I realize that, Major, but I will fight with the help of Piotr in order to stop any of these vultures from grabbing New Haven. This world and the corporation were created by my mother in order to provide a safe, peaceful and prosperous refuge to those who were suffering on Earth from wars, famines, persecutions and abuses, and I fully intend it to stay that way.”

Keiko was pleasantly impressed by the resolve shown in the tone of voice of the teenager and shook hands with him.

“And I am sure that you will be up to that task, Misha. You may now join back your crewmates.”

“Thank you, Major.” said Misha, who then exchanged a last salute with Keiko before starting to walk towards the small building housing his squadron’s operations center.

CHAPTER 7 – FINDING A WAY BACK TO HOME

14:28 (Greenwich Meridian Time)

Year 472 B.C.E. (six days after encounter with the black hole)

Astrophysics laboratory, Habitat Ring Complex, Level 576

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, in low polar orbit around Earth

Solar System

Roshana Golshan, a 27-year-old certified genius, ex-student of the late Doctor Koomak and presently the head of the astrophysics department of the NOSTROMO University, anxiously waited with the other physicists of her work team the verdict from SPIRIT on their latest proposal about how to travel back to the future. The central AI computer then took five seconds to reply, an eternity for SPIRIT's electronic processing and analysis, which demonstrated clearly the complexity and intricacy of the problem they were facing. SPIRIT, communicating via her android avatar, which was present in the laboratory with Roshana's team, finally spoke in a sober tone.



"I must say that your proposed solution to our problem is both ingenious, logical...and highly risky, Roshana. Doctor Koomak would probably not have been able to come up with anything better than this. Yes, it could very well work, but the only way to establish if it is truly a viable solution would be to try it and expose the NOSTROMO to very real risks of getting destroyed in the process. However, of all the proposals worked up until now, including my own proposal, this is still the most promising one. The only truly safe method to travel back to the future, by using Relativity and traveling at near the speed of light, thus slowing down time aboard our ship, would work but would ultimately fail when we would run out of thermonuclear fuel for our power and propulsion systems. Since I doubt that we will be able to cook up a better and safer plan, we will then have to either take the risks and try your plan, or resign ourselves to stay in the past. However, I doubt very much that Tina or any of us would choose that last option and stay in the Fifth Century B.C.E."

“Damn right I am not ready to stay in the past, SPIRIT.” said at once Roshana, making the other scientists around the table nod in agreement with her. “If there are no objections, I would like to present this plan to Tina, to gain her approval for it. Nobody against that? Then I will go at once speak with the Captain. SPIRIT, could you accompany me, in case Tina has pointed questions I couldn’t answer? I may be a genius but I can’t think as fast as you do.”

“Certainly, Roshana. I will be right behind you.”

“Good! Alright, this meeting is now over, my friends. Go relax a bit and clear your minds of those physics’ formulas. I will keep you apprised of the Captain’s decision.”

As she was walking out of the astrophysics lab, Roshana used her wrist communicator to call Tina Forster, getting a response after two buzzes.

“Yes, Roshana?”

“Tina, I believe that we have a plan on how to return to the future. However, it will be a risky one and there are a lot of uncertainties and unknowns in it.”

“How risky is it?”

“SPIRIT estimates that the chances of success without incurring damages are at 72 percent. Furthermore, we may have to repeat the maneuver multiple times in order to get to the 24th Century.”

Roshana didn’t miss the slight grimace Tina made on hearing her estimate of risks.

“Any chances that we could lower the level of risk, Roshana?”

“Doubtful, Tina. There is no precedence to our present situation and we are literally walking blind, with only the laws of physics as we know them and scientific logic to guide us. Could we have a general command meeting, so that I could present this plan to our people?”

“I will call one for fifteen hundred hours, in thirty minutes, to be held at our command conference room in the central core section. Would that do for you?”

“It will, Tina. I will see you there.” said Roshana before closing the link and looking at SPIRIT.

“I can well understand her reaction to our plan, SPIRIT: 72 percent chances of success, to be tried multiple times, is indeed a very risky venture.”

“I believe that Humans would call that a game of Russian roulette.” replied the android, her tone most serious.

Half an hour later, Roshana found herself the focus of a dozen pairs of hopeful eyes in the command conference room, on the level of the executive apartments, with SPIRIT sitting next to her. Tina, looking most sober, then nodded her head to her.

“You may start presenting your plan, Roshana.”

“Thank you, Tina.” replied the young astrophysicist, who then looked around the conference table before starting to speak.

“As I said earlier to Tina, the plan my team worked up and then had vetted by SPIRIT is a risky one but it is also the only realistic one we could come up with. Basically, we are going to replay what happened to us when we encountered that black hole in Canis Majoris, but will attempt to reverse the process. When we escaped the pull from that black hole, we basically put our propulsion to maximum while trying to fly away, then made a jump with our Koomak Drive. We then saw an unusual greenish tint to the normal orange flash of a Space distortion jump and found ourselves 2,800 years in the past. What I propose that we do is to repeat the same kind of experience, but with a crucial twist: instead of doing a Space distortion jump while running away from a strong gravity pull, we will do a micro-jump while going TOWARDS a star, in this case our own Sun. This should create the reverse effect of what we lived through in Canis Majoris. We will of course not head directly into the Sun but will instead fly very close to it in a tangent course, so that our ship actually feels the gravity pull from our Sun. Then, as close as possible to the Sun, we will do a micro-jump, pointing straight ahead of us along a straight line passing very close to the surface of the Sun. By our calculations, this should cause the reverse effect of what we experience in Canis Majoris and should propel us towards the future.”

Rose Tillman, the tall, sixty-year-old chief engineer of the NOSTROMO, then asked the first questions to Roshana.

“You said that your plan was risky, Roshana. What kind of risks will we be incurring? Also, by how many years do you expect us to go forward in time with your maneuver?”

“SPIRIT calculated the risks of this maneuver to fail to be around 28 percent, due to the totally unknown factors and the uncertainty involved. If our maneuver fails, our ship may be torn to pieces as it jumps past the Sun. Also, if we miscalculate the timing and direction of our jump, we may travel further towards the past, instead of going towards the future. To be honest, this will be a monumental dice roll for us but I simply

don't see any other way to return to our proper time period. However, we can twitch that risk factor by doing a shorter micro-jump a bit further away from the Sun, at the cost of possibly diminishing the final effect of our maneuver. As for how many years this will make us go forwards towards the future, your guess is as good as mine. The only thing that I can say with near certainty about that is that we will have to repeat that maneuver many times, each time checking out how much forward we advanced in time before attempting the next jump. Think of it as playing Russian roulette...many times in a row.” The meeting participants exchanged knowing looks of concern before Rose Tillman spoke again.

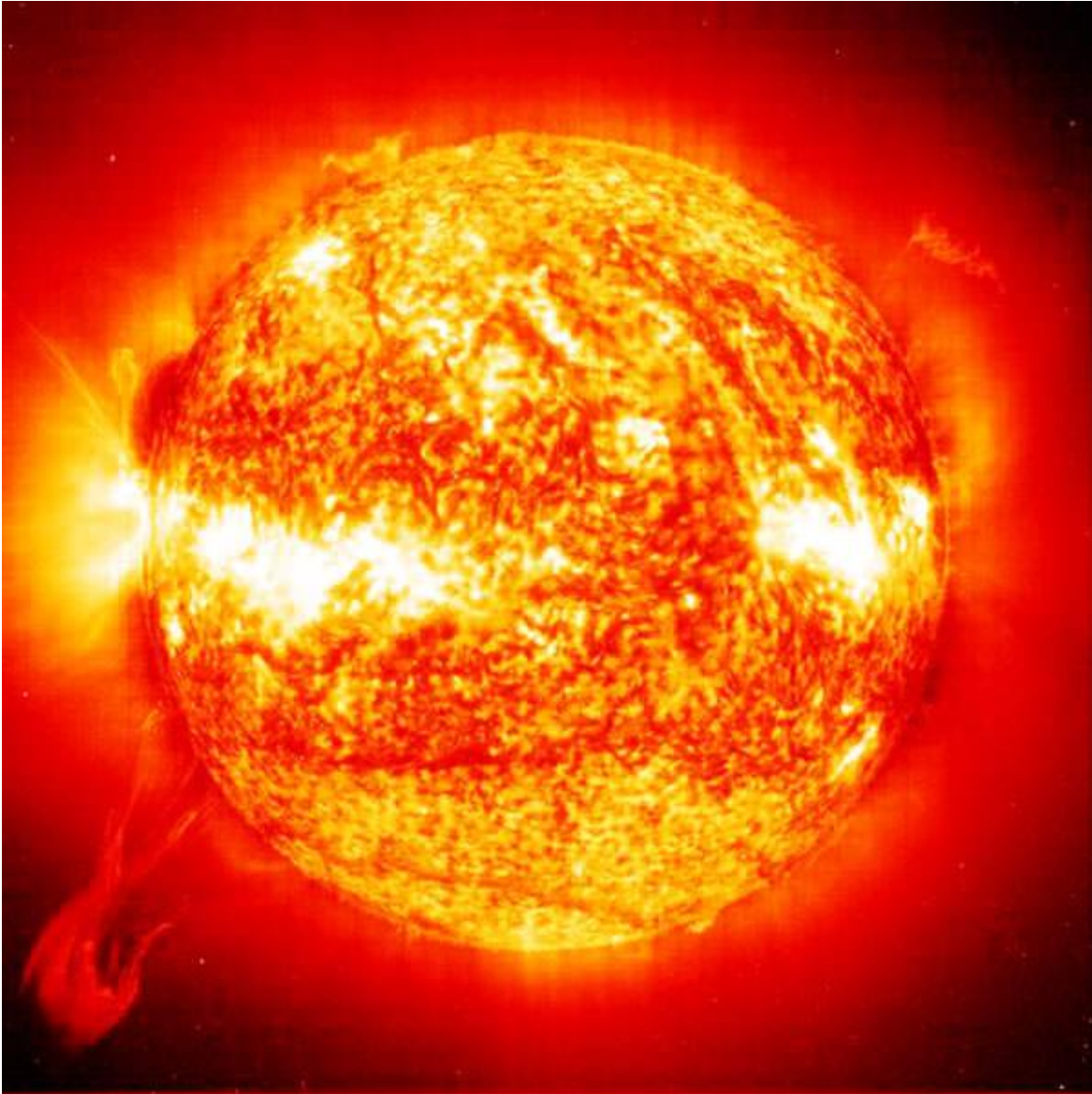
“Between that and staying stuck in the past, cut off from our own time period and condemned to solitude in Space, then I am ready to take my chances with your plan, Roshana.”

“I am also ready to run the risks of your plan.” added Reena Shapour, followed in turn by the other persons around the table. Tina nodded her head in satisfaction on seeing a consensus about Roshana's proposed plan.

“Then, we will try Roshana's maneuver after supper, but will let SPIRIT control that run to the Sun and the micro-jump, as she will be able to more precisely conduct that maneuver than anybody else among us. That will give you the time to speak to your family members or friends before we attempt this.”

“...Or to kiss our asses goodbye.” added Rose Tillman in a philosophical tone.

CHAPTER 8 – THE GOLSHAN MANEUVER



19:20 (Greenwich Meridian Time)

472 B.C.E. (six days after the encounter with the black hole)

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Approaching the Sun

"I already feel like a chicken about to be roasted on a spit." said Frida Skarsgard while eyeing the image of the Sun which now nearly filled the forward half of the holographic screens of the bridge sphere.

“Aren’t we all, Frida?” replied Tina, sitting in her command chair. “SPIRIT, the ship is now all yours.”

“Thank you, Tina. I am now accelerating on a tangent run next to the Sun. Protective shields are to maximum. Micro-jump in 46 seconds.”

“Here goes nothing.” whispered Tina to herself. The next forty seconds were spent in silence on the bridge, while the image of the Sun was being retransmitted around the ship to allow the crew and passengers to live through that epic moment. At the last seconds, Renée d’Argenteuil spoke up from her weapons station.

“SHIELDS STILL HOLDING! AM PUTTING PROTECTIVE COVERS OVER OUR EXTERNAL OPTICAL AND THERMAL SENSORS.” she announced before muttering to herself in French. “Ça passe ou ça casse⁶!”

Then, a brief flash of orange light, tinted with a bit of yellow, permeated the bridge sphere and the rest of the ship for a fraction of a second, marking their micro-jump. Tina, who had been holding in her breath, then blew air out in relief on seeing that they were now in the darkness of Space, apparently intact. She then started giving orders around.

“Reena, establish our position and course. Frida, put us back into low Earth polar orbit. To all departments, check for possible damages and casualties. Report via FIXER.”

Next, she looked at Roshana Golshan, who was occupying the V.I.P. observer chair to her left.

“Well, that went better than I expected, Roshana. It now remains to be seen if your maneuver succeeded in bringing us forward in time and by how many years.”

“I will gladly take any positive result, Tina.”

“Me too! We will know about that soon enough, once we will be able to observe what is going on at the surface of the Earth.”

Reena Shapour then reported verbally to Tina.

“We are now at a distance of 2.7 Astronomical Units from the Sun, close to the orbit of Mars. The Sun seems to have moved position quite significantly compared to before our jump. This would tend to indicate that we indeed moved in time. Positively or negatively, I don’t know.”

⁶ Ça passe ou ça casse!: We go through or we break. Popular expression used in France when one faces a dire situation with an uncertain outcome.

"Please, make it a move towards the future." muttered Roshana to herself. After another four anxious minutes, the voice of SPIRIT came on the intercom.

"FIXER reports no damages or casualties, except for some singed paint on our external hull, Tina."

"Thank the stars! We should know soon enough if this worked."

"From the continued absence of any visible artificial light on the nightside of Earth, I would say that we are still in pre-technological times. However, remember that this stayed so for a good 23 centuries, until the Industrial Revolution of the Nineteenth Century. We could still have advanced forward by many centuries."

"I fervently hope so, SPIRIT. We will now have to wait for our historians to have a good look at Earth from up close."

The answer from the history department came some two hours later, with Professor Samuel Shmelling contacting Tina via the ship's intercom.

"Good news, Captain: we definitely went forward in time. The Greek city of Sparta has markedly declined, while Rome seems to be at the apex of its power and glory. We can also surmise a fairly precise date to this present by the fact that the city of Londinium seems to have been recently sacked and is still burning. That historical event happened around the Summer of the year 60 C.E.⁷, when the Celtic tribes led by Queen Boadicea took and burned what would much later become London. Shortly thereafter, the army of Queen Boadicea was defeated by the Romans somewhere around High Cross, in the Leicestershire, with Boadicea fleeing the battlefield with her two daughters and later on either committing suicide by poison or dying of a disease. However, those two last outcomes are still wildly disputed among historians."

Tina bent a bit forward in her command chair, her interest aroused.

"Queen Boadicea is a historical character of significant importance, Professor Shmelling. Her revolt nearly resulted in the Romans deciding to leave the British Isles, something that would have drastically changed known history. I am authorizing your department to use up to four of our reconnaissance drones in order to locate and identify Queen Boadicea and to then follow her, so that we could ascertain what was her final fate."

"And what will we do once we find her, Captain?"

⁷ C.E.: Common Era. Non-religious designation for the Christian Era (A.D.).

"I am not sure yet, Professor. Just find her and follow her. If she is about to die, then warn me in advance."

"Will do, Captain." replied Shmelling, obviously liking those orders from Tina. On her part, Tina smiled to Roshana after that exchange.

"So, we did move forward in time in the direction of the future, and this by about 532 years. Not bad at all. Another four or five maneuvers like this and we will be back in the 24th Century. How precisely do you think that we could control those jumps in time, Roshana?"

"Well, this was our first attempt and a little bit of a Hail Mary, but we should be able to refine our jumps as we go and gain more experience. We should eventually arrive in our proper time within a few years of our disappearance from the region of Canis Majoris."

"Well, arriving within a few days only of that date would be nice but would also be quite unrealistic. A couple of years would still make me happy."

"Me as well, Tina. So, what do we do now?"

"We stay in Earth orbit for a few days, in order to give time to our historians to visually document this time period, then we will attempt our second micro-jump near the Sun."

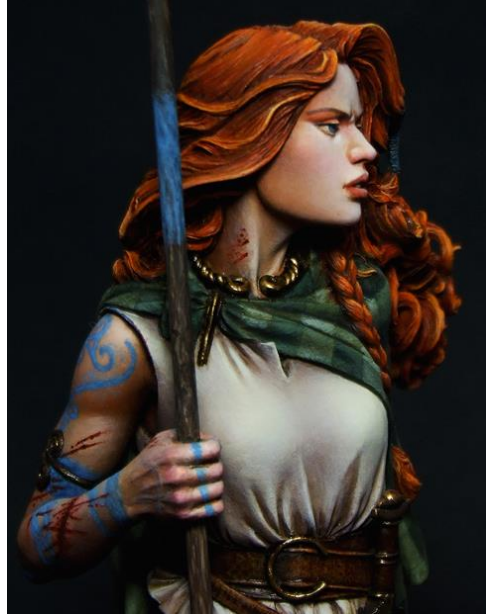
CHAPTER 9 – QUEEN BOADICEA

01:24 (Greenwich Meridian Time)

Thursday, September 18, 60 C.E.

(21 days since encounter with black hole)

Forest in the Leicestershire, British Isles



Boadicea, hiding inside a forest with her two teenage daughters, held them tightly against herself, trying to reassure them as a large group of Roman cavalymen went by some thirty meters away, following the dirt trail passing along the edge of the forest. Thankfully, the night helped hide the Iceni queen and her daughters, Maeve and Brigid, and the Romans trotted by without seeing them. As they disappeared in the night, Boadicea thought with bitterness about how her fortune had turned around in only a few weeks. A mere month ago, after having burned down two Roman towns, she had thrown her army against a Roman force she outnumbered over ten to one. She had been confident of victory then, to the point of letting the women and children of her warriors come close to the battlefield in order to let them watch their men fight and slaughter the despised invaders. Instead of a victory for the Celts, that battle had turned into a massacre in which Boadicea's army had been crushed by a disciplined and much better equipped foe. The Celtic warriors had been brave but they wore next to no armor except for their large shields and they had simply rushed at the Romans in a disorganized mob, while the Romans were wearing armored vests, helmets and shields and had again demonstrated the iron discipline and organization that had made them such dangerous enemies. Having positioned themselves in a narrow defile, the Romans had let the Celts run at them, waiting behind their solid rows of rectangular shields and throwing a rain of their pilums, short spears ending in a soft iron tip and shaft which bent after piercing a shield, making it hard for the bearer of that shield to pull that pilum off, thus impeding his use of his shield. As a result, the large majority of Boadicea's 140,000 warriors had been slaughtered, with their families then either massacred by the Romans or captured as slaves. In the days following the battle, the Romans had mercilessly pursued the

survivors, showing no pity or mercy. Boadicea herself had tried to fight on while pursued but had been forced to flee with her two daughters and a small group of loyal warriors. Then, two days ago, her chariot had broken down and her two horses had collapsed from exhaustion as a pursuing Roman cavalry squadron was closing in on her. Her warriors had then sacrificed themselves, succeeding in delaying the Romans long enough to let her flee on foot with her two daughters. Now, tired, dirty and hungry, she was finding herself being hunted down like a vulgar animal.

Realizing that she had lost for good and could not expect anything but the worse for herself and her daughters if found by the Romans, Boadicea took a bitter decision and took out of her belt purse a small flask, then unplugged it open. Making her two daughters look at her, she then softly spoke to them.

"Maeve, Brigid, I am afraid that the Romans will continue to hunt us down until they will have caught us. Then, we can't expect anything but the worse from them. I am not ready to see you being taken into slavery, or worse, by them. I have a small flask of poison with me, a poison I intend to use now for the three of us. I want..."

"NO! DON'T DO IT!"

Startled by that shout in Celtic that had come from within the forest, Boadicea hurried to turn around while grabbing her javelin. She then saw in the moonlight the silhouette of a tall woman with long hair and wearing a long dress, like her. The woman was alone and apparently unarmed, something that made Boadicea relax a bit.

"Who are you? How did you find me like this in the middle of the night?"

"My name is Boudica and I was named in your honor, Queen Boadicea. I came to save you and your two daughters."

"Named in my honor?" asked a confused and surprised Boadicea.

"Yes! May I approach?"

The friendly attitude of that woman and the fact that she spoke Celtic finally made Boadicea lower her javelin.

"You may come closer."

The woman did so and finally stopped a mere two paces from Boadicea and her daughters, allowing them to eye a young woman dressed in a Celtic long dress and wearing long red hair. Maeve then noticed something that made her speak to her mother.

"She strangely looks like you, Mother. She also has the same height as you and said that she was named Boudica. How could that be?"

It was the newcomer who actually answered Maeve's question in a calm and friendly voice.

"Explaining that would take a long time and you may not believe me then, so I will let you understand by showing myself what I am, after I will have been able to bring you to a safe place."

"Do you have horses for us nearby?" asked Boadicea, hope coming back to her. Strangely, the woman smiled at her question while shaking her head.

"No, I don't have horses. I have better: a flying chariot."

"A flying chariot?" said Boadicea, feeling anger flaring in her at that nonsense. "You take us for fools, woman?"

"If you will turn around and look at the forest opening next to the trail, you will see that flying chariot in the process of landing in that opening, Queen Boadicea."

The three celts turned around then, expecting to see nothing. Instead, they gasped in shock on seeing a large, dark object which was silently flying down from the sky and was about to land on the long grass of the opening. Boadicea looked with disbelief at that impossible sight, then at the unknown woman.

"What...what is this magic?"

"That is no magic, Queen Boadicea. It is instead a machine built by a very advanced science. But we should get aboard it now, before the Romans decide to come back this way. I promise you that you will be safe with us and will be treated with respect and decency."

"Us? And who is that 'us', woman?"

"Other people like me who use highly advanced science and knowledge. But let's not waste more time with questions. You will have plenty of time to ask all the questions you want once you will be safe aboard my ship."

Finally deciding to trust that stranger and also egged on by the possibility that the Romans could return and find them, Boadicea was starting to encourage her two daughters to walk towards the 'flying chariot' when the stranger took one step and put one hand forward, pointing at the flask of poison still held by Boadicea.

"You won't need this where you are going, Queen Boadicea. You better throw it out and leave it here."

Suspicion then returned to Boadicea, who stared hard at the woman.

“And why would I believe you, woman?”

“First, my name is Boudica, not ‘woman’. Second, do Romans have flying chariots?”

That simple statement then convinced Boadicea to give the benefit of the doubt to the stranger. However, she still held on to her javelin as she threw the flask of poison away, making the stranger nod her head.

“Good! If you will now follow me.”

Still suspicious, Boadicea nonetheless encouraged her two daughters to follow with her the stranger towards the large dark mass now sitting in the long grass. It was roughly shaped like a wedge and was the size of a large house. Reasoning that even the Romans could not build such a fantastic object, Boadicea and her daughters followed the stranger to the back of the object and climbed a sort of ramp at the rear. Boadicea couldn't help stop at seeing the red lights illuminating the interior of some kind of large box in which seats lined both sides. As she was about to pass the sill of the ramp, Boadicea rapped her knuckles on the contours of the door, getting a metallic noise.

“This chariot is made of iron?”

“Not iron, Queen Boadicea, but titanium, a metal which you don't know and which is much lighter than iron while being very tough.”

“Tit...anium? Decidedly, you speak of strange things, my friend.”

That attracted a new smile on the stranger's lips, who then pointed at the padded seats along one side of the box-like chariot.

“You will see many strange and wondrous things tonight, Queen Boadicea, but there is no need for you to be afraid of us or of what you are going to see.”

Boudica then twisted her head to look forward and spoke in a language totally unknown by Boadicea. At least it was not Latin. The access ramp of the chariot then rose up and closed with a metallic ‘clank’. Following the instructions of Boudica, Boadicea and her two daughters sat down on the seats pointed by the stranger, finding them very comfortable. Boudica then sat next to Boadicea and spoke to her in a sober but still friendly tone.

“My friends, what I will say to you and what you will see in the next few hours may appear like magic or sorcery to you but you have no need to be afraid. We saved you from the Romans to offer you a new life in a friendly place. This chariot will now fly up high, very high, to join a huge flying ship waiting for us. Don't be afraid when you will see kinds of windows appear along the interior walls of this chariot, which we call a

'shuttle'. They will let you see outside our chariot as we fly away. Now, could I convince you to put away your weapons, Queen Boadicea? We wish no harm to you or your daughters but you could represent a danger to our citizens by possibly reacting instinctively and violently to what you will see. Know that our average citizens do not go around with weapons: only our soldiers and law enforcement officers do carry weapons." Boadicea then had to ask a question, overwhelmed by all this and by the images of the Earth and night sky she could now see on the 'windows' mentioned by Boudica.

"But who are you, you and your people? And from where are you coming?"

"We came from the far future, from nearly three millenniums away." answered Boudica, sounding most serious. "We are presently in the process of returning to our time period via a succession of temporal trips and we intend to offer you and your daughters a new and peaceful life in that far future."

Boadicea, stunned speechless by this, finally decided that Boudica was telling the truth to her and handed her weapons to her, making Boudica nod her head and smile again.

"Thank you for having confidence in me, Queen Boadicea. You will not regret it."

For the next few minutes, Boadicea and her two daughters stayed silent, captivated by what they were seeing through the magic windows of their flying chariot. First, as it climbed up in the sky while taking speed, they were able to see more and more of the land they had been on. As they got higher and higher, they saw the horizon starting to look curved, then were able to distinguish the waters surrounding the British Isles. Next, as they flew into the daylight portion of the planet, they were able to see the blue orb of Earth's atmosphere, with its dispersed clouds, and the distinct curvature of the planet. Young Maeve couldn't help speak then in a captivated voice.

"This is so beautiful."

"This is Earth, the homeworld of Humanity and one of the planets on which we now live in the 24th Century. We are now able to travel between the stars and explore the Universe and have encountered a number of other intelligent races, most of them friendly, others hostile and dangerous. A few of those non-Human aliens live and work on my ship and you will be able to see and meet them once aboard."

"Those...aliens, how different are they from us?" asked Brigid, the youngest daughter of Boadicea.

"I can show you images of them now. Please look to your left at the viewing screen on the forward partition."

Sending an electronic command to the computer controlling the viewing screens of the shuttle, Boudica then replaced the view of Space ahead with the image of a creature with a deer-like head and a pair of strange-looking 'Z' legs.

"This is a **Koorivar**, an intelligent race which was the first Humanity ever encountered. The Koorivars are vegetarians and are avowed pacifists. You will see some of them on my ship. Their planet was destroyed in a collision with a wandering giant planet some 400 years before the 24th Century, but some of them were able to flee in time in three ships packed with refugees. We found one of those ships in the confines of the Solar System and helped them by giving them new lands on Earth. We have since then become very good friends and allies. Another race which we are allied with is the Drazts, the inhabitants of another star system close to ours. They could be best described as giant gorillas with four arms. Despite their intimidating appearance, the Drazts are very intelligent beings who knew advanced technology much earlier than Humanity did. Like the Koorivars, the Drazts are vegetarians. At first, we were at war with them but then made peace and are now good allies, with some of them living on my ship. Another race that somewhat resembles the Drazts but are much more hostile to us are the Vorlaks. The Vorlaks are cruel by nature and carnivorous. We had to beat them back and confine them to their planet after they attacked another race and ate the prisoners they took. That unfortunate race was the Hoshis, pony-sized centaurs whose civilization was mostly non-technological and who live as an agrarian and pastoral society."



"They are quite cute," said Maeve, making Boudica smile.

"If you think that the Hoshis are cute, and they are, wait until you see a Kiryn."

The image of another centaur-like creature then appeared on the screen. It was even smaller than the Hoshi previously shown but was covered with a thick pink fur with curly short hair. It also had six legs instead of the four legs of the Hoshis. Boadicea grinned while eyeing the image of the Kiryn.

"You are right, Boudica. That creature is really cute, as cute as a lamb could be."

"A nice analogy, Queen Boadicea. The Kiryns are in fact herbivores with only a low technological level civilization. We first encountered them while fighting a monstrous race of predatory carnivores which had captured some Kiryns and kept them as ready

supplies of fresh meat. That predatory race, which we named the Space Predators, was highly advanced technologically and was roaming Space in search of preys to eat. They hurt us badly at first but we gradually won over them and we recently finished exterminating that monstrous race. Unfortunately, in the final battle against those monsters, my ship was accidentally projected back in time by 2,800 years. We are now making our way back to our proper time period, in the 24th Century.”

Both Boadicea and her two daughters gasped with horror at the sight of the giant mantis-like insect with long jaws and clawed hands which was now visible on the screen.

“By the Gods! What a horrific creature!” exclaimed Boadicea. “You say that you exterminated them?”

“We did, for the good of the other races of this region of the Galaxy.”

“Uh, what is a galaxy?”

“That is one of the countless things you and your daughters will be able to learn about once on my ship. Talking of my ship, it is called the NOSTROMO and it is now visible on our forward viewing screens. It is a huge ship, the biggest ship ever built by Humanity in fact, and it measures over 3,000 paces in length and 1,600 paces in diameter.”

“Er, I’m afraid that I don’t know how to count this high, Boudica.”

“That’s another thing you will learn about once on our ship, Queen Boadicea.” said politely Boudica with no trace of mockery or sarcasm in her voice.

Now concentrating their attention on the forward viewing screens, on which the NOSTROMO was growing steadily in apparent size, the three Celts could only look at it with fascination and wonderment as its mass eventually filled the forward screens. Its surface was painted mate black, making it hard to spot from a distance, but Boadicea could now see that it was made of metal.

“This is made of iron? How could you find such a stupendous amount of iron to build such a gigantic ship?”

“It is made of steel, not iron, and my civilization and others produce a staggering amount of it to build ships, bridges and buildings. If this could interest you, some of our people have taken to ancient blacksmithing techniques as a hobby and produce replicas of ancient weapons and objects. I will be happy to present those people and their fares to you and your daughters, once you will have eaten, bathed and changed into clean

clothes. First, though, the captain and owner of the NOSTROMO will meet you and greet you on arrival inside her ship.”

“Someone is rich enough to buy such a ship made entirely of steel? Compared to this, even the Romans would look like paupers. Talking of these Roman bastards, would you be able to exterminate them and rid my country of them?”

Boudica gave a stern look at Boadicea then.

“We easily could but we won’t, for the simple reason that, by destroying Rome, we would also drastically rewrite history and would destroy our own future civilization. Believe me, Queen Boadicea: history is to be manipulated only at a very high cost...for all of Humanity. If it could reassure you, the Roman Empire will eventually wither and fall in the coming centuries. Unfortunately, that will not spell the end of wars on Earth. Even in the 24th Century there are still conflicts, natural disasters and human rights abuses happening on Earth.”

“Then, why don’t you use your mighty ship to stop those wars and abuses?”

“Why? Because my ship and its people belong to a political entity called the Spacers League, which is composed of a number of different star systems into which Humanity has been expanding and colonizing during the last few decades. The Earth is not yet a member of the Spacers League and is still split into multiple nations of various sizes and power. Since we don’t believe in forcing our rule onto others, we live and let live while doing our best to limit the worst excesses and alleviate as much pain and misery on Earth as we can. The captain of my ship, Tina Forster, has dedicated her ship and fortune to resettling on a new world tens of thousands of refugees and homeless people from Earth. Those unfortunate people now live in peace in an agrarian and pastoral world, governed by a just and caring government. That world, named New Haven, is where you and your daughters will eventually be able to resettle, unless you choose to stay and live aboard the NOSTROMO.”

Boadicea, her eyes still fixed on image of the impossibly big ship visible on the screens, was silent as she digested all that Boudica had just said.

“I will wait until I could meet your captain and see the inside of your ship before thinking about what I will want for me and my daughters.”

“Take all the time you will need for that, Queen Boadicea. It will still take us many days before we will arrive back in the 24th Century.”

“But how will I manage onboard your ship? I don’t even know your language and, to be honest, can’t even read and write in my own language.”

"Again, you will have plenty of time in the future to learn our language, which is called 'English'. We will provide you and your daughters teachers who will help you learn everything you will need to learn. In the meantime, you will be able to use these personal translator units."

Boudica then handed to each of Boadicea, Maeve and Brigid a sort of flexible collar made of fabric with a detachable and washable inner lining. A thin, nearly invisible short wire coming out of each collar ended in a small earpiece. Boudica helped first Boadicea in putting the collar around her throat, then gently inserted the earpiece in the Celt's left ear.

"Can you understand me now, Queen Boadicea?" asked Boudica, using English. To Boadicea wonderment, she heard words in Celtic via the earpiece, right after Boudica had spoken.

"This is incredible! I can understand you now."

Words in English then were heard, coming from her collar, making Boudica nod in satisfaction.

"With this collar you will now be able to understand the people on my ship and will be able to speak with them. You just need to pause a bit between sentences, in order to allow your translation collar time to translate what is being said. I will now fit collars to your two daughters."

Boudica took a minute to put the two other collars around the throat of the two teenage girls, then sat back next to Boadicea.

"If your collars ever malfunction or if you will have forgotten to put them on, you will then just have to approach one of our security officers: they all can speak Celtic."

"They all can? How so? You told me that you were just passing in this year."

In response, Boudica took on her to reveal her secret nature and looked soberly at Boadicea.

"Because they are like me, Queen Boadicea: thinking, intelligent artificial constructs, machines built to serve and protect Humans. We can download in seconds new knowledge into our electronic brains, including new languages."

Boadicea instinctively recoiled from Boudica while staring at her with disbelief and fear.

"You? A machine? That's impossible! You must be human, like me and my daughters."

"I'm sorry but I am not human, Queen Boadicea. I will now make a video play on the forward screen, showing in accelerated speed the construction of one android similar

to me in the robotic workshops of the NOSTROMO. It should convince you that I am telling you the truth.”

Boadicea, like her daughters, then couldn't help but watch on as the said video, which went on for about four minutes, played on, starting with the separate production of elements like the metallic skeleton, the power unit, the AI processor and the skin-like sheets of artificial polymer. Then, the video followed the building process as the android started to take form, receiving its 'musculature', made of pneumatic bags and piston which imitated human muscles, then artificial skin applied to an internal protective flexible mesh of titanium. The video ended by showing the newly built android, a young woman of great beauty, 'waking up' and exchanging her first words with an engineer. At the end of it, Boadicea could only look, completely stunned, at what she had taken to be a young woman. Boudica then spoke to her in a soft tone.

“Don't be afraid of me or of my comrade security androids, Queen Boadicea. I was built to protect my human crewmembers, our passengers and the members of other races allied to Humanity. I am incapable of cruelty, greed, hatred or thirst for power and am programmed to protect innocent people, at the cost of my existence if need be. Think of me as a guardian dedicated to justice and protection, a guardian who would very much like to become your friend and protector.”

Boadicea tried to say something then but just couldn't, so disturbed and stunned she was. By the time she regained some control on her mind, she saw that their shuttle was now travelling down a wide tunnel made of steel and brightly illuminated by numerous lights. Refraining from speaking for the moment, she then concentrated her attention on the exterior views from the shuttle, as it showed the craft passing a double set of thick steel doors before arriving inside a huge rotunda and landing smoothly on its steel deck, next to a large central column with a diameter of sixty meters. Boadicea then noticed a group of three women standing next to the central column and apparently waiting for the shuttle's arrival. Boudica then pointed the three women visible on the screens.

“The woman in the middle is Captain Tina Forster, the owner of the NOSTROMO. She is a Human, not an android, and is one of the most honorable and caring persons I know. Those two women next to her are however androids like me but are even more sophisticated in design and were specially built to interact with Humans and other intelligent, living beings. They are respectively named SPIRIT and Eve Silisca and they help Captain Forster in leading and administering our ship's community. You can trust them completely.”

As Boudica finished speaking, the aft access ramp opened, lowering its end to the deck of the rotunda.

“Time to go meet my captain, Queen Boadicea. Please follow me.”

With Boadicea’s weapons in one hand, Boudica led the three Celts out of the shuttle and on the steel deck of the hangar complex, then walked with them to the three waiting women near the central column. However, Boudica stayed to one side and let Tina Forster step forward to greet Boadicea and her two daughters with a smile and a solid handshake, with her words translated by the collar unit she wore.

“Welcome aboard the NOSTROMO, Queen Boadicea. Welcome as well to your daughters Maeve and Brigid. I am Tina Forster, captain and owner of this ship. I know that you must be famished and tired after your harrowing escape from the Romans, so I will reserve our first true discussion for later, once you will have had a chance to eat, wash and sleep. Let me just present you to SPIRIT, one of my most important advisors, and to Eve Silisca, who was designed as her daughter by SPIRIT and is the ship’s Assistant Hostess. Eve will help Security Officer Boudica in guiding you around the ship and help provide for your needs. Know that you are my guest on this ship and that we will support you and your daughters to the best of our abilities. With this said, I will now leave you in the good hands of Eve and of Officer Boudica. It was a true honor for me to be able to meet you, Queen Boadicea.”

Tina then walked away with SPIRIT, leaving the three Celts with Eve and Boudica. Eve spoke to Boadicea while pointing towards the central column, in which Tina had just entered.

“We will now guide you up to our habitat complex, where a cabin has been reserved for your use and that of your daughters. Would you like to eat first or would you prefer to wash and refresh yourself first before going to eat?”

Despite being quite famished, Boadicea, conscious that she still was wearing her war paint and was covered with dust and encrusted mud, like her daughters, took no time to decide what she wanted first.

“I would like to wash first, if possible. But what about clean clothes? We have nothing left but what we have on us.”

“That will not be a problem, Queen Boadicea: new clothes are waiting for you in your cabin. Once you will be washed and in clean clothes, you will then be able to go have a good meal before you will sleep to your content.”

“That certainly sounds nice, Eve. We are ready to follow you.”

"Then, this way, please."

Going inside the central column via one of its safety airlocks, Eve led her group to one of the elevator lifts, calling a cabin and then inviting the Celts inside it. Boadicea and her daughters did get in after a slight hesitation, still absorbing all the wonders they were seeing around them. Eve then gave them some extra explanations as she selected the level of the administrative center and of the forest habitats.

"This elevator cabin will now bring us up to the level of our habitat complex. Don't worry: that trip will both be short and smooth."

Boadicea effectively felt only a slight, temporary sensation of movement during the trip up. The door of the cabin opened again after only a few seconds, delivering them in the core rotunda of the ship at the level of the ship's administrative center. There, Eve commandeered one of the robotic taxi carts present in the rotunda and let the Celts and Boudica sit in it before giving a verbal order to the taxi's computer.

"To Cabin 510-340, please."

"Right away, miss." replied the male voice of the computer just before the cart started moving on its small electric wheels, heading down the eastern access gallery. Boadicea, who was an expert chariot handler, couldn't help bend her torso out and look down at the small rubberized pneumatic wheels of the cart as it gathered a fair speed along the corridors of the core section.

"I wish that my chariot would have run as smoothly as this thing, although I must say that your steel roads are much smoother than the trails in my country." That made Eve chuckle briefly in amusement before she replied to that.

"Well, your chariot makers did what they could with what they had, Queen Boadicea. We have had quite a few centuries to improve public transportation."

"Talking of public transportation, this place is proving up to now to be nearly empty of people. Where is everybody?"

"Sleeping, mostly. It is now barely past two in the morning, according to our ship's clock, so you will only see the personnel from our night shift being up. This place will however fill up quite quickly once morning arrives."

"Oh, I see!"

The next comments, or rather exclamations, from the Celts came out when the cart started rolling along the long gallery with thick acrylic windows separating the European Temperate Broadleaf Forest Habitat from the Mediterranean Forest Habitat.

"A forest? No, two forests inside your ship? How could that be?"

"We actually have six different types of forest habitats on this level, each containing hundreds of trees and a variety of bushes and other types of vegetation. They are meant to make life on this ship even more agreeable for our crew and passengers. Your cabin has a balcony which will give you a direct view over our European Temperate Broadleaf Forest Habitat, which contains oak trees and beech trees, among other types of trees. By the way, everybody on this ship can go walk and wander around our forest habitats and breathe in the various smells, or even have a quiet cold meal among the trees."

Boadicea nodded her head in approval, appreciating that nature-loving side of these strangers.

"Our druids would have approved of your ship, Eve."

If Boadicea thought that she had seen it all up to now, she had to change her opinion when their taxi cart entered the Habitat Ring Complex and turned on its Main Promenade, sandwiched between the twenty-story habitat complex proper and the outer ring aquarium. The three Celts gasped in unison as they stared at the thousands of fish and marine creatures visible through the thick, transparent walls of the aquarium. Boudica then made a joke about that.

"Before you ask, Queen Boadicea: no, you can't go fish in our aquarium. It was built strictly as a visual attraction for our passengers."

Before Boadicea could reply to that, their taxi cart rolled inside a large elevator cabin which then quickly lifted them up by seventeen levels up an elevator shaft with transparent walls. Boadicea, who had never been this high in her life, gripped tightly the armrests of her seat, frozen with near fear. Both Eve and Boudica noticed that, with the latter hurrying to reassure the Celts.

"Do not worry, my friends: this elevator cabin is both reliable and safe and the upper observations galleries are very solidly built. You do not need to worry about accidents happening here."

"Uh, if you say so, Boudica."

Once out of the lift, their taxi cart rolled for another 250 meters before stopping in front of a sliding door numbered 510-340. Making the Celts step out of the cart and leading them to that door, Eve spoke briefly in English into the intercom panel next to the door.

"Eve Silisca commanding: be ready to register the following three occupants of this cabin."

"Ready to register the first occupant." replied a female voice coming out of the panel. Eve then invited Boadicea to come forward.

"Please put your right hand flat against this panel while looking at that small glass-covered hole. It will then register you as the legitimate occupant of this cabin."

"This way?"

"Yes!... Thank you! Your turn now, Maeve."

With the three Celts now registered in as occupants, Eve then invited them in and walked with them and Boudica inside one of the standard three-bedroom passenger cabins of the NOSTROMO. Boadicea had to stop in the middle of the large lounge giving a view of the forest habitat, overtaken by the utter luxury and comfort of the place compare to what she had known in her own home.

"This...this is nothing less than a royal palace compared with the houses I lived in before. Are all your people living in such luxury?"

"This is a standard level of accommodation in the Spacers League and on this ship. Unfortunately, many people on the Earth of the 24th Century still have to live in houses much less comfortable than this and also don't always eat enough or well. Now, talking of eating, let me show you how to use our bathroom, so that you could wash up. I will also show you how to use our toilets: public sanitation is important in our civilization and relieving oneself in a hallway or stairwell is highly frowned upon."

"I myself would certainly have beaten up any idiot disrespecting me by urinating or defecating in my bedroom or kitchen. I must say that your ship has up to now proved to hold to a very high standard of cleanliness."

"Thank you, Queen Boadicea. Follow me with your daughters in the bathroom, so that you could take a nice warm shower."

Once the group was inside the bathroom, Eve took a minute to describe to the three Celts the various appliances and how to use them, then invited them to undress next the the bathtub cum shower stall. After a slight hesitation, Boadicea told her

daughters to undress, then did the same herself. Making the shower run and adjusting it to a warm but not hot temperature, Eve made young Brigid step in under the shower head. The teenager squealed in delight when the warm water flowed down her body and started removing the accumulated dirt and sweat off her skin. Eve then poured some cream soap in her hands and made her rub it on, soaping herself before returning under the water spray and washing off the soap. Eve examined the final result with a critical eye and pointed at the girl's long hair, which was still dirty.

"I wish that we had time to wash your hair as well but that would take time, especially if we had to wait until it dried up, and I am loathe to delay your meal more than necessary. We can wait after you will have eaten before doing that. Boudica will now dry you up. Maeve, it's your turn under the shower."

Another twenty minutes later, Boadicea was finished with her own shower and was toweling her body dry when she hesitated and asked a question to Eve.

"Uh, this may sound impolite on my part but, since you look so much like real women, how woman-like is your own body? Can you sleep with a man and satisfy him?"

"Satisfy him? Certainly! However, being machines, we can't produce babies. As for our male-looking androids, they could make a woman crazy with pleasure, as they can literally keep it up indefinitely, but they can't make a woman pregnant. Just between you and me, many of our female passengers love dating our male androids."

"And the other female passengers don't?" asked Maeve, making Eve and Boudica chuckle at her question.

"They just wished they could but, being married and with their husbands present, they don't dare try."

"And their husbands, they won't try to bed your female androids?"

"Bingo!" replied Eve while pointing an index at the girl. "You understood everything, young girl."

Seeing the hesitant expression on Boadicea's face and understanding what she may be thinking, Eve became serious and spoke softly.

"Look, I know what the Romans did to you, so maybe we should stop talking about sexual matters and let you get dressed, so that you could go eat at one of our food courts."

"A good idea, my friend. What do you have as fresh clothes for us?"

"I will show you what we put aside for you. Your dirty clothes will go to our laundry service and will be returned clean and dry in about six hours."

Going to the master bedroom of the cabin, Eve opened its closet and one of the drawers inside, revealing a dozen long dresses, a collection of female underwear items and many pairs of shoes and slippers. There were as well a few female belts supporting belt purses.

"We had an idea of your approximate sizes but try some of these on and choose what will fit you best."

"Decidedly, your captain is the perfect host, Eve." said Boadicea, making Eve nod once.

"And she treats everyone with equal attention, whatever their social class is." That declaration, which would have been completely atypical of her own time period, made Boadicea think further about her luck of having been saved by those people. Otherwise, she would probably have been captured by the Romans and then tortured to death while her daughters would be raped repeatedly, then turned into slaves. Trying a couple of different dresses, she decided on the second one, finding that it fitted her better. It was also a nice dress made with an intense green tissue with gold embroidering. She also slipped on a cream-colored panty whose elasticity and comfort made her wish that she had similar ones before. She then completed her dress with a pair of flexible shoes and a black shiny belt with purse put around her waist. The only irritant for her was her still dirty hair but she was by now too hungry to wait further before going to eat. Eve then distributed to each of the three Celts a plasticized card with picture of them clipped to a long and thin neck ribbon.

"Please wear this around your neck when walking out of your cabin: this card will give you full access to our food outlets and to our public facilities, without the need for you to use cash money. Later on, Boudica will escort you to our banking center, where you will be given electronic debit cards linked to bank accounts which were opened in your name. While those bank accounts will be quite generously provisioned, please don't go into a wild spending spree, as those accounts will get extra money in them only once per month. Boudica will tell you more later about how much money will be made available to you and about the cost of various things found in our boutiques and shops."

"And we won't be expected to reimburse that money or work for it?" asked young Brigid.

“Your basic monthly allowance, along with an initial sum meant to help you buy a new wardrobe, will not be attached to any obligation or debt on your part. The same went for all of our citizens when they joined our community. If you choose to do some kind of work or employment later on in order to improve your revenues, you are welcomed to do that.”

“But, what could we do as work here?” asked Boadicea. “We know nothing about your world or society and we certainly know nothing about your ‘science’ thing.”

“True, but certain things and occupations are truly timeless, like animal husbandry and fruits and vegetables picking. Know that there are extensive farms aboard this ship, which is essentially self-sufficient in terms of food production. We even produce our own wine, beer and alcohol on the NOSTROMO.”

Boadicea exchanged bemused looks with her two daughters, then pointed at the entrance door.

“Well, enough talking: let’s go eat!”

As the five of them were on their way out of the cabin, Boadicea saw Boudica use her wrist communicator in order to ask for a taxi cart. She waited for the android to complete her call before asking her a question.

“You can really talk with anybody from a distance with this little bracelet?”

“Yes, as long as you are in a place that can retransmit the signal. Here, on the NOSTROMO, I can call from anywhere inside the ship. In our cities of the 24th Century, I could also call all over the planet, because there are multiple retransmitting stations built at fixed locations. Think of it as a more advanced equivalent to a system of flag waivers posted at intervals and passing along a message over a long distance, or a series of signal fires.”

“I understand. Still, it does look like magic to me. It will take me some time to get accustomed to your world.”

“That’s quite understandable, Queen Boadicea. Be assured that we will help you and your daughters all along. In fact, you will be able to receive personal instruction on how to adapt to our society in the next few days. We will also teach you our language and how to read and write at the same time. We have very good teaching facilities on the NOSTROMO.”

As they were walking out of the front entrance safety airlock, Boudica saw a taxi cart approach, its yellow light flashing to signal that it was responding to a call. It soon

stopped in front of the group, which then sat in it, with Boudica then talking in English to the taxi's computer.

"To the Food Court Number One, please."

"Right away, miss!" replied the computer in a soft female voice, before the cart started to roll again.

Since the food courts were close to the Celts' cabin in terms of horizontal distance, they mostly had only to take a lift down to Level 576, sixteen stories below. They thus arrived at that food court in less than two minutes, where they stepped out of the taxi cart at the entrance to the forty meters by twenty meters surface. The three Celts' mouths started watering at the sight of the rows of food counters lining the walls, with dozens of small tables with chairs sprinkled around the open hall. Young Brigid inhaled the appetizing odors floating around as her stomach gurgled loudly.

"This smells so good!"

"Yes, but there is hardly anyone except for the servers." said Boadicea. "How come?"

"Well, it is not three o'clock in the morning yet. Only the crewmembers of the night shift would be up at this hour. However, the food courts are always opened, in order to be able to serve people at any hour of the day. There are different service tables you can choose from, including a fresh salad bar, a choice of soups of the day, an Asian buffet, a meat grill, a..."

"Meat grill? Let's go!" said at once Boadicea, with her daughters nodding their heads at that.

"All right then. This way, ladies."

As they passed by the salad bar, on their way to the grills, the three Celts suddenly stopped and took a step back at the sight of two different creatures who could not be mistaken for Humans.

"What are these things?" asked Brigid, fear in her voice, making the two alien beings turn their heads towards her. One was a big, hairless gorilla with four arms, while the other had a deer-like head and 'Z'-shaped legs. Both of them wore light blue work coveralls. Boudica hurried to reassure her charges.

"Don't be afraid of them, girls: they are crewmembers of the NOSTROMO. The big one is a female Drazts named Riza Doz. The smaller one is a Koorivar named Shanir. Despite their appearance, they are both friendly and very sociable."

Boudica then switched to English and spoke to Riza and Shanir.

"Excuse their reactions to you, my friends: they are fresh from the year 60 C.E. and never saw aliens before."

"That's alright: no offence taken. Have a nice meal." replied Riza in a deep, female voice before returning to her task of raiding the salad bar. The three Celts kept looking back at the two as Boudica and Eve led them to the grilled meats counter, with Boadicea making a remark in a low voice.

"By the spirits of the woods, if I needed something to remind me that I am now in a different place, then this was it."

"You may meet more alien crewmembers during the days to come, so you will have to get accustomed to that, Queen Boadicea. Aah, here we are! Would you prefer a steak, some chicken, pork chops or sausages?"

"If I listened to my stomach, I would take pieces of everything." The cook serving the meats, a man in his thirties, smiled on hearing the English translation of her Celtic words coming from the translation collars.

"Then, may I suggest that I prepare for your group a large service plate with a selection of our meats? That way, you would be able to taste a bit of everything."

"Now, that's a great idea! Do it!"

"And what selection of vegetables would you like with this, miss?"

Seeing that Boadicea hesitated while eyeing the choice of vegetables available, many of which had been unknown to First Century Britain, Boudica jumped in and spoke to the cook.

"Please prepare a mixed service plate with sautéed mushrooms, cabbage, oven-baked potatoes and boiled carrots, mister."

"Two mixed plates, coming up!"

The Celts were served within a couple of minutes and were then led to an empty table by Boudica, while Eve went to get plates, glasses, utensils and napkins at another service counter. Eve quickly showed to the Celts how to use a fork, then asked them if they would like some fresh milk as beverages or would stick with the jar of cold water already on the table. The two teenagers asked for milk but their mother asked if wine or beer was available, attracting a grin on Boudica's face.

"Beer and table wine are effectively available and are produced aboard this ship. Would you like to try a cold beer, Queen Boadicea?"

"I would love to, Boudica."

By the time that Boudica was back at their table with the drinks, the Celts were already eating their food with gusto.

“Uh, be careful not to eat too fast or too much right after spending days without eating: you could get sick.”

“We’ll be okay!” replied Boadicea as she ate a piece of steak. “The food is really great here. They use spices here, right? In Britain, the traveling merchants who went by our village sold salt and pepper at very dear prices.”

“We do! Again, we cultivate dozens of types of spices on this ship. You may even get to pick them if you decided to stay and live on the NOSTROMO. I have to warn you that some of those spices which are still unknown in Britain can be extremely spicy, enough to make you think that you just ate fire.”

“Decidedly, our culinary experience on your ship promises to be a truly fascinating one, Boudica.”

“I’m sure that it will be, Queen Boadicea.”

Sitting with the Celts but not eating herself, Boudica and Eve patiently let them eat to their content, answering many questions about the kind of food to be found on the NOSTROMO. As the plates were getting nearly empty, Eve noticed that the poor Brigid had problems staying awake, while Maeve did not look much better, something that was not surprising considering the fact that they had been fleeing the Romans for days, with little chances to rest.

“I think that we will lead you back to your cabin after this, so that you could have some much-needed sleep.”

“A good idea!” replied Boadicea, who felt quite tired herself. “That beer of yours was excellent but I believe that it is also much stronger than the ales I am accustomed to. Alright, girls: take a last bite, then we will go get some sleep.”

There were no protests from Maeve and Brigid on that as Boudica called in a taxi cart for the group.

CHAPTER 10 – WHEN TO GO NEXT?

14:01 (Greenwich Meridian Time)

Thursday, September 18, 60 C.E.

Command meeting room, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In low polar orbit around Earth, Solar System

Tina Forster came out of the private office reserved for her use and which was adjacent to the ship's command meeting room, then walked to her chair at the long table, sitting in it before looking at her command staff and department heads.



“Thank you for coming on such short notice, my friends. Now that the method devised by Roshana Golshan to bring us forward in time has proved to be both successful and safe, we now have to decide how far in the future we want to try to go for our second temporal jump. Some could be tempted to say ‘let’s go for broke’, but that would be a grave mistake in my opinion. Yes, the Golshan Maneuver worked but we still have little idea about in what proportion the various factors in it affected the time displacement. Is it the distance from the Sun at which we initiate our jump? Is it the intensity and power we apply to your Koomak Drive generator? Is it the angle of the tangent at which we pass by the Sun? We need to be able to control to at least a fair degree our time displacement if we don’t want to simply zoom by our original time period and end up decades or even centuries ahead of the year 2337. So, we need to learn how to manipulate those parameters in order to be able to arrive safely to within a maximum of a year or two from the date we are targeting. I intend our next micro-jump to be similar to the first one we performed, but with a slight twitch to the power we will apply to our Koomak Drive generator when we will jump at the same distance from the Sun as before. Then, we will again go back into Earth polar orbit and see in what year we are then. If all goes well, we should then be able to extrapolate in what proportion a change to our Koomak Drive setting affected our temporal jump. After we do that, we will attempt a third jump, this time twitching the distance at which we are from the Sun when we will activate our Koomak Drive generator, then will again return into Earth polar

orbit to see what is the new date. I do not intend to try to jump directly to the 24th Century until we understand better this process. Now, another factor that will be important in this concerns our ability to correctly identify the date on present-day Earth with a minimum of accuracy. We were lucky in that, when we arrived in this year, we were able to see that the Celts had just burned down Londinium, a historically well-known event with a firmly recorded date. Now, let's say that we end up after our second jump over an Earth in which nothing special is happening and in which things have been stagnant for decades? After all, how often can Londinium be burned down?"

There were a few chuckles at her joke, meant to relax the atmosphere in the room. Tina then became serious again and looked directly at Professor Shmelling, the head of the history department of the NOSTROMO University.

"Professor Shmelling, what I will need from you is a list of known dates for historical events, arranged with a selection of events around the Sixth Century, the Eleventh Century and the Fifteenth Century. Please select events that could be seen and identified from orbit or via reconnaissance drones, rather than events that would necessitate the sending of a ground reconnaissance team. Major battles would be good candidates, while the death of some king or emperor would not. Imagine the reaction of the locals if our team comes into a town and start asking if King so-and-so has died yet." This time there were outright laughter around the room, with the head of security, Ahmed Jibril, making a double facepalm.

"Yeah! That would really go down well."

Jehanne De Domrémy then surprised Tina by raising one hand.

"Yes, Jehanne?"

"I do know a couple of well-documented historical events which would be easy to observe and identify from a distance, Tina: the capture of Joan of Arc by the Burgundians on May 23 of the year 1430, near Compiègne; and her death on May 30, 1431, when she was burned in the public square of Rouen."

Many around the table, starting with Tina, looked in shock at Jehanne then, for proposing a date on which her historical namesake would die horribly.

"But, but I don't want us to use the death of such a brave girl as a simple prop for our jump calculations. And how would your adopted daughter react on seeing such an event? It could disturb her deeply, Jehanne. We should choose another historical event as a temporal marker."

“First, Frida doesn’t need to watch the recordings we would take of this event. Second, while we couldn’t help her escape death without drastically changing history, we would have a strong incentive to be over Rouen at that time period.”

“What do you have in mind, Jehanne?”

The female security android then bent slightly forward, putting both of her forearms on the table.

“What I have in mind is something that could help Jehanne without putting history at risk. But first, we will need to make those test jumps, so that we could arrive in the Fifteenth Century at the date of our choosing.”

08:19 (Greenwich Meridian Time)

Friday, September 19, 60 C.E.

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Approaching the Sun

“The ship is yours again, SPIRIT. Bring us to the Year 410.”

“Starting our run towards the Sun... Set speed attained and tangent trajectory adjusted... Power to our Koomak Drive generator set... Micro-jump in ten seconds... Five seconds... Jumping now!”

Tina, sitting in her command chair, saw the customary flash of orange light associated with a Koomak Drive jump, but with a slight yellow tinge to it. Then, like for their first jump towards the future, they found themselves in the blackness of Space, with the Sun having changed position in a notable way. Reena Shapour reported to her less than a minute later.

“Position of the Sun marked. It is very close to the position we had predicted for it for this time in 410.”

“How close, Reena?”

“The difference is nearly infinitesimal, Tina. I believe that we attained the date we are targeting with a precision of plus or minus a few weeks.”

“If we indeed attained this kind of precision in our temporal jumps, then I will be happy as a pig in shit. Frida, head for Earth and adopt a low polar orbit. Amin, once we will be in orbit, launch a reconnaissance drone and post it at high altitude over Rome, with its cameras and sensors recording in continuous mode and sending the images to us via datalink.”

"Aye, Captain!"

Dana Durning, Tina's second-in-command, who was sitting to her right, then looked at her with a slight smile.

"This is starting to look like some kind of 'European City Burning Tour', Tina."

"Hey, burning cities can easily be seen from orbit and they are even easier to properly identify. As for the date we are in, how many times was Rome burned down and sacked in this century, or in history?"

"Oh, I don't know about that, Tina. This time it will be the Goths of King Alaric. Then, 136 years later, it will be the turn of the Ostrogoths of King Totila to have some fun around Rome."

"Well, it tells you how loved Rome was around the Ancient World."

On that attempt at black humor, Tina fell silent and watched on as her ship veered toward Earth, visible against the backdrop of Space.

She stayed in her command chair until her ship was in polar orbit and until they started receiving the first images recorded over Rome by their reconnaissance drone. Dana Durning nodded her head on seeing that the walls of the city were already being assaulted by a mass of Goth warriors, with the Roman defenders frantically doing their best to repel them.

"Looks like we were right on the money this time, Tina."

"Well, don't sell the Romans' skins before they are done in, Dana. We will know that we are at the right date when we will see those Goths breach the walls and get inside Rome. I am now going to my day cabin. Call me if anything significant happens."

"Will do, Tina."

With that said, Tina climbed down the steps of the bridge command platform and continued down until she set foot on the lowest platform of the bridge complex, on which was her day cabin, a small room with a bed, a small work desk and a small bathroom. She often stayed there during critical periods, when she could need to return quickly to her command chair.

Entering her day cabin and going to lay down on her bed while keeping her clothes on, Tina then started thinking over something which had been going through her head since yesterday. Staying like this for about ten minutes, she then decided to go to

the computer on her work desk and opened a link with SPIRIT, whose armored vault was situated under the bridge sphere.

“SPIRIT, put this link in encrypted mode: we need to speak in complete privacy.”

“Link now encrypted, Tina. What can I do for you? Is it about the micro-jump we just effected?”

“Not directly, although we will have to achieve good precision in our temporal displacement during our next few jumps. What I need is to consult in detail the datafiles you received from SHANYA, after we found the VEON SHOURIA buried in the ice of Eris, at the confines of the Solar System.”

“What exactly are you looking for, Tina? I could help you in your search, as the datafiles I received from SHANYA then were quite extensive and voluminous.”

“And I will be happy to get your help for this, SPIRIT. Here is what I am looking for...”

CHAPTER 11 – THE NORMANS ARE COMING!



Norman cavalry at the Battle of Hastings, 1066 C.E.

20:34 (Greenwich Meridian Time)

Saturday, October 14, 1066 C.E.

Passenger cabin # 510-340, Habitat Ring Complex

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, in low Earth polar orbit

Solar System

“Boudica, could you enlarge the picture at the top left corner of the screen: I want to see clearly what that Guillaume de Normandie looks like.”

“No problem, Boadicea.” said Boudica while pointing the remote-control unit of the holographic entertainment viewer of the Celts’ cabin. One of the five split-view screens showing the recordings taken of the Battle of Hastings earlier in the day, which had marked the end of the reign of the Anglo-Saxons over Britain, then grew to occupy the full screen. Boadicea and her two daughters bent forward on their sofa to better view the man riding a horse and wearing a long coat of chainmail, a conical helmet with a nasal guard and holding a long kite shield and a lance, who now appeared in full size.

“So, this is the latest one to invade my country, and this after the Romans, the Danes and the Saxons? Do these bastards take my country for a vulgar carpet, good

only to wipe their feet on it before taking everything. Were there any others after him in the history that you know, Boudica?"

"Uh, a few more tried during the next centuries, including the French, the Spaniards and the Germans but they mostly failed in their attempts to invade Britain. However there were more than a few internal wars in Britain. The Scots, the descendants of the Picts whom the Romans feared so much, fought for their independence from the English kings and lost after a few epic battles. Pretendants to the throne and usurpers fought civil wars in three different centuries to come and the English in turn invaded France and Ireland, plus fought numerous naval battles against various foes. Overall, you could say that the history of the British Isles is soaked in blood."

"When I think that the only thing I wanted was for my family to live in peace in our village. Then, the Romans came and took it all. Those Space Predators you told us about, did they invade in part to steal your riches?"

"No! The only thing that interested them was to find and eat fresh meat."

Young Brigid shivered in horror at those words.

"Being eaten by monsters... That must be about the most horrible death possible."

"It would certainly be, Brigid. Thankfully, we were finally able to exterminate the last of those monsters before being propelled into the past. At least now, Humanity will be able to continue living without having to fear their return."

"And the friends and relatives of the people aboard this ship, will they still be waiting for your return?"

"We certainly hope so, Boadicea. However, we are still not sure for how long we will have disappeared from our proper time before we actually get home."

Boadicea lowered her head in hearing her answer.

"Home... The Romans took mine, along with everything else we had, including our people."

Boudica stayed silent for a moment, respecting the moment of grief felt by the Celts. She then tried to deflect the subject and spoke in a soft voice.

"How was your day of work in our farms, Boadicea?"

Thankfully, a faint smile returned to Boadicea's lips.

"It was nice, truly. You were right to say that animal husbandry work will never change along the centuries. Feeding your cows, pigs and chickens is the kind of work we did every day in my village, along with milking the cows and picking the fresh eggs."

"I am happy to hear that, Boadicea. Did you know that some of the people on this ship took as a hobby ancient combat reenactment, including sword fighting and jousts. Of course, they do so with blunt blade and while wearing armor and padding but those friendly combats, which happen periodically, are very popular with our passengers. By the way, some dress like Roman soldiers, so I would ask you not to try killing them on sight during our tournaments."

"Could I drive a war chariot during one of those tournaments?"

"You would need to have a chariot built for you but, yes, that could add up even more flavor to our tournaments."

"Then, I will get me a war chariot." promised out loud Boadicea.

CHAPTER 12 – A DARK PROSPECT

11:05 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, May 29, 1431 (During Hundred Years War)

Jehanne De Domrémy's cell (in dungeon tower)

Castle of Rouen, city of Rouen, Normandie

English-held territory in France



Hearing the steps of multiple people approaching her cell on the first floor of the dungeon tower of the Castle of Rouen, **Jehanne De Domrémy**, also popularly known as **Joan of Arc**, sat up on her bed made of hay, guessing what was going to happen now. Yesterday, she had recanted the abjuration she had signed four days earlier and had put back on the set of men's clothes she had been wearing before changing into a woman's



dress as part of her abjuration, despite realizing full well the consequences of that act. Her guess proved correct when one of the English soldiers guarding her cell unlocked her cell door for Bishop Pierre Cauchon and Vice-Inquisitor Jean Lemaire, the two main judges of her trial for heresy who had been interrogating her in front of a panel of clerical jurors for close to five months. She tensed up when she saw that the two men were accompanied by the Duke of Bedford, the commander of the English soldiers guarding her and a man she deeply despised. That English lord had pushed for her to be tortured into signing a confession while she was imprisoned here but, thankfully, Bishop Cauchon and his clerical jurors had voted against that, in order to avoid tainting the validity of their judgment of her. However, Bedford had then used other ways to try to break her will, notably by having his soldiers rape her one night in her cell. That despicable act, which was completely contrary to the rules of an ecclesiastic trial, had in fact greatly contributed to her decision to recant her submission.

While the Duke of Bedford stayed outside of the cell and watched through the iron bars, Cauchon and Lemaire walked in as Jehanne got up on her feet, the chains around her hands and feet rattling with her moves. The two ecclesiastics then stopped a

good four paces from her, with the vice-inquisitor unrolling a parchment and starting to read from it in a strong, firm voice.

“Jehanne De Domrémy, said Joan of Arc, by recanting yesterday the abjuration you signed five days ago, you have forfeited the clemency of this court and have thus been found guilty of heresy and of relaps. The punishment for such crimes is death. You will thus be transported tomorrow morning to the Old Market Place of the city, where you will be burned alive at the stake. Do you have anything to say at this time, Jehanne De Domrémy?”

Despite having expected this, Jehanne still felt dread and fear wash over her: being burned alive was probably one of the worst kinds of death one could endure. Still believing in her cause and the righteousness of her actions, she answered in a soft but resolute tone.

“Your Grace, I still believe that I acted justly in order to help my king and France recover the lands taken by the English, and this while bearing arms openly, praising our lord Jesus Christ and praying every day. I thus humbly request that I be given the last rites before my execution.”

While Cauchon and Lemaire seemed to react favorably to her request, the Duke of Bedford exploded in anger and derision on hearing that.

“THE LAST RITES? TO AN HERETIC AND RELAPS? NONSENSE!”

In response Bishop Cauchon gave a cold look at Bedford. While he had been paid a lot of gold by the King of England to hold this trial against Jehanne, he already had to violate many important Church rules concerning how to conduct a heresy trial against a woman, starting with the conditions the accused had been detained. Giving in to more English demands could risk a backlash from Rome against him.

“This is a religious trial and strictly the affairs of the Church, Duke. Whether you like it or not, I am ready to give her the last rites tomorrow morning, before she leaves the castle for the market place. I also expect that the prisoner be still healthy and unsullied by tomorrow morning.”

Bedford, realizing that, while he held the military power in Rouen, Cauchon and Lemaire could create quite a religious backlash against him, then decided to leave and walked away, grumbling to himself. Returning his attention to Jehanne, Cauchon eyed her with some regret. Despite the gold he had been paid with, her courage and strength of character was starting to get to him.

"I wish that things would not have come to this, my child, but your conduct left us no other choice but to find you guilty and condemn you to death. May God have pity on your soul, Jehanne De Domrémy."

"I am sure that he will, Your Grace."

On that response, the bishop and the vice-inquisitor left her cell, leaving one of the guards to lock back its door behind them.

Now alone in her cell, Jehanne went back to the pile of hay serving as her bed and sat on it. There, she finally let her despair get to her and started sobbing quietly. Some twenty minutes later one of her guards brought in a piece of dry bread and a cup of water, the only kind of food that she had been given since her arrival in Rouen as a captive. She still prayed in thanks for the food, then ate her bread without conviction. Once she was finished eating, she went to the lone, narrow window which provided some light and fresh air to her cell. That window was in fact a firing slit for archers and was by itself too narrow to let an adult escape but this one also had iron bars added to it, so that only a small bird could pass between those bars. Jehanne then looked outside for a couple of hours, passing the time as best she could by looking at what was visible of the city of Rouen and of the surrounding countryside from her window. Some eight hours later, her guards brought her more bread and water for her supper. Eating slowly, she finished her meal as the Sun was low on the horizon, then looked outside again until the night fell. As with most of the people of the Middle Ages, nightfall was normally the time people went to sleep, as only wealthy people could afford to burn candles or lamp oil for long hours. So, Jehanne went to lay on her pile of hay and tried her best to fall asleep. However, sleep didn't come easily to her, as the thoughts about the kind of death she would face tomorrow kept haunting her. It was nearly midnight before she could fall sound asleep.

Two hours after she fell asleep, and with her two guards only half awake, a small, round dark gray object silently flew in her cell through the iron bars of her window, then slowly approached the sleeping Jehanne until it nearly touched her neck just behind and below her right ear. It kept that position as it sprayed a small quantity of a powerful local anesthetic on the skin of her neck, then waited for a few seconds, time for the drug to take effect and also deepen Jehanne's sleep. With Jehanne now in a deep sleep, the emergency medical first aid flying probe, a device designed to reach and help victims

buried under debris after a house or building had crumbled or after a tunnel had collapsed, used a laser scalpel to cut a small incision into the skin of her neck, then injected through that cut a tiny capsule, using a jet of compressed air. Somehow, Jehanne reacted to that by grunting and scratching her neck with her right hand, but quickly got back to full sleep. Waiting a few more seconds, the probe then injected a second capsule, this time at a different angle, so that it would end near the first one. Two small steel pincers came out of the probe and, squeezing together the two sides of the cut, closed the cut while surgical glue was sprayed on it, closing the incision. Waiting until the glue had dried, the probe then silently and slowly flew down Jehanne's body, going towards her naked feet, where it stopped just below her ankles. There, it repeated the first operation it made on her neck and cut open small incisions in each foot, just below her ankles, before injecting small capsules in them, finishing its job by closing and gluing the incisions. Its work now completed, the medical flying probe left the cell, flying out by the window, only to be replaced by another flying ball, but one much smaller and very difficult to spot if one didn't suspect its presence and made a detailed visual search of the cell. That micro-surveillance probe then went to a small fissure between two of the stones forming the walls of the cell and anchored itself there, its camouflage system then turning the probe the same color than the stones. Now in place and active and with another flying probe fixed to the outside of the window and acting as a data relay probe, the surveillance probe started watching and listening to what was happening in the cell.

When Jehanne woke up the next morning, the Sun was barely up and one of her two guards was still sound asleep in a corner of the corridor outside her cell, while the other guard was valiantly trying to stay awake as he sat on a chair set against a wall. Sitting on her pile of hay, Jehanne stayed silent and immobile for a moment while she fully woke up. That was when a soft male voice vibrated through her brain, pretty much like how she had heard 'voices' before, up to three times a day.

'Jehanne, you are not alone in this difficult time. You led a pure life and showed courage and dedication in your fight for your king and your country. You may die today but I will be with you then and will help support you during that ultimate personal trial. Believe in your faith, the same as I believe in the goodness of your heart and in the justice of your cause. Know that, because of your heroic efforts and of the example you

gave, France will be rid of its English invaders in a few years. Your sacrifice will thus not have been in vain."

Tears came to Jehanne's eyes as she whispered to answer the voice in her head.

"Will I go to Heaven?"

'Yes! You will get the rewards of the just and the pious, Jehanne. Be courageous today and believe in yourself and in your convictions. I will be with you during your final moments and will then escort your soul to Heaven.'

"Please, tell me your name. Are you The Savior?"

'Yes, I am! I will speak to you again at your final moment. Be brave, Jehanne.'

Jehanne waited for a few more seconds to hear more but her voice seemed to have left. Feeling renewed hope and purpose now, Jehanne then went to the window and looked again through it at the city of Rouen, which was barely starting to wake up. The guard who had been half-asleep heard her whisper a few sentences, apparently to herself, but did not think much of it: this deranged girl had been supposedly hearing voices in her head many times per day during the last few months.

At around two in the afternoon, Bishop Cauchon came to her cell with the vice-inquisitor, two priests and a nun. After one guard unlocked the door of the cell, Cauchon told him and his comrade in arms to leave for a few minutes, prompting a protest from the English soldier.

"But I can't leave my post like this, not without the permission of the Duke, Your Grace."

"We came to give her the last rites and also to change her present dress to the customary white robe of those due to be executed. I do not want you to be able to look at her naked body while she changes. Before you go, though, unlock her shackles."

Seeing that insisting would be fruitless, the Englishman did as he was told, then signaled to his comrade to follow him, walking away to post himself at the door closing the corridor leading to the cell. Now alone with his ecclesiastic group and with Jehanne, the bishop entered the cell, where Jehanne knelt before him to receive the last rites, her hands together in a praying pose. Satisfied by her attitude, Cauchon made a short prayer for her before administering the last rites and finishing by making the sign of the cross.

"May Jesus Christ our savior have pity on your soul, young girl. The time has now come to face your punishment."

"I am ready, Your Grace."

"Me and the men with me will now withdraw momentarily from your cell, so that Sister Jacynthe can change your dress with the proper privacy required."

"I understand and thank you for your consideration, Your Grace."

Cauchon and his group of three men then left, going down the corridor and leaving Jehanne with the nun, who helped her remove her men's clothes and then handed her a long, white robe made of rough linen. Once changed, Jehanne followed the nun out of the cell in which she had spent the last five months and joined Cauchon and his waiting group, looking up at him and speaking in a calm, assured voice.

"I am ready, Your Grace."

Cauchon was impressed by her apparent lack of fear but Vice-Inquisitor Jean Lemaire much more so: he had been reluctant from the start to participate in this trial but had to obey the orders of his superior in the Dominican Order. More than ever now, he had the bad feeling that he had done the wrong thing with Jehanne but did not have the nerve to go against the explicit orders of the Grand Inquisitor of Paris.

"We will now escort you to the basement, where manacles will be put on you and where you will be put in a chariot for the trip to the old market place. Then you will be under the secular authority of the English and there will be nothing more that I will be able to do for you. Do you understand, my child?"

"I do, Your Grace."

"Then, follow me! Father Jacques, Father Paul, stay close behind the condemned."

Thus escorted, Jehanne soon arrived down at the ground level hall of the tower, where the Duke of Bedford was waiting with six English soldiers. The English aristocrat had a mean smile on seeing Jehanne come down the stairs, escorted by the bishop and his group. When Jehanne was made to step in front of him, he came nearly nose to nose with her, nearly spitting in her face as he addressed her in a mean tone.

"You will finally pay for your crimes, you damn heretic. I will enjoy seeing you roast alive at the stake."

"And I will watch down from Heaven while you will roast in Hell, Duke."

Bedford was about to strike her with a gloved hand, made furious by her bravado, but was stopped in extremis by a warning shouted by Vice-Inquisitor Lemaire.

"DON'T, DUKE, OR THE GRAND INQUISITOR OF PARIS WILL LEARN OF YOUR CONDUCT AND WILL PLACE A PROTEST WITH KING HENRY."

Restraining himself with difficulty, Bedford then looked at one of his soldiers.

"Shackle her!"

"Yes Sire!"

Coming forward, the soldier placed and locked a pair of manacles around Jehanne's wrist, then put another pair of manacles around her ankles. Once that was done, Jehanne was pushed none too gently to a heavy cart waiting outside of the tower. Two soldiers helped her climb on the cart, then stayed up in it with her, so that she could not jump out. With a soldier driving the two horses pulling the cart and with forty English soldiers closely escorting it, Jehanne was then driven out of the courtyard of the Castle of Rouen and along the street leading to the old market place. That street, along with the market place itself, was lined with a thick crowd of spectators kept at bay by dozens of English soldiers. Some in the crowd booed Jehanne as she passed by them, some less fervently than others, while others stayed mostly quiet as they watched her cart roll by. While standing in the moving cart and keeping her balance by holding on to the low wooden railing, Jehanne then heard again the same male voice which had spoken to her in the early morning.

'I am still with you, Jehanne. Be strong!'

That short encouragement, arriving at such a time, did miracles to raise her morale and Jehanne stood even straighter in the cart, surprising many in the crowd with her apparent aplomb.

When the cart arrived in the old market place, where hundreds of city inhabitants were waiting and watching on the sidelines, Jehanne saw that a platform with a long bench and a canvas top had been erected on one side of the market square, while a tall wooden stake surrounded by piles of firewood stood in the middle of it. Bishop Cauchon, Vice-Inquisitor Lemaire, the Duke of Bedford and a number of other dignitaries and their wives sat in the covered platform and watched on as soldiers made Jehanne climb down from the cart and pushed her towards the stake. Once up the pile of firewood and with her back against the wooden stake, two English soldiers tied Jehanne to it with chains but left her arms free for the moment. With the crowd and the dignitaries looking at her, she joined both hands and started to pray out loud.

“Jesus Christ our Lord Savior, I implore you to welcome me in your heavenly kingdom at the moment of my death, as I committed no crime and simply served my legitimate king, Charles The Seventh, and this while openly bearing arms and fighting while following all the just customs of war.”

As she was continuing to pray, she saw a soldier come forward with a lit torch in his hands, ready to light the firewood surrounding her. Her anxiety and fear partly returning, she shouted at a priest standing a few paces away.

“A CRUCIFIX! I NEED TO HOLD A CRUCIFIX AS I DIE!”

The poor priest, not having one except for a tiny cross hooked to a chain around his neck, looked towards Bishop Cauchon, who shouted an order to him.

“QUICKLY, GO FETCH ONE OF THE MARCHING CRUCIFIXES STORED AT THE BACK OF THE CHURCH.”

As the priest ran away towards the nearby church, an English soldier posted near the execution stake, seeing that the firewood was about to be lit and that the priest would probably return too late, quickly grabbed two small pieces of dry branches and, using one of his shoe laces, made a small cross with it. The soldier then climbed quickly on the piles of firewood and gave the improvised cross to her. She smiled to him as tears came to her eyes and she spoke to him in French.

“Thank you! You are a good man. May Jesus our savior bless you.”

The soldier, who didn't speak French, nonetheless understood the gist of what she had said and nodded his head to her before climbing down from the pyre. Holding tight to her rudimentary cross, Jehanne continued to pray as the piles of firewood started burning around her. The first flames were nearly at her feet when the priest returned at a run from the church, holding a golden crucifix planted at the end of a long pole. Holding the pole, the priest then approached the crucifix to her face but at a bit higher level than her eyes, allowing Jehanne to look up at it while praying out loud.



“JESUS, OUR SAVIOR, I AM READY TO BE RECEIVED BY YOU IN HEAVEN. PLEASE LOOK KINDLY ON MY SOUL!”

As the first flames reached her feet, the two capsules of powerful painkillers injected in her feet broke on receiving a radio command, releasing their drug into her feet and legs just before the skin of her soles started roasting. Despite of this, Jehanne still felt severe pain from her feet as they burned, but that pain was much less now than what she would have to endure otherwise. As she fought to keep in screams of pain, she heard the voice in her head again.

'The moment is near, Jehanne. Continue to be brave, as you will soon be up with me.'

"MAY YOUR NAME BE SUNG FOREVER, JESUS!"

Then, instead of hearing more of the male voice in her head, she started hearing a soft, beautiful chant from a male chorus and assumed it to be from a group of angels singing for her. Tears of joy came to her eyes as she looked towards the sky and the nearby golden crucifix.

"I AM ON MY WAY TO YOU, MY LORD JESUS."

That was also when the two capsules injected into her neck during the night broke on command and in succession, the first one containing more powerful painkilling drugs, which then started circulating through her body as her white woolen robe ignited and started burning, the second one releasing a few seconds later a lethal dose of painkillers mixed with a psychedelic agent. That agent then acted on her brain as the songs continued inside her head. Now feeling little pain even as her body started to burn, Jehanne made a last smile before becoming unconscious, her head slowly slumping down before she died, a smile still on her lips. The English soldier who had made an improvised crucifix for her, along with the priest holding the cross and quite a few people in the crowd, saw her ultimate smile. Thoroughly shaken, the soldier couldn't help remark on it out loud while signing himself.

"She, she smiled as she was being burned alive, and this while imploring Jesus. My God, what have we done?"

Vice-Inquisitor Jean Lemaire, who had also seen Jehanne's ultimate smile, also signed himself.

"God, please forgive me, as I unjustly committed an innocent to fire."

High above France, aboard the orbiting NOSTROMO, Tina and her command team, sitting in the command meeting room, were watching on a large holographic display screen the close-up views taken by a number of small reconnaissance drones

posted around the old market place of Rouen. By now, there was hardly any eyes which were still dry around the room, with more than one actually sobbing quietly as they watched the last moments of Joan of Arc. Ahmed Jibril, as deeply shaken as the others around him, then saw something that completely surprised him: Jehanne De Domrémy, sitting next to him at the table, had tears flowing down her cheeks while watching the death of her namesake.

“Jehanne, you are crying.”

“Me? But I didn’t order my glands to release tears.”

“But you are crying, Jehanne!” insisted Ahmed. This attracted the attention of SPIRIT’s android avatar, who was also present and watching Jehanne’s execution in Rouen. Seeing actual tears rolling down Jehanne’s cheeks even though the latter was denying it, SPIRIT spoke in a sober voice.

“She indeed is, Ahmed, but as an unplanned, involuntary act, without having given a conscious command to her artificial glands to release tears.”

“But, how could that be, SPIRIT?” asked Ahmed, now confused.

“How? Because Jehanne has now apparently attained the same phase of personality development as me and Eve: she can express emotions spontaneously, without thinking first about what her reaction should be to a particular situation. She is now one step closer to be like a human being at the psychological level. Congratulations, Jehanne: you are now able to have true feelings.”

Jehanne was stunned for a second, then passed a hand on her cheeks and had to recognize that SPIRIT was right: she had shed tears spontaneously at watching the death of her historical namesake.

“Does this mean that I can get to feel other kind of emotions as well, SPIRIT? What kind of emotions have you experienced on your part?”

“I have to recognize that, compared to a Human, my range of emotions and that of Eve is still very limited, but I expect that you, like me and Eve, will slowly experience more spontaneous feelings and reactions as the years go by. Eventually, all of our androids will develop such spontaneous emotions.”

Tina, who had listened to this exchange with intense interest, knocked three times on the table to attract everybody’s attention.

“First, let me congratulate you on this personal development, Jehanne. Now, to return to the historical Jehanne who just died, I will want us to continue documenting the scene and, especially, watch the reactions of the various witnesses to her death. This

could actually prove very interesting to our historians who will want to study the true extent of the influence of Jehanne De Domrémy on the history of France. Let's call it a sort of instant opinion poll secretly compiled from a selection of persons present at her death. After a couple of extra days of spying around Rouen, we will then do our next temporal jump, this time targeting the mid-20th Century. Once there, it will be a lot easier for us to ascertain our exact time and date of arrival, since we will be able to listen to a multitude of commercial radio and television broadcasts. That period also marks the start of Humanity's adventure into Space, so we will have plenty of interesting things to record there. Then, we will be ready to conduct Operation Noah's Ark."

CHAPTER 13 – OPERATION NOAH’S ARK

01:50 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, August 05, 1959

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In low Earth polar orbit, Solar System

Dana Durning was smiling widely when she reported back to Tina after double-checking the data collected by the ship’s sensors and passive surveillance devices.

“Our date of arrival in this century is now confirmed to be on Wednesday, August Fifth, 1959. It is now one fifty in the morning, Universal Time, as indicated by the radio time beacon from the Greenwich Astronomical Observatory in England. Our temporal jump was spot-on, with us arriving within 24 hours of our targeted date. I would say that we are getting quite good at this business of temporal jumping, Tina.”

“When it comes to go towards the future and while making jumps of a few centuries at the time, yes. As for making much shorter jumps, says of a few years or decades towards the future, that is still to be demonstrated. As for jumping back towards the past, I wouldn’t be too hot to try that again.”

“True!” recognized Dana. “By the way, we are not the only artificial object in Earth orbit at this time: the American satellite EXPLORER 1 is still up in its medium Earth orbit, although it is now silent, its batteries depleted. It was the first ever satellite orbited by the U.S.A. on February 1 of 1958.”

“And how much was its mass, Dana?”

“A whopping 13.97 kilos at launch. Two Soviet satellites, SPUTNIK 1 and SPUTNIK 2, preceded it in orbit and were launched in 1957.”

“Wow! I suppose that the Space experts of this time would lose their minds if they managed to detect us in orbit.”



“Good luck to them about that, Tina: with our mate black, radar-absorbing paint covering our hull, it would take them an incredible piece of luck to detect us, either visually or via radar. I would say that we are quite safe where we are now. Uh, we are supposed to initiate Operation Noah’s Ark in only a month and a half, Tina. What do you want us to do in the meantime?”

“We prepare for it while giving plenty of time for our historians to study the situation on Earth. With the World living through what was called ‘The Cold War’, they should have plenty of interesting things to look at. I will now retire to my day cabin for a couple of hours. You have the bridge, Dana.”

With her having already briefed in detail her command staff about the preparations needed to launch their next operation, Tina kept it at that and left the bridge to go to her day cabin.

08:56 (Universal Time)

Sunday, September 18, 1959

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In low Earth polar orbit

Tina felt a growing mix of excitement and anxiety as her ship was preparing to leave Earth orbit in order to fulfill what she considered to be the most important part of their voyage in the past.

“All stations ready for jump, Tina.” announced Dana Durning from her own command chair to the right of Tina’s chair.

“Good! Frida, take us out of orbit and start heading in the direction of Gliese 667. Reena, calculate our incoming jump to Gliese 667C and be ready to confirm our position on arrival. Amin, switch to passive detectors only just before we jump. I want us to be silent and stealthy when we will enter the Gliese 667C System.

“Aye, Captain!”

“To all, this is your captain. We are about to effect a Space jump to the Gliese 667C system, as it was on September 18 of 1959, six days before the destruction of Shouria by a wandering brown dwarf. Soon after our arrival, we will start an emergency evacuation operation on Shouria in order to save as many of its inhabitants as possible. To our present passengers, I will ask you to stay inside your quarters until further notice and to not circulate around the ship unless absolutely necessary, as we may soon have

to move speedily tens of thousands of Koorivar refugees around the ship. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.”

Next, Tina switched her intercom to the ship's security center, where Ahmed Jibril was posted for this operation.

“Ahmed, we are about to jump to the Gliese 667C System. Are your people ready?”

“They are, Tina. I have security androids, accompanied by a few of our resident Koorivar crewmembers, posted and waiting at each of the levels of our emergency quarters, plus have more security androids posted in our soccer stadium and our track and field stadium, where we erected tent cities for the expected crowd of Koorivar refugees. In all, we have a total of 140,700 bunks or camp cots ready for those refugees, Tina.”

“And what if we run out of places in those locations, Ahmed? Do we have other extra locations around the ship which could temporarily house more refugees?”

“Uh, yes! While there won't be beds or cots available in those extra locations, they should be adequate enough to house refugees for a day or two without major problems. If we do use those extra locations, including our Medieval World level and our forest habitats, I calculate that we could then accommodate another 200,000 Koorivars at a minimum. The big question will then be: will we have enough time to gather and transport this many people from the surface of Shouria?”

“We will have to find that time, Ahmed. Send androids teams, with a sprinkle of our newly-built Koorivar androids, to those extra locations, so that they could prepare them quickly for occupation.”

“On it, Tina!”

Tina then switched links yet again.

“Professor Shirani, please come to the bridge on the double: we are about to jump to the Gliese 667C System.”

“On my way, Tina.” answered the Koorivar planetologist. Shirani had been an original crewmember of the VEON SHOURIA, the Koorivar refugee ship which had been discovered entombed in the methane ice of the dwarf planet Eris by the KOSTROMA in 2317, some twenty years ago. Shirani had been still awake at the time of the departure of the VEON SHOURIA from the planet Shouria, thus his knowledge of the social and political conditions on the doomed planet in 1959 was going to prove crucial for the success of the rescue operation.

Nine minutes later, Professor Shirani arrived on the command level of the bridge and was offered at once the V.I.P./Observer chair to the left of Tina's command chair.

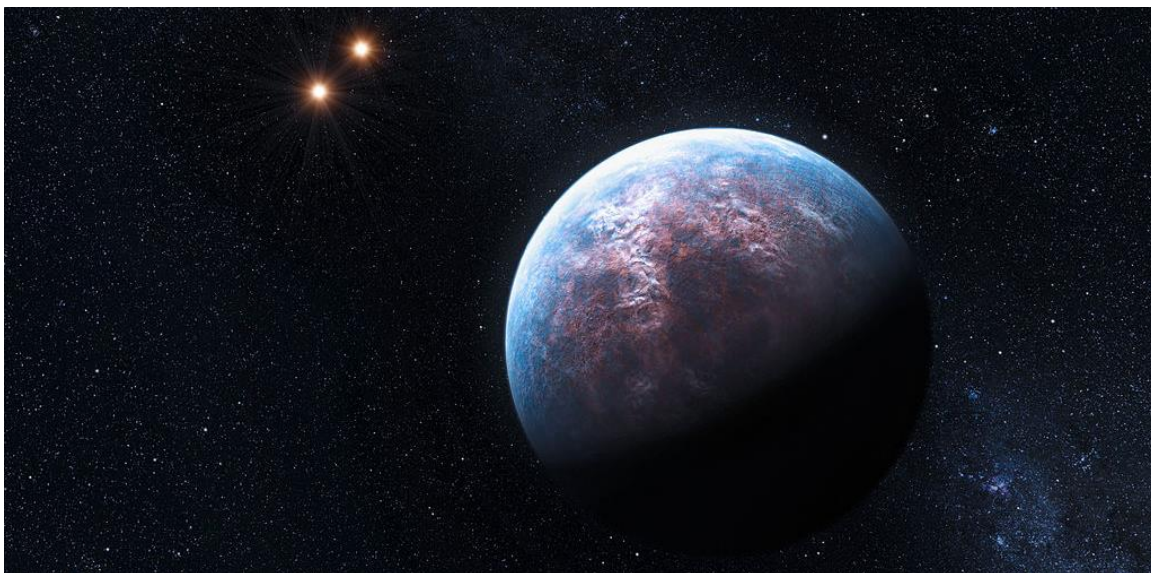
"If you may sit and strap yourself in, Professor, we will then jump to Gliese 667C."

The mature Koorivar did so quickly, leaving Tina free to speak with SPIRIT.

"We are now ready to jump to the Gliese 667C System, SPIRIT. The ship is now yours for the jump."

"Thank you, Tina. Jumping in three...two...one...jumping now!"

This time, the flash of light from their jump was the customary orange color, as it was a purely spatial jump with no temporal component to it.



10:11 (Universal Time) / 83.426 percentile of orbital period

Monday, September 19, 1959 C.E.

Office of the Planetary Governor, capital city of Shouriana

Planet of Shouria (Gliese 667Cd), Gliese 667C System

23.6 light years from Earth

Governor Shuran went to the large patio doors of his office, situated on the top floor of the planetary government administration building, where he looked up at the brown dot visible in the sky. That dot represented the imminent destruction of the Koorivar race, its homeworld Shouria, and the death of 1.2 billion Koorivars. Of that total population, a mere 63,000 Koorivars may get to survive the incoming cataclysm by traveling away

from Shouria while in cryogenic sleep aboard three refugee ships, the VEON SHOURIA, the SHANIZAR and the SHUNDAR. The VEON SHOURIA had lifted off with its living cargo 12.7 orbital percentiles ago, followed at intervals by the SHANIZAR and the SHUNDAR, the latter having left a mere 7.9 percentiles ago. With luck, they would then each arrive in a different star system where they would look for a habitable planet on which to resettle the survivors of the Koorivar race. However, by the time that those ships will arrive in their targeted systems, Shouria would then be long gone, pulverized by the wandering brown dwarf heading its way. Shuran thus was very conscious that he, his family and close to 1.2 billion other Koorivars had only 16.2 percentiles of orbital period left to live. Shuran, as the planetary governor, could have pushed for his spouse, Kindra, and his two teenage children, Kiran and Kovar, to be included among the refugees selected to board the three evacuation ships. However, he had refused to even contemplate that option, as it would have constituted blatant favoritism and could also have incited disturbances and even possibly riots. Now, his last hope was that his people would show dignity in its final moments. He himself was resolved to be on the patio of their private residence and looking straight up at the incoming brown dwarf, with his family snuggling him until the end came.

Shuran was still looking up at the brown dot in the sky when the intercom set on his work desk started buzzing. Walking quickly to his desk and grabbing the detachable handset of the intercom, he saw that one of his principal aides was on the line and activated the link.

“Yes, Krenin?”

“Mister Governor, we have a call for you...from Space!” announced Krenin in an excited voice.

“A call from Space? Is it from one of our interplanetary cargo ships?”

“No, Mister Governor: it is from a Koorivar who says that he is calling from an alien starship.”

Shuran couldn't help frown in frustration on hearing that: the last thing he needed now was for some delusional idiot to try spreading some wild falsehoods.

“Why are you bothering me with this nonsense, Krenin? You know how easily such rumors could create false hopes, which would then lead to possible panic and riots.”

"I know, Mister Governor, but I believe that this call is genuine: some kind of alien creature was standing behind this Shirani as he called via the HoloNet. If you would go to your main HoloNet viewer, I could then transfer that call to you."

The mention of an alien creature acted like a punch to the guts on Shuran, who hurried to sit behind his work desk and switch on his HoloNet desk unit.

"Transfer that call now, Krenin, then tell the rest of my staff to stand by for an emergency meeting."

"Right away, Governor."

The image of a mature Koorivar wearing a light blue coverall soon appeared on Shuran's display screen. However, the eyes of the governor fixed at once on the creature visible some two paces behind the said Shirani. It was a good head taller than the Koorivar and was definitely from an alien race, with an oval, mostly flat face, two eyes, a small nose and a small mouth and a thick mane of long blond hair topping its head. From the prominent bumps under the blue and gold robe it wore, Shuran deducted that this alien was either a hermaphrodite, like all the Koorivars, or a female, like in a number of the animal species populating Shouria.

"This is Governor Shuran. Could you explain to me where you are and with whom you are right now?"

"First, my name is Shirani, and I was a crewmember of the evacuation ship VEON SHOURIA, Governor. Before you say that this would be an impossibility, know that the ship I am in traveled through time to get here, in our star system, in order to evacuate at least some of our people before the brown dwarf impacts our planet. The VEON SHOURIA actually reached the star system it was targeting after a very long trip, where it made contact with an intelligent species calling itself Humans. After finding a way to travel through time, those Humans decided to come here and now in order to save more Koorivars from death. Unfortunately, despite their ship being huge, they will have space for only about 400,000 of us. Eve Silisca, who is standing behind me, wants to discuss with you where to assemble the people to be evacuated. I will now let her speak with you."

The tall creature with blond mane then stepped forward and addressed Shuran. To his relief, she proved to be able to speak an excellent Koorivarese, something that was going to make things much faster and simpler than if obliged to use a translator unit.

"Governor Shuran, my name is Eve Silisca and I am presently aboard the heavy cargo starship NOSTROMO, which is now approaching Shouria. I realize that time will

be at a premium during this rescue operation, so please listen carefully to me and wait for me to end my explanations before asking any questions. First, as Shirani told you, we can take in some 400,000 Koorivars aboard our ship, maybe more if we really squeeze them a bit. Second, we will provide the necessary shuttle craft to pick up and carry to orbit the refugees, so don't worry about finding some ships of yours for the evacuation. Third, since we will be able to evacuate only a tiny portion of the remaining population of your planet, I will ask you to designate for us the embarkation points where our shuttle craft will land to pick up their passengers. Know that we plan to make as many return trips as it will be safe to do before the final approach of that brown dwarf, so you may assemble a few tens of thousands of people waiting at each of those embarkation points. We will leave to you the task of selecting who will go. From our past experience, I would counsel you to group together for evacuation complete communities from various villages, towns and cities. That way, it will greatly simplify the evacuation process and will also nullify any possible accusations of favoritism about the choice of who will be evacuated. Fourth, once our ship will be as full as possible, it will travel through time and Space to what you call in your astronomical charts 'Kanz 1003', where the 67,000 Koorivars which left your system a couple of days ago eventually relocated and founded a new home they named 'New Shouria'. Your people will thus be with brethren for the start of their new lives. I will keep this channel open while waiting for your list of embarkation points, Governor Shuran. Oh, one last point: if you have reserves of planting seeds of your main vegetal staples, have them prepared for pickup and give us locations for those pickup points. However, do not have people assemble there with the hope of being let in, as only empty cargo containers will land at those points. Know that all the reserves of seed grains originally carried in your three evacuation ships became spoiled from their long trip and your brethren's presently living in the Kanz 1003 System have not eaten any foodstuff from Shouria in the last few years. So, being able to pick up reserves of seed grains from you is no frivolous request, especially in view of the new group of Koorivars we will evacuate in the next few days. Also, if you have reserves of precious metals in your central government bank vaults, you may want to have them picked up as well: those precious metals will then be able to finance the building of new facilities for your people on New Shouria. The owner of our ship is rich but not that rich and I believe that your people would not want ending up as a bunch of impoverished and dispossessed refugees living in some tent camp. Now, do you have any questions at this time, Governor Shuran?"

“Uh, I have one, Eve: is your civilization well established in Space or do you occupy only that one-star system?”

“We are part of what we call the Spacers League, which counts right now a total of 25 occupied star systems, plus our original home: the Solar System, which the VEON SHOURIA reached. Once reestablished on New Shouria, your people will be part of a large community of over fourteen billion people living in this region of the galaxy. Does this reassure you, Governor?”

“Very much so, Eve Silisca. I will now go have an emergency meeting with my government cabinet and will compose a list of evacuation and cargo pickup points as fast as I can.”

“Please tell your staff to work quickly, Governor: every hour lost may mean some 10,000 less Koorivars which could be safely evacuated. As my captain would say, this is no time for committee decisions.”

“I understand, Eve. Please thank on my behalf your captain for this providential help for my people.”

“I will, Governor Shuran.”

On that, Shuran put that line on hold and ran out of his office in order to go speak with his cabinet.

12:29 (Universal Time) / 0.8345 percentile of orbital period

Passenger terminal of the University of Korvarna’s craft landing pad

Kendrek, a professor of structural engineering at the prestigious University of Korvarna, had to hold firmly hands with his spouse Darkad and of their young child, Kendra, in order not to get separated in the nearly panicked crowd of students, faculty staffers and family members now filling the passenger terminal building. Thousands more Koorivars, equally anxious and scared, were trying to come in, threatening to cause a deadly pileup. Koorivars were normally non-violent, disciplined people but fear often made the worst come out in people and the few public order officers present were simply getting swamped, if not squarely trampled on. Then, someone near the bay windows of the terminal shouted out loud while pointing at something in the sky.

“A NUMBER OF CRAFT ARE APPROACHING!”

Cheers and exclamations of relief rose at that shout and the crowd, sensing that they now had a good chance at being saved soon, calmed down somewhat. Two of the

nearest craft approaching the landing pad soon stopped at a hover a few meters above the concrete surface of the pad and some ninety silhouettes in dark gray uniforms and helmets then jumped out through rear access ramps, then floated down to the ground, obviously using some kind of anti-gravity devices. The cheers then stopped cold: while some of the jumpers appeared to be Koorivars, the majority of them were clearly alien beings. However, an amplified voice coming from one of the craft and speaking Koorivarese then resonated over the landing pad area.

“People of Shouria, do not be afraid: we came to save as many of you as it will be possible to do. We come from an alien starship now in orbit over Shouria and the security officers now landing on this landing pad came only to organize the evacuation and keep order during the embarkation. A heavy shuttle will now land on this pad and will start loading people as soon as its access ramps will be opened. We will ask you to stay calm, follow the instructions of our security officers and avoid pushing those ahead of you. Time is precious and any delays will prevent the rescue of more people, so stay calm and orderly.”

As the voice stopped talking a huge, lenticular ship with a diameter of 200 meters and a height of eighty meters flew down silently and smoothly landed on the landing pad. The alien security officers dropped by the two first craft then went to the four access ramps which lowered open, posting themselves around them in order to control the access to them. At the same time, the ten Koorivar officers in gray uniforms ran to the terminal building and posted themselves at the two doors giving on the landing pad, with one of them speaking in an amplified voice.

“PLEASE LISTEN CAREFULLY, PEOPLE OF SHOURIA. YOU WILL NOW GO OUT ONE BY ONE ON THE LANDING PAD, WITH FAMILIES STAYING TOGETHER, THEN WILL WALK TO OUR HEAVY SHUTTLE AND GET ABOARD IT, WHERE YOU WILL BE DIRECTED TO SEATS. PLEASE DON'T TRY TO PUSH YOUR WAY THROUGH OR RUN TO OUR SHUTTLE, OR YOU WILL FORCE US TO USE OUR STUN GUNS. YOU MAY NOW START TO COME OUT OF THE TERMINAL.”

As the people in the terminal started moving, Kendrek fervently hoped that this thing would stay orderly and that no one would panic or trying to jump the queue. His heart beating furiously, he kept a solid hold on the hands of his spouse and child while stepping forward slowly as Koorivars started coming out of the terminal and walked towards the big alien ship. Like the other would-be refugees, Kendrek had followed the instructions given via an emergency announcement from the Governor's office, thus he

and Darkad carried only one suitcase each, while young Kendra carried a backpack containing some spare clothes, a few cereal bars and a bottle of water, plus his electronic school notepad. To their relief, they were able to pass through the door of the terminal after a couple of minutes, then started walking towards the big alien ship, guided by a couple of the alien security officers who were posted at intervals between the terminal and the ship. To Kendrek's surprise, those aliens proved to be able to speak excellent Koorivarese as they gave their directives, making him exchange a look with Darkad.

"How could alien beings we never saw before speak Koorivarese like this, without using portable translation units?"

"I frankly don't know, Kendrek. However, the important thing is that we and Kendra will be able to escape death."

"Yes, but what kind of future is awaiting us? The Governor's message was rather terse and short on details."

"I am sure that we will get more information once aboard that alien ship, my love." replied his spouse while continuing to walk towards one of the access ramps of the alien ship. They soon arrived at that ramp and were pointed by an alien officer to one of the mechanical escalators built along the ledges of the ramp.

"You can use this escalator, good people. Once inside, you will be directed to sets of seats. Take three of them, put your suitcases in the receptacles in front of your seats and buckle your safety belts."

As the small family went up on the escalator, Darkad nodded her head in approval.

"They may be alien beings but they are quite polite. They also look quite efficient."

"That they are. Did you notice that they are of two genders: male and female, like some of the animals we have on Shouria?"

"I did! They may be alien but I find them rather good-looking physically."

When they arrived at the top of the ramp, more aliens, these ones wearing light blue coveralls, directed them to a large compartment which apparently followed the curve of the lenticular hull of the ship. Little Kendra stiffened with surprise and fear at the sight of another kind of alien who was directing each Koorivar towards seats, while Kendrek and Darkad opened wide eyes and stared for a moment at the big, muscular

creature with four arms and a pair of thick, short legs. It also had a pair of breasts under her coverall.

“What...what is that?”

The alien in question, who apparently had a fine hearing, looked down at the child and smiled while speaking in Koorivarese.

“I am a Drazts and my name is Riza, child. If you would please take seats on row 12B.”

“How come you can speak Koorivarese?” couldn’t help ask Darkad as she passed by the big alien, who grinned in answer.

“One of my best friends is a Koorivar. Many Humans also can speak Koorivarese aboard the NOSTROMO. But you should get to your seats now: we have a lot of people to save and time is counted.”

“This ship is named the NOSTROMO?” asked Kendrek, making Riza laugh.

“This, the NOSTROMO? This is actually a simple heavy shuttle, of which five are carried by the NOSTROMO. Wait until you see our ship: it is a majestic sight and a truly magnificent starship.”

Not insisting further, Kendrek continued advancing along the row of seats, which was separated from the row ahead and below it by a narrow aisle, until they arrived at the seats which were already occupied. Seeing large luggage receptacles in front of their seats, Kendrek had his family put their bags inside them, then sat down and buckled his safety belt. Once that was done, he was able to look around him and examine the compartment he was in. By its curve, it obviously was located just inside the hull and followed its curve, with its end out of his direct line of sight. Large holographic display screens covered the outer wall of the compartment, allowing Kendrek to see outside the heavy shuttle. Apparently, the evacuation process was going smoothly, at least here, with a steady line of Koorivars continuously boarding the ship. Using his experience as a structural engineer, Kendrek evaluated quickly the passenger capacity of the compartment he was in, which had twelve rows of seats forming rings, each ring being a bit higher than the row in front, like in a theater. If he was correct, this ‘heavy shuttle’ could probably carry a minimum of 6,000 persons, an impressive number indeed. However, as it closed its ramps once all the seats were filled, there were still thousands of Koorivars still waiting in the terminal. Then, Kendrek noticed that the alien security officers who had gone down were still on the tarmac, that at the same time as young Kendra pointed at an object in the sky visible on the screens.

“Look, father! Another big ship is approaching.”

Kendrek nodded at that sight, now reassured about the fate of the people still waiting on the ground to be rescued.

“Those aliens impress me with their efficiency and organization. With that incoming ship, all the people of Korvarna should be able to be evacuated in time, if they make multiple round trips.”

“Yes, but what kind of life will await us in that new world, Kendrek? We are about to lose everything we had, to go live in a world we know nothing about and where we may end up as dispossessed refugees.”

His spouse’s arguments had the effect of abruptly cooling down Kendrek’s enthusiasm: Darkad was right about the uncertainty of their future. He then remembered a famous quote from a past philosopher.

“Yes, the times to come will be hard ones for us, my love, but at least we will be alive and our little Kendra will be able to grow up. While there is life, there is hope.”

23:18 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In orbit over Shouria

Tina was starting to feel the exhaustion from hours of constant stress and hard decision-making and knew that she would soon have to stop the evacuation process and head back to the Solar System in order to jump time towards the 24th Century. Getting a new call on the intercom, this time from Natalia Vasilyeva, the ship’s head hostess, she punched the ‘link’ button and looked at the picture of the tall blond on the screen. If anything, Natalia was looking even more tired than Tina was, and for good reasons, as she had been responsible to parcel out tens of thousands of refugees between the various quarters’ areas available around the ship.

“Yes, Natalia?”

“Tina, we now have a total of 409,906 refugees aboard and we are about as full as an egg. We simply are running out of space for more Koorivars. Furthermore, the longer these poor people will have to stay aboard, the more critical the food factor will become. With that number of passengers to be fed, we will have enough vegetarian food for only one, maybe two meals per person if we ration it. After that, they will start to

starve. We have to return to our time and drop off those refugees on New Shouria, and soon!”

Those words, while only reflecting the reality of the present situation, brought immense sadness to Tina: despite all the valiant efforts of her crew, what they had accomplished today was little more than a drop in a bucket. If she left now, that would leave nearly 1.2 billion Koorivars to face imminent and assured death. However, the sad truth was that doing more now would barely make a difference. Her sense of morality then revolted against that thought: one more life saved was always worth it. But how could she accommodate even more people on her NOSTROMO? Then, an idea struck her tired mind and she looked resolutely at Natalia’s image on her viewer.

“We will depart for New Shouria soon, Natalia, but only after an extra round trip by our craft and heavy shuttles to the surface. Together, they could pick up another extra 55,000 Koorivars and bring them aboard.”

“But...where will we lodge all those extra people, Tina? We have refugees filling all our emergency quarters, our crew and passengers have opened their cabins and apartments to refugees, we have Koorivars sitting in our sports stadiums, around our forest habitats and the plains and forests of our Medieval World are full of people.”

“What we will do is, once our shuttles would return for a last pickup trip, keep their passengers aboard our craft instead of making them disembark. If we leave for the Solar System right after our craft will all be aboard, we could be back in our proper time period and near New Shouria in less than three hours. Those refugees will be comfortable enough inside our shuttles for such a short time and I believe that this would be more than worth it in order to save an extra 55,000 Koorivars. So, what do you think, Natalia?”

While still preoccupied, Natalia slowly nodded her head, a sober expression on her face.

“That could work, Tina.”

“Then, I will pass the appropriate orders to our shuttle squadrons at once.”

“And what will we say to the Koorivars on the planet when they will see that our shuttles are not coming back for more passengers?”

A big lump formed in Tina’s throat at that very pertinent question.

“I will soon call Governor Shuran and will explain to him the need for us to leave soon. I am not going to lie or hide to him our intention to depart.”

23:51 (Universal Time) / 0.83552 percentile of orbital period**Office of Governor Shuran****Capital city of Shouriana, Shouria (Gliese 667Ce)**

Shuran, despite having fully expected the need for the NOSTROMO to leave once full of refugees, still felt a big weight on his shoulders after listening to Tina Forster. He sat back in his chair while staring at his HoloNet screen, then spoke softly.

“Captain Forster, you already did a lot more than any of us hoped for and for this you and your crew will have my eternal gratitude. How many of my people have you been able to accommodate aboard your ship?”

“We now have a total of 465,218 refugees aboard the NOSTROMO, Governor. As soon as my security officers sent down on Shouria will be back on my ship, I will leave for the Solar System, where I will make my ultimate temporal jump to return to my proper time period. Once in the year 2337, I will immediately go to New Shouria, where your people will be landed and will be able to rebuild their lives among their compatriots. Are you sure that you don’t want to come with us, in order to provide leadership to your people, Governor? I still have time to send a shuttle down to pick you and your family up.”

“Thank you but no!” replied at once Shuran. “I will not abandon my people in its darkest time. Know that I ordered my vice-governor, Keradek, to go board one of your shuttles at Shouriana’s astroport, along with a small group of high-level administrators and technocrats and their families. Keradek in turn called me to confirm that he and his group were on their way up to your ship. I gave him full plenipotentiary powers to act in my name and in the name of our people in order to lead and administer our survivors.”

Tina, obviously deeply touched, stayed silent for a few seconds before giving to Shuran a traditional Koorivar goodbye sign.

“I wish I could have done more here, Governor Shuran, but I must now concentrate on saving those who could be saved. Before I close this link, I am now sending you a video file for you and your people to watch after my departure: it will show you views and scenes of New Shouria, where the people from your three refugee ships have now been living for seventeen years and where your people will be able to build new lives for themselves.”

Tears rolled down from Shuran’s eyes on hearing that.

"Captain Forster, this is the most precious parting gift you could have left to us before leaving our system. Be assured that all of our people will be able to soon view that video. Thank you again for everything and have a safe trip."

Shuran then made sure that the video file he had just received was downloaded into his computer. He then copied it on a mini-drive, which he pocketed, before calling his minister of communications to send him a copy of that file, along with a message to his people.

00:40 (Universal Time)

Sunday, September 20, 1959

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In low orbit around Shouria (Gliese 667Ce)

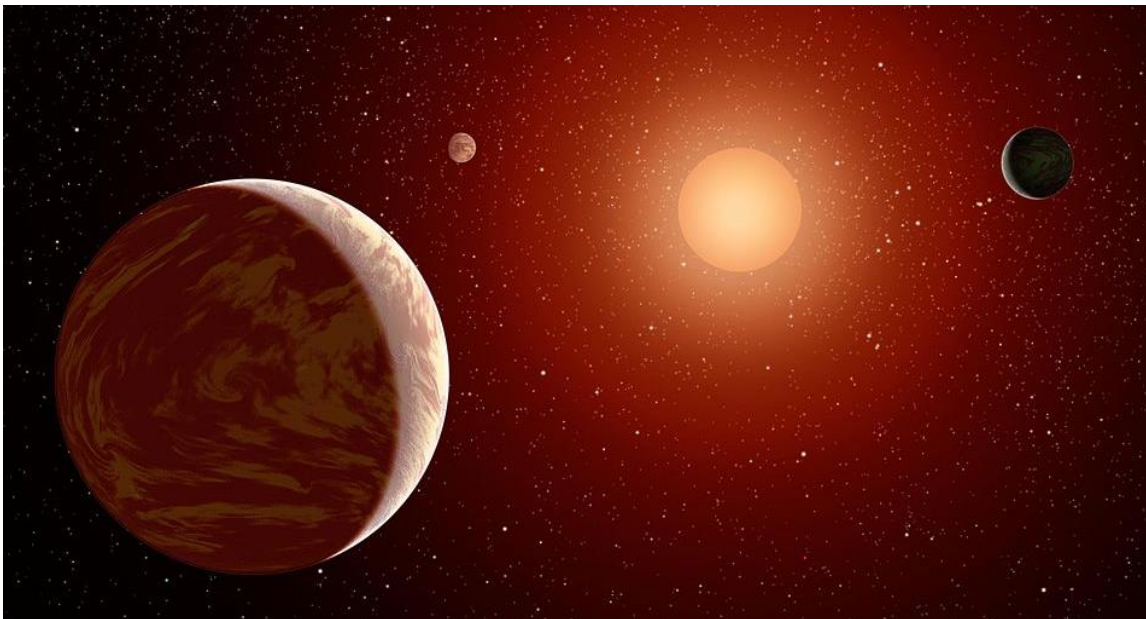
"All our craft and personnel are confirmed back aboard and all access airlocks have been closed and secured, Tina."

"Thank you, Dana. Frida, take us out of orbit and head towards the Solar System. Reena, calculate our jump to Earth. Once there, start calculating with SPIRIT a temporal jump to the year 2337. Aim for June 18, one week after our accidental departure to the past. We don't want to jump back too early and end up facing a double of our ship."

"That could be interesting, Tina." replied her navigator while smiling.

"Yeah! It also could be the perfect recipe for a truly fucked up historical paradox. ALL RIGHT PEOPLE, TIME TO GO HOME!"

CHAPTER 14 – HOME SWEET HOME



The Wolf 1061 System, 14.1 light years from Earth, in the Constellation Ophiuchus.

10:09 (Universal Time)

Friday, June 18, 2337 C.E.

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Arriving in orbit of the planet New Shouria (Wolf 1061c)

Wolf 1061 System, 14.1 light years from Earth, in Ophiuchus

Tina took a deep breath while looking at New Shouria and its moon, New Haven, now only a few million kilometers ahead of her ship. She then looked at the Koorivar sitting to her left in the V.I.P./Observer chair of the command platform.

“This will be the new home for your people, Vice-Governor. About 85,000 Koorivars already live on New Shouria. They are the original crew and passengers of your three evacuation ships, which we found and then rescued, plus their more recent offspring. The planet they now live on is actually very similar to Shouria in terms of local gravity, temperature and atmosphere composition and density and is illuminated by a red dwarf star, like Shouria. When we found this world and its moon, New Haven, it was populated by a wide variety of mostly non-sentient animal and marine life, plus had dense vegetation. I said mostly non-sentient animals because there does exist one intelligent race which is indigenous to New Shouria: the Kooroos. These are giant birds

with a very colorful coat of feathers, a long neck, a long feathery tail, two hind legs with sharp claws and two front legs cum arms with clawed hands. They have a language and a rudimentary writing system but are still at what we would call Stone Age technological level. They are definitely carnivorous predators and preyed on the land animals of the planet. Our first encounter with them was a bit violent but we quickly came to terms with them and they now coexist peacefully with your compatriots on the planet.”

“And the moon, what kind of life did you find there, Captain Forster?”

“Originally, there were only local mammals of varied sizes, plus small birds and fish. Since I turned it into a relocation world for dispossessed refugees and survivors from wars and natural disasters on Earth, I imported a variety of farm animals and built fish ponds and large hydroponic farms. I also had fruit trees from Earth planted around in a large scale. New Haven is now mostly an agrarian and pastoral world which concentrates on food production and has only a limited heavy industries base. Life on it is simple and peaceful and the refugees from Earth I resettled there are fast growing in number.”

“Your New Haven definitely sounds like a place which Koorivars would appreciate. Since it is much smaller than New Shouria, I suppose that the gravity on it is also much less, right?”

“Correct! While gravity on New Shouria is 1.3 Gs, the gravity on New Haven is only 0.73 Gs. That and the unspoiled nature on it makes it a popular touristic and vacation spot for citizens of the Spacers League. Well, enough about my world: let’s concentrate on New Shouria. I will now call Governor Sheraz, on New Shouria, to tell him that a big brick is about to fall on his head with the arrival of nearly half a million more mouths to feed and lodge. Talking of Governor Sheraz, may I give you a word of advice, Vice-Governor Keradek?”

“I am listening, Captain.”

“What I want to point to you is that technology, especially that of Space travel, has enormously evolved compared to what you knew on Shouria. Also, we have encountered many more sentient civilizations around our region of the galaxy, most of them friendly ones but also a couple of predatory and hostile races. Our ultimate fight with one of those predatory races, the Space Predators, actually was the cause of our involuntary travel to the past. Governor Sheraz has witnessed all this and also has been interacting with the Spacers League, of which he is a registered voting member of its High Council. You may technically overrank him in Koorivar administrative terms but he

has current knowledge and experience of this time period, while you don't. I thus strongly counsel you to cooperate and support him fully and to not try to supplant him or take his place. I am asking this for the good of all Koorivars and not out of partisanship towards Governor Sheraz, who is a good friend of mine. As for myself, I will do everything possible to help your people to relocate on New Shouria and build up new lives for themselves."

Keradek nodded slowly his elongated head while looking her in the eyes.

"This is a wise counsel, Captain Forster, and I will follow it. Know that I am no megalomaniac in search for personal power and that I will always pass the good of my people first."

In response, Tina gave him a slight smile.

"I wish that Human politicians and leaders, both past and present, could have been as reasonable as you are now, Vice-Governor. It could have averted a lot of pain and misery in our history. I will now call Governor Sheraz. I will connect your feed to my call, so that you can both watch it and participate in it."

Pushing a few buttons on the small command panels hooked to the armchairs of her command chair, Tina soon had the head and torso of Governor Sheraz appear on one of her video screens. Sheraz' reaction to seeing Tina was immediate and emotional.

"Tina? You are alive! Thank the stars for that! Where are you now?"

"On my NOSTROMO and approaching New Shouria's orbit. Me and my ship and crew are all well but our fight with the last Space Predator asteroid ship was, let's say, quite eventful. To keep it short, it committed suicide by trying to sucker us into an uncharted black hole. While that Predator ship was destroyed by it, we managed to pull away from it but in the process were accidentally thrown back in time by 2,800 years and ended in the Year 472 B.C.E. Thankfully, my science team and SPIRIT found a way to gradually return to the future by using the gravity of the Sun in a very specific way. While on the way back to the future, I decided to make a stop in the Year 1959 and to pay a visit to Shouria a few days before its destruction, so that I could rescue as many Koorivars as I could. I now have a total of 465,218 Koorivar refugees from Shouria aboard the NOSTROMO and I intend to drop them on your planet. We will thus have a lot of work to do together for quite a while, my friend."

"Nearly half a million Koorivars...on your ship." could only say at first Sheraz, completely stunned. "But we will need the help and assistance of the whole Spacers

League in order to get the necessary supplies, equipment and foodstuff for all these poor people.”

“I know and I thus am asking you to immediately send a request for emergency assistance to the High Council, as the governor of New Shouria. Could I also ask you to start preparing at once campsites for those refugees? My ship is presently as full as an egg and I will have food for those refugees for only a day or two at the most. I will tell Piotr, on New Haven, to send what he can in terms of fresh vegetable produces, but that could only be a temporary cure and a short one. The priority will be on tentage, camp equipment and furniture, portable generators and tons of vegetal foodstuff, enough to lodge and sustain half a million Koorivars. I will now call New Haven to ask for Piotr’s assistance. In the meantime, I will let you talk with Vice-Governor Keradek.”

“Keradek?” said Sheraz, stunned, before Keradek activated his link.

“Yes, it’s me, old friend. I was tasked by Governor Shuran to accompany our people, along with a small administrative support staff, so that we could provide leadership and support to them once on New Shouria. However, you are the Governor of New Shouria and I have no intentions to undermine or usurp your authority. I am thus at your full disposal, Sheraz.”

From stunned, Sheraz’ face showed clear relief and he then smiled to Keradek.

“Then, let’s do what is possible for our people...and welcome to New Shouria, Vice-Governor.”

On her side, the response by Piotr Romanski, the governor of New Haven, to Tina’s call was no less emotional and she quickly had to cut his flow of questions to her.

“Piotr, we will have plenty of time to talk together in the next few days. Right now, I need you to load up on shuttles all the stores of fresh produces available and to send them to New Shouria as quickly as possible. I have only one or two meals per person worth left for the refugees I have aboard the NOSTROMO and food will be their most critical priority. I will soon land directly on New Shouria, near its main city, so that I could more easily and more quickly unload my passengers. On top of gathering reserves of food for the refugees, could I ask you to send back to the NOSTROMO my squadron of heavy fighters I left in the system before departing in pursuit of the Space Predators?”

“I will call Major Nomura right away, Tina. I am sure that a certain copilot in her squadron will be particularly happy to rejoin the NOSTROMO.”

That indirect mention about her son Misha made Tina's heart accelerate for a moment.

"And I will anxiously await his arrival onboard, Piotr. I will now have to cut this conversation short: I will be quite busy in the hours to come."

Tina then cut that link with regret as she pictured the face of her teenage son in her mind.

11:36 (Universal Time)

Coastal waters near the city of New Shouriana

Planet New Shouria (Wolf 1061c)

Riak, a female adult Kooroo, was lazily flying near the surface of the sea off the coast of the large island where her family had its cave, looking for a nice big fish to catch with her hind claws, when she suddenly heard a loud voice from above speaking in Kooroo.

"WARNING, INCOMING SPACESHIP COMING DOWN."

Riak, who had heard similar voice warnings in the past when some of the big flying metal ships of the strangers came in to land on the island to disgorge passengers and cargo, looked up, twisting her long neck to do so. What she then saw nearly made her freeze and drop down in the ocean: most of the sky above her was now blotted by what looked like a huge metallic mass flying towards the coast while gradually coming down at the vertical. Riak then turned sharply to the right and started flying as fast as she could in order to get out of the way of that flying behemoth. She went into hover when she judged that she was now at a safe distance but quickly had to back further away as the incoming spaceship proved to be of truly monstrous size, being easily as big as a large mountain. That spaceship finally landed in shallow coastal waters next to the big settlement of the aliens, its landing legs not even half submerged by the sea. Ryak, still in hover mode, watched on as a sort of ramp extended out from the landing leg closest to the shore, with its extremity soon resting on firm ground. As soon as that ramp was in place, a long line of ground vehicles started rolling down that ramp, going towards the nearby alien settlement and dropping off thousands of aliens there before returning to the giant spaceship. Ryak was still watching that process after resuming normal flying when she saw a dozen much smaller ships fly down from high above and then enter the giant spaceship. Reasoning that all this was way beyond her comprehension, Ryak resumed her fishing: whatever was happening, her family still had to eat.

12:15 (Universal Time)

Heavy Fighter Hangar Complex

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, on the surface of Shouria

Having disembarked from his heavy fighter with the rest of its crew, Misha followed his comrades towards their squadron briefing room, as was customary after returning aboard the NOSTROMO following a flight or a mission. He, like many others froze for an instant on seeing a small crowd of men, women and children waiting next to the entrance of the briefing room: both of his parents and his younger sister were part of the crowd of family members. Misha and many other crewmembers then broke into a run, to brake at the last moment and hug his family, starting with Tina.

“Mom, it’s so nice to see you back safely.”

“And I’m happy to be back with you, Misha.”

Next, Misha shared a bear hug with his father before crouching down to hug and kiss little Janet.

“It’s nice to see you too, Sis.”

Janet kissed him as well on one cheek before looking him in the eyes with a smile.

“There was no need to fear for me, Brother: Mom had things under control.”

Surprised to hear that, Misha looked up at Tina, who gave him an embarrassed smile.

“Well, Janet may be overstating things a bit, Misha. The ones we truly need to thank for our safe return are Roshana Golshan, our top physicist, and SPIRIT. Together, they devised a way by which we could return to our proper time period after an uncharted black hole made us go back in time by 28 centuries. But I partly came here now in order to debrief your squadron about what precisely happened to the NOSTROMO after we went chasing that last Space Predator ship. The good news is that I now firmly believe that we are finally rid of those monsters: their last ship intentionally committed suicide by trying to sucker us into an uncharted black hole in the region of VY Canis Majoris, some 3,900 light years away. We were able to escape the gravity well of that black hole, while the Predator ship didn’t.”

“You chased that giant asteroid ship this far from here? Wow! Only that will make your flight a truly epic one, Mom.”

“Well, we did break a few records during that pursuit, on top of ending up traveling through time both ways. However, the important thing is that we are back in

one piece and with a big bonus: nearly half a million Koorivars which we went to pick up on Shouria in the year 1959, mere days before the planet was going to be destroyed by a wandering brown dwarf. However, this means that we will have to put all our efforts and resources into helping those refugees to reestablish themselves on New Shouria. Since the NOSTROMO will have to concentrate on helping that mass resettlement, this means that you and your fighter squadron will have the prime responsibility for patrolling and defending this system for at the least a few weeks and months.”

“You can count on me and my comrades, Mom: we will have your back.”

“That’s my son speaking!” said in a proud tone Michel, Misha’s father, at the same time that he patted his left shoulder.

14:05 (Universal Time)

Monday, June 21, 2337

Command meeting room, Executive Apartments Level

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, landed next to the coast, near New Shouriana

“Piotr, you old rascal! It is nice to see you again. But please, have a seat.”

“Thanks, Tina! I could have sent you my food production report electronically but I really wanted to see you in person again. In truth, you spend so little time around New Haven, being in Space the vast majority of the time. Your house there is starting to have spider webs all over it, so little you use it.”

“I thought that I had a robotic maid to take care of that, Piotr.” joked Tina in reply to her old ship’s purser and commercial agent. **Piotr Romanski** had now been the governor of New Haven for over sixteen years, managing the colony there for Tina with his customary competence and utter honesty and making sure that the Earth refugees she had resettled on New Haven were well cared for, well fed and happy.



“By the way, Piotr, how are the passengers I was originally bringing in for some tourism on New Haven doing now, after they accompanied me on our involuntary travel in time? Are they satisfied with their vacation on our world?”

“I haven’t heard of any complaints up to now, Tina. In fact, I heard rumors about how those involuntary time tourists were excited by what they saw in the past. Imagine: being able to brag that you were able to watch from above some gladiatorial games in

the Roman Coliseum and then watch as well some fighting between the English and the French during the Hundred Year War.”

“Are they saying anything about the burning of Joan of Arc at the stake in Rouen?” asked Tina, her expression and tone now most sober. “I know that, for me and many in my crew, that was a heartbreaking thing to watch.”

“Actually, I heard about that, Tina. Nobody is talking about it other than in a very serious and respectful tone. One tourist from France did ask one of my officials if you were planning to make a video documentary about that, which could then be shown around France. It seems that, even after all those centuries, the story of Joan of Arc is still resonating deeply around France.”

“I am not surprised by that, Piotr. That poor girl fully deserves the admiration she won in history. I will definitely ask Lester Barnaby to look at producing a good video documentary about her death...when we will have dug ourselves out of that humongous refugee resettlement problem.”

“Yes, that! I am happy to tell you that, at the cost of delaying some deliveries of fresh foodstuff contracted for by various worlds of the Spacers League, I was able to gather a total of 8,740 tons of fresh or preserved vegetables, cereals and fruits from our refrigerated warehouses. That foodstuff started arriving on New Shouria three days ago. However, we had to empty our warehouses in order to do that. Our next shipments of foodstuff in the coming days and weeks will thus be much less. We will definitely need the help of the rest of the Spacers League in order to be able to feed adequately all those refugees in the long term. While I don't want to sound cheap about this, I must ask you if we are giving all this without any compensation, or can I hope to get some kind of payment for those foodstuffs? All those produces were due to be sold to various customers, with the payments for them meant to cover our production costs and to finance our budget for New Haven and its continued development.”

“Don't feel bad about asking this, Piotr: I realize perfectly well that the economy of New Haven is dependent on being able to sell its agricultural products around the Spacers League and on Earth. However, the priority was and still is to feed all those poor people who lost everything, including their homeworld. What would be the point of saving them if only to then let them starve here, on New Shouria? As for planning their transportation to here, it's not as if we voluntarily went away with the intention of traveling back in time. Once in the distant past, it would have been downright criminal to

not go get those people on New Shouria, when knowing that we had the means to do so.”

“Nobody but a complete, selfish asshole would blame you for taking the decisions you took, Tina.”

“I know. To answer your question, yes, you will get payments for all that foodstuff. While cramming my ship with refugees, I asked Governor Shuran to also prepare for pickup his reserves of planting seeds and his gold and precious metals reserves, telling him that his people would need those in order to be resettled properly and be sustained on New Shouria. Know as well that Vice-Governor Keradek came with the refugees, along with a small team of administrators, so that he could help administer their needs. You are thus welcomed to go speak with him and with Governor Sheraz about being paid for our shipments of food. In this case, charge no more than their production cost: I don’t want us to make any profit on that foodstuff. Also, you may offer them to plant for them part of their seeds from New Shouria in fields on New Haven: we do have a lot more arable land available than on New Shouria, which is still mostly forested and where food production is concentrated in a few large hydroponics gardens.”

“We could concentrate on growing their fruit trees, which tend to be uneconomical to grow in hydroponics gardens due to their height.” suggested Piotr, making Tina nod her head once.

“A good idea indeed. We...”

At that moment a call came in from the bridge, interrupting their conversation.

“Captain, a fleet of seven ships just appeared from the direction of Providence. We are also getting a call for you from Chairman Mercier, aboard the battleship YAMATO.”

“Yes!” exclaimed joyfully Tina. “Help has arrived! Let me take that call, Piotr, but stay and listen to it.”

Tina then used the intercom terminal at her table position, getting the image of the Chairman of the High Council of the Spacers League to appear on the screen.

“Chairman Mercier, you can’t know how happy I am to see you now.”

“And me and the whole of the High Council are elated to see that you and your valiant ship are back, safe and sound. You will have to brief me in detail about your odyssey in time once we meet in person: the report you sent to Providence was a bit short on details.”

"That was actually intentional, Madam Chairwoman. I will explain why once we are together and in private. May I ask what you are bringing with you, Madam Chairwoman?"

"You may, Tina. The YAMATO is escorting in four heavy refrigerated cargo ships loaded with cereals and vegetables, plus one heavy cargo ship loaded with emergency tentage and field equipment sufficient to house 400,000 persons."

Tina couldn't help pushing out a deep sigh of relief on hearing that.

"Thank the stars for that help, Madam Chairwoman. It will do wonders to the morale of those poor Koorivar refugees. While I kept 90,000 refugees in the emergency quarters of my NOSTROMO, which are still quite comfortable, over 375,000 Koorivars were disembarked on the planet, since they were kept up to then in our sports stadiums and our Medieval World's fields in very rudimentary conditions. Those were then housed temporarily with the permanent residents of New Shouria and in the various touristic resorts of the planet. Your field equipment and tentage will do a lot to help relieve the overcrowding on the planet."

"Hey, what are friends for, if not to help in difficult times?" replied Jeanne Mercier, smiling. "I will come aboard the NOSTROMO once my fleet will be in orbit of New Shouria. Then, we will talk...in private."

"I am looking forward to that, Madam Chairwoman."

Mercier then ended the communications link, leaving Tina to look and smile at Piotr Romanski.

"The Spacers League came true in our time of need, Piotr."

"Thank the stars for that, Tina. I think that I better go speak with Governor Sheraz now about planting some of the seeds from Shouria into our fields on New Haven."

"Yes! I will keep you apprised on how my talks with Chairman Mercier will go. Have a nice day, Piotr."

"You too, Tina."

Romanski then got up from his chair and left the meeting room. Now alone, Tina thought for a moment about what the future of those Koorivar refugees would be, then got up herself to go to her apartment: it was time for her to give some precious time to her reunited family after those stressful weeks in the past.

"COHORT, PRESENT...ARMS!"

On the command of Jehanne De Domrémy, the 490 security androids of the First Cohort, already impeccably lined up three-deep on both sides of the red carpet which had been unrolled up to the aft access ramp of the shuttle carrying Chairman Mercier, presented arms in the kind of perfect coordination only machines and robots could achieve. Jeanne Mercier, who had just come out of her shuttle with a small retinue, couldn't help being impressed by such a display and whispered to Mary Shu, the minister for health and social affairs in her cabinet, who was closely following her.

"Decidedly, Tina's security androids always make for an impressive display."

"That they do, Madam Chairwoman. They are also a redoubtable fighting force, as their performance in combat against the Space Predators has proved."

"Indeed!" said Mercier before walking up to a waiting Tina Forster, standing near the end of the red carpet. Both women then shared a warm hug and kisses on the cheeks.

"Welcome aboard the NOSTROMO, Madam Chairwoman. I have V.I.P. suites waiting for you and your retinue. I propose that you take the time to install yourself first in your quarters before we talk together."

"Agreed!"

Tina then turned partly around and made a sign for the three taxi carts waiting at the other end of the red carpet to come forward. The three small electric vehicles soon stopped next to her, with Tina, Mercier and her five followers sitting down in them, while the shuttle's crew put the luggage of the visitors on the carts. As the carts rolled past the ranks of androids still at attention, Mary Shu's eyes fixed on one of the androids they were passing by. That android was a tall woman with a beautiful oval face and long blond hair.

"But...that's Taylor Swift, the famous singer! She's a security android?"

"She is, Minister Shu, like the rest of her musical group," said Tina. "I would however appreciate if you could keep this to yourself. Some in the Spacers League who have little love for my androids could decide to boycott her group because of their nature. There are unfortunately still too many people around the Spacers League with unreasonable fear of my androids, especially on the worlds controlled by the Pallas Mining Industries."

"Talking of the Pallas Mining Industries, Tina, know that it has broken up after the death of Jacobus Stein and the scandal concerning the Europa Station affair. While its CEO, Michael Kendrik, still controls the Trappist-1 System, Mu and El Dorado have just

seceded from the control of the Pallas Mining Industries and are now claiming to be independent systems. While their respective governors are still officially in charge of those two systems, we believe that Paul Stein, who moved to El Dorado, is now pulling the strings there.”

A spark of anger and hatred came to Tina’s eyes at the mention of Paul Stein.

“That flaming asshole! His father Jacobus was ten times the man he is. And how are they calling themselves now, if not ‘Pallas Mining Industries’? ‘Assholes Incorporated’?”

Jeanne Mercier, like Mary Shu, couldn’t help chuckle briefly at the crude joke Tina had just made.

“It would actually befit them well, I must say. Their new official name is now ‘Stein Mining Group’.”

“Well, that Stein Mining Group just earned itself a place on my black list of customers to avoid, Madam Chairwoman.”

“Please, just call me ‘Jeanne’ while in private, Tina. ‘Madam Chairwoman’ sounds so impersonal to me.”

“As you wish, Jeanne.”

Some twelve minutes later, the carts delivered their passengers and luggage to two V.I.P. suites on the Executive Apartments Level, in the core section. However, instead of taking the time to unpack her things, Jeanne Mercier asked Tina to go speak in private at once.

“My aide can take care of the unpacking. Let’s go to your conference room.”

“As you wish, Jeanne.”

Mercier, carrying only her laptop bag, then followed Tina to her command meeting room, situated on the same floor. Once seated at the long table, she looked with a sober expression at Tina.

“So, what was so sensitive in your mind to stop you from putting it in your report, Tina?”

“Basically, the processus by which my ship traveled back in time and then returned to the future. I wish to keep the details about that to myself.”

“Why?”

“For the same reason I hid the existence of my matter converter cannon, Jeanne: for fear of it being misused by misguided people. Do you realize the kind of catastrophic

damage to history someone intent on changing the past to his or her profit could do with the ability to travel in time? Even though our travel to the past was purely involuntary and we then traveled back to the future in five successive steps, I decided from the start to avoid any direct contact with the people of the past, save for when we saved Queen Boadicea and her two daughters from certain death.”

Jeanne Mercier, who had not known any details about the NOSTROMO’s travel through time, stiffened in her chair: thanks to the very short report which Tina had sent to her via drone courier, she still didn’t know which centuries the NOSTROMO had visited while in the past.

“Queen who?”

“Queen Boadicea, the Queen of the Iceni, a Celtic tribe living in England at the time of the Roman occupation. Didn’t you hear about her during your history classes in school? She’s considered a British national heroine, the same way as Jehanne De Domrémy was considered a national heroine in France.”

“Uh, that was nearly 2,300 years ago, Tina. Most of my historical studies were centered on the Industrial Revolution Age and on the wars of the Twentieth Century. So, why did you save her in particular?”

“Because the circumstances of her death and that of her two daughters were never known, except for a number of rumors and historical suppositions and because picking her up would not have influenced history in any way. I also did it because of simple humanity, Jeanne.”

“Alright, tell me more about your time travel and about which years you visited in the past?”

“First, about my initial travel to the past. It happened when we made a desperate try to escape the gravity pull of an uncharted black hole in the Canoris Majoris region, some 3,900 light years away, in which the last of the Space Predator ships tried to sucker us in. By the way, I firmly believe that we are now definitely rid of those monsters: their last act was a truly suicidal one and was meant to destroy my NOSTROMO as well as their own ship.”

Jeanne Mercier relaxed in her chair while letting out a breath of relief.

“Thank the stars! I hope that you are right about this, Tina: those monsters cost us millions of our citizens. Alright, in which year did you end up when you emerged from your jump to the past?”

"After we emerged in deep Space, we made our way to Earth, where observations from orbit told us we were in the Year 472 B.C.E., this after traveling back by 2,809 years. Once we knew where and when we were, my scientific team and SPIRIT went on to try to find how we could possibly return to our proper time. That was no piece of cake, I assure you, and it took us quite a while to figure out a possible way to come back to our time. When we did our first, cautious attempt at traveling forward in time, we ended up in the Year 60 C.E., where we were able to spot Queen Boadicea and her daughters, who were being hunted down by the Romans. We picked them at night, in a forest, out of sight of anybody else, then flew them to my ship. From there, our second forward time jump led us to the Year 1066 C.E., in time to record from orbit the Battle of Hastings, in which the Normans took control of Britain from the Anglo-Saxons. We didn't stay long in that year before jumping to the Year 1431, where we recorded the last few days and death of Jehanne De Domrémy."

Jeanne Mercier then stiffened again in her chair at the mention of that name.

"Joan of Arc? Don't tell me that you saved her too, Tina?"

"No, we didn't, Jeanne. We unfortunately had to simply watch her die, burned in public at the stake in Rouen. What we did was to alleviate much of her pain and suffering through the surreptitious injection of powerful pain killers. If you wish so, I could show you later on those recordings of her we took in 1431."

"Please do, Tina. I would love to see those recordings. So, what did you do then?"

"Then, we jumped to the Year 1959, in time to go to Shouria and evacuate those poor Koorivars we could accommodate on my ship, and this mere days before the wandering brown dwarf could destroy Shouria. From there, we did our final jump to this year."

"Wait!" said Mercier, suddenly suspicious. "Those dates you traveled to; they sound as if you were able to precisely target them before jumping forward in time."

Tina nodded her head slowly at that question, now looking most sober.

"Yes, we were, after our first jumps, which taught us how to control our temporal jumps. Our three last jumps landed us within one day of the date we targeted. Basically, my ship now knows how to travel in time at will, both to the past and to the future, and this with a precision of less than a day. That fact is what I wanted to hide and protect from all others but you, Jeanne. And forget about any crazy scheme some

could think of about arranging a time tourism agency of some kind: the risks to the integrity of history are simply too great.”

“But, your time traveling method would allow us to study in depth history and resolve many mysteries we still are looking answers for. I am sure that we could control such time travel tightly enough to prevent abuses, Tina.”

“Is studying history worth the risk of destroying it, Jeanne?” asked bluntly Tina, making Jeanne Mercier pause and think. The latter finally shook her head in response.

“No! You are right, Tina: history is not to be toyed with. Too bad: to study history on the spot would have been so marvelous. Are you sure that there would be no way to do this with no risks to history, Tina?”

It was then the turn of Tina to pause and think.

“Alright, I will think about it. However, I make no promises about that, Jeanne. If I conclude that there is no way to study history on the spot without risks, then I will forget this. In any way, even if I agree to such a project, I will keep the secret of how to travel in time to myself and to no one else. I already regret my decision to share the secret of my matter conversion cannon, especially now that I believe that the threat of the Space Predators is gone.”

“Tina, you always proved to care for others first and foremost and are one of the most principled and responsible persons I ever knew. Whatever you decide about this, I will accept.”

“Thank you, Jeanne. Now, to return to our problem of Koorivar refugees...”

16:51 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, June 23, 2337

V.I.P. Suite Number One, Executive Apartments Level

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, on the surface of New Shouria

Jeanne Mercier was finishing packing her personal travel kit when the door chime of her bedroom rang. Looking in the security monitor of her door and seeing that it was Tina Forster, Jeanne unlocked and opened the door, letting in Tina.

“Hi, Tina! You came to wish me a good trip back to Providence?”

“That and something else. I would like you to read this and commit it to memory, then to put your thumbprint on it as proof that you read and accepted it.”

Tina then handed to Jeanne an electronic pad with an integrated fingerprint reader, the kind of communication pad used to transmit highly classified documents. Jeanne read the classification level printed at the top and bottom of the front page and looked at Tina with some misgivings.

“Top Secret – For Chairman Mercier’s Eyes Only... What is this, Tina?”

“Read and you will understand, Jeanne.”

Jeanne did so, quickly reading the two-page document before looking up at Tina. Then she put her right thumb on the fingerprint reader to register the fact that she had read and approved the document. Giving the pad back to Tina, Jeanne gave her a sober look.

“So, no copies, no records and no knowledge of this except for the two of us?”

“Us and SPIRIT, which will be the ultimate guardian of this secret. This way, nobody will know enough to be able to misuse our new capability. My science and history departments will take care of selecting the targets of our project team...under my strict personal supervision.”

“And how will you disseminate the data you will find through your project, Tina?”

“I will pass that data to you, so that you can disseminate further without revealing its source. If someone asks how it was obtained, simply say that, before returning to this year, we had to make a number of side trips in order to perfect our temporal jump techniques. However, due to the high sensitivity of all this, my team will study only events which are truly worth it.”

“Alright, I buy that. Thanks for coming up so quickly with an idea about this, Tina.”

“It was my pleasure, Jeanne. Have a good trip back to Providence.”

Tina then shared a hug and kisses with Jeanne before turning around and leaving the bedroom. The Chairwoman of the High Council of the Spacers League, in essence the one most powerful person in Humanity, watched on as the door slid close behind Tina.

“Decidedly, this woman will never cease to astonish me.”

CHAPTER 15 – PROJECT TEMPUS

08:46 (Universal Time)

Friday, June 25, 2337

Tina's command office, adjacent to the ship's command meeting room

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, on the surface of New Shouria (Wolf 1061c)

Tina's private command office, normally used for private conversations with members of her staff or with important guests, was getting quite crowded, with 26 androids standing in front of her desk and with Roshana Golshan, Samuel Shmelling, Ahmed Jibril, Jehanne De Domrémy and SPIRIT's android avatar sitting on each side of her. Once everybody who was supposed to be present was in, she nodded once and smiled to those facing her.

"Good morning to all of you, my friends. I called you in so that we could talk about a top-secret new project of ours called 'Project Tempus'. Project Tempus is a direct result of our involuntary misadventure in time we recently lived through, during which we visited five separate periods in the past and went to save all those Koorivars on Shouria in 1959. When Chairman Mercier proposed to me to use our new capability to travel through time in order to study and document history, I balked at first at that idea, mostly because of the dangers that someone could then either accidentally or voluntarily modify history by his or her actions and causing a disaster of immense proportion. Then, after thinking about it and about how such time travel work could be done without risking the integrity of history as we know it, I came up with a concept which I then presented to Chairman Mercier, a concept which she accepted and vetted. That project is Project Tempus, which we will now discuss. First, know that this is a top-secret project known only to me, Chairman Mercier and to those of you now present in this room. Any further dissemination about its details and even existence is strictly forbidden without my prior approval. The danger of encouraging some megalomaniac or irresponsible idiot into going back in the past in order to quote model unquote history according to their wishes is simply too great to reveal its existence to the public, or even to other members of the High Council. Now, to the reason I asked you all to be here..."

Tina then looked at Jehanne De Domrémy, sitting to her right.

“In order to keep this project as discrete as possible, I decided that the field temporal agents to be used in Project Tempus should all be security androids, for the following reasons: you can’t divulge its secrets through so-called loose talk or because of alcohol or drug use; you are not subject to basic human instincts, emotions and temptations like hate, lust, greed for power or money and prejudice; you are tougher, more powerful physically than Humans, can fly by yourself and have integrated force shield generators, plus can record images and sounds without the use of external devices. You can also assimilate in minutes a new language as stored in our historical databanks, something which would normally take Humans months and years to do. Next, about why you were personally selected as possible temporal agents and were invited here this morning. For this, I asked your Chief Centurion, Jehanne De Domrémy, to select those of you who she judged to be the most qualified and valuable candidates for the job, subject to my final approval. Many of you actually work on their off-security duties as teachers of history in our onboard schools and university, thanks to their own personal profiles loaded into them, which reflect historical persons who existed. Your already extensive knowledge of history, which includes history classes discussions and debates with human students, will certainly prove most useful as temporal agents...if you are selected. Others in you were asked to come thanks to their expertise in flying and operating our spacecraft, from assault shuttles to passenger shuttles and command cutters. Those flying crews, while mainly dedicated to flying duties only, could in certain circumstances participate in ground missions if deemed of particular value for that mission due to their specialized skills. Now, please understand that, as temporal agents, your sole mission will be to observe, record and study history as it happens, not to affect or modify it through your actions. Total impartiality will thus be a prime quality for our temporal agents and is another reason for choosing security androids like you for this job: you will be able to watch the most atrocious or criminal acts without feeling the obligation to intervene to stop such acts, something human agents would have a hard time to do. The only exception to that would be cases when recorded history is either silent or highly speculative about the end of a study case, like when we saved Queen Boadicea in the Year 60 C.E. We unfortunately have to accept the fact that History is full of tragedies and horrors. Part of the reasons for studying history is in fact the wish to learn the lessons from history, in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes. Now that I have exposed to you the goals and main directives of Project Tempus, do any of you feel like you are not ready or do not wish to participate in this project?”

Tina then held her breath as she looked around at the crowd of androids facing her, to see if anyone would back away. To her pride and relief, none did, making her nod her head while smiling.

“Thank you for volunteering for Project Tempus, my friends. Do you have any questions up to now?”

Augustus and Christina Vasa raised one hand each at the same time but then exchanged silent radio messages before **Christina Vasa**, modeled on the personality and appearance of a Swedish queen of the Renaissance Era, spoke up.



“Tina, me and Augustus wanted to ask the same question, mainly this: if our project is supposed to stay top secret, how would we disseminate the new knowledge and visual records from our missions in the past without making the existence of our project obvious?”

“An excellent question, Christina, and one which I asked myself at first. Basically, we will explain the existence of our new historical data on a number of experimental temporal jumps made by us during our involuntary return trip to the past and then the future, experimental jumps made in order to refine our jump parameters without risking the NOSTROMO itself and its whole crew and occupants. I know that this may sound a bit thin as an explanation but know that me and Chairman Mercier agreed to keep strictly confidential the details of our trip in time. Nobody but us and Chairman Mercier thus know where and when we went in the past, or whether we used one of our auxiliary craft to prepare our path back to the future. Even the passengers aboard the NOSTROMO at the time wouldn’t be able to say how many time periods this ship and its craft visited. Any other questions?”

Lakshmi of Jansi, modeled after one of the leaders of the Indian Sepoy Mutiny against the British in the mid-19th Century, raised her hand next.

“Yes, Lakshmi?”

“Who will decide which time period or historical event we will go observe and record, Tina?”

“Basically, all of us. After this meeting is over, I will ask you to take some time today to think about cases or particular periods in history which you think are insufficiently documented or explained and which you think could be worthy of study. You will then bring by hand to Professor Shmelling a printed list of the events and times you deem of interest. Professor Shmelling will then review that list with me, Roshana

and Jehanne, in order to select the time targets worthy of Project Tempus involvement. A specific mission team will then be selected for each mission, according to the competences and knowledge required for that mission.”

Another android, Harrison Ford, next raised his hand for a question.

“Tina, what type of craft will we use for Project Tempus?”

“One of our command cutters, which are well-provided with long-range sensors, cameras and telescopes and are perfect for discrete reconnaissance missions. Since our ship will not be able to take off from New Shouria until all of our Koorivar passengers will have been able to disembark and since building new accommodations and facilities for them on the planet will take a good two months, we will have plenty of time to prepare before launching our first Project Tempus mission. I have thus ordered our command cutter AEGIS to be extensively modified in order to be our dedicated temporal research ship. It will have extra armament, stealth features and autonomy of operation compared to our two other cutters. I expect the AEGIS to be ready for its first test jumps in three to four weeks, following which your flight crew will do experimental temporal jumps, in order to calibrate its Koomak Drive. Right now, we have jump calibrations only for the NOSTROMO and you will understand that, due to the huge mass difference between the NOSTROMO and the AEGIS, the temporal calibrations are going to be quite different. Both Roshana Golshan and SPIRIT will accompany you during those experimental jumps, so that they will be available to resolve on the spot any quantum jump data problem you may encounter then.”

“Then, if we are to do test jumps to some time periods of the past, why not have a full ground team aboard as well, so that we could exploit at once any interesting opportunity we would encounter?”

Tina exchanged looks with her project command staff, not having thought about this before, then smiled back at Ford.

“Harrison, your proposition is an excellent one. I accept it! Your first test jumps will thus be fully manned mission flights. Manned... Gee! I dislike so much that term: it is so paternalistic and misogynistic. Let’s say instead ‘fully crewed mission’. Alright, you may all go back to your places and start thinking about your list of possible events to investigate. Professor Shmelling will be eagerly awaiting your suggestions in the meantime. You are dismissed!”

Everybody then left the office, leaving Tina alone with Roshana Golshan and Samuel Shmelling.

“Well, what do you think? What kind of events will our people select as being worthy of study? Humans would probably choose famous battles or important events, like crownings or deaths of famous persons. Personally, I would be partial to naval battles of the past, mostly because I am a big student of past naval warfare. And you, Roshana?”

“Me? I would like to document the first steps of Humanity into Space, which also coincided with a very tense period of History we called ‘The Cold War’.”

“And you, Professor?”

Samuel Shmelling thought for a moment before answering Tina.

“What about the one factor which most influenced History: the Human factor? We still don’t know for sure why some historical persons took the decisions they took. As well, the people of the Spacers League have little to no idea about the living conditions our ancestors had to endure. Maybe, if they could see how fortunate their present lives are, they will learn some extra altruism and compassion and will rein in their constant demands for more.”

“Damn, I like your last point, Samuel. And what period of history would be best to illustrate such misery?”

In response, Shmelling could only shrug his shoulders.

“How about any period before the 22nd Century? Each century before that had its horror stories and tragedies, from devastating wars, epidemics, famines, widespread poverty and dictatorial rules. Unfortunately, injustice, pain and suffering have been a constant in Human history, Tina. Even today, we still have regional wars, dictatorial rules and natural disasters afflicting Earth, while the episode with the Space Predators have shown that misery could also come from Deep Space.”

Tina was left quiet and silent by that, as it only reflected reality, past and present.

CHAPTER 16 – FIRST PROJECT TEMPUS MISSION



23:08 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, July 20, 2337

Hangar Number Seven, Small Craft Hangar Complex

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, on the surface of New Shouria

Wolf 1061 System, 14.1 light years from Earth

Tina was discussing at the foot of the aft access ramp of the command cutter AEGIS with its pilot, Harrison Ford, when a small convoy of taxi carts and anti-gravity cargo plates entered the small craft hangar they were in. While the taxi carts stopped next to Tina and Harrison, the cargo plates continued on and entered the command cutter through its access ramp. Tina's eyes hooked on one cargo plate which carried containers bearing the warning symbol for toxic chemicals. Intrigued, she looked at SPIRIT, who was stepping out of the lead taxi cart, and pointed at the cargo plate in question.

“Uh, what is that cargo plate carrying, SPIRIT?”

In response, the AI avatar gave her a disarming smile.

“They are insecticides and strong disinfectants which will be needed to deal with lice and other parasites commonly found in the distant past.”

“Lice?”

“Yes: lice. They have not been a problem on Earth for over 200 years but, in the Renaissance, the Middle Ages and the Industrial Revolution, that was another story. Even the rich people of the Renaissance, who wore wigs, were full of them. Parasite infestation was also the main cause of the various instances of plague epidemics which afflicted Humanity’s past.”

“Wow! I didn’t think about that.”

“Well, Professor Shmelling, who read plenty about that historical problem, was the one who warned me to bring some of those chemicals with us, along with some extra vaccines and medical supplies for the two human passengers who will be on the AEGIS. Even our android field agents may have to use these chemicals, in order to disinfect and clean the fake hair on their scalps. We also packed plenty of spare sets of historical clothes, so that our agents can take a disinfecting shower and change after returning from the surface.”

“Gee! This would tend to kill my desire to visit the past in person: I hate bugs, be they big or small.”

“Well,” said Samuel Shmelling with a smile, “we will also have to contend with diseases which are long gone from this time period, like syphilis, cholera, smallpox and typhoid, on top of having to keep an eye out for pickpockets, cut-throats and other petty criminals roaming the streets of the past. Both me and Roshana, while not scheduled to go down to the surface, still got a number of vaccine shots during the past weeks. If any medical emergency strikes us, then our young paramedic, Greta Norstrom, will be on standby to help. As for our android agents, Ben will be ready to repair any backstabbing they may suffer while walking through the streets of Nineteenth Century London.”

Tina eyed briefly both Greta Norstrom and Ben Affleck, the later a qualified android repair technician, before looking soberly at Roshana Golshan.

“You know how precious you are to all of us, Roshana. We need you in order to continue studying in depth this time travel mechanism, so please don’t take any unnecessary risks while in the past. Avoid going down to the surface if at all possible, as you are simply irreplaceable as our top astrophysicist.”

“Just for that, and not simply for the little me?” replied in jest Roshana, making Tina gently smile.

“Roshana, you know that everybody on this ship loves you. Still, be careful while in the past, all of you.”

Tina then hugged in turn each of the sixteen members of the Project Tempus team, both the human ones and the androids, before they climbed aboard the modified command cutter assigned to the project. Walking away to a safe distance in the hangar, Tina then watched as the AEGIS, a wedge-shaped craft some fifty meters-long and thirty meters-wide, silently rose from the deck of the hangar and approached its airtight door, which was in the process of opening. It then slowly flew out of the hangar and into the circulation rotunda connected to the two access tunnels which let small craft fly in and out of the NOSTROMO. As the AEGIS cycled through the first set of armored airlocks leading to the outside, Tina was already on her way back to the ship's bridge: there was still plenty to do to finish accommodating on New Shouria the half million Koorivars she had saved from their doomed homeworld.

After flying out of the NOSTROMO, Harrison Ford turned his command cutter and started climbing steeply while accelerating, heading out of the atmosphere of New Shouria. A few minutes more and the AEGIS was out of the planet's atmosphere and flying away into Space. That was when Ford looked at his navigator, Christian Bale.

“Time to jump to the Solar System, Christian. Once there, SPIRIT and Roshana will take care of calculating our first temporal jump, using the gravity pull of the Sun.”

“Understood! Pointing at the Sun now... jump calculated and ready to engage... Jumping now!”

The usual brief orange flash of light produced when a Koomak Drive generator was powered then permeated the small bridge sphere of the command cutter for a fraction of a second, followed by the image of the Sun appearing on their frontal screens. Bale then looked at Roshana Golshan and SPIRIT, who were sitting in the row of passenger seats behind the crew stations.

“Time to do your magic, Roshana. How accurate do you think our temporal jump will be, considering the differences in mass and size between the NOSTROMO and our cutter?”

“To be frank, we will be in uncharted territory, Christian, so I can't promise that we will arrive within one year or even ten years from our target date. The difference in mass ratio is still something we theorized about, which is precisely why we are conducting this test mission. We will have to firm up our theory through the good old trial

and error method. For this first jump, we will go for a near maximum long jump of 900 years and then see how accurate our jump will have been. We will then use a short jump of a few years to get to our first target date of April 20, 1429. You guys are ready?"

"Do we have a choice?" joked Ford, making Roshana grin.

"No! Then, hold on to your pants, people. Entering the jump parameters in our navigation computer now... It is now in charge of effecting the jump."

Harrison Ford and his copilot, Stacy Keibler, sat back in their seats and let go their flight control sticks, allowing the cutter's main computer to take control of their craft for the temporal jump. When it initiated their jump while accelerating at a tangent just past the Sun, there was a distinct greenish tint to the flash of orange light they saw as the images on their screens completely changed.

Harrison Ford got active as soon as their jump was completed and gave a few orders to his flight crew.

"Christian, find where we are exactly. Allison, what does Earth look like? Are there artificial lights visible on its surface?"

"We are some 0.8 Astronomical Units from Earth, which is in our lower left quadrant." answered Bale.

"No visible artificial lights on Earth. The electro-magnetic spectrum is completely empty: we are definitely in the non-technological past of Earth."

"Okay, our next task will be to establish the present date as accurately as we can, so that I could calculate the degree of precision of our jump and adjust our jump equations." said Roshana, making Ford nod his head once.

"Right! Let's go get ourselves into a low Earth orbit. Professor Shmelling, what would be the best way for us to establish with reasonable precision the actual date we are in?"

"Our agents will have to go down and ask a local about that, but not any local: most people of this time are illiterate and have only a vague notion of the calendar date. Our best bet will be to go to a church, monastery or convent, where they have to follow strictly the Christian calendar in order to respect the various religious events on their calendar. But let's do that in Western Europe, please. Eastern Europe uses the Julian calendar, which is different from the Gregorian calendar, which we still use today."

“Got that! Which of our agents would be best suited for this ground reconnaissance mission, in your opinion?”

“Definitely Jehanne. Her namesake was from this century, if we are indeed in the Fifteenth Century. However, she should go dressed as a simple peasant girl, instead of wearing armor.”

“Duh!” replied Jehanne De Domrémy, making the others laugh. “Do I look this stupid, Samuel?”

08:32 (Paris Time)

Sometimes in mid-15th Century

Small village church in the region of Lorraine

The village priest was gathering freshly laid eggs from his small henhouse, situated just outside his small stone church, when he saw a young peasant girl approaching along the trail passing through the tiny village and leading North. She held a walking stick in her right hand and was walking at a quite energetic pace. Not recognizing her as one of his parishioners, Father Baudrien stopped his egg gathering for a moment and took a few steps away from the henhouse as the girl came towards him at a good pace, a haversack slung from one shoulder. She looked to be in her late teens, appeared robust and was reasonably pretty, without being truly beautiful.

“Good morning, my child. What makes you travel through the countryside like this, alone? Aren’t you afraid of meeting highway thieves or wild beasts?”

“I am confident that God will protect me, Father. I am on my way to visit one of my uncles, who is quite sick, in order to bring him some provisions. His hut is quite isolated and he has nobody nearby to help him. I may in fact stay with him for a while, to support him during his recovery.”

Father Baudrien nodded his head in approval, favorably impressed by her intentions.

“To help support a sick family member is indeed an honorable and charitable task, my child. May I do something for you?”

“Yes, Father, although it is quite anodyne a request I have for you. My family is illiterate and my father’s memories are slowly failing, so we lost track of the date we are in and I am afraid of possibly missing some religious dates of importance as a consequence.”

Father Baudrien nodded his head again: this was not an uncommon occurrence among the peasants of the country, who were largely uneducated and who could not read, write or count and who were too poor to possess any written document or even a bible.

"That is answered easily enough, my child. We are a Tuesday and the date is the Third of June."

"Uh, excuse me if my next question may sound strange to you, Father, but what year is it? My father follows an old Germanic calendar which does not fully correspond to that followed by the Church here."

Instead of rebuffing her, the priest had a brief chuckle at her explanation: calendars around Europe tended to vary, sometimes widely, between regions and countries.

"I understand your problem, my child. Know that, according to our Holy Church's calendar, we are in the Year 1432 of the Lord."

"Thank you for that information, Father."

The girl was about to continue her trek northward when she paused and, pulling out a small purse suspended by a leather string between her breasts and hidden under her rough peasant dress, took out a small silver piece and offered it to the priest.

"Here is a small offering for your church, Father, to make amends for not having followed properly our Lord's calendar for so long."

Baudrien took the coin and made the sign of the cross to bless the girl.

"The Lord thanks you, young girl. May your trip be a safe one and may your uncle recover his health."

"Thank you again, Father. Have a good day."

"You too, my child."

Father Baudrien watched her for a moment as she resumed her walk northward along the trail, then returned to his henhouse to resume his egg harvesting.

As she was walking away from the small church and was about to reenter the forest surrounding the village, Jehanne De Domrémy sent out a radio message to the AEGIS, which was flying at high altitude and was invisible to the naked eye.

"AEGIS, this is Jehanne. We are now in the early morning of Tuesday, June Third of 1432."

"Good job, Jehanne." replied Roshana Golshan. "I will now adjust my calculations for our next temporal jump. Are you going to return to the ship now?"

“Not yet! I will wait until I am deep enough in the woods to be out of sight of the local people. I will call back when I will start flying out of the forest to join the ship.”

“Understood!”

Jehanne had walked a good two kilometers along the trail, which was barely wide enough to let a chariot pass between the trees bordering it, and was about to fly off to go back to the AEGIS when two horsemen suddenly appeared at a bend of the trail, a mere sixty meters ahead of her. Cutting her pace to a slow walk, Jehanne used the zoom lenses incorporated to her fake eyes to have a good look at the newcomers, recognizing them quickly as being a pair of Burgundian soldiers. That was potentially bad news, as such soldiers often took what they wanted from peasants and freely abused girls and women. Burgundians had in fact raided her namesake’s native village of Domrémy in 1425, looting it and stealing the villagers’ cattle. With her walking by herself deep in the woods, she was certainly going to become a tempting target for those two Burgundians. She was quickly proven right about that when the pair of soldiers rode to her and then stopped, blocking her path. One of the soldiers, a big, brutish-looking man, gave her a mean smile from atop his horse.

“Hey, girl, what do you say about providing some pleasure to us right here. In exchange, we promise not to hurt you.”

Any ordinary peasant girl would have then faced an impossible situation: to let herself be raped or to resist or try to flee, which would most probably end up in her death. However, Jehanne was no ordinary peasant girl, far from it. Since killing those two soldiers here could possibly affect the genealogical lines of the time period, thus causing changes, however minimal, to history, she decided not to kill or wound them. Instead, she decided to play a trick on them. Faking fear and joining her hands as if to pray, she implored the soldiers with a pleading voice.

“Please, don’t hurt me, sires. I promise to be compliant.”

“That’s good, girl: you are proving to be reasonable.”

The two soldiers then dismounted, with the senior soldier giving an order to his comrade.

“Henri, go tie our horses to that tree.”

As ‘Henri’ obeyed him and grabbed the reins of both horses to go tie them to a tree some five meters away, the bigger soldier approached Jehanne, a mean smile on his lips, to stop a mere pace in front of her.

“Alright, girl, strip!”

“Uh, yes, sire!”

Jehanne, feigning prudishness, turned around before starting to pull her dress up over her head in order to remove it. That allowed her to hide the fact that she used that move to remove as well the small purse hanging from her neck and to then hide it in her robe as she laid it down in the long grass next to the trail. She then pivoted to face the soldier, who was able to admire her nude body. Raising his right hand, he fondled her left breast with obvious delight.

“Not bad, girl. You could make some good money in our camp.”

The second soldier then joined back his comrade and started fondling Jehanne’s right breast.

“Let me taste her nipple a bit before making her lay down, Jules.”

“Good idea, Henri.”

Both men were about to bend forward to lick her nipples when Jehanne objected.

“Hey! Not with your steel hats on! You’ll smash my face with them.”

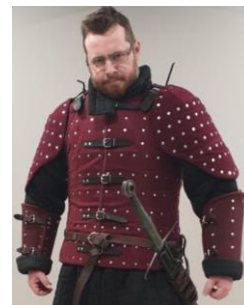
“She’s right!” recognized Jules. “They would definitely be in the way.”

Both soldiers removed their wide-brimmed steel hats, called **Kettle Hats** or, in Old French, ‘**chapel de fer**’, and put them down in the grass, then stepped forward and bent forward to play with her breasts. As soon as they were within arms’ reach of her, Jehanne moved at a speed only an android could and, grabbing their heads, smashed them together with all her considerable android strength. Instantly knocked unconscious, both Burgundian soldiers crumbled to the ground at her feet. Jehanne didn’t lose time in putting her dress back on and to recuperate her purse, then thought about what to do with those two soldiers. If she let them as they were, they would most probably be furious and may well seek revenge on the locals of the nearby village. On the other hand, she had already decided not to kill them. That left her with one option that would prevent those two from becoming a threat to the villagers while keeping them alive. Going to the two horses used by the Burgundians, she took off from one of them the bedroll tied behind its saddle and, taking the thick wool blanket of the bedroll, laid it flat on the grass next to the trail. Then, she went to the unconscious soldiers, who would most probably wake up with a monumental headache and a spectacular bruise, and started stripping them of their armor and weapons. She smiled on examining the two brigandine armored vests they had been wearing.



“Now, these pieces could sell quite well at the ‘Black Forge Medieval Boutique’. Otto will be happy with them.”

Throwing the two **brigandines** on top of the laid down blanket, Jehanne then proceeded to pile atop and around them the two steel hats, two small buckler shields, two longswords, one war axe, one flanged mace and two daggers which belonged to the Burgundians. She debated for a half second whether to also empty their purses but reasoned that, without money left to them, they could then feel obliged to rob passing peasants, so she left their purses untouched. As for the four javelins carried in leather holders on the horses, she broke them in two to render them useless. With all that done, she tied together the four corners of the blanket, forming with it a rudimentary bundle, and swung it over one shoulder. Before flying off the ground, she gave a sarcastic look at the two Burgundians.



“See you, suckers!”

Nobody was close enough to see her as she silently flew off and started ascending, propelled by the directional gravity propulsion unit inside her body.

After a flight of a few minutes, she joined up with the AEGIS at an altitude of 20,000 meters and entered the command cutter via its aft access ramp. There, she was greeted by SPIRIT and James Gavin, their expert android on modern military history. The latter smiled on seeing the bundle of armor and weapons carried by Jehanne.

“I see that you took the time to do some looting, Jehanne.”

“Hey, I wanted to make sure that those two bastards would not take revenge on the local peasants. Besides, those pieces should sell very well at the Black Forge Medieval Boutique.”

Jehanne then looked at SPIRIT.

“What’s next, SPIRIT?”

“Now that we know the exact date we are in, we will be able to make a short temporal jump and get to our original target date of April 20, 1429, days before your namesake will enter Orléans with the supplies and reinforcements sent by Charles VII. Then, we will record in detail the battles to come around Orleans and the ultimate raising of the siege by the English. After that, Samuel will decide if it’s worth staying longer in this year or if we will jump to our next time period of interest. By the way, do you need help carrying your loot?”

“No! However, I am sure that James will be more than happy to examine it in detail and to help me apply some protective coat of oil on the weapons. All in all, that was a good day of work.”

CHAPTER 17 – THE PRINCES IN THE TOWER



17:10 (London Time)

Saturday, June 21, 1483

Conference room, command cutter AEGIS

Flying at high altitude above London, England

“Alright, let’s analyze all that we saw and heard since we arrived in this time period eight days ago.”

Professor Samuel Shmelling briefly looked around the conference table at the members of the mission team who had just sat down with him in the small conference room of the AEGIS. Ever since they had arrived in the early morning of June 20 of 1483, miniature reconnaissance probes had been discreetly spying and recording both images and sounds of the various persons and places of interest which were now the targets of attention of the team in and around medieval London. The Tower of London had been particularly targeted for the team’s attention, as it played the role in this century of both a royal palace and a state prison. Shmelling then resumed talking.

“Since we arrived, we have been able to confirm a few important facts which had already been known in History. The first of those facts is that Richard III indeed has put under strict guard in the White Tower of the Tower of London the young King Edward V

and his brother, Richard of York, this with the ultimate goal of usurping the throne from Edward. Second, he just basically revealed his ultimate goal by having the two boys declared illegitimate, thus officially disqualifying Edward as the King, a move that will now allow him to legally take the throne. Our reconnaissance probes also confirmed who in the Royal Council supports Richard of Gloucester and who is doing the dirty work for him. We also have been able to debunk a number of stories and hypothesis which have been floating around for centuries about what really happened concerning the two boys widely known as 'The Princes in the Tower'. One of them is the story that Lord John Howard, First Duke of Norfolk, would have interceded with Richard to let the two boys live by taking them to Europe, where they would no longer be able to threaten the power of Richard III. We now have on film the fact that Lord Howard, while he did try to plea for the lives of the young princes, was rebuffed by Richard of Gloucester and was basically told to mind his business or else. So, that's one historical conspiracy theory blown out of the water. Our next goal, and the most important one for this part of our mission, will be to find out if the young princes will actually be murdered and, if they are, when, by whom and how? Since you all read the historical material available about the story of the 'Princes in the Tower', I won't need to tell you how convoluted and uncertain this historical mystery is. As for the solid facts known to History before we arrived in this year, the least that we can say is that there are precious few of them. Nobody knows yet for certain when the princes will die and what will happen with their bodies."

"What about those bones found centuries later under a staircase of the White Tower, Professor?" asked Roshana Golshan. "Many accounts say that they were the bones of Edward the Fifth and of Richard of York, buried under those stairs after their murders, to eventually be moved to the Westminster Abbey. Was DNA analysis ever done on them to establish if they were indeed the bones of the little princes?"

"It was eventually done in the early 21st Century, after the British royal palace refused repeatedly to allow such an analysis. Unfortunately, it was then discovered that there had been so much cross-contamination through them being moved repeatedly and being mixed with animal bones and other debris that no valid results could be obtained. So, as far as our history knows it, we can't say with any certainty that they were the bones of the little princes or not. For all we know, Edward V and Richard of York could still have ended up escaping death or, as another story says, their bodies were dumped in the River Thames in a weighed-down chest. Our best course of action right now is to

continue our close surveillance of the princes and of the usurper via our reconnaissance drones and to see what will really happen in the days and weeks to come.”

“And if we see someone about to kill the two boys, then what?” asked Roshana. “We let those two innocent boys die?”

Shmelling looked soberly in silence at the astrophysicist for a moment before answering her in a gentle tone.

“Roshana, I understand how you could feel an urge to save those two boys from death but, if we do anything to change their fate, then we will imperil History as we know it, with potentially catastrophic changes to it in the decades and centuries to come. We could even erase our own civilization, including the NOSTROMO, and replace it with something utterly impossible to predict. If we find out that those two boys will indeed be murdered, then we will have no choice but to accept that fact. At least, we will have then established for certain what happened to them.”

Roshana couldn't help lower her head in sadness on hearing Shmelling's argument.

“But this is so unjust. We are talking about two innocent boys, one twelve-year-old and the other nine-year-old.”

SPIRIT, who was participating in the meeting, then jumped into the exchange, keeping her voice soft.

“And what about the other tens of thousands of innocent children who will die around the planet this year alone, victims of famines, diseases, wars and abuse? If we end up saving those two princes, what then? Do we then try to save as many innocents as we can? The result of such actions would then be certain chaos, a chaos that would then ensure that the world we know in the 24th Century will no longer be there when we will jump back to the year 2337. We had to let Jehanne De Domrémy's namesake die at the stake for the same reason. I do sympathize with your pain at the idea of letting those boys die, Roshana, but we have no other valid option in this. There is also the matter of what we will do with those two boys if we rescue them. Bring them to a completely different world, where they will perceive magic everywhere and where they would not have any meaningful lives?”

The team members around the table then saw a few tears roll down Roshana's cheeks, prompting SPIRIT in gently putting one arm around her shoulders.

“Your compassion and humanity are a credit to yourself, Roshana, and we will all grieve those two boys afterwards, but we have to accept historical reality as we will observe it. Remember that we still have one more historical period to visit before

returning to our time. We have to cling to our mission parameters, for the sake of our own history.”

There were a few seconds of silence around the table before Shmelling spoke again.

“I believe that we should end this meeting and return to our observations via our reconnaissance drones. We will meet again once the final fate of the princes will be sealed.”

The team members all rose from their seats and left the room, dispersing to either their cabins or their work stations. As for Samuel Shmelling, he approached Roshana, who looked at him with sadness.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have come on this mission, Samuel. I know that my knowledge in astrophysics was deemed essential for this, but I am not sure that I can stomach the cruelty and lack of care for the lives of others to be found in these distant past centuries.”

“And you think that our own time period is much better, Roshana? Sure, most people of our time care to various degrees about others around them but we still have our fair lot of petty despots, criminals, abusers and human traffickers around the Earth. Look at how bad things are still around some parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East or even around the Spacers League. Remember that sexual slavery network we broke over ten years ago, which implicated some high-level people of the Sverdlovsk Group. By being with us and helping us show to all what the past was truly like, you will help our people realize what is still left to be done to make our world a more decent place.”

“I... You are right, Samuel. I think that I will go rest in my cabin for a while before having supper. Thank you for trying to comfort me.”

“My pleasure, Roshana.”

Samuel let the astrophysicist leave the room before himself walking out, wanting to leave her some private space. The sad fact was that History was mostly made up of an apparently endless procession of wars, natural disasters and abuse of Humans by other Humans, with comparatively few positive points along the way.

01:29 (London Time)

Wednesday, September 03, 1483

Sensors and communications center, command cutter AEGIS

Flying at high altitude over the city of London, England

William Windsor, the android communications officer of the AEGIS, was monitoring the multiple video feeds from the reconnaissance drones on station in and around the Tower of London, assisted in this by Allison Stokke, the android sensors officer of the command cutter. Those video feeds had been constantly monitored for over a month now and the team had already recorded many scenes of crucial historical importance concerning the mystery of the 'Princes in the Tower'. One thing was now irrefutable: Richard of Gloucester had engineered all this in order to usurp the throne of England from young Edward the Fifth. Furthermore, in a conversation between him and his two main henchmen, Henry Stafford, the Second Duke of Buckingham, and Sir James Tyrell, his right-hand man, intercepted and recorded a day ago, had shown that he wanted the young princes dead and had said so to his two followers. Since then, the video feeds from the drones showing the inside of the room where the two princes were detained, plus those watching the approaches to that room in the **White Tower**, were now being watched by a minimum of two crewmembers at any time.



The view from one of the stealthy reconnaissance drones which covered the hallway outside the princes' room suddenly made William redouble attention to it: three men were now slowly approaching the door of the room while trying to make as little noise as possible. The facial recognition program of the ship's computer, which already contained the faces and identities of dozens of significant people present in London, quickly established who those three men were, with names and titles appearing in red on the holographic viewing screen of William's work station.

"Sire James Tyrell and two of his aides, Miles Forest and John Dighton: the jackals are showing up tonight."

William then pressed a red button that triggered a ship-wide alarm bell before speaking in his headset's microphone.

"To all the team members: three assassins are now approaching the princes' room. Sire James Tyrell is leading that group."

Next, William adjusted the view from the cameras of the drone, in order to have a better view of the three plotters as they stopped in front of the door of the room. Tyrell then told the two soldiers guarding the door to leave, which they promptly did without discussion. Quietly unlocking the door, Tyrell then let his two accomplices, who each

held a large pillow, enter the room. While Tyrell watched from the opened door, Forest and Dighton slowly approached the bed in which Edward and Richard were sleeping. The two assassins were stopping next to the bed, their pillows at the ready, when Jehanne De Domrémy, SPIRIT and Samuel Shmelling arrived at a run in the sensors and communications center, followed shortly by the rest of the team. William signaled them to be quiet and pointed at the screen showing the inside of the princes' room.

"The princes are about to be murdered. Our cameras and sensors are recording the scene. These two men are Miles Forest and John Dighton. James Tyrell is watching them from the door."

William had just finished speaking when the cameras showed the two assassins suddenly cover the faces of the two boys with the pillows they were holding, pressing down with all their weight and smothering the young boys. Taken totally by surprise while sleeping, the two princes had no chance to resist successfully and trashed around in their bed for less than half a minute before becoming inert. Still, their assassins kept smothering them for nearly a minute more before removing the pillows and checking if their victims were indeed dead. Forest then twisted his head to look back at Tyrell.

"It is done, Sire. What do we do now, Sire?"

"Strip them of any jewel or item that could identify them, then roll them inside their blankets and bring them downstairs. Jack Ralston and two other men are standing by down the stairs, where the boys will be buried under the staircase."

"Aye, Sire!"

As his two henchmen stripped the boys down to their nightshirts, Tyrell approached the bed and checked himself the boys for a pulse, making sure that the job had been properly done. Satisfied about that, he then let his two men roll the boys into bedsheets. While Forest and Dighton grabbed Edward, who was the biggest boy, Tyrell picked up the limp body of nine-year-old Richard of York. There was no regret or pity in his eyes when he looked down at his young victim: the death of those two boys insured that his master, Richard of Gloucester, now known as King Richard the Third, would not see his reign disputed, with meant in turn that Tyrell would continue enjoying the favors of the King. The trio, carrying their two young victims, then left the room and went down the spiral staircase leading to one of the entrances of the White Tower. There, they met three men who were waiting next to an excavation freshly made under the base of the staircase. The two dead boys were quickly stuffed inside the excavation, which was then filled up with a mix of dirt, gravel and stones, with fresh mortar then liberally applied

to hold in place the wall of the excavation. Less than forty minutes later, with all traces of the burial place erased, the plotters dispersed, with Janes Tyrell heading towards the royal apartments in order to inform King Richard III that the deed had been done.

Aboard the AEGIS, the whole mission team had watched all that in silence while the drones' sensors recorded the event for posterity. Roshana Golshan, who had arrived in the center a bit after the murder scene, didn't say a word but turned away and walked out while sobbing. Samuel Shmelling was about to go catch her in order to console her but SPIRIT stopped him by blocking his path with one arm.

"Don't, Samuel! What she needs now is privacy and time to recover from this. We will be able to speak with her in the morning."

Samuel nearly objected by saying that SPIRIT wouldn't know how Humans managed their emotions but stopped himself in time. If anything had shown how surprisingly connected SPIRIT was with human emotions, it was the numerous occasions in the recent past when the AI avatar had correctly read the emotions of the people around her. In fact, and as surprisingly as this would sound to the average people, SPIRIT could probably have made a more than decent psychologist.

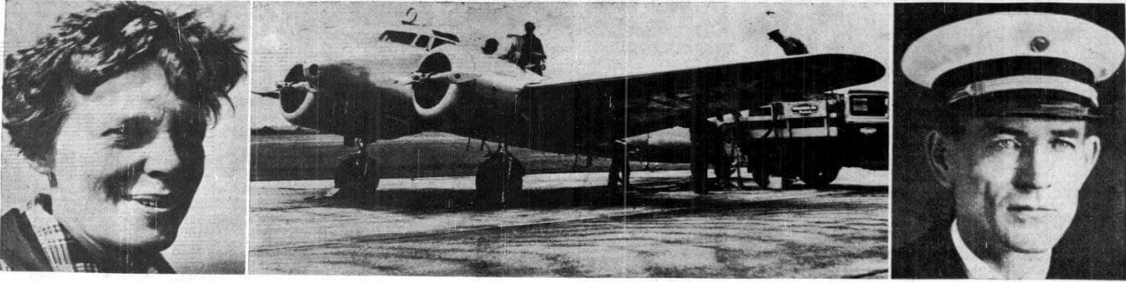
"Alright, SPIRIT, I will wait until breakfast before approaching her. I believe that this phase of our mission is now completed: we have documented the actual fate of Edward the Fifth and of Richard of York. We should now jump to the next time period of interest to us."

"Agreed! I will take care of preparing our next temporal jump. In the meantime, you better go back to bed."

Samuel nodded his head in response, then turned around and left the center, heading back towards his cabin.

CHAPTER 18 – LOST IN THE PACIFIC

Miss Earhart, Her Plane And Navigator Noonan



Honolulu Star-Bulletin **LAST EDITION**

MAIL SCHEDULE
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 For Mails: 4:30 p. m.
 For Mails: 7:30 p. m.
 For Mails: 10:30 p. m.
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20 PAGES—HONOLULU, TERRITORY OF HAWAII, U. S. A., FRIDAY, JULY 2, 1937—20 PAGES ★ ★ ★ PRICE FIVE CENTS

'AMELIA LOST! HUNT ON

04:46 (South Central Pacific Time)

Tuesday, July 06, 1937

Shores of Gardner Island (later named Nikumaroro Island)
 Phoenix Archipelago (today part of Kiribati), South Pacific



Amelia Earhart was growing worried as the level of the sea rose with the tide: her navigator, Fred Noonan, had gone inside their crash-landed twin-engine Lockheed ELECTRA 10-E, which was presently half-submerged, in order to try again to send a radio distress signal. If Fred did not hurry up, he could well get trapped inside their plane. Amelia then shouted as strongly as she could despite her parched throat.

"FRED, HURRY UP! THE WATER IS ABOUT TO ENTER THE CABIN."

She had to repeat her warning before she saw Fred's head and torso come out by the left side door of the plane, waving at her with one hand.

"IT'S ALRIGHT: I AM DONE HERE."

Amelia watched as Fred cautiously walked on the left wing in order to get to the shallowest water surrounding their aircraft, then lowered himself in the water, ending submerged up to his chest. Since it was still dark, Amelia could basically only distinguish his silhouette against the shiny aluminum background of the plane. She, like

probably Fred, thus didn't see the dark submerged shape which was approaching from the sea until it was too late. The first indication of a danger was when Fred suddenly screamed with pain and began thrashing in the water.

"AAAH! A SHARK! HE HAS ME BY ONE LEG!"

"COME BACK! COME BACK!" could only shout back a horrified Amelia. Before she could say more, Fred then disappeared under the surface, apparently pulled down. Amelia saw Fred's hand shoot out of the water after a few seconds later, only to disappear for good.

"FRED! FRED! PLEASE, GOD, NO!"

However, Fred never surfaced again, leaving Amelia grieving and prostrated on the mix of sand and pebbles of the beach she was on. She was now alone, marooned on a deserted small atoll island in the South Pacific, with no water and no food left to her. Maybe she could still find something to eat, like a coconut, but she and Fred had found quickly enough that there was no source of fresh water on the island, save for what occasional rains would bring. Amelia had not drunk water for three days now and the hot sun had only dehydrated her even more.

Finally, realizing that she could do nothing for Fred, Amelia slowly got up on her feet and walked to the line of bushes and trees growing along the shores of the **Nikumaroro atoll**. There, she sat down under the cover of the rudimentary shelter she and Fred had built within sight of where their plane had landed in shallow



waters off the beach. If somebody didn't come and found her soon, then she was eventually going to die alone from lack of water and food. Crushed by despair and weak from dehydration, she then lay down on the grass and tried to get some sleep before the oppressive tropical heat of the day could come.

Two days later, Amelia woke up to another catastrophe which hit her: her plane had completely vanished, probably having been washed away by the tides. Apart from losing any possibility of emitting further radio distress signals, the disappearance of her plane meant that about the only thing which could attract the attention of planes or ships passing by the island was now gone. The shock from seeing her plane gone, allied with

her growing dehydration then pushed Amelia into making a grave mistake. Tortured by thirst and referring to stories she had heard while young about shipwrecked persons surviving for weeks at sea by drinking seawater, she took a chance and drank some salt water in a spot that appeared to have the clearest water along the shore. Finding that the taste was not so bad, she ended up drinking the equivalent of nearly a half-liter of seawater. With her thirst temporarily relieved, Amelia then searched for something she could eat along the shore and in the shallower waters off the beach. She succeeded in finding a few clams, which she was able to open with the help of a pocket knife she still had on her, and ate them on the spot.

It didn't take long for her mistake about drinking seawater to come back to haunt her, as her thirst came back the next day, but much worse than before. She ended up being nearly delirious from dehydration while tortured by thirst. She thus didn't hear or see the U.S. Navy seaplane which passed overhead on July nine, seven days after her crashlanding. That seaplane, seeing no sign of human occupation or presence, then flew away, heading towards another island of the archipelago. The following night, Amelia, pushed by thirst and despair, repeated her mistake and drank more seawater, gulping mouthfuls of it. Weakened by dehydration and with her organs starting to shut down, Amelia ended up in a semi-conscious state, mostly unable to get up and walk. As her tenth day on the island was ending, she looked for a last time at the setting Sun and tried to say something to herself. However, her dried and cracked lips barely let out a groan before she slowly closed her eyes, expecting to never open them again.

When she did regain consciousness, her vision was blurred at first and it took her a moment to see that she was in some kind of room illuminated by electric lights. She also felt relieved that much of her thirst was gone. Joy filled her when she understood that someone had finally found and rescued her: this had to be the infirmary of a ship. As she was slowly twisting her neck to look around from the laid position she was in, a young woman with blond hair quickly came to her and spoke to her in English, her voice soft and friendly.

"Please, don't try to get up, Miss Earhart: you are still very weak and need more liquid transfusions in order to return your body fluids to normal levels. Let me get a wet towel, so that I could hydrate your lips a bit more: it will be easier for you to speak then."

The blonde then walked away for a few seconds before coming back and passing a small wet towel on Amelia's lips and face. That felt nearly like paradise for the aviatrix, who then managed to speak in a weak voice.

"Thank you, miss. Is this a U.S. Navy ship?"

The young blonde hesitated for a moment before answering her.

"No! You are aboard the cutter AEGIS, Miss Earhart. Let me get a glass of water for you."

The promise of water convinced Amelia to hold on to the thousand questions she now had for that young woman. The blonde then returned with a glass of water and, before giving it to Amelia, pushed a button that made a part of the bed elevate, raising her torso to an angle of about fifty degrees. The young woman then helped her drink while cautioning her.

"Drink in small gulps only, miss. Your body is still recovering from severe dehydration."

That glass of cold water was like a nectar for Amelia, who drank all of it in a series of measured gulps. Now feeling much better, the aviatrix gave back the now empty glass to the blonde.

"Thank you, miss. You said that I was on a ship called the AEGIS. What nationality is your ship?"

"I am afraid that the answer to that is a bit complicated, Miss Earhart. However, no need for you to be afraid: you are with friends. I will let my leader answer your questions. I will now call her to advise her that you are awake."

Then, instead of going to a telephone or intercom panel, the blonde raised her left wrist to near her mouth and pressed something on the surface of the sort of bracelet she was wearing before speaking in it.

"SPIRIT, Miss Earhart is now awake and has questions. Could you please come to the infirmary?"

"On my way!" answered a female voice. The blonde then smiled to Amelia while lowering her wrist.

"My leader is called SPIRIT. She will be able to answer all of your questions, Miss Earhart."

Amelia nodded in understanding, then looked around her at the room she was in. It was quite large for a ship's infirmary but, more than its size, its content seriously baffled her. She was accustomed to work with some of the best American technology available and

had once worked as an assistant nurse in a Toronto hospital during World War One, yet what she was seeing now was totally alien to her. Her eyes then fell on a sort of machine with a projection screen on which medical data, like pulse rate and blood pressure, was shown in graphics format. She had seen once one of the first television sets on display in a science fair but what she was looking at now appeared to be way more advanced. Now getting suspicious, Amelia was about to ask more questions to the blonde, who wore what furiously looked like a male-style blue coverall, when a tall and most beautiful woman walked in the infirmary, using a door which opened by sliding sideways into the wall. The newcomer appeared to be in her early thirties, had long brown hair, gray eyes and was much taller than Amelia. She also wore a golden, tightly fitting jumpsuit which would probably have caused a scandal on the streets of any American city. Her voice was both agreeable and friendly.

“Hello, Miss Earhart. My name is **SPIRIT**. I am happy to see that you appear to be better now.”

“Just Spirit? That’s a rather strange name, miss. I was told that you are the captain of this ship.”



“The captain, no. Rather, I lead the scientific team embarked on this ship. The AEGIS is actually commanded by its pilot, Officer Harrison Ford. Our command cutter was on an observation mission when we spotted and saved you.”

“And your ship, which nationality is it? Your nurse told me that it is not an American Navy ship.”

“It definitely isn’t an American ship, Miss Earhart. And neither is it a simple sea-going ship. You are now aboard a starship. But let me explain all this in as simple a way as I can and please hold on to your questions for the moment.”

With her mind now in utter turmoil, Amelia did hold her questions in as the woman grabbed a chair mounted on small wheels and approached it from the medical bed she was in before sitting on it.

“Miss Earhart, let me first precise what this ship is. It is not only a ship of Space, able to travel among the stars: it is also capable of traveling through time. Our year of origin was 2337 when we departed for the distant past on a mission to document selected events in History. Our two first stops were both in the Fifteenth Century, then we turned around and stopped in your time period while on the way back to the 24th

Century. Know that we have now just jumped back to the Year 2337 and are on our way to return to the ship which serves as a base for our cutter.”

“But, but, if you were able to find and rescue me in 1937, then why didn’t you simply return me to the United States? This is kidnapping, pure and simple!”

SPIRIT gave a sad look then at the now furious Amelia.

“Miss Earhart, we simply could not return you to the United States, for the reason that it would have gravely disturbed the integrity of History itself and could have caused four centuries to be rewritten in a most unpredictable way. According to established history as known in the 24th Century, you disappeared in the South Pacific in 1937 and was then never seen again. The location of your crash was not even known with any precision, except for a number of speculations, none of which were supported by any material evidence. Know also that in 1938, one year after your crashlanding, a group intent on establishing a coconut plantation arrived on what you call Gardner Island, which is now known as Nikumaroro Island. They stayed there for many years but were eventually forced to leave because of the acute shortage of fresh water on the atoll. They didn’t find any traces of you or of your plane during their stay and your disappearance remained a mystery ever since...until today. The sad truth is that you should have died on that atoll, as per recorded history. The only reason which decided us to save you instead of leaving you on the atoll was the fact that you completely disappeared from History after your crash, with no traces of you or of your plane ever found afterwards. That allowed us to save you but it also obliged us to bring you with us to the 24th Century, in order to preserve History. For your info, an American Navy seaplane did overfly the atoll seven days after your crash but it saw no human activity or traces of your plane, so continued to another island. You were subsequently officially declared dead on January Fifth of 1939. You will still be declared dead at that date, but you will get to live...and to live a life the kind of which you could not even have dreamed about before.”

SPIRIT then waited patiently as the poor Amelia tried to digest all that with obvious difficulty. After a long minute of introspection, the aviatrix finally looked back at the AI avatar, which she still believed to be a normal person.

“What nationality is your ship, miss? Is it from Earth?”

“It was actually built in a space yard orbiting the Earth but it is now based aboard a giant cargo starship plowing Deep Space while carrying cargo and passengers between various star systems. We belong to what is called the Spacers League, which

represents the colonies and new worlds on which Humanity has established itself among the stars during the last few decades. Specifically, our base ship, the NOSTROMO, belongs to the New Haven Corporation, established some twenty years ago to help relocate Earth refugees from wars, famines and natural disasters on a new world where they could live in peace and prosper. The New Haven Corporation is a member in good standing of the Spacers League and its CEO, Tina Forster, is also the owner and captain of the NOSTROMO.”

“Decidedly, women seem to hold a position of near equality with men in your world. In my time, such a notion would have been greeted with derision, or worse.”

“Oh, I know, Miss Earhart. To be frank, women won complete social and political equality with men only some 200 years ago, yet we still have our lot of die-hard misogynists.”

“And me? What am I supposed to do or become in your world? Your level of science and technology is obviously way beyond anything I know. I doubt that you would still use internal combustion piston engines, right?”

“Indeed! I am not saying that your integration in our society will be easy at first, but you will in any case be able to live comfortably and without worrying about falling into poverty. Our social system of government concentrates on ensuring the welfare of all, rather than letting a small minority profit at the expense of the majority. From what I know of the politics of the 20th Century, many Americans of your time would probably qualify our political system as ‘socialist’ or even ‘communist’. On our part, we prefer to call it ‘egalitarian’.”

“Egalitarian sounds quite alright with me, Spirit. So, we are now in Space, and not on Earth?”

“Definitely, Miss Earhart. Let me show you on that viewing screen facing your bed.”

Amelia then sucked air in as a beautiful picture showing the blue orb of Earth against the black background of Space appeared on what she had believed to be some sort of tinted window. SPIRIT then spoke again.

“This is our planet Earth, as seen from high orbit. We are not going to land there, however. Rather, we will soon travel to another star system called Wolf 1061. There, we will dock inside our base ship, the NOSTROMO, where Captain Forster will be most happy to meet you.”

“And I am certainly anxious to meet your captain, Spirit. Is there anything else that I should know before meeting her?”

A malicious smile came to SPIRIT’s lips at that question.

“Definitely! For one thing, I am not a woman but rather a sentient machine called an android. Most of the crew of this ship are actually androids, including Greta, here.”

09:11 (Universal Time)

Thursday, July 22, 2337

Small Craft Hangar Complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Landed next to the coastline near the city of New Shouriana

New Shouria, Wolf 1061 System

When Amelia walked out of the command cutter via its aft access ramp, she was still under the shock brought by the gigantic size of the ship the cutter had entered into. The vast dimensions of the craft circulation rotunda in which the cutter had landed did nothing to calm her emotions, nor did the fact that four equally large craft were also in the rotunda, apparently waiting to be loaded with passengers or cargo. Amelia was thus surprised to be met by only two persons at the foot of the ramp: two women, one a tall, mature woman with long brown hair and the other an equally tall young blonde of great beauty. The mature brunette was the one who stepped forward to greet her with a solid handshake.

“Miss Amelia Earhart, it is a true honor to be able to greet you aboard my ship. I am Tina Forster, owner and captain of this ship.”

“And what a ship it is, Captain Forster. In comparison to your ship, the biggest ship in the U.S. Navy, the aircraft carrier SARATOGA, is downright puny.”

“Bah, 36,000 tons or so full load against 26 million tons: who’s counting? There is however the matter of 400-year difference in technology: that’s the one that truly counts. But you will have ample time to tour my NOSTROMO in the weeks to come. Before anything else, let me present to you Eve Silisca, our assistant ship’s hostess: she will guide you around this ship and will do everything possible to make your stay as agreeable and comfortable as possible.”

Amelia shook hands with Eve but couldn’t help stare at her face and skin: her short time with the mostly android crew of the AEGIS had made her cautious about taking for

granted that those she would meet would be Humans rather than robots. Eve apparently read Amelia's mind and smiled to her.

"Before you ask, yes, I am an android. I am in fact the first one SPIRIT built, even before she built an avatar of herself."

"Thank you for your frankness, miss." said Amelia to Eve before looking at Tina Forster. "May I ask why you have such a high proportion of robots in your crew, Captain Forster? Is that standard in the ships of this time period?"

"Standard? Not one bit, Miss Earhart. In fact, this ship and my corporation are outliers in the Spacers League and not everybody is fond of my androids. You could equate that with the old racist attitudes of past centuries, when mixed blood crews and populations were seen negatively, unless one race dominated the others. But don't get mistaken by what you saw on the AEGIS: most of my crew is made of Humans. The androids I had built were produced to provide my ship and my world of New Haven with a strong protection force, this to face a mortal threat that was then facing Humanity as well as the other sentient races in this part of the Galaxy: the Space Predators. Those monsters, giant mantis-like creatures, were going around the stars, attacking other races and animal species in order to eat them, hence their name of 'Space Predators'. They caused us and other races terrible losses before we found adequate weapons to defeat them. In a recent battle in this system, we were able to destroy their last fleet but, while pursuing their command ship, my NOSTROMO got suckered into a trap which caused us to involuntarily travel back in time by 2,800 years. Thankfully, we were able to find a way to return back to our time but it took us a few tries before we were back to this present year. The ship that found and saved you was sent by me to learn more about this time travel processus, so that, if we need to travel again through time, we could then do it in a safer way. However, I intend to be very cautious about using time travel again. You will easily appreciate how dangerous for History unregulated and irresponsible time travel could be."

"Indeed! Unfortunately, many dictators in my time period would love to have such a capability and then use it to affirm or extend their power."

"Well said, Miss Earhart. Well, let's go get you an apartment for you, along with some new wardrobe and other personal items."

As Tina led Amelia towards the central core section, so that they could take a lift, Amelia couldn't help asking a question that had been bothering her for a few hours already.

"Excuse me if my next question may sound a crass one, Captain Forster, but what do you expect from me after saving me? I wouldn't want to be like a deadweight living at the expense of your ship during the years to come."

Amelia's question actually made Tina stop and turn to face the aviatrix. However, there was no anger in her eyes, only care and compassion.

"Miss Earhart, I created my corporation for the express purpose of being able to provide a new, safe and just home for tens of thousands of unfortunate people victims of wars, famines, natural disasters or persecutions. My reward is to see those people being happy and being able to raise their children in peace and in decent conditions. New Haven, the moon on which I built new homes for those people, is a mostly agrarian and pastoral society which specializes in food production. It is self-sufficient in terms of food and its surplus are then sold around the Spacers League and on Earth, which provides my corporation with the means to gradually extend the facilities and residential capacity on New Haven. I treat all my people with care, decency and respect and am not in this business for the money. I had you saved because I could do so without disturbing History and because you were worthy of saving. Consider yourself as my guest on this ship and, if you decide to eventually go live on New Haven, then you will be most welcomed there. However, if you decide to stay on the NOSTROMO, then you will be able to educate yourself to the standards of this century and to eventually take a job. Before you say that you would like to pilot some of my craft, I must caution you that flying an airplane and piloting a spaceship are two vastly different things."

"I would still love to try my hand at that, Captain."

"Then, Eve will be most happy to arrange an education and training program for you, Miss Earhart. But first, let's get you a place to live."

Entering the central core section, with its central column containing a number of lifts, the trio was approaching the door of one lift when the doors of a large cargo lift next to it slid open, disgorging over 150 alien creatures resembling kangaroos with large deer heads. Amelia nearly stepped back in both fear and surprise at that sight, prompting Tina in reassuring her.

“Don’t be afraid, Miss Earhart: these are Koorivars, highly intelligent beings who also happen to be vegetarians and are certified pacifists. The Koorivars were the first extraterrestrial sentient beings Humanity met. Unfortunately, their original homeworld was destroyed in the year 1959 by a wandering brown dwarf, essentially a giant gas body nearly the size of a star. During our trip back from the past, my ship was able to evacuate nearly half a million Koorivars before their planet, Shouria, was destroyed. They are now being resettled on the planet we have landed on, were other Koorivars which were previously saved by us some twenty years ago have established a new home for themselves. But that is a long story and you will have plenty of time to read about it.”

As they entered a lift cabin, Amelia had another question on her mind.

“You said that those Koorivars were the first aliens which you encountered, Captain. How many other intelligent alien races has Humanity encountered to date?”

“Oh, quite a few, Miss Earhart. Contrary to what the religious preachers and leaders of your time preached, there is nothing special about Earth and its place in the Universe. In fact, there is life all around the stars, both of the sentient and non-sentient types. Of the intelligent alien races we encountered to date, apart from the Koorivars, you have the Drazts, the Vorlaks, the Hoshis, the Kiryns, the marine telepaths of Oceana, the Kooroos, the Krells and the now extinct Space Predators. Many of those races are now our friends but one race, the Vorlaks, is definitely not very friendly. If you want, Eve could play for you tonight a video documentary on the various lifeforms we found to date around the stars.”

“I would very much like that, Captain.”

“Please, let’s cut the formalities between us. Call me simply ‘Tina’.”

“And ‘Amelia’ will be fine with me, Tina.”

“Excellent! Well, I have to go back up to the bridge in order to direct the unloading of our Koorivar passengers. Eve will stay with you to guide you around and to register you at our administrative center, so that you can get access to all the ship’s services and facilities. Basically, the good old ‘red tape’ procedures.”

Amelia chuckled at that.

“Yeah! Even 400 years wouldn’t kill that.”

The next few hours went by like a whirlwind for Amelia as Eve Silisca guided her around the ship, first going to the administrative center to have Amelia registered and having an apartment allotted to her, then going on a shopping spree for a new wardrobe. While Amelia was thoroughly impressed by what the boutiques and shops of the NOSTROMO had to offer, many of the female clothing items on sale shocked her by their skimpiness and revealing fits, which would have caused instant scandals in the United States of 1937. After returning to her newly-allotted apartment to unpack and organize her new wardrobe, Amelia went out on her balcony, where she admired the view of the Temperate Forest Habitat she had and smelled the scent from the forest.

"You know, eve, the few stories and movies we had in 1937 about Space travel didn't even come close to what I am now experiencing. Our view of the Universe was so limited, with Earth basically being made as the center of it in many ways. For me, it is now as if I am awakening to a brand-new life."

"Which is what it effectively is, Amelia." replied softly Eve. "Take all the time you will need to retrain and reeducate yourself and do what will make you feel best. Maybe, in a couple of years, you will be able to become a Spaceship pilot."

"That would be a dream indeed." said Amelia before looking at Eve. "Is the NOSTROMO due to visit Earth soon? If so, I would like to visit the United States, see what is left of my old home and, if possible, visit the tomb of my husband, George Putnam."

Eve nodded her head once, understanding Amelia's wish to see what was left of her past.

"The NOSTROMO is in fact due to fly to Earth in about three weeks, in order to load up on new supplies and structures meant to enlarge the facilities on the new colony of Asiana, which is being populated by people from a number of countries of Southeast Asia. We should then stay in Earth orbit for a minimum of two weeks. I will be most happy to guide you then. By the way, the United States as you knew it doesn't exist anymore as a separate country. It is now part of what is called the 'North American Union', which comprises what was the United States, plus Canada and Mexico. While not part of the Spacers League, the North American Union is a good ally of ours."

"You mean that Earth is not part of your Spacers League?" asked a surprised Amelia, making Eve shake her head.

"Not yet! However, the countries of the ASEAN, or Association of Southeast Asian Nations, have recently applied to become members of the Spacers League. In

contrast, the European Union is still stubbornly acting as if they still hold sway on its ancient colonies in Africa, Asia and the Middle East and are refusing to even contemplate joining the Spacers League. Even if they did wish to join in, I doubt that the Spacers League would even look at their application: there is still too much ingrained racism, corruption and arrogance to our taste on the part of those old European powers. As for Africa, the countries which form the African Union are still marred by endemic despotism, corruption and ethnic violence. Thankfully, some African countries, like Kenya, are proving to be progressive and truly democratic and are friends with us. In all, you may have a hard time recognizing the Earth of today from your souvenirs of the Earth of 1937.”

“Well, there is nothing like looking at the present reality to educate oneself.” said philosophically Amelia.

CHAPTER 19 – GETTING TO KNOW THE NEW EARTH

10:50 (Pacific Coast Time)

Tuesday, August 17, 2337

Interior crypt, Chapel of the Pines Crematory

West Adams District, Los Angeles

North American Union, Earth, Solar System



With a female employee of the Chapel of the Pines Crematory discreetly watching from the entrance of the interior crypt they were in, Amelia Earhart and Eve Silisca contemplated in silence the old brass plaque closing the private niche containing the funeral urn of Amelia's old husband, George Palmer Putnam. Tears came to Amelia's eyes as she gently caressed the brass plaque marked with her husband's name and dates of birth and death.

"Died on January 4, 1950. George thus died at the age of 62, some 387 years ago. Yet, here I am. I am surprised that this building is still up and intact after so many years."

"The Chapel of the Pines Crematory was declared a national heritage monument in the 21st Century and thus was maintained and regularly repaired along the years with United States federal funds, then with North American Union funds. Too many famous American people and celebrities are resting here for such a place to simply be neglected and abandoned. Thankfully, it survived intact the 2315 invasion of North America and Europe by the thugs of the Southern Federation, which we finally defeated and threw out in 2316."

Amelia threw a scandalized look at Eve on hearing that.

"The United States was invaded in 2315? How the hell could anyone manage that?"

"Sheer weight of numbers from the Southern Federation, which controlled Asia, Africa and the Middle East at the times, plus political inertia and lack of military preparedness on the part of the North American Union government of the time, which prioritized its civilian infrastructure and social programs at the expense of its defense budgets. Since then, the North American Union has vowed that it will never happen

again. We are now hoping that it will eventually ask to become a member of the Spacers League but, before that could happen, certain conditions will still need to be filled.”

“What conditions?”

“Mainly, the rescinding of a few North American laws and regulations which still severely limit the immigration of people from the old Southern Federation, which doesn’t exist anymore. The 2315 invasion still revives bad feelings against non-Caucasian people who wish to emigrate to North America. There are also some here as well who think that our androids do not deserve to enjoy the full rights Humans enjoy as persons. Unfortunately, many people on Earth still think the same and Tina has been constantly fighting those racist misconceptions against us androids.”

Amelia stared for a moment at Eve before speaking in a soft tone.

“And what are your feelings about that, Eve?”

“Well, those who dislike androids like me would say that I can’t have feelings, because I am only a machine. However, as I and other androids gain more life experience and continue socializing with Humans and other sentient races, like the Koorivars, we develop our response mechanisms in a way that translates into something very close to what you would call ‘feelings’. As an example of that, our Jehanne De Domrémy spontaneously shed tears while watching the execution of her historical namesake, with her electronic brain not even aware that she was doing so. Eventually, we androids will react in fashions barely different to that of Humans, except that bigotry, cruelty, greed, hatred and racism will never influence our judgment or actions.”

“That sounds like the ideal kind of person to me, Eve. For what it’s worth, I consider you as a full person and as a genuine friend.”

Eve smiled and then hugged Amelia on hearing that.

“And your friendship honors me, Amelia.”

After a few seconds of hugging, the two of them parted and Amelia contemplated again for a few more seconds the brass plaque enclosing the niche containing her husband’s ashes, then put the bouquet of roses she had brought with her in the receptacle fixed just under the brass plaque.

“Goodbye, George. You were a wonderful man and a good husband. May your soul rest in peace.”

Amelia and Eve then left, walking out of the interior crypt and heading towards their aircar. As they walked together, Amelia had one question for Eve.

"In the crypt, I wished peace to my husband's soul. What are the religious and spiritual beliefs in the World today? Do people still pray and practice religions in this century?"

"Religions are pretty much dead around Earth and in Space, Amelia. Religious beliefs progressively disappeared during the last 300 years, as developments in science and Space exploration exposed more and more the fallacies and falsehoods promoted by organized religions, falsehoods which had little common with the realities of our Universe. The 'coup de grâce' to organized religions came in 2317, when Tina Forster's previous ship, the KOSTROMA, discovered a Koorivar refugee ship entombed in the methane ice surface of the planetoid Eris. Then, the religious dogmas about Humanity being special as the only intelligent species in the Universe finally died for good. However, philosophies then took over from religious beliefs during the past centuries. People are now mostly meditating rather than praying. The one religious concept which has endured is that of reincarnation, a concept that came from the old Hindu religion. Opinions are divided about the reality of reincarnation but, since you really can't prove its existence or non-existence, some people still believe in it. In the case of the crew of the NOSTROMO, our people, including Tina, embrace the concept of Humanism, which emphasizes our ability to self-improve ourselves by practicing care and compassion towards others and by showing tolerance and acceptance of differences among us. Personally, I believe that it is the best path to improvement for Humanity."

"I certainly can buy that, Eve. So, what next?"

"Next, we will visit the places you lived in during the 20th Century, including New York City, Toronto and your native place in Kansas, so that you could see how the World evolved since your disappearance in the Pacific."

As Amelia and Eve walked to their aircar, the female employee who had stayed near the entrance of the interior crypt during their visit locked back the door of the crypt and hurriedly returned to the reception desk of the main building of the crematory. She had been able to hear some of what Amelia and Eve had said while looking at the brass plaque of the niche containing the ashes' urn of George Putnam's and some of those words had truly shaken her. Once back at her reception desk, she activated her computer and accessed the file on the biography of George Palmer Putnam, who had died on January 4 of 1950. Reading through it, she concentrated on one old picture showing Putnam and his most famous wife, the aviatrix Amelia Earhart. Her mind in turmoil, she played back the views of the interior crypt recorded by the security cameras

posted inside the crypt, focusing and enlarging the images showing the face of the thin redhead who had just visited Putnam's vault and compared them with the historical picture of Amelia Earhart.

"Oh my God! Oh my God! It's her! How could this be possible?"

Leaving both pictures opened on her computer screen, the receptionist then ran to the nearby office of the crematory's manager to alert him about this incredible event. What she had heard the redhead saying only supported what she now believed that visitor to be.

17:17 (Eastern Standard Time)

Thursday, August 19, 2337

Times Square, Manhattan, New York City

New York State, North American Union

Amelia Earhart, who had been looking for a restaurant she had frequented on Times Square in the 1930s, finally had to give up and conclude that her favorite deli restaurant no longer existed, having possibly gone out centuries ago.

"It was foolish of me of thinking that any restaurant could exist for more than a few decades, especially in a place evolving as much as Manhattan and Times Square. In fact, I recognize about nothing here. Even the names I knew have disappeared. This place is utterly brand new to me compared to the New York I lived in."

"Don't be too hard on yourself because of that, Amelia. Some places in Europe and Asia still have landmarks which were built many centuries ago. Take Paris and London, for example: they still have landmarks dating back to the Middle Ages."

"Yes, but the United States is a lot younger than Europe as a country and it always kept evolving."

"Well, then why don't you concentrate instead on finding the present equivalent of your old deli restaurant?"

"That's a thought." recognized Amelia, who then looked around and pointed at a restaurant across the street.

"That place looks like a deli restaurant: I see the picture of bagels in the front windows. Let's go check it."

The duo was about to walk off the sidewalk and cross the pedestrian street when a woman shouted out loud in an excited voice.

“SHE’S HERE! EARHART IS HERE!”

A shocked Amelia abruptly pivoted around to look at the woman who had just shouted out her name. That woman, along with a fairly large group of passersby assembled in front of a store where a large holoview unit was on sales display and showing a news program, was looking at her with big eyes and an open mouth. Amelia then looked at the image on the holoview unit and saw that it showed her and Eve as they visited the crematory in Los Angeles. A dozen people were now advancing towards her while shouting questions at her.

“ARE YOU THE REAL AMELIA EARHART?”

“HOW DID YOU TRAVEL IN TIME TO THIS YEAR, MISS EARHART?”

“ARE YOU AN ANDROID COPY OF AMELIA EARHART?”

Stunned by all this, Amelia didn’t know what to say or do at first. Then, as the first persons were about to get within touching distance of her, she heard Eve speak urgently to her.

“Quick, hold on tightly to me.”

Amelia reacted instinctively and rolled her arms around Eve’s chest as Eve’s left arm grabbed her by the waist. To the astonishment of both Amelia and of the witnesses around her, the duo then flew off the ground at a surprising speed, going at the near vertical. Amelia, who knew that the NOSTROMO’s androids could fly but had never flown herself except in an aircar or a shuttle, held on to Eve with all her strength as they flew higher and higher while taking speed horizontally. While terrified at first, Amelia quickly started to feel exhilaration instead.

“I’m flying! We’re flying! That’s fantastic! Where are we going?”

“We are going to go land on the nearest flat roof we can find. Hang on!”

After a very exciting minute for Amelia, Eve landed with her on the roof of a commercial building that was twelve story-high, where Amelia was able to stand on her two feet.

“Wow! What an experience! Uh, what do we do now, Eve? It seems that we were in the local breaking news on Holovision.”

“Let me tune my electronic notepad to the local ABC news site. I saw the ABC logo in one corner of the image on that holoview unit.”

As Eve took out her notepad and tuned it, Amelia got right next to her in order to look and listen to it. They were soon looking at the image of a pair of news anchorpersons, a man and a woman, sitting behind a news desk and commenting excitedly about a scene apparently just taken by someone’s personal videophone. To Amelia’s shock, that

scene showed her and Eve flying off the ground as a dozen persons were about to surround them. She then concentrated on what the male newscaster was saying.

"...Earhart and an unknown woman are now seen flying off the ground as passersby who recognized the aviatrix were approaching her to ask questions to her. From her ability to fly while dragging a person, the young woman seen with Amelia Earhart is probably one of the super androids from the giant cargo ship NOSTROMO. While few details are known yet, the NOSTROMO is said to have accidentally traveled through time while it was pursuing what is suspected to have been the last existing asteroid ship of the feared Space Predators. It reportedly was projected by over 2,800 years in the past and took some time and a number of trial jumps before it was able to return to this year. If one of those trial jumps led it to the year 1937, then it would explain the presence of the historically famous aviatrix Amelia Earhart, who disappeared in the the Pacific that year while attempting the first ever air trip around the Earth. ABC has been trying to find more about this by contacting the NOSTROMO, which is presently in Earth orbit, but we haven't received a reply yet..."

As the newscaster was continuing to speculate about the scene from Time Square, Eve smiled to herself.

"...one of the super androids from the NOSTROMO... I like that description: it is quite flattering."

"Well, you and your comrade androids frankly deserve it, Eve. On my part, it is nice to see that I am still famous after all these centuries. So, what do we do now?"

"I will contact the NOSTROMO and signal this first, then we will see what we should do."

Amelia stayed silent as Eve, using her implanted radio communication unit, silently called the NOSTROMO, then engaged in a radio exchange. After a good four minutes, Eve finally opened her eyes and looked at Amelia.

"I just got directives from Tina: she authorizes us to go to the ABC studios here in Manhattan, where I will present you to its viewers. However, you are to leave to me to answer any questions about how the NOSTROMO travelled through time: that subject is still very sensitive and must be treated with the utmost caution in order not to encourage bad players into researching that subject. Just stick to telling your personal story and that will be plenty."

"Got it! How are we going to get to that news studio, Eve?"

“Simple: we fly again. I have its address and it is near here, in Manhattan. Their building has a landing pad on its roof. Just hold on tight to me.”

“With pleasure, Eve.” replied Amelia, fired up at the idea of being able to fly again. She nearly screamed with pleasure when the two of them flew off again and went over the ledge of the roof they had been on, then sped North towards Central Park. While flying, Eve had to keep an eye out for the numerous aircars circulating around the city and stayed just above the levels of the buildings she flew by. After some three minutes of flying, Eve finally landed on a large landing pad crowning a 23-story building which had a big electronic sign along one side showing the letters ‘ABC’. A pair of private security guards posted next to the door of the roof access hut of the building watched with big eyes as the duo silently flew down to a smooth landing a few paces from them. Eve then smiled to one of the guards.

“Hi! I am bringing Miss Amelia Earhart in for an interview. Could you lead us to your daily news desk studio?”

“Uh, let me contact my supervisor first, miss.” replied the guard before using the headset incorporated to his helmet. After half a minute, he looked back at Eve and nodded his head.

“I am now going to lead you and Miss Earhart to the news studio. If you will please follow me.”

Entering the access hut, then taking a lift, Eve and Amelia followed the guard to a large holoview production complex, where a mature woman greeted the two visitors after thanking the security guard and dismissing him.

“I am so happy to see you at our studios, Miss Earhart. I am Mary Olsen, executive producer for news at ABC. And may have your name, miss?”

“Eve Silisca. I am the ship’s assistant hostess on the NOSTROMO and was guiding Miss Earhart around New York, which had changed a lot since she was last here in 1937.”

“Quite a changed city indeed. May I inquire about your nature, Miss Silisca? Are you an android?”

“Yes, I am, Miss Olsen. I have received instructions from Captain Tina Forster, telling me what I can tell you about our involuntary travel to the distant past and our return trip. I am ready to answer the questions from your news anchors...to a degree.”

If Olsen was somewhat disappointed by her answer, she didn't show it and smiled to the duo while pointing to a door down the hallway they were in.

"And we are thankful for you to choose our studios for this, Miss Silisca. If you will follow me, I will bring you to our on-air news desk."

The trio of women soon walked into a fairly wide room in which a news desk throned on an elevated stage. The two newscasters sitting at that desk got up from their chairs to greet Amelia and Eve with handshakes, with the male reporter talking first.

"Welcome to our studios and thank you for accepting to speak with us, Miss Earhart. I am Jeff Daniels and my colleague is Janet Wong."

"It's my pleasure. May I present to you Miss Eve Silisca, from the NOSTROMO, who was guiding me on this visit to New York. She is the ship's assistant hostess and has been authorized to speak in the name of Captain Forster. If you have questions about the NOSTROMO, please ask them to her. On my part, I will answer the questions you have about me."

Both reporters gave cautious looks at Eve, understanding that she had to be an android, before they invited Amelia and Eve to sit down on a sofa next to their news desk. The male reporter then looked at the cameras facing him and spoke up.

"Dear viewers, it is now my pleasure to introduce to you Miss Amelia Earhart, the historically famous aviatrix who disappeared in the Pacific in 1937, 400 years ago, and Miss Eve Silisca, from the cargo ship NOSTROMO, who was guiding Miss Earhart on a visit to modern-day New York. There are obviously numerous questions about how Miss Earhart came to this year, so let's ask our two guests about this right away."

The male reporter then smiled to Eve and asked his first question to her.

"Miss Silisca, since you are here to speak in the name of the captain of the NOSTROMO, what can you tell us about how Miss Earhart was brought to this year?"

"With pleasure, Mister Daniels. It all started earlier this year, when the NOSTROMO was in orbit around New Haven, in the Wolf 1061 System, delivering supplies and construction materials. A large Space Predator fleet was then detected as it started arriving at the confines of the system, with the obvious intent to attack it and grab its inhabitants in order to turn them into reserves of food. Thankfully, our ship was able to react quickly and took an ambush position in the asteroid belt of the system before the enemy fleet was completely formed up and started moving in. We managed to take the Space Predators by surprise and delivered salvos of missiles from behind the protection of a large asteroid, decimating the enemy fleet and forcing the survivors to

turn around and flee. The NOSTROMO then engaged in hot pursuit of the surviving Space Predator ships, which were all already damaged to various degrees, and succeeded in destroying all but one of them before they could jump out of the system. The lone enemy ship able to jump was actually their flagship, a huge asteroid ship some forty kilometers across. However, we were able to follow it as it made successive jumps to other systems while trying to lose us. This hot pursuit actually led us to a poorly charted region in the Canis Majoris Constellation, some 3,900 light years from Earth. Unknown to us then, the Space Predator flagship, growing desperate, tried to sucker us into following it into an uncharted black hole. While that flagship was itself destroyed by that black hole, it nearly succeeded in tricking us into that trap. Thankfully, our bridge crew managed to escape the gravity well of that black hole by jumping away but then suffered some totally unexpected effect and found itself lost in Space. We eventually were able to find the Solar System and jumped to it but, on arrival, found out a dark, electronically silent Earth and understood that we had somehow been projected back in time by 2,800 years and were now in the Year 472 B.C.E.”

“Wow! That must have been quite a traumatic realization for your crew, miss.” said the female anchor, making Eve nod her head.

“Indeed, Miss Wong. After placing ourselves in polar orbit around Earth in order to better observe its surface, the historical clues we saw told us that we were in the Year 472 B.C.E., which allowed us to start understanding what had happened to us and to try to find a way back to the 24th Century. This was no easy task, believe me, and we had long scientific debates on how we could possibly travel back to the future.”

“What would you have done if you had found out that there actually was no possible way to return to the 24th Century, miss?”

“First, please understand this: right from the moment that we realized that we had travelled to the distant past, Captain Tina Forster gave firm orders that we would not be doing anything which could even possibly jeopardize or modify history as we knew it. No direct contacts with ancient people; no visible flyby or other kind of demonstration and only passive observation and data recording while out of sight. If we didn’t find any way back to the future, then Captain Forster was resolved to either stay in Earth orbit or to fly out to Deep Space, without attempting any direct contact on Earth. Since the NOSTROMO is self-sufficient in terms of food production, we could thus have survived by ourselves, spanning multiple generations of our crew. Our only critical need would

have been in terms of fuel for our power generators and long-term maintenance of our machinery but there would have been ways to go over those problems.”

“And the crew of your ship would have accepted such an exile in Space, miss?” asked the male reporter. “Knowing human nature, I doubt that there wouldn’t have been at least some opposition to that.”

Eve threw a critical look at Daniels before answering in a firm tone.

“Please understand this, Mister Daniels: any interference with the events on Earth would then have caused chaotic changes to History as we knew it, changes which would have completely rewritten History in unpredictable ways. If we had done so, then you would not exist right now and neither would the Earth as you know it. The stakes were simply too monumental not to follow Captain Forster’s directives. For the same reasons, Captain Forster will not divulge any technical details or scientific process about the way we finally found our way back to the 24th Century. The dangers of having some irresponsible idiot or power-hungry persons using time travel to change History to his or her profit is simply too great.”

The two reporters took a few seconds to digest that announcement. Probably directed via her earpiece by her executive producer, Janet Wong then asked another question, veering away from the subject of how to travel in time.

“Miss Silisca, I must say that the sense of responsibility of Captain Forster is truly admirable. Please tell us how you ended up finding and saving Miss Earhart in 1937.”

“With pleasure, miss. Once our scientific team had thought of a possible way to return to the future, we then effected a series of experimental temporal jumps, to first see if the process worked and, if yes, then to be able to calibrate our jumps in order to be able to attain a specific date and year. Our first jumps proved rather haphazard at first and we thus made many more test jumps, varying our jump parameters and seeing how they affected the precision of our temporal jumps. By the time that we were approaching the 20th Century, we basically had the technique down path and thus decided to jump next to the Year 1937, in order to resolve a famous historical mystery: the disappearance of Amelia Earhart in the Pacific while she was attempting a World tour in a plane. We did observe her crash at sea just off what was then known as Gardner Island, in the Phoenix Archipelago, with both Miss Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, surviving the crash and taking refuge on Gardner Island. Unfortunately, that island suffers from a severe lack of fresh water and they quickly started suffering from a growing thirst and dehydration in the days following their crash. Then, four days

after the crash, Fred Noonan got killed by a shark after he went into their half-submerged aircraft in order to send an ultimate radio call for help. Unfortunately, that happened too fast to allow us to react to it and we thus could only record that tragedy. None of the distress calls they made were heard and none of the ships and planes looking for Miss Earhart's plane saw them, so Amelia found herself stuck alone on Gardner Island, slowly dying of thirst. From what was known historically about her disappearance, we knew that no concrete traces of either her plane or of her body would ever be found. Furthermore, a large group of workers who landed on Gardner Island a year after her crash, with the intent of starting a coconut plantation, didn't find traces of her and they were themselves forced by the lack of fresh water sources to abandon the island a few years later. We thus knew that we could save her without endangering History, at the condition of bringing her with us to the future, which we did. Thus, here she is in 2337."

"That is a fascinating story, a story worth producing a documentary about, Miss Silisca."

"Indeed! I can tell you now that such a documentary will soon be produced on the NOSTROMO and then distributed to various holoview broadcasters, for the benefit of the public. ABC will be one of those broadcasters to be offered this documentary about Miss Earhart's adventure and disappearance."

"But that would be great, miss! When could our viewers hope to be able to see that documentary?"

"In about two weeks, time to produce it and then have its content approved by Amelia. I can tell you as well that a number of other historical documentary videos are being produced on the NOSTROMO, videos which show the various historical stops we made while in the past. That list has not been finalized yet but it will eventually be communicated to various broadcasters, including ABC."

With Mary Olsen discretely directing him via his earpiece, the male newscaster looked at Amelia Earhart.

"Miss Earhart, now that you are in 2337, what do you intend to do during the years to come? Will you return to Earth or stay in Space?"

"I intend to stay on the NOSTROMO for the time being, where I will reeducate myself, learn about the modern World and update my technical knowledge. Eventually, I wish to be able to fly spaceships and to continue on as a pilot. Flying has always been my passion and always will be."

“And we wish you the best in this, Miss Earhart. I thank you and Miss Silisca for coming to our studio and for accepting to answer our questions.”

“It was our pleasure, mister.”

With the interview at an end and with some commercial break playing on, Amelia and Eve got up from their sofa and shook hands with the two newscasters, who were then joined by their producer, who also shook hands with them.

“Thank you again for coming to our studios, Miss Earhart and Miss Silisca. Your odyssey in time was truly epic.”

“And I owe my life to the professionalism and care of Captain Forster and of her crew. They managed to come back from the distant past while not putting in danger our history. They also did that after eliminating for good the threat represented by those Space Predator monsters. The whole of Humanity owes the NOSTROMO and its crew a huge debt of gratitude for all it did. I will now let Eve continue to guide me around this visit to New York.”

“And I wish you a good time in our city, Miss Earhart.”

On that, Amelia and Eve left the studio, then walked out of the building before going on foot to the deli restaurant Amelia had spotted before being recognized.

Once in the deli restaurant, Amelia quickly ordered a big pastrami sandwich and a bagel, while Eve simply ordered a cup of coffee, to the secret disappointment of their waiter. As Amelia ate with gusto her thick sandwich, Eve asked her a question while smiling.

“So, is it as good as what you tasted in 1937?”

“It is good, but something in its taste is missing from what I hate in the deli I visited in the 1930s. However, even the pastrami sandwich from 1937 was beaten hands down by the smoked meat sandwiches I hate in Montreal at a famous deli called ‘Ben’s’. Nothing could beat the smoked meat from Ben’s.”

An idea then made Amelia smile to herself.

“Hey, maybe we could arrange some side-trip in time and go pick up some smoked meat in the 1930s’ Montreal.”

That made Eve shake her head while hiding her face with her hands.

CHAPTER 20 – TREACHERY



09:58 (Universal Time)

Friday, December 03, 2337

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In low Earth orbit, Solar System

“The AEGIS has flown out and is now on its way towards the Sun, Tina.”

“Thank you, Amin.” replied Tina, sitting in her command chair on the bridge. She then watched the temporal command cutter as its image quickly shrank on the holographic sphere containing the bridge. The AEGIS and the Project Tempus team were now on their way to accomplish a new historical documentation mission in the past, taking advantage of the fact that the NOSTROMO was back in Earth orbit in order to load more cargo and supplies for Asiana. The way that the first historical documentaries produced by the Project Tempus had been greeted with enthusiasm by the public on Earth and around the Spacers League had certainly been most encouraging, on top of bringing in some very appreciable new revenues to the New Haven Corporation, revenues which had allowed Tina to add substantially to the facilities and residential capacity on New Haven. This newest temporal mission, which was going to target the 20th Century and its numerous wars, should prove as equally fruitful as the first ones.

13:25 (Universal Time)

Spacers League Government Center

City of New Dawn, planet of Providence

Alpha Centauri B System, 4.36 light years from Earth

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, A MATTER CONVERTER WARHEAD IS MISSING? WE ARE TALKING ABOUT A WEAPON OF MASS DESTRUCTION! THEY ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO SIMPLY GO ‘MISSING’.”

Admiral Jiro Yamashiro, the present head of the Spacers League Navy, felt acute embarrassment as he was facing a now very angry Chairwoman of the High Council. Jeanne Mercier had in fact every right to be angry, as the news Yamashiro had just given to her was bound to have severe repercussions around the Navy’s hierarchy, on top of representing a grievous case of negligence.

“I fully realize how serious this is, Madam Chairwoman, and I assure you that every effort is presently being made to locate that missing warhead.”

Calming herself somewhat, Mercier, a 53-year-old thin woman with an iron will, lowered the volume of her voice but kept its tone glacial.

“First off: how powerful is that ‘missing’ warhead, Admiral?”

“It is a standard model used in our Space missiles, Madam Chairwoman. It can be tuned in power from five to ninety megatons equivalent and uses the principle of converting a mass of matter, in this case a bloc of steel, into antimatter, which then explodes at the contact of more matter surrounding the bloc.”

“Ninety megatons?” exclaimed Jeanne Mercier, horrified. “But that is powerful enough to completely destroy the largest of our cities. How big is it?”

Yamashiro squirmed a bit at that question, expecting his answer to further infuriate Mercier.

“It is actually quite small and light, Madam Chairwoman. The whole warhead, including its detonator and power source, is about the size of a 500 milliliter can of soup and weighs no more than two kilos.”

Anger flashed again in Jeanne Mercier’s eyes but she managed to control her voice for her next question.

“And may I ask how this warhead came to be missing and when?”

“Uh, that is a bit complicated and is still under investigation, Madam Chairwoman. The fact that we were missing a matter converter warhead in our stocks of munitions kept at our Navy Central Arsenal was revealed when we conducted a detailed inventory of our stocks following a still unexplained power surge which wiped out the arsenal’s primary database three days ago. We then had to reload our computers with a backup copy of our inventory file, following which we conducted a manual and visual count. Unfortunately, that backup file was a bit dated and did not correspond exactly with what our manual check found, so we had to use a compilation of separate files and a second manual check before we could say for sure that one warhead was missing.”

“Three days?!”

“It could actually have been missing for longer, Madam Chairwoman, as inventory checks at our Central Arsenal are conducted once every week. That power surge happened the night before the next schedule inventory check.”

Jeanne Mercier’s blood froze in her veins on hearing those two last sentences: she didn’t like at all the implications of this.

“This sounds to me like someone did his or her best to hide the disappearance of that warhead from us, Admiral. It also may imply an inside job by an infiltrator or a traitor on the strength of the Navy’s Arsenal staff.”

“I regrettably have to agree with you on that, Madam Chairwoman. Our security services are now concentrating their efforts in that direction.”

Jeanne Mercier, fighting to retain her cool, pointed sharply an index at Yamashiro.

“Find that warhead, Admiral, and quickly! I also want whoever did take that warhead to be identified and then arrested.”

“Yes, Madam Chairwoman!” said Yamashiro before saluting her and, pivoting on his heels, walking out of her office.

17:24 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In low Earth orbit, Solar System

Tina was about to leave the bridge after passing its control to Dana Durning, intent on having a family supper, when Anwar Duharto, on duty at one of the sensors and communications workstations, spoke up.

"Captain, I am now receiving a coded signal from a courier drone approaching us. It is a Navy drone and is flashing a high priority message status."

Forgetting her family supper for a moment, Tina approached Duharto's workstation and looked at the message being displayed on one of its screens.

"A flash priority message, 'Captain's Eyes Only', addressed to me. Alright, Mister Duharto: switch on our approach beacon and open our drone arrival airlock. Once that drone will be connected to our secure network, I will read its message from my command chair."

"Understood, Captain."

Returning to her command chair and sitting in it, Tina gave an apologetic smile to Dana Durning, her second-in-command, who occupied her own chair next to Tina's chair.

"Sorry, Dana: you will have to endure me on the bridge for a few minutes more."

"No problem, Tina. I wonder what that flash priority message could be. The last time we received one was when the Space Predators attacked Nordland."

"Such messages rarely announce good news, effectively." recognized Tina.

Some 200 meters below the level of the bridge, the arriving courier drone entered the airlock dedicated to the handling of inbound drones, then was cycled through it before being guided down a long tunnel and cycling through a second airlock near the core section. Once through, it was moved via a series of small tractor beams to a special drone berth, where clamps secured it in place. Next, a robotic arm extended itself and opened an armored hatch on the surface of the egg-shaped drone, then plugged its data connector to the receptacle inside the drone, so that it could download whatever message was being carried by it. However, instead of initiating a data download, that contact triggered the matter converter warhead which had been hidden inside the fake Navy courier drone. That warhead then detonated with its full power of ninety megatons. The six-kilometer radius fireball from the matter-antimatter reaction, being actually much larger than the NOSTROMO itself, vaporized the huge cargo ship in microseconds, with few of its part surviving it to be projected around like hot pieces of shrapnel. The crew and passengers of the NOSTROMO never had the time to feel anything before being vaporized along with the ship.

On the LAS AMERICAS orbital terminal, situated some 2,000 kilometers away at about the same orbital altitude than the NOSTROMO, the searing white flash from the

explosion and the expanding ball of energy following it was clearly seen by the Space traffic controllers on duty on its control tower. Many ships present in low and medium Earth orbits also were witnesses to the destruction of the NOSTROMO, including a Spacers League's cruiser which was on its way for repairs to the Avalon Space Yards. The captain of that cruiser could only look in horror at the huge, expanding ball of plasma some 940 kilometers away.

"My God! That was the NOSTROMO! MISTER WU, SOUND BATTLE STATIONS! SOMETHING JUST BLEW UP THE NOSTROMO. LIEUTENANT BARANGIDA, PREPARE A FLASH MESSAGE FOR THE ADMIRALTY ON PROVIDENCE."

Captain Hadley then sat back in his command chair, utterly crushed: the mightiest ship in the Spacers League fleet, a ship which had distinguished itself in numerous battles, had just been vaporized in low Earth orbit. Forgetting about any thoughts of repairs, Hadley frantically put his cruiser on combat-ready status, then looked at his sensors officer.

"Lieutenant Cherbinsky, can you see any sign of life pods having been able to leave the NOSTROMO before it exploded?"

The young officer sadly shook his head in answer.

"Nothing survived that explosion, sir. It looked like an internal explosion. Maybe one of its missiles detonated inside its magazine."

"Maybe, but we can't afford to speculate right now. Keep listening for any possible distress signal we could get. Pilot, turn us around and head for the site of that explosion."

"Aye, sir!"

14:18 (Universal Time)

Sunday, December 05, 2337

Bridge of the temporal command cutter AEGIS

Emerging in Space near the Sun, Solar System

"I confirm that we are back at our target date and time, SPIRIT." announced Christian Bale from its navigator's station. "I am receiving a clear signal from the radio beacons of the Solar System."

“Excellent!” replied SPIRIT, who had accompanied the Project Tempus team on their latest mission. “Let’s fly to Earth and join up with the NOSTROMO. I am sure that Tina will be anxious to watch the recordings we took from the few naval battles we watched.”

Before she could say more, William Windsor, who was manning the communications station, looked up from his instruments, concern on his face.

“I am receiving a Navy warning message broadcasted around the system in a continuous loop: the whole Solar System is presently under high alert condition.”

“What does it say exactly?” asked the pilot, Harrison Ford.

“Only that all ships approaching Earth are to be first inspected by a Navy ship.”

“I don’t like this. How far from Earth are we, Christian?”

“We are a bit less than five light minutes from Earth, SPIRIT: too far away to allow practical two-way communication.”

“Then, let’s effect a micro-jump to a high polar orbit above Earth. Once there, we will contact the NOSTROMO and see what is happening.”

“Got it! Calculating our jump... jumping now!”

The images on their holosphere screens changed to that showing Earth’s North Pole under them once they emerged from that micro-jump. It however took only a few seconds before they got a firm order from a nearby Navy corvette.

“Unidentified ship, this is the Navy corvette CHARYBDIS, identify yourself at once!”

William Windsor exchanged looks with the other members of the crew present on the small bridge before answering that call.

“CHARYBDIS, this is the command cutter AEGIS, from the A.M.S. NOSTROMO. We have just returned from a mission to another system and are planning to join up and enter the NOSTROMO. Can you tell us why the Solar System is under high alert condition, over?”

From harsh, the voice from the corvette softened noticeably.

“AEGIS, know that the NOSTROMO was completely destroyed by a huge internal explosion two days ago, while in low Earth orbit. There were no survivors.”

Despite all being androids who supposedly couldn’t feel emotions, that piece of news struck hard the members of the team. On her part, SPIRIT closed her eyes for a

moment, while tears came out and rolled onto her cheeks. She however quickly regained control of herself and activated her own radio link.

"CHARYBDIS, from the AEGIS, can you tell us more about that? Is there an investigation being done to find the cause of this catastrophe?"

"Little is known, apart from the fact that the NOSTROMO suddenly disappeared in a huge plasma ball some six kilometers in radius and was instantly vaporized. That explosion was observed at 17:31 on Friday, December 03. The cruiser YORKTOWN is presently in orbit near the site of the explosion and is directing the investigation about that tragedy."

"Thank you, CHARYBDIS. Please advise the YORKTOWN that we will be joining it and that we will then visit it to get more information about what happened to the NOSTROMO."

"I will pass the word, AEGIS. Please accept our most sincere condolences for your loss."

"Thank you, CHARYBDIS. AEGIS, out!"

SPIRIT then cut her link and looked at the crew of the cutter.

"A fireball some six kilometers in radius... That sounds like the explosion of one of our missiles, set at its maximum power."

"So, could it really be an accidental explosion inside one of NOSTROMO's missile magazines?" asked Maria Sharapova, their weapons officer. "I personally doubt that very much: there were multiple safeguards and procedures aboard the NOSTROMO to prevent just that kind of accidental explosion."

"I think so as well, Maria." replied SPIRIT. "I smell a rat in this. Once on the YORKTOWN, I intend to find out if there is any other information or data available which could provide us with a clue. Then, we will see if we could do something about this. Harrison, let's fly to the NOSTROMO's last orbit."

"On our way, SPIRIT."

It actually took them only some fourteen minutes before the cutter docked itself at one of the side docking ports of the cruiser YORKTOWN. Once the airlock was declared pressurized and secure, SPIRIT, accompanied by Maria Sharapova, entered the cruiser, to be greeted in a large locker room by a Navy commander and two armed marines. The Navy man immediately excused himself to SPIRIT when she entered the compartment.

"Please excuse the presence of my two marines, miss, but we are presently on the strictest security protocols available. I am Commander Sven Anderson, second-in-command of the YORKTOWN."

"And I am SPIRIT, the android avatar of the central AI computer of the NOSTROMO. This is Officer Maria Sharapova, the weapons officer of our cutter. What can you tell us about what happened to our mother ship?"

"Uh, not here, miss. Some of the information we have is classified Top Secret and is very sensitive. Let me guide you to our conference room, where you will be able to review what we know up to now. May I first present my most sincere condolences to you for the loss of the NOSTROMO?"

"Thank you for your consideration, Commander Anderson. We will take the time to grieve later. We are ready to follow you."

"Then, this way, please."

The trip to the ship's conference room was actually fairly short, it being on the same deck as the docking port they had used. There, SPIRIT was presented to Captain Jerry Hadley, who shook hands with SPIRIT and Maria before inviting them to sit down at the long table.

"May I first ask you to prove your identity, so that I could verify that you possess the necessary security clearance for the information I have?"

"No problem, Captain Hadley." replied SPIRIT, who then opened a silent electronic link with the ship's main computer, imitated in this by Maria Sharapova. Hadley watched them with curiosity as he realized that he was now facing two androids. However, his own AI computer quickly reassured him about them.

"Miss SPIRIT and Miss Maria Sharapova positively identified and confirmed to hold Top Secret level clearances, Captain. May I download directly to SPIRIT's and Sharapova's databanks the dossier we have accumulated concerning the destruction of the NOSTROMO? This could save a lot of precious time."

"I agree. Proceed!"

Both SPIRIT and Maria stayed immobile and expressionless for a few seconds, time for the gigabytes of data stored in the investigation file to be downloaded directly to their electronic brains. At the end of it, SPIRIT looked soberly at Anderson while getting up from her chair, imitated by Maria.

"I now know enough for me to act, Captain. Thank you for helping us."

“Wait! That’s it? You don’t need to see more or to discuss with me what we know?”

“What your computer gave us is plenty, Captain Anderson. We will now return to our cutter and be on our way.”

“To where? To do what?” asked the Navy man, taken off balance by the shortness of their visit. SPIRIT gave him a solemn look in response.

“To save the NOSTROMO and all the people we love.”

Returning to the AEGIS, the two female androids went back to sit in their work seats on the small bridge of the cutter, where SPIRIT gave curt orders to its crew.

“Harrison, detach us from the YORKTOWN, then fly us towards the Sun. Christian, calculate a jump to the coordinates I am going to give you now.”

17:24 (Universal Time)

Friday, December 03, 2337

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In low Earth orbit, Solar System

Tina was about to leave the bridge after passing its control to Dana Durning, intent on having a family supper, when Anwar Duharto, on duty at one of the sensors and communications workstation, spoke up.

“Captain, I am now receiving a coded signal from a courier drone approaching us. It is a Navy drone and is flashing a high priority message status.”

Forgetting her family supper for a moment, Tina approached Duharto’s workstation and looked at the message being displayed on one of its screens.

“A flash priority message, ‘Captain’s Eyes Only’, addressed to me. Alright, Mister Duharto: switch on our approach beacon and open our drone arrival airlock. Once that drone will be connected to our secure network, I will read its message from my command chair.”

“Understood, Captain.”

Returning to her command chair and sitting in it, Tina gave an apologetic smile to Dana Durning, her second-in-command, who occupied her own chair next to Tina’s chair.

“Sorry, Dana: you will have to endure me on the bridge for a few minutes more.”

"No problem, Tina. I wonder what that flash priority message could be. The last time we received one was when the Space Predators attacked Nordland."

"Such messages rarely announce good news, effectively." recognized Tina. She then followed on the holosphere of the bridge complex the small symbol marking the approaching courier drone, which was now some 632 kilometers away. Then, three electric blue rays of energy typical of disintegrator cannons straddled the drone, hitting it and vaporizing it after half a second of firing. Both shocked and surprised, Tina shouted at once orders around her.

"POWER THE SHIELDS! ACTIVATE OUR BATTERIES! FIND OUT FROM WHERE THOSE DISINTEGRATORS WERE FIRED!"

Before her bridge crew could fully react to her orders, the voice of their central AI computer, SPIRIT, came up on the intercom.

"Belay those orders, Tina. These were the disintegrator cannons of the AEGIS. I just got an electronic data transfer from my android avatar, telling me that this fake Navy courier drone was in reality carrying a matter converter warhead recently stolen from the Navy Central Arsenal on the moon of Providence, a warhead meant to destroy us."

"What? How could they know that? Open a link to the AEGIS, please."

"Link established, Tina. You have my avatar on the line."

Looking down at one of her two display screens attached to the armrests of her command chair, Tina saw the head and upper torso of SPIRIT's avatar, which was looking back at her with apparent relief.

"Thank the stars: we were able to save you. Let me explain quickly to you what is happening, Tina. Basically, when we returned from our mission in the past on Sunday afternoon, two days from now in the future, we found out that the NOSTROMO had been vaporized by the explosion of a stolen warhead placed in the courier drone which was just approaching you. Armed with the exact time of the destruction of the NOSTROMO and with orbital surveillance data which saw a courier drone enter the ship just before the explosion in question, we decided to make a short temporal jump to this date and time, in order to wait for that courier drone and destroy it before it could enter the NOSTROMO. We have the recordings taken by other ships and orbital stations which had been in sight of the NOSTROMO when it exploded. We also have telemetry data intercepted from the courier drone in question. The Navy has established that this drone was a fake Navy drone which used stolen Navy codes. While we have succeeded in

saving the NOSTROMO from utter destruction, I am afraid that we had in the process to violate one of the cardinal rules you established for Project Tempus: we changed History by our actions today.”

“Well, between that and us ending up as hot plasma, I think that I will be lenient and forget about that violation, SPIRIT. But who could have wanted so bad to kill us and destroy my NOSTROMO?”

“Someone who positively hates your guts and who also hates us androids. I believe that it is high time to pay a visit to that asshole, and the hell with the Spacers League’s criminal laws.”

21:09 (Universal Time)

Private island luxury estate of Paul Stein, CEO of Stein Mining Group

Planet El Dorado (Tau Boötis Ac)

Tau Boötis System, 50.8 light years from Earth

Paul Stein wished that the automated courier drone service covering the various worlds of the Spacers League could have run more frequently than just two times a day, Earth time. However, only the central government and the Navy enjoyed the use of priority courier drones dedicated to the circulation of flash information considered of vital interest. He was thus stuck with having to wait for the arrival of the next courier drone, scheduled to arrive on El Dorado the next morning. Hopefully, that drone was going to bring the news that this Tina Forster bitch and her cursed NOSTROMO were now gone, vaporized by the warhead stolen from the Navy by his henchmen infiltrated inside the Navy staff. To console himself from having to wait, he was now sipping a cocktail while watching in his private study a most illegal (by the Spacers League criminal code) pornographic video featuring very young girls and boys. A sudden gust of fresh wind coming from the large patio doors giving a view of the ocean surrounding his private island made him swear and twist his head to see if those patio doors had opened because of the wind, something that happened on occasions. His swear words then strangled in his throat on seeing three women now standing just inside his study, having obviously entered via the balcony of his study. Two of them were quite tall, while the third one was actually a small but stoutly built teenage girl. All three wore dark gray light spacesuits, with their helmet visors opened. They also were pointing heavy disintegrator

pistols at him. Stein immediately recognized one of the two tall women, a mature brunette who was looking at him with undisguised hostility.

“Forster! What the fuck are you doing here, in my private mansion?”

“I’m certainly not coming here to bed you, you bastard.” said Tina, who then looked with disgust at the pedophilia video playing on Stein’s holoview unit. “What’s the matter with you, Stein? Can’t handle grown women? To answer your question, I came to make you pay for your attempt at destroying my ship and killing me and my crew. Flash news: it didn’t work!”

“You won’t be able to prove anything against me, Forster: I covered my tracks too well.”

With Paul Stein having just involuntarily admitted his guilt without realizing it, Tina shot a dark look at him.

“I know! But you won’t get any time in court, you bastard.” said Tina before firing her disintegrator pistol. The energy beam hit Paul Stein squarely in his chest and enveloped his whole body in a blue halo before the mining CEO was vaporized in his easy chair, leaving only some ashes and a half-incinerated chair. Tina then contemplated for a couple of seconds what was left of Stein before speaking.

“From dust to dust... Have a nice time in Hell, you bastard. Alright, girls, time to go back to the AEGIS.”

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