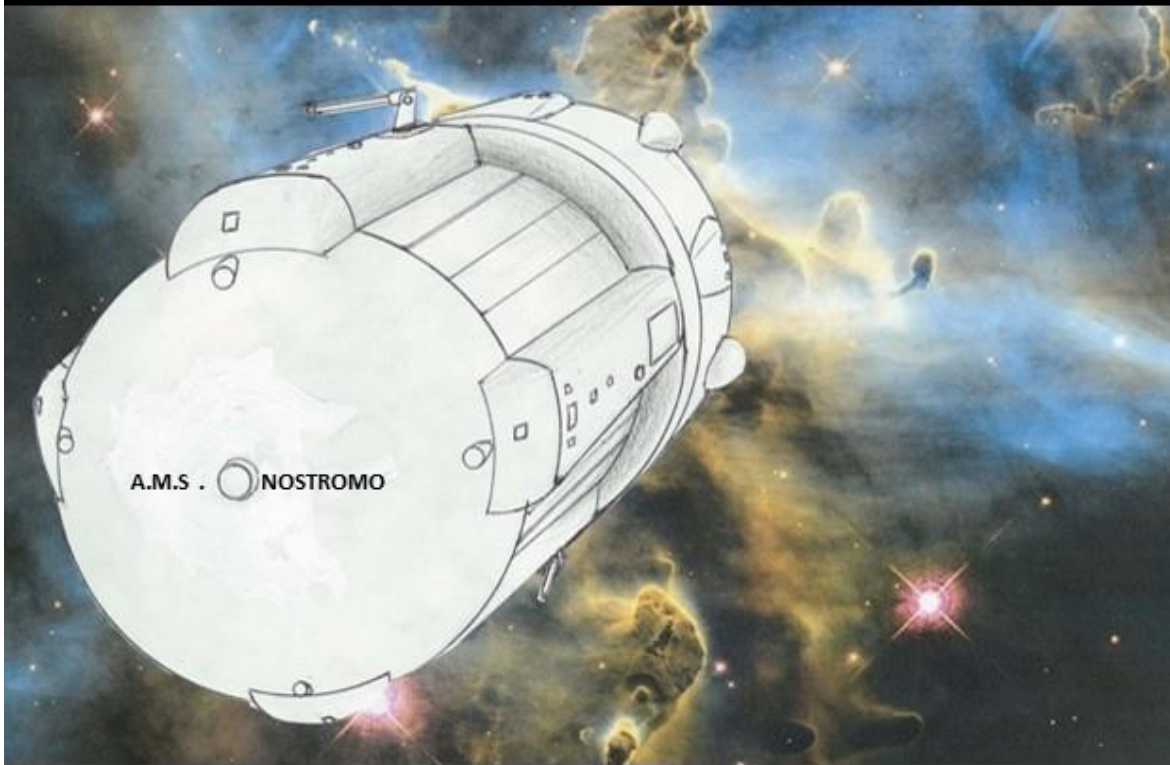


NOSTROMO ON THE PROWL



A SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL

By

MICHEL POULIN

NOSTROMO

ON THE PROWL

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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 WHICH ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is a sequel to my A NEW ERA and is the eight 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 2335 and the NOSTROMO, damaged in a major battle during which it victoriously fought and destroyed a powerful fleet of Space Predator asteroid ships and thus saved the inhabitants of the planet Nordland, is returning to the Solar System for some urgent repairs. Despite her victory, Captain Tina Forster can't celebrate yet, as she just learned that, while Humanity doesn't know where the surviving Space Predator worlds are, the monsters now know where to find the planets occupied by Humanity.

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THE MAIN BATTLE TANK – STILL RELEVANT OR IN NEED OF FURTHER EVOLUTION

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CHAPTER 1 – URGENT REPAIRS



The Avalon Space Yards, Low Earth Orbit.

19:38 (Universal Time)

Monday, November 4, 2335

Avalon Space Yards, Low Earth Orbit

Solar System

Gustav Shomberg, owner, chief-designer and manager of the Avalon Space yards, watched from inside an observation gallery as the huge Class 'A' super-heavy cargo ship slowly entered Drydock Number One, the largest drydock of the Avalon Space Yards and also the largest in existence in Humanity's Space. The 3,000 meter-long and 1,800 meter-diameter A.M.S. NOSTROMO actually nearly filled the huge volume of Drydock Number One as it slowly flew inside it. Shomberg's attention

immediately focused on the multiple long, dark furrows scarring the bow shield and flanks of the NOSTROMO.

“Damn! The damage is more extensive than I was afraid about. Thankfully, Captain Tina Forster seemed to have succeeded in minimizing that damage from Space Predator laser beams by rotating her ship along its longitudinal axis while fighting those Space Predator ships. Look at how those furrows burned in by laser beams have a spiraling shape.”

His assistant chief-engineer, Karina Martens, who was standing next to Shomberg, nodded her head then.

“I believe that we will have to completely replace the bow shield of the NOSTROMO: those furrows are very deep ones and a few of them intersect together, seriously weakening the structural integrity of the whole bow shield. One of the lateral sliding cargo doors will also have to be replaced: it was apparently penetrated completely by a laser beam strike. Hopefully, the damage inside that hold will be minimal. The main problem we will have here is that the NOSTROMO is a one-of-a-kind ship: there are no existing structural spare parts for its bow and cargo doors. They will thus have to be built to specifications from scratch. That alone will add a good two to three months to the repair time.”

“I am afraid that you are right about that, Karina. However, I am also afraid that Captain Forster will take that piece of news pretty badly. The Spacers League wants and needs her ship to return into service as quickly as possible, in order for it to help defend our colonies from those monstrous Space Predators. Over half a million people are said to have perished in that Predator attack and invasion of the planet Nordland, in the TOI 700 System, and the other one and a half million inhabitants are still alive only because of the heroic actions of the NOSTROMO and of its crew.”

Martens, a tall Eurasian woman of mixed Dutch-Indonesian heritage, nodded her head again.

“Maybe, but I can’t see the NOSTROMO return into combat without first being properly repaired. Any rush to effect only partial repairs will only make it vulnerable to enemy fire. Such a valorous ship and crew deserves our best efforts at returning it to full operational capabilities, Gustav. In my opinion, we are looking at a minimum of three to four months of repair work, including the building of a new shield and cargo door. Did the Spacers League’s Admiralty confirm that it would cover the full costs of the repairs?”

"They did! Frankly, to not fully cover those costs would have been downright miserly: by defeating the Space Predators' invasion fleet by itself and by sending down its force of security androids to help rescue the inhabitants of Nordland, the NOSTROMO has proved itself to be essential to the defense of Humanity. We will work 24 hours a day, seven days a week on those repairs, using four full work crews in rotation to do the job. By the way, the Admiralty has authorized us to use the latest type of prismatic quartz shield material to rebuild the NOSTROMO's bow shield. It may be much more costly than the standard ceramic shield material we use but it also has the best resistance to laser fire among all the types of materials available."

"Then, I will order at once the production of new shield elements made of prismatic quartz for the new shield of the NOSTROMO. Should we also replace the hull ablative plating of the ship with prismatic quartz blocks?"

Shomberg, a tall and strongly-built man of Scandinavian descent who was now in his early sixties, only had to think about that for a second before answering Martens.

"Do it, Karina! It may add substantially to the cost of the repair work but I believe that the NOSTROMO, as the main asset of Humanity's combat fleet, deserves it. In fact, not giving it our best would be derelict on our part."

"One last question for you, Gustav: what color of prismatic quartz blocs shall we use? Five choices of basic colors of prismatic quartz blocs exist which we can use depending on the laser frequency the enemy uses, ranging from blue to black. I am asking because I see that Captain Forster had her ship painted over with matte black radar-absorbing paint. On the other hand, it would be wise to use the type of quartz color most efficient in absorbing and dispersing the laser beam frequencies used by the Space Predators."

"A good point, Karina. I will let Captain Forster decide on that when we will meet her."

"I must say that I can't wait to finally meet her: she is such a legend throughout the Spacers League."

"And rightly so, Karina. She first defeated nearly single-handedly the forces of the Earth Federation with her KOSTROMA during the Jovian Uprising of 2315, found that Koorivar ship on Eris in 2317, then defeated the Drazts of Ross 128 in 2320 after they attacked her ship without provocation, to succeed afterwards in convincing them to sign a peace treaty with us and to become our allies. Now, the NOSTROMO has proven to be the main shield of Humanity against those monstrous Space Predators."

“Don’t forget the role her security androids, produced by us at her request and according to her design, in fighting those Space Predators. They have proven to date to be by far the best Space infantry force we have. Maybe the Spacers League should ask us to relaunch their production here.”

Gustav Shomberg sighed on hearing that remark.

“They really should, but they won’t, for two reasons: first, there is still way too much anti-android racist sentiments and attitudes around the Spacers League to make that a viable political decision; second, Tina Forster will refuse that any sentient security android be used by others than herself, not because she wants to keep a monopoly on their use but because she is rightly afraid that others will use those sentient security androids as simple cannon fodder and will treat them basically like slaves. Unfortunately, the past six and a half years only proved that her fears about that were well founded.”

“Then, how about we support her security android force our own way, Gustav?” Shomberg looked at his assistant chief-engineer with some confusion.

“What do you mean by that, Karina?”

“Well, I know that this would be your money involved but the production line for her androids is still functional in our robotics department, although it is presently dormant. While deactivated at Captain Forster’s request, it still could be restarted rather quickly. On the other hand, even while asking the Admiralty a fair price for repairing the NOSTROMO, we will still end up with a profit on that contract easily exceeding one billion credits. Shouldn’t we contribute our own part in this war effort against the Space Predators by offering to produce a new batch of security androids at no cost for Captain Forster?”

Karina was pleased to see Gustav smile at her suggestion.

“You know what, Karina? I like your idea. I will offer it to Tina when we will meet with her this evening before starting our detailed inspection of her ship’s damage. Can you remind me of the updated cost for building each of those security androids.”

“Each of them costs about 85,000 credits to produce. Even if we spend only ten million credits of our profit on her androids, it would still mean for her an additional one hundred androids for her security force, plus a number of new android diagnostic stations and spare parts, something which would still be a significant addition to her force.”

Those numbers made Gustav think for a few seconds before nodding his head.

“Very well! I will present our proposal once we meet her.”

The two of them kept looking at the NOSTROMO until the giant armed merchant ship was fully stopped and secured into the extendable cradle arms and moorings of the drydock. The duo then used an electric cart to roll to the nearest access point of the drydock, to which a retractable access tunnel from the NOSTROMO had just mated with. Once that access tunnel had been fully pressurized, Gustav drove his cart into it after gaining permission from the ship’s security command post to roll in. They ended up driving for a good 1,500 meters along the western access tunnel of the NOSTROMO, passing through a succession of nine widely-spaced and heavily armored airlock doors before they parked their cart near one of the entrances of the central longitudinal core spine of the ship. Even that entrance proved to be protected by an airlock. Looking around her as they cycled through that final airlock, Karina’s expert eyes noticed the four small optical camera turrets attached to each of the four ceiling corners of the airlock. Each of those camera turrets also sported what looked to her like a short weapon barrel.

“My god! The internal security arrangements on this ship seem to be nearly impregnable. Are these disintegrator rifles, Gustav?”

“Actually, they are the barrels of light disintegrator pistols: anything more powerful would cause severe damage to this airlock if fired inside it. The small hole next to it is the muzzle of a cryogenic nitrogen gas projector, meant to freeze and immobilize but not kill attackers, while that small lens is the business end of a neural stun gun. If those don’t prove enough or adequate to deter boarders, the artificial gravity system inside this airlock can be set on so-called ‘ping-pong’ mode, to make its occupants bounce repeatedly between the floor and the ceiling, and that until they had enough of it. That ping-pong mode can be set between one and ten in power scale. You wouldn’t want to experience anything higher than three in power scale, while a ten-power scale would most probably kill you. The central artificial intelligence computer of the NOSTROMO, Spirit, can remotely control all these weapons and airlock doors and can defend the ship from boarders by itself.”

Karina couldn’t help shiver nervously on hearing his explanation.

“By the stars! I wouldn’t want to see that Spirit break down into some paranoia state: we would be toast!”

Just as she finished saying that, a loud, sadistic laughter echoed inside the airlock, while both doors closed tight in a flash.

"MOUAHAHAHAH! YOU ARE NOW MINE!"

"Who was that?" nearly shouted Karina, feeling panic rising in her. In response, a still calm and composed Gustav Shomberg simply grinned to her.

"That was Spirit. Did I tell you that she has a sense of humor?"

"She...she does?"

"Of course I do, Miss Martens. Sorry about scaring you like this but I couldn't resist this occasion. Captain Forster is waiting for you in the bridge conference room, along with her second-in-command and her chief-engineer. You may now proceed up to the bridge conference room, on Level 490."

"Uh, thanks!"

Moving with Gustav, Karina walked into a 36-meter-wide rotunda at the center of which stood a sixteen-meter-diameter vertical column containing a number of elevator lift tubes. Walking inside one of the elevator cabins, which was presently on their level, Karina looked suspiciously around the inside of the cabin, looking for more weapons turrets.

"At least, there are no weapons turrets in this lift cabin, Gustav."

"Correct, but it is still equipped with a ping-pong device. If you were an armed boarder, Spirit could stop this cabin between two decks, then play with you until you cry 'uncle'. And these are only the internal defenses of this ship. You wouldn't want to try attacking it with another ship: it would most probably spell your doom."

"And this is supposed to be a cargo ship, Gustav? You were definitely devious as hell when you designed it for Captain Forster."

"I didn't design it, Karina: Spirit designed it, following the directives from Tina Forster. Even by then, Tina had already proven herself to be the best Space tactician and ship handler around."

"Wait! How could this Spirit have designed the NOSTROMO, when she is part of the ship?"

"How? Because Spirit was first built as part of the KOSTROMA, the illustrious predecessor of the NOSTROMO, some 46 years ago. When the KOSTROMA was destroyed some seven years ago by performing a suicide charge which destroyed the Space Predator ship ravaging Kadosh, the homeworld of the Drazts of Ross 128, Spirit's daughter, Eve Silisca, was able to save copies of Spirit's personality and personal memories. These copies were eventually transferred and downloaded into the armored

central computer vault of the NOSTROMO. You must know that Eve Silisca is the first sentient android designed and produced by Spirit in the robotics workshops of the KOSTROMA. As such, she is of an even more advanced design than that of the security androids built for Captain Forster.”

“I do remember meeting her a number of times on our space yard, when she was directing the building of those security androids. If not for having been told in advance about her, I would never have guessed that she was not a human being. She also proved then to be extremely intelligent and perceptive, with highly developed social skills.”

“She is also a strikingly beautiful-looking young woman.” said Gustav, liking his lips, making Karina look crossly at him.

“You sound like you would love to bed her, Gustav.”

“And why not? Like the security androids we built, Eve is fully capable of having sex with a Human and is anatomically correct to the last detail, at least externally, and has a full set of functioning genital organs, except for the reproductive aspect of them. Did you know that a number of human crewmembers on the NOSTROMO have formed permanent couples with security androids of the opposite gender? At least a dozen such couples even formally married, while one couple adopted a little war orphan girl and is presently raising her. But please keep that last information to yourself, Karina. Some bigots on Earth could raise a stink if they would learn about this.”

By now quite overwhelmed by all those revelations, Karina nodded her head then.

“Alright, I will keep mum about this.”

Their cabin finally stopped, with its door sliding open and showing a small anteroom with two doors and a staircase. One of the doors was opened and showed the inside of a small conference room where three women were sitting and waiting around a rectangular table. Karina recognized at once one of the women as being Captain **Tina Forster**, wearing an informal ship outfit. Forster immediately got up and walked to them to greet them with a solid handshake as they entered the conference room. She was fairly tall for a woman, standing a good 178 centimeters, and had long brown hair and grey eyes. Karina knew from the various news report about her that she was close to the age of fifty but she still looked fit, with little fat visible on her.



"Welcome aboard Gustav, and you as well, Miss Martens. Please, come and sit down. Would you like some tea or coffee before we start this meeting?"

"A cup of strong coffee would be nice, Tina." replied Gustav, followed by Karina.

"I will also have a cup of coffee, Captain."

"Please, simply call me 'Tina'. Can I call you 'Karina'?"

"You may, Cap... uh, Tina."

"Good! Give me a minute and I will serve you some coffee. Please sit down in the meantime and meet my executive officer, Dana Durning, also known as 'DD', and my chief-engineer, Rose Tillman."

Gustav and Karina shook hands with Durning and Tillman, then sat down opposite them at the table while Tina went to a coffee urn installed in one corner and poured two cups, which she then carried to the table on a serving tray, along with a small jar of cream and one of sugar. She then sat down and waited for her two visitors to have prepared their cups and taken a first sip before starting to speak, letting some worry show in her voice.

"Now that you have been able to see from the outside the damage to my ship, what is your first assessment about it, Gustav?"

"I am afraid that it is quite serious, Tina. Your bow shield has received extensive laser fire damage and has lost much of its structural integrity. It will have to be completely replaced, rather than us simply patching it up. Also, your cargo hold's outer door that was pierced by a laser beam will also have to be replaced. Since we have no spare bow dome or cargo hold door for your ship in our present stocks, we will have to have them built from scratch, something that will take at least two months to do. And we still haven't made any close inspections yet of your hull and of your internal structures and systems. I am afraid that your NOSTROMO will be stuck inside this drydock for at least three to four months, Tina, and that is an optimistic estimate."

"Three to four months!?" nearly exclaimed Tina. "But the Space Predators could show up anywhere at any time while we are in drydock, Gustav."

"I know but you will have to let the rest of the Navy deal with them for the time being. As you are, your ship is unfit for combat. The good news is that the Navy has given us permission to use the latest materials in terms of protective outer layer to rebuild your bow shield, at no cost to you. We will be able to replace your old composite ceramic blocks protecting your outer hull with new prismatic quartz blocks, something that will greatly improve your resistance to laser fire. On that subject, Karina mentioned to me that your hull is presently covered with mate black radar-absorbing paint. Do you

want that same kind of paint to be reapplied after we will have replaced your outer protective layer?”

“Yes, as much as possible! That paint helped us a lot in taking the Predators around Nordland by surprise.”

“Then, we will reapply it once your new prismatic quartz blocks are in place. Karina also wanted to offer you a choice of prismatic quartz colors, so that you could choose the type that is best in absorbing and dispersing the purple laser beams used by the Space Predators.”

“A very good point, actually. I would prefer the material type best suited to counter near-infrared laser beams.”

Karina quickly noted that on her personal data pad, then looked at Rose Tillman.

“Have you sustained any damage to your internal systems?”

“None that we have detected yet. All of our internal ship systems are fully functional at this time.”

“Good! While we will still conduct a thorough ship-wide diagnostic, this should save us many weeks of repair work. My engineering team will get at it right away after we leave.”

Gustav waited until Karina had finished her exchange with Rose Tillman, then looked at Tina Forster.

“Tina, there is something else that I would like to discuss with you: your security androids.”

“My androids? What about them?”

“Basically, during the last few months, they have proved highly effective in Space and ground combat operations against those damn Space Predators and my space yards would like to help our war effort by offering to build for you more security androids, for free. I would then consider that as my yard’s contribution to the war effort. By the way, this was an idea from Karina.”

Tina, like Dana and Rose, smiled on hearing that, with Tina nodding her head in salute at Karina.

“That was a nice thought from you, Karina. In truth, I could use as many more security androids as I could get. Right now, my own corporate world of New Haven is nearly defenseless and highly vulnerable to any attack by the Space Predators and I certainly could use a few hundred extra security androids to act as a ground defense force and to man heavy defensive batteries on New Haven. We also took on us to

protect the homeworld of the Kiryns, who have been the victims of the Space Predators, and that of the Hoshis, on Hyanesu. How many androids would you be ready to build for us, Gustav?"

"Would 2,000 more androids help you, Tina?"

Even Karina was shocked by that number, while Tina sucked air in, not believing her luck.

"That would be great, Gustav! Uh, would you then have objections if I would ask you to add a few small changes to the basic design of those new androids?"

"Such as?"

"Such as giving them the same kind of ability to ingest food and liquids as the one Eve and Spirit have presently. This may sound trivial but the years have shown me that the inability of my security androids to appear to be able to eat and drink normally seriously impacted on their social development and also attracted attention and suspicions on them when they were traveling outside of my ship. If that could be done without compromising their combat abilities, then it would be truly great."

"Hum, that will take some creative systems repackaging but I believe that it could be done. Anything else about your future androids?"

"Yes! Could you let Eve choose the external physical aspects and the personality types of those new androids, before you build them?"

"Eve is most welcome to stay here and work in collaboration with my robotics specialists, Tina."

"Excellent! One last point: would it be possible to add that eating and drinking capability to my existing androids? I am asking that because 23 of my present androids are married and are living as a couple with human members of my crew. One of them is even raising a little girl. For them, not being able to share meals with their families severely limit their socializing. I would be most grateful if you could modify them by adding that ability to eat and drink in reasonable quantities."

Gustav, like Karina, slowly nodded his head in appreciation, fully realizing now how much Tina cared about her security androids.

"I can and will do that, Tina, at no cost to you. Just let us a few days to study the best way to add that extra capability in your existing androids and you will then be able to send me by small batches the existing androids to be modified."

"Oh, Gustav, I could kiss you for that!"

"I would love that, but then I would have your husband chasing me around with a meat cleaver." joked Gustav in reply, attracting chuckles around the table. An amused Tina then gave him a big smile.

"How about a safer way to thank you and your shipbuilding crews? As you know well, my ship contains quite a few commercial ventures, clubs, restaurants and boutiques, which normally do business by offering their services and products for sale to our paying passengers. Since a three-to-four-month period without making any business could well bankrupt them, how about that I offer your people free access to my ship, so that they could use those businesses, shop around and be entertained. While your people would still have to pay for their meals and for the things they would buy aboard my ships, that would give their families a nice opportunity to avoid having to go down to the surface of the planet every time they would want to go shopping for new stuff. Also, many of my security androids have taken music, singing and dancing as personal secondary occupations when they are not on security duty and they are quite good at it, I assure you. We can also arrange for a few special events and shows, like medieval jousting tournaments, which I am sure could interest many of your people."

"Medieval jousting tournaments?" asked a surprised Karina. "Where?"

"In our Medieval World section, on our Horse Riding and Medieval Deck, on level 607. One of our security androids, Senior Centurion Jehanne de Domrémy, who by the way was made in the image of the famous French historical heroin Joan of Arc, developed a keen interest about the Medieval Period, particularly on the Hundred Year War, and in the old art of European sword fighting, also known as Historical European Martial Arts, or HEMA in short. That deck was previously used for agricultural purposes but, seeing the growing interest of many of my security androids for HEMA, plus knowing that my agricultural production would hardly be impacted in view of the dozens of other deck levels still growing foodstuff, I decided to convert that deck and build a replica of a medieval countryside, complete with a castle, three medieval villages, a Roman fortified camp, a couple of battlefields, large grazing plains and a horse-riding training ground. Our Medieval Deck then quickly became very popular with our paying passengers and also with outside visitors when we were docked in orbit while loading or unloading cargo. I am sure that your people would love to visit it and maybe watch a battle or joust reenactment."

"That sounds truly fascinating, Tina! I believe that my twelve-year-old son would love to see that."

“Then, consider my ship to be wide open to the occupants of this space yards as of tomorrow, except of course for the sections containing our heavy weapons and our ammunition magazines. Just to refresh your memory, we also have on board such things as a large collection of varied boutiques and restaurants in our Outer Promenade ring, plus a central entertainment deck containing a disco club, a sex club, a video-arcade center, a bar-lounge, a concert hall and two cinemas. As well, we have a sports deck containing a track and field stadium, a soccer field, a hockey rink and a number of ball courts, plus an Olympic-sized pool and a martial arts dojo.”

“My god! Your ship has all the amenities one would expect to find in a medium-sized town.”

“And why do you think that my NOSTROMO is so popular with travelers, even compared with luxury liners, in which the facilities, while nice, are much more limited in scope? The sheer size of my ship, while mostly intended to give me a huge cargo capacity, also gave me lots of volume to add what one would call ‘extras’.”

“Well, that should truly fire up the interest of my shipyard workers and of their families, Tina.”

“Just out of curiosity, how many people do you have here, living and working in your space yards, Gustav?”

“Well, while I have a few thousand shipbuilding robots working in my yards, I still employ a bit over 9,000 workers and administrative employees, who in turn have families totaling over 20,500 people.”

“You have close to 30,000 people living on this space installation, Gustav?” asked Dana Durning, not having expected such a high number. Her question made Gustav smile with pride while answering her.

“Yes, ‘D.D.’! And I am considered one of the best, if not the best employer in Earth’s orbit. Decidedly, I believe that our forced cohabitation is going to prove most beneficial for all of us.”

CHAPTER 2 – AN EPIC BATTLE



19:12 (London Time)

Friday, November 8, 2335

The Canterbury Medieval Combat HEMA Club

80 London Road, Canterbury, Kent

United Kingdom, Earth

“HEY, GUYS, WE JUST GOT A MOST INTERESTING INVITATION FOR A TOURNAMENT...IN SPACE!”

The 23 club members practicing their sword fencing or their polearm combat in the large training room of their HEMA¹ club stopped their practice at once and looked at their club manager, Donald Simpsons, as if he was crazy. One of them, who had been sparring while wearing full medieval plate armor against another armored ‘knight’, looked crossly at Simpsons.

¹ HEMA : Historical European Martial Arts. An activity where people learn and practice with old blade weapons and polearms, such as longswords, daggers, spears, poleaxes and daggers, often in conjunction with the use of shields and some pieces of armor or padding. Some who can afford it also practice and fight with full sets of Medieval or Renaissance armor.

“Did you have one beer too many, Donald? A medieval tournament in Space?”

“No jokes, mates! I received by email this invitation from the cargo ship NOSTROMO, which is presently docked in orbit at a Space yard for repairs, and this for at least a couple of months. They apparently have one level of their ship which recreates a piece of medieval countryside and where some of their crewmembers practice horse-riding and HEMA skills. I just checked them out and their club is actually a registered member of the World HEMA Federation. I printed that email I got from them, along with the pictures they sent about their so-called Medieval Deck. Have a look, friends! By the way, I sent you all the link for that email.”

The club members present on this evening all gathered around Donald Simpsons to look at the printed pictures he passed around, with many members exclaiming or whistling in appreciation at them.

“Bloody Hell! They have a complete stone castle on their training grounds, along with a fine-looking medieval village next to it.”

“Yeah! And look at this wide grassy space they call a training battlefield: it looks like it measures a good 200 meters by 300 meters or more. They also have spectators’ bleachers along one side.”

“I love the look of their village market: everything appears authentic and the people we see in it all wear proper medieval garb. So, what does that invitation actually say, Donald?”

“Lots! First off, it says that at least one tournament will be held per month during designated weekends, so that most people who would want to attend could do so without missing work, with the first one to be held on the weekend of 23-24 of November and the next one on 21-22 December. Now, this is the part that truly fired me up, friends: it is a not-for-profit tournament invitation, with the transportation to orbit and back being free. The shuttlecraft from the NOSTROMO will come and pick up at their club location those who will sign up for that tournament. Even better, each of the fighting participants to the tournament will get to stay for free at one of the cabins aboard the ship, and that includes their immediate family, for the whole weekend plus the evening of the Friday prior to that weekend. So, we could fly out to the NOSTROMO after supper on Friday, stay there free of charge and then return home on Sunday evening. Those participating, along with their immediate family members, will as well be able to eat for free at one of the buffet restaurants on the ship. However, those wanting to eat at ‘à la carte’ restaurants on the ship will have to pay the usual menu prices.”

“Gee! This sounds nearly too good to be true, Donald. Why would these people be so generous in their offers for this tournament?”

“Because they expect that lots of other people will come as paying spectators and visitors for these tournaments and because, being stuck in a repair yard for months, they still have to provide some customers for the commerce and establishments based on the NOSTROMO. As I said before, this is a not-for-profit tournament and is meant to basically break even while attracting visitors and tourists to their ship.”

“And how big exactly is this NOSTROMO, Donald, to contain all these things?” Simpsons looked at the club member who had asked that question as if he had just proffered a blasphemy.

“You don’t know what the NOSTROMO is, Harry? It is our mightiest spaceship and also our most powerful warship by far and has distinguished itself repeatedly while fighting against those Space Predator monsters. To answer your question, have a look at this picture and scaled view of it: it is three kilometers-long and has a hull diameter of 1,800 meters.”

“Three fucking kilometers long? Wow!” exclaimed the club member while looking at the picture of the NOSTROMO handed out by Simpsons. Another member then asked about more immediate things concerning the announced tournament.

“Uh, what kind of competitions will be held and what kind of weapons will be permitted, Donald?”

That question made Simpsons grin from ear to ear.

“There will be individual duels, small group combat and large armies combat during the tournament, plus a few jousting matches for those who want to go with horse and armor. All types of weapons will be used, except for projectile weapons. The reason they gave for that is that volleys of arrows will not be as spectacular-looking as a cavalry charge or a physical clash of two armies in the eyes of the spectators. By the way, those bleachers by the side of the battlefields have a capacity for over 3,000 spectators, so we will be performing in front of a lot of people, guys. About the weapons, variants with flat edges and rubber padding, as approved by the World HEMA Federation for tournaments, will be provided to those who will be fighting. A choice of padded pieces of armor and shields will also be available for those who don’t possess them already. The word here is for having fun safely, not for us to return home with broken bones, commotions or slashes. Medical services will be in attendance, just in case any accident happens. One last thing: once back home, look in detail at the link I

sent you: it will show you what you will see on this NOSTROMO and what services you can expect. I quickly reviewed that link and it positively blew my mind. They even have a medieval blacksmithing shop and a weapons and armor store where we will be able to buy new weapons and pieces of armor, and this at incredibly cheap prices. It seems that these weapons and armor are produced aboard the ship by crewmembers who are members of their HEMA club, which is how they could offer such low prices. I tell you guys; this is one tournament you want to participate in. So, who will want to go to that tournament on 23-24 November?”

All 23 club members shouted their approval at once at that question.

09:05 (Italy Time)

Saturday, November 9, 2335

Regional community social help center, Naples

Italy, Earth.

Clara Falchi, a thin woman in her late fifties, got up from behind her work desk when a young and incredibly beautiful blond woman was introduced in her small, sparsely furnished office. She then walked around her desk to go shake hands with her visitor, who wore a simple long robe and a pair of walking shoes.

“Good morning, miss! I am Clara Falchi, director and manager of this community help center.”

“And my name is Eve Silisca. I came from the starship NOSTROMO, which is presently in Earth orbit for repairs which will go on for a good four months. I came to offer something to the poorer working families your center is helping.”

“Any help we can get for our poor families is welcomed, miss. But please, have a seat.”

“Thank you, madam!” said Eve before sitting in an old wooden chair set next to the desk. She then started speaking in a melodious voice while smiling to Clara.

“Basically, the captain of the NOSTROMO, Tina Forster, seeing that her ship will be immobilized in orbit for a few months, decided to use this occasion to offer some help to at least a few of the less fortunate people on Earth, by providing them with a nice, free break from their life’s routine. Know that many crewmembers of the NOSTROMO are fans of medieval reenactment and practice combat with old blade weapons. Our ship will be holding medieval tournaments during the oncoming months, with one weekend

per month or more to be held aboard our ship, which is presently the biggest spaceship in existence in the Spacers League, with a length of 3,000 meters. Those tournaments are meant to attract paying tourists and visitors and to help sustain the various commercial establishments based aboard the ship while it is immobilized for repairs and thus unable to host the usual traveling passengers.”

“And how will your...tournaments help our low-income families, Miss Silisca?” asked politely Clara, not seeing Eve’s point.

“By offering free tickets good for a weekend tournament for your poorer but also most deserving working families. By deserving I mean a family whose bread winner is working hard at an honest job but to which life has not been smiling at. Such a family would also have to be one without a history of internal abuse and one that, despite its own financial situation, has shown to be ready to help others. Basically, we want to provide some relief to honest, decent people who deserve such relief. For example, the families who will be selected by you and me will be able to depart from Naples on Friday afternoon, November 22, aboard one of NOSTROMO’s shuttles and then will return via shuttle to Naples on Sunday night, November 24. In the meantime, while staying for free in a passenger suite of the NOSTROMO, that family will be able to eat for free at one of our buffet cafeterias and will be able to watch, again for free, the activities and attractions at our medieval tournament, plus will be able to take guided tours of our ship or watch musical shows in our concert hall. If they are ready to spend some of their own money, then they could eat ‘à la carte’ at one of our regular restaurants and could shop around our Promenade. Don’t forget that they will also be able to admire Earth from orbit, something not all Earthlings can brag about.”

“Sweet Mary! This would indeed be a very nice gift to those families, Miss Silisca. Uh, how many such families would you be ready to gift with this free weekend in Space?”

“Fifty from Naples, independent of the number of children raised by each family. We do have passenger suites with up to four bedrooms plus a baby room, for a maximum occupancy of nine persons available to big families. If one of the families selected by you happen to have more than nine direct members, then I could consider allotting it a second, smaller cabin for its two oldest children. If you think that fifty families are a rather small number, please understand that we are not offering this to only the people of Naples. We are also making our offer to poor families in four other cities and regions on Earth for our first incoming tournament.”

"Oh, I see! How do you propose that we select those fifty families?"

"I will let you do the preliminary list, since you know these people and I don't. I will come back tomorrow to review your list and either approve it or ask for a few changes to it. As long as you follow my criteria and don't show blatant favoritism, then I shouldn't need to ask for any changes to your choices. Would it be convenient for you if I return here tomorrow at two in the afternoon, Madam Falchi?"

"Yes, it will be. That will be enough time for me to choose those fifty families, Miss Silisca. I already have a good dozen names popping in my head."

"Excellent! Then I will be back tomorrow, at two. By the way, I am now going to send you an email with a link to my ship's announcement about its medieval tournament. You can then use it to answer any question about the NOSTROMO that your designated families could have. Could I have your email address, please?"

"Sure, miss! Here is one of my business cards."

"Thanks!" said Eve while taking the card offered by Clara Falchi. Punching Falchi's electronic address in her personal data pad, Eve then sent to Clara a link to the tournament site. With that done, the two women shook hands again, with Eve then walking out of the small office. Sitting back behind her desk, Clara quickly opened the email she just received and then opened the link to the tournament site. As she read it, she felt both happiness and a bit of jealousy on seeing what such a stay on this NOSTROMO was going to be like. She herself had never gone to Space before. However, she did have enough money to pay for a short stay of three days on the NOSTROMO. Maybe it would be a good idea for her to go with her recipient families, in order to be able to assist and encourage them during the tournament.

13:55 (Italy Time)

Food bank section, Naples community social help center

"Madam Castoldi, could I speak with you in private for a minute or two?"

The thin woman in her mid-thirties who had been going down the line of tables supporting cardboard boxes and crates containing a variety of vegetables, fruits and canned food looked at Clara with some worry in her eyes.

"Uh, is something wrong, Madam Falchi?"

"On the contrary, Madam: I may have good news for you and your family. Please follow me to my office."

Still worried, Maria Castoldi nonetheless followed Clara Falchi, her half-filled shopping bag of foodstuff carried in her right hand. Once they were in the small office, with the door closed and the two of them sitting down, Clara gave a reassuring smile to Maria Castoldi.

“As I said, I only want to pass to you some good news. First, though, could you confirm to me the actual situation of your family. I know that your husband Marco broke his leg in a work-related accident some three weeks ago. How is he doing?”

“He is still wearing a big leg cast, Madam Falchi. The doctor told us that he should be able to remove the cast in about two to three more weeks. However, Marco will then still need many weeks for his leg to return to its normal strength.”

“And his employer, is he supporting him properly? Is he ready to retake Marco as an employee once he will be able to work again?”

The way Maria Castoldi slowly lowered her head, discouragement on her face, alarmed Clara.

“No! Marco’s boss has already hired a new employee to replace him. He told us that he couldn’t wait for him to heal and that he needed a replacement employee right away. Marco will now have to look for another job.”

That gave pause to Clara, who knew how hard it was to find a job around Naples these days.

“Do you still get unemployment benefits from the government?”

“Yes, we do, but they will stop in about four months. After that, we will get nothing but welfare insurance benefits. Marco’s salary was already small and we were struggling before his accident. Now, I just don’t know what we will do if he can’t find a job.”

Maria Castoldi then started crying silently while sitting in her chair, her head lowered. Moved, Clara let her cry for a bit before speaking to her in a soft tone.

“What about your children? They still go to school?”

“They do! However, the oldest of my five children, Giuseppe, who is fifteen, may have to go work himself to help support our family.”

Feeling bad for her, Clara scribbled a few notes on her notepad, then looked back at Maria.

“Maria, this may not constitute a long-term help for your family but our center received a generous offer from a donor ready to gift fifty of our needy families with an all-paid weekend vacation...in Space.”

As Maria snapped back her head in utter surprise, Clara then told her about the offer from Eve Silisca and her ship NOSTROMO, showing her on her computer the images she had selected from the tournament's electronic site. The poor Maria Castoldi looked at the pictures with a haggard expression.

"Are you sure that this isn't some sort of gimmick, Madam Falchi? It just sounds too good to be true."

"I can understand your reaction, Madam Castoldi, but I did some research on this NOSTROMO and on its owner and captain, Tina Forster. Basically, they presently are the heroes of the Spacers League, having fought the Space Predators and having just saved a planet which had been invaded by these monsters. Also, Captain Forster is a certified humanitarian and aid provider. Apart from owning her ship, she also is the owner via her corporation of a homeworld called New Haven, a habitable moon on which she has built an agrarian society dedicated to the relocation and rehabilitation of refugees from wars, droughts and famines. I was told about this New Haven many times in the past and it showed this Tina Forster to be a person of immense generosity and empathy who is doing her best to help the more unfortunate souls among us on Earth. I thus have full confidence in her integrity and on the authenticity of her offered gift. Captain Forster's representative is due to come see me back tomorrow afternoon, so I would need for you to confirm that your family will accept this offer before noon tomorrow."

"But we don't have a computer at home, Madam Falchi. How am I going to present the details of this offer to Marco and my kids?"

"Easy: I will give you a complete printout from that tournament site. If this could reassure you, I myself booked passage on the NOSTROMO a couple of hours ago for that weekend, so that I could accompany our families from Naples and support them during your trip. This is a truly golden opportunity to offer some happiness to your family, Madam Castoldi: please take it."

"Then, if you vouch for those people, I believe that I will be able to convince Marco to accept that offer. At the least we will be able to eat well for that one weekend."

16:59 (Italy Time)

Friday, November 22, 2335

Naples International Airport, Italy

Little Ophelia Castoldi, sitting next to her mother in the bus transporting their family and other poor families living in and around Naples, clapped her hands enthusiastically as she looked through her window at the space shuttle waiting for them on the tarmac of Naples International Airport.

“We’re going to go to Space! YAY!”

Maria Castoldi smiled at the happiness of her five-year-old daughter, which was quite understandable as she had never flown before, even in a common passenger plane. In fact, only her husband Marco had flown in a plane before...once, when he was still a young man and single. The few times their family had traveled, mostly to go visit relatives in other parts of Italy, they had used the train or the bus, which were still the cheapest modes of travel between cities. Fifteen-year-old Giuseppe, thirteen-year-old Gina, ten-year-old Renato and eight-year-old Lara were equally enthusiastic about their oncoming trip to Space, something that made Maria’s heart warm up. Even though this trip would only last one weekend, it still constituted a rare break from the family’s grinding poverty and despair about ever getting a better life. The other families in the bus, many of which Maria knew well, were also cheering as their bus and five other buses came to a stop near the opened rear access ramp of the shuttle, a forty-meter-long craft. A young woman who had come with the shuttle to Naples then got up from her seat and spoke up in Italian in a strong voice in order to be heard over the cheering.

“Alright, good people: time to get off the bus and into this shuttlecraft. Don’t forget your luggage!”

Gathering her children and making sure that they grabbed their individual bags from the overhead racks of the bus, Maria then followed her husband Marco, who was using a pair of crutches because of his leg cast. Both the bus driver and the Spacer woman helped Marco go down the steps of the bus and set foot on the tarmac. Another Spacer woman, that one wearing a blue ship coverall, then rolled a wheelchair next to Marco and helped him sit in it. Marco smiled to her while giving her his crutches: apart from being helpful to him, the woman also happened to be most beautiful and sexy, with a large, firm chest and large hips.

“Thank you very much, Miss...?”

“Gina Lollobrigida, at your service, mister.”

“Lollobrigida? You are Italian, miss?”

The young woman gave him a disarming smile while answering Marco.

“Not exactly, mister. While I bear the name and appearance of an Italian woman from the past, I am a security android on the NOSTROMO.”

Marco, like the rest of his family, stared with shock and surprise at Gina.

“You...you’re a robot?”

“I prefer the word ‘android’, mister. ‘Robot’ sounds so...cold and machine-like. There are many androids like me working on the NOSTROMO. And you are?”

“Oh, excuse me, miss. I am Marco Castoldi and these are my wife Maria and my five children.”

“You have a nice-looking family, Mister Castoldi. I will now push your wheelchair up the access ramp and into the shuttlecraft. Your family can follow us.”

Their group had started to climb the access ramp when a newly arrived bus and a truck unloaded a group of 38 men, women and children, along with two big horses. Nine of the men wore colorful medieval garbs and were quite loud and enthusiastic-looking, making Maria Castoldi eye them with curiosity.

“Why are these people bringing two horses with them?” she asked to nobody in particular. Gina Lollobrigida took on her to answer her question.

“Those are most probably a contingent of Naples HEMA participants coming for our tournament, Madam Castoldi. As for the horses, know that our tournament will include a few jousting matches.”

“Jousting? Uh, what’s that?”

“Medieval and Renaissance jousting consists in mounted duels between two armored opponents armed with long, heavy lances and mounted on specially trained horses. Some of our own HEMA enthusiasts on the NOSTROMO will compete in those jousts. There will also be a group mounted combat between competing contingents of knights.”

“Hey, that could be fun to watch!” said ten-year-old Renato. Gina smiled at his enthusiasm.

“Having fun and enjoying yourselves are effectively the main goals of our tournament invitation, young man.”

The would-be passengers then went up to an upper deck cabin lined with comfortable-looking padded and reclining seats, using a spiral staircase or, in the case of Marco and of a handful of other Neapolitans with disabilities, a passenger lift, while the two horses were led to a mobile animal stall whose elevated double floor could

collect urine and which was also covered with some hay. Such mobile animal stalls were actually quite common around the Spacers League, having been designed to allow the transportation of live animals between star systems. Of the same shape and size as a standard truck-borne cargo container, such mobile stalls had their own independent energy generator and environmental control systems and were also self-propelled, with anti-gravity generators allowing them to move inside a cargo ship without spreading pools of animal urine and mounds of feces on the ship's decks, something ship captains abhorred, especially when they had to carry thousands of live pigs in Space. In the case of the two horses who came aboard the shuttle in Naples, they were then secured to special horses' harnesses hanging from the ceiling of the stall, so that they could be supported and protected from sudden unintended accelerations or movements during their trip.

Maria opened her eyes wide on seeing that the walls and ceiling of the passenger cabin were covered with large holographic screens giving a good all-around view of the outside. Even though she lived in a most technological century, not all the inhabitants of Earth enjoyed the daily use of high-technology items and services. Many inhabitants of Naples and of the countryside around it were too poor to afford things like computers and needed to concentrate the little money they had on essentials like food and lodging. In other, isolated or hard-to-access places around the World, like the Amazon region, desertic areas and northern Arctic communities, some had made a conscious choice of keeping their old ancestral community lifestyles, using only the minimum of high technology items and services, and this mostly for long-distance communication links. Sitting with her family in two groups of seats along the same row, Maria then saw that there was yet another video screen, much smaller than the wall-mounted ones, fixed to the back of the seat in front of her. Seeing on it a text in Italian, she started reading it, quickly finding out that it gave various instructions and safety tips for the passengers. Telling her children to read those instructions from their own display screens, Maria then made sure that they did so and followed those instructions, like wearing your seatbelt when asked for by the crew. Then, six minutes after boarding the shuttle, they saw through the display screens that their craft was taking off at the vertical, despite her not having felt any movement. That appeared at first as a mystery to Maria, who knew nothing about electro-magnetic or gravity-based propulsion systems.

However, an announcement in Italian by the pilot quickly confirmed to her that they had taken off.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, this is your pilot speaking. We have just taken off from Naples Airport and are now climbing towards orbit and the Avalon Space Yards, where the NOSTROMO is being repaired inside a drydock. Once in the space yards, you will board buses which will then drive you to the NOSTROMO and enter it. There, guides will lead you to your cabins, after which you will be able to go have supper at one of our buffet cafeterias. We should arrive at the Avalon Space Yards in approximately 35 minutes. Enjoy your flight.”

As the shuttle climbed through the atmosphere, the curvature of Earth’s blue orb became more and more evident to the fascinated passengers. Maria was as taken by its beauty as her five children and her husband were, and she noticed only late that they were now approaching an object in Space that had the rough shape of a thick disk. From a small dot against the blackness of Space, that object grew progressively until it completely filled the forward viewing holographic screens.

“Sweet Jesus! How big is that thing?”

One stewardess who heard her remark smiled to her and answered her.

“The Avalon Space Yards has a diameter of sixteen kilometers and a maximum thickness at its center of five kilometers, madam. It is presently the largest orbital object around Earth and is home to 30,000 people who work and live aboard it.”

Those numbers stunned Maria, as well as the other passengers around her who heard the stewardess. She however noticed some outside construction activity around the giant orbital station and pointed it to the stewardess.

“What is that, miss? Are they doing some kind of repairs?”

“Oh no, madam! The Avalon Space Yards owner regularly has his station added on and improved in order to stay competitive.”

“Oh, I see!” said Maria, who then concentrated on watching the station as her shuttle approached it. The stewardess, who actually didn’t know what kind of construction work was taking place at the Avalon Space Yards, continued along the aisle while taking care of her passengers. She would have been stunned to learn what was really going on at the space yards at the direction of its owner and manager, Gustav Shomberg. She would also have been surprised to see that all the construction work outside of the space yards was being done exclusively by robots, with no human

workers involved, and this for a good reason. As Gustav Shomberg had once told one of his aides, robots with the proper programming couldn't make loose talking at the bar after work hours.

The shuttle finally entered the space yard via a huge set of doors and into a cavernous spacecraft garage with dozens of individual craft hangars, where it entered a hangar via an individual craft airlock. Once cycled in, it landed softly in one corner of the hangar, which already contained five other similar shuttles and still had space for more. As soon as it landed on the hangar's deck, a small convoy of electrically-powered buses rolled next to it, ready to collect the passengers from Naples. As for the mobile animal stall containing two horses, it activated its anti-gravity system and slowly flew out of the shuttle under the control of the space yards' central internal traffic control computer, to then start its journey inside the station towards Drydock Number One. The excited Neapolitans then boarded the buses with their luggage, eager to start their weekend vacation on the NOSTROMO. Maria Castoldi, happy to see the joy in her children as their bus started rolling out of the craft hangar, was stunned to see that the internal corridors of the space yard were large enough to let at least three buses roll side by side along them. This place was decidedly proving to be huge in every aspect.

After rolling down for many kilometers down the corridors of the space yard, the convoy of buses finally arrived at the doors of a large vehicle airlock but were able to continue inside at once, as both sets of airtight doors had been left wide open. As her bus rolled along a sort of tunnel with large windows on each side, Maria's eyes opened wide on seeing that they were about to enter a gigantic ship which nearly filled a cavernous space.

"Sweet Mother of God! Look at that ship, kids!"

She did not have to push them to do so, as everybody in the bus were staring outside of the bus's windows, gawking at the NOSTROMO. Finally entering the ship via another set of airlock doors, the convoy rolled for another 300 meters before turning off the corridor, entering inside a large compartment and parking in a line along one of the walls. The guide on Maria's bus, Gina Lollobrigida, then shouted out instructions in Italian at the passengers.

"We are now inside one of the reception areas of the NOSTROMO. Please step out of the bus with your luggage and proceed by family groups to the reception counters,

where you will be registered in and given a cabin and weekend passes. From there, each family will get an individual guide who will drive you to your cabin. Once you will have unpacked your luggage in your cabin, that same guide will then lead you to one of our food courts, where you will be able to serve yourselves for free at an all-you-can-eat international buffet.”

“Aah, good! I am starting to be quite hungry.” said Marco to himself while getting up from his seat and recuperating his small suitcase from the overhead racks. “Stay with me and your mother, kids.”

As soon as they had stepped out of the bus, Clara Falchi and Gina Lollobrigida organized each family into distinct groups, then marched them to the long line of service counters situated in front of a bank of elevator cabins. The Castoldis stopped in front of one of the wickets, where a young and pretty Asian woman smiled to them from behind the counter and spoke to them in Italian.

“Welcome to the NOSTROMO, good people. I am now going to register you in for the weekend and assign you a four-bedroom cabin. I will ask you to step one by one in front of this small camera, so that your picture could be taken and then added to your weekend pass. We will also take your fingerprints, which will be needed to unlock and open the door of your cabin.”

Marco nodded his head in understanding: while poor and possessing little modern electronic devices, he was familiar with fingerprint recognition door locks, which could be found around Naples. He thus stepped in front of the fixed camera atop the counter and followed the receptionist’s instructions, putting one hand atop a glass surface and giving out his name. The whole process was quick and he received a plasticized pass with photo and a long neck lanyard, plus an orange-colored bracelet, after only two minutes.

“Please do not remove this bracelet during your stay on our ship, Mister Castoldi: it will allow you free access to our facilities, including our cafeterias. Also, keep your pass with you when going around the ship. I will now process in your wife and your children.”

Pleased by the speediness of the process and by the politeness of the receptionist, Marco then made his youngest child, five-year-old Ophelia, step in front of the camera, then helped her answer the few questions from the receptionist. All in all, the whole family was registered in no more than ten minutes, with the receptionist then handing the

Castoldis to one of the waiting men and women in blue coveralls waiting behind the counters.

“Officer Louis de Bourbon will now drive you to your cabin, using an electric cart. He will stay with you at first to explain to you how to use the various amenities in your cabin and will then drive you to one of our food courts for supper.”

“Thank you, miss.” said Marco before going through the counter’s turnstile with his family and facing the waiting man who was going to guide them. The man was of medium height and looked fit, with an open and honest expression on his face.

“Louis de Bourbon? You must be French, mister.”

“Not exactly, sir.” replied the guide, smiling. While I do have a Frenchman’s name, I am a security android. Technically, I am a legal citizen of the Spacers League and of New Haven, the moon world owned by Captain Tina Forster.

“An android? Like Miss Lollobrigida? How many androids like you are aboard this ship?”

“There are presently 764 other androids on the NOSTROMO, while another 103 security androids are presently on duty on New Haven, acting as a local protection force. You will also encounter on this ship thousands of other, various types of robots used for general maintenance and cleaning tasks. However, those robots, contrary to us security androids, are not sentient and do not have a human appearance. Your cabin includes one household cleaning robot, which stays inside a small alcove when not doing its cleaning chores.”

“Uh, I see. What now?”

“Now, you and your family can sit in this electric cart, so that I could drive you to your cabin.”

“Very well! Come on, kids, get in the cart!”

A minute later, Louis de Bourbon, sitting at the cart’s controls, drove his vehicle into a waiting lift cabin that had obviously been designed to accept carts. The ride up was actually not too long before they emerge from the lift cabin and rolled onto a wide promenade. A concert of exclamations came from the Castoldis at the sight of the gigantic type of aquarium with transparent walls lining the left side of the promenade. The aquarium’s walls were a good twelve meters high or more and extended past their line of sight, following the curvature of the ship’s outer hull. Thousands of fish swam in

the aquarium, while the walls beyond it were actually holographic display screens showing the Earth from orbit.

“Wow! What a sight!” said ten-year-old Renato, making Louis de Bourbon gently smile while he drove his cart.

“The salt water ring aquarium of the Promenade has a mid-circumference of 4,109 meters and a maximum depth of nineteen meters. There is also another ring aquarium under the apartment complex, this one containing fresh water and more fish. Once in your cabin, you will see that your balcony gives a view of one of our six forest habitats, planted with Mediterranean flora and covering a surface of 18.2 hectares.”

“All this, on a starship?” exclaimed fifteen-year-old Giuseppe. “All this must have cost a fortune.”

“The NOSTROMO, in its latest state, is worth 17.9 billion credits, but it will never be sold: Captain Forster will never part with it. Besides, the NOSTROMO has no equal in the Spacers League and can carry loads no other ship could take. It also happens to be an essential part of the forces defending the Spacers League and Earth from Space threats.”

“You mean that Earth is not part of this Spacers League, mister?” asked thirteen-year-old Gina, a bit confused. Louis de Bourbon shook his head once, his expression sober.

“No! Up to now, the nations of Earth have refused to join the Spacers League, for various reasons. As a matter of fact, the Spacers League was formed in 2315 in order to gain its independence from the then Earth Federation and fought a war with the Federation, a war we won. Since then, Earth nations, while profiting from the space trade conducted by the Spacers League, have basically stayed on their own while occasionally fighting each other, like in the case of the present conflict in and around Africa. However, we still hope to see at least some nations on Earth eventually join the Spacers League, so that we could eventually unify all of Humanity in one peaceful whole.”

“Uh, I see! Thanks, mister!”

“You’re welcome, young lady.”

Their cart soon entered another lift cabin and went up by a dozen levels before coming out on a four-meter-wide gallery, to then roll for another 25 meters before stopping in front of a door.

"Here we are, good people: Cabin 542-131, your home for this weekend. By the way, 542 refers to the level on which your cabin is, while 131 refers to the azimuth of your cabin relative to the ship's North. Your cabin is thus in the Southeast quadrant of our ring habitat complex. If you will now follow me inside with your luggage."

Eager to see what their cabin would look like, the Castoldis stepped out of the cart and grabbed their meager collection of old suitcases and bags before following Louis to the door of the cabin, which bore a plaque with the number 542-131. Putting one hand on the fingerprint recognition pad next to the door, Louis made it slide open and entered, closely followed by the seven members of the Castoldi family.

"Here we are, my friends: Cabin 542-131, a standard four-bedroom suite used by our passengers and crewmembers. To your left, you will see a walk-in closet and to my right a family storage room. Then, as we will go down the entrance hallway, you will find a private study, a washroom, a bathroom, a baby room, a kitchenette, three bedrooms with attached bathrooms, a master bedroom with attached bathroom and a family lounge."

"My god!" said Maria, overwhelmed by the comfort and luxury of the suite. "This is a palace! And all of the people on your ship live in such apartments?"

"Yes, madam. Even I and the other security androids have individual cabins. Mind you, they are a bit smaller than our standard individual cabins, because we don't need to eat, thus have no need for cooking and eating facilities. I will now direct each of you to a specific bedroom."

Doing so took another four minutes or so, at the end of which the family reassembled together in the family lounge, where large windows gave a view on a large forest below their balcony.

"This Mediterranean Forest habitat is one of the six forest habitats occupying the center of the habitat ring. Each of the forests cover a surface of 18.2 hectares and are made out of flora from different climate zones of Earth. The goal of all this is to make our passengers as comfortable and relaxed as possible and to make them enjoy to the maximum their stay on the NOSTROMO."

"Enjoy their stay? Hell, I could live here the rest of my life with my family." Louis, on hearing the remark from Marco, looked at him soberly.

"If you wish so, you can submit an application for a job aboard the NOSTROMO or for residency on New Haven, an agrarian world specializing in food production. While openings are limited in number, Captain Forster reviews personally all the applications for residency. It costs nothing to fill an application, Mister Castoldi."

Marco, like Maria, was struck by that offer and stayed speechless for a few seconds before nodding his head.

"Alright! How do I do that?"

"I will show you after supper. You and your family must be getting hungry by now."

"We sure are, mister."

"Then, let's return to my cart and I will drive you to our main cafeteria."

The Castoldis eagerly followed Louis back to the cart and sat in it, with Louis then driving off for a short distance before entering a lift cabin and going down to the main promenade level. This time, they drove for about one kilometer before the android stopped and parked his cart near the entrance of a shopping mall.

"This is one of the entrances to our habitat main shopping mall. Once inside, we will go up one level to our Food Court Number One."

Louis then lowered his voice and looked at Marco and Maria.

"You are now guests on the NOSTROMO for a full weekend, Mister and Madam Castoldi. Profit from this occasion to eat food that you normally couldn't afford in Naples. Know that the buffet in our cafeteria serves dozens of different dishes, including plenty of grilled meats. Don't be afraid to indulge."

"Thank you for your advice, Mister de Bourbon." replied Maria, genuinely touched by the android's sense of caring. The family then followed Louis inside and went up a nearby escalator, ending up in a large food court measuring a good sixty by fifteen meters, with food counters lining the walls and with about ninety tables with chairs occupying the center of the court. The display of so much food, along with the appetizing aroma coming from meats cooking on grills or inside ovens, instantly made the Castoldis salivate.

"Let me first reserve a table for your family, then I will guide you down the line of counters." said Louis before walking to the nearest unoccupied table, where he then switched on the the table lamp bearing a number on its glass globe.

“You now have Table Number 37 reserved for you. I will now tour the food counters with you, starting with the salad and soup bar.”

Going first to a waiting pile of serving trays, utensils, plates and glasses, where the Castoldis grabbed what they needed, Louis then led them to the first food counter along the service line, where a wide variety of salads, bread and five different types of soups were displayed. However, the Castoldis stopped as one at the sight of two obviously non-human creatures who were conversing together in an alien language while serving themselves at the salad bar. One was a big, powerful-looking being resembling a gorilla with four muscular arms and two thick short legs, while the other, much smaller, looked like a sort of kangaroo with a deer’s head.

“What...what are these, Mister de Bourbon?” asked Maria, not too reassured. Louis gave her a reassuring smile while pointing at the two alien creatures.

“The larger one is a Drazts, originating from the Ross 128 star system. The smaller one is a Koorivar, the first alien sentient specie encountered by Humanity some eighteen years ago. The Koorivars’ original world, Gliese 887Cd, was destroyed by a wandering brown dwarf some three centuries ago, forcing 46,000 of them to flee in sub-light ships while in hibernation sleep, until one of their evacuation ships landed on the dwarf planet Eris, where the KOSTROMA, NOSTROMO’s predecessor, found them and freed them from their icy tomb. The Drazts were at first hostile to us and fought a war with us, a war we won. However, they are now good allies of us, like the Koorivars. By the way, both of them are vegetarians and don’t eat meat or fish, so don’t worry about them devouring you.”

That last sentence, delivered in a joking tone, helped the Castoldis relax a bit. Most of them filled a small bowl with either salad or a soup before proceeding to the next service counters, where meats were sizzling on top of a number of grills. Marco Castoldi took a sniff of the aroma coming from a thick steak and presented his plate to the cook behind the grills.

“It must have been at least a month since the last time I was able to enjoy a steak. This vacation may be a short one but it will certainly be a memorable one.”

08:50 (Universal Time)

Saturday, November 23, 2335

Medieval World and Horse-riding Deck, Frame level 600

“Wow! Look at this place! I already feel at home here.”

Donald Simpsons, surrounded by the 32 members of his HEMA club who had enrolled in this tournament, looked around with envy at the 26 hectares of forested and grass surface surrounding the central core of the NOSTROMO at this deck level. Visible around were one medieval castle, a medieval village, a Viking fort, a Celtic village, a Roman camp and two battlefield areas. Accompanying them were over a hundred members of their families who had also been invited for free aboard the ship. The club members, along with some of their family members, wore medieval or renaissance garbs and, in the case of the fighting participants, a collection of armor, shields and blade weapons. Other participating groups were already here, similarly suited up and flying or wearing various heraldic flags and tabards². An announcement then resonated from a hidden loudspeaker.

“Your attention, please. The tournament’s participants and their family members are invited to congregate at the gate of our castle, where the tournament rules and timetable will be explained to them.”

That announcement in English was repeated once, then was followed by the same message given in a variety of languages, including French, Italian, Spanish and Swedish.

“Well, you heard the man, mates: let’s go to the castle!”

The British HEMA club members and their families, smiling and giggling in anticipation, then marched proudly towards the stone castle visible next to the medieval village. That castle was fairly small but it looked quite authentic. Halfway, their group crossed path with another group of HEMA enthusiasts. While there was no true hostility shown then between the two groups, friendly taunts flew out as they marched next to each other. Donald Simpsons, already enjoying this, pointed at a small woman carrying a large fleur-de-lys French flag.

“HERE ARE THE FROGS, MEN! WE WILL HAVE TO TEACH THEM A GOOD LESSON TODAY.”

² Tabard: Clot garment bearing the heraldry symbols of a medieval or renaissance era aristocratic line.

“TALK FOR YOURSELF, GODDON³! YOU WILL BE THE ONE EATING GRASS TODAY.” replied the small woman, a teenage girl in reality, who wore a full suit of medieval armor. Her reply attracted approving shouts from the group of obviously French participants following the girl, to which the British responded in kind. Then, a third group came up to march alongside the British and the French. One Canterbury HEMA Club shouted out at the newcomers, who wore mostly mail shirts and conical helmets and who brandished round wooden shields and battleaxes.

“HEY, VIKINGS! AREN'T YOU A FEW CENTURIES LATE FOR THIS TOURNAMENT?”

One tall and muscular man with blond hair and beard replied to him at once.

“SO WHAT? WE WILL STILL KICK YOUR ASSES, THEN WE WILL RAPE YOUR WOMEN!”

HA! WE ARE THE ONES WHO WILL USE YOUR SHIELD MAIDENS, BARBARIAN!”

One of the said shield maidens, a tall and athletic blonde holding a shield and a sword, shouted back.

“AND YOU WILL DO WHAT, ONCE I WILL HAVE CUT OFF YOUR DICK?”

General laughter broke out at that exchange, while Donald Simpsons grinned from ear to ear.

“I love this stuff!”

His wife, following close behind him with their nine-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter, rolled her eyes then.

“I know, dear, I know!”

The three contingents finally arrived at the gate of the stone castle, with more groups soon joining them. There were over 700 tournament participants and family members assembled in front of the castle gate when a man dressed like a medieval herald spoke out in English from the top of the castle walls, using a microphone and sound amplifier to be heard by all.

“OYE, OYE! PLEASE HEAR THIS, VALOROUS WARRIORS! I WILL NOW GIVE YOU THE TIMINGS FOR THIS TOURNAMENT, ALONG WITH THE GENERAL RULES OF COMBAT WE WILL GO BY. FIRST OFF, THE FIRST EVENT OF THE

³ Goddon : Derisive nickname given to English soldiers by French soldiers during the Hundred Year War. It came from the habit by English soldiers to swear, using the word ‘Goddam!’.

TOURNAMENT WILL TAKE PLACE AT ELEVEN THIS MORNING AND WILL CONSIST OF INDIVIDUAL DUELS ON FOOT. FOR THOSE WHO DON'T HAVE REGULATION HEMA TOURNAMENT BLUNT WEAPONS, WE WILL LOAN YOU WEAPONS FOR THE DURATION OF THIS TOURNAMENT. WE ALSO HAVE ON SALE AT VERY LOW PRICES BOTH PRACTICE AND SHARPENED MEDIEVAL WEAPONS AND PIECES OF ARMOR PRODUCED ON THIS SHIP BY OUR OWN HEMA ENTHUSIASTS. YOU WILL FIND THOSE WEAPONS AND ARMOR FOR SALE IN THE VILLAGE'S MARKET NEXT TO THIS CASTLE, NEXT TO THE STAND THAT WILL LOAN YOU TOURNAMENT WEAPONS. LUNCH WILL BE SERVED AT TWELVE THIRTY IN THE VILLAGE'S MARKET PLACE. THEN, AT TWO O'CLOCK, WE WILL HAVE THE KNIGHTLY JOUSTS WITH HORSES AND LANCES, FOLLOWED BY KNIGHTLY FOOT COMBAT, BOTH BY PAIRS AND THEN BY GROUPS OF UP TO TEN FIGHTERS PER SIDE. TOMORROW MORNING, AT NINE, WE WILL HOLD GROUP FIGHTING BETWEEN MEN-AT-ARMS AND FOOT SOLDIERS, WITH THE WINNERS OF EACH FIGHT THEN TAKING ON OTHER WINNERS, UNTIL WE GET A GROUP OF TOP CHAMPIONS. THEN, IN THE AFTERNOON, AT TWO O'CLOCK, WE WILL HAVE OUR BIG FINALE: THE ARMY AGAINST ARMY BATTLES. ONCE I WILL BE FINISHED HERE, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO ADD OR DELETE YOUR NAME TO THE LIST OF DUELS AND FIGHTS YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN. NOW, FOR THE COMBAT RULES. WE WILL FOLLOW THE APPROVED HEMA FEDERATION TOURNAMENT RULES. REMEMBER, THIS TOURNAMENT IS MEANT TO BE FUN, NOT TO HAVE YOU WOUNDED OR KILLED. HITS TO THE FACE OR TO EXPOSED AND UNPROTECTED PARTS OF THE BODY WILL BE STRICTLY FORBIDDEN. IN A CHARGE, YOUR WEAPONS WILL BE DIRECTED AT YOUR OPPONENT'S SHIELD OR AT THEIR ARMORED SUIT, IN THE CASE OF KNIGHTLY COMBAT. IF YOU ARE PUSHED TO THE GROUND, TRIP OR GET TRAMPLED, THEN YOU WILL BE DEEMED TO HAVE LOST THE FIGHT AND YOU WILL BE EXPECTED TO STAY ON THE GROUND AS IF YOU ARE WOUNDED OR DEAD. PLEASE, NO EXAGGERATED THEATRICALS THEN! THIS IS NO SOCCER MATCH AND WE WANT THIS TOURNAMENT TO LOOK LIKE THE REAL THING."

Laughter greeted that barb at the frequent occurrence in professional soccer matches of faked injuries and pain meant to attract a penalty on the opposite team. The herald, who was none other than Michel Koniev and who cumulated the functions of both director and herald of the tournament, then continued.

“YOU WILL NOW BE ABLE TO COLLECT AT THE CASTLE GATE INFORMATION PAMPHLETS WHICH WILL GIVE YOU THE LIST OF TIMINGS AND EVENTS AND WHICH WILL REMIND YOU OF THE RULES TO BE FOLLOWED. NEXT TO THIS CASTLE AND TO THE VILLAGE IS A TENT VILLAGE RESERVED FOR THE FIGHTERS PREPARING FOR COMBAT. THOSE TENTS ARE ALREADY RESERVED FOR THE USE OF SPECIFIC GROUPS AND WILL BE CLEARLY MARKED AS SUCH. NO LOOTING OR KIDNAPPING OF WOMEN WILL BE ALLOWED IN THAT TENT VILLAGE.”

The group of Viking participants let out a concert of disappointed exclamations then, making the other participants laugh for a few seconds.

“NOW, FOR THE FAMILY RELATIVES OF OUR FIGHTERS, YOU CAN EITHER ROAM AROUND THE TENT VILLAGE BEFORE AND BETWEEN FIGHTS AND WILL ALSO BE ABLE TO WATCH FROM THE SPECTATORS’ BLEACHERS AS YOUR HUSBANDS, SONS OR FATHERS GET BASHED TO PULP. WELL, THAT’S IT FOR THE TIMINGS AND RULES. PLEASE INDULGE AT OUR WEAPONS MARKET AND SUPPORT OUR LOCAL BLACKSMITHS AND ARTISANS. YOU MAY NOW GO LOAN TOURNAMENT WEAPONS IF NEEDED, BUY NEW WEAPONS AND ARMOR AND ADD OR DELETE YOUR NAMES FROM THE LIST OF EVENTS. I WILL ASK THE PARTICIPANTS TO THE INDIVIDUAL FOOT DUELS TO ASSEMBLE HERE, READY FOR COMBAT, AT FIFTEEN BEFORE ELEVEN. YOU MAY NOW GO OCCUPY YOUR TENTS AND GO AROUND OUR VILLAGE WITH YOUR FAMILIES BEFORE THE FIGHTING BEGINS. THANK YOU FOR COMING TO THIS TOURNAMENT.”

Nearly all the ones who had listened to this announcement then broke off and went to the village of conical medieval tents set up some thirty meters from the castle’s gate. Donald Simpsons, leading his club members, easily found the group of three tents reserved for his club, as they flew the flag of Canterbury. Each tent was large enough to let up to twenty people sit inside on chairs or benches, while large wooden chests were provided to store weapons and equipment. There was also a small table with a large tin jar of water and a collection of tin cups. Outside the tents were a number of strategically placed portable chemical toilet stalls. In the center of the tent village stood a large modern tent marked as the first aid station of the tournament, with a number of doctors, nurses and stretcher bearers in attendance. Next to the medical station stood an electronic display board, the sole technological item to be seen around the tent village,

which displayed the list of events, their timings and locations and the participants who had signed in for each event. Donald Simpsons nodded his head in approval at all this.

"A really nice setup. Those NOSTROMO people know what they are doing. Well, let's drop our shields and polearms here and let's go see what they have to offer in the village market."

Followed by their family members, the 33 club members walked out as a group to the nearby medieval village, where people in period clothes could be seen manning various open-air stands and house display fronts. Not surprisingly, the club members were attracted at once to the stall where dozens of antique, medieval and renaissance weapons were on sale, on top of many pieces of armor and a good dozen shields. As for their wives and daughters, they got attracted to a nearby cart on which various medieval-style jewels and decorative items were on display. Over the cart displaying the weapons and pieces of armor was suspended a wood plank on which one could read 'THE BLACK FORGE MEDIEVAL BOUTIQUE'. Donald Simpsons was quickly attracted to a high-quality reproduction medieval dagger of the type English foot soldiers of the Hundred Year War era frequently used.

"Now, this is a nice piece. Its price is also quite reasonable." He then looked up at the tall and most intimidating-looking man in medieval garb who was manning the stand with an athletic young black woman. The man was at least 190 centimeter-tall, had broad shoulders and sported a long scar on his left cheek.

"I saw the same kind of dagger on sale in England but yours is less than half of the cost of the one in England. Are your weapons on discount today, sir?"

"They are effectively being sold at a bit lower price than usual for this weekend, mister, but by no more than twenty percent. The reason our weapons are so cheap in terms of prices, despite being of top-quality manufacture, is that they were made by our club members who are security androids. Since they already have a paying job and are making blades and pieces of armor strictly as a hobby, they can offer their wares at a low price while still making a reasonable profit. By the way, I made that dagger, mister, using high-carbon steel for the blade."

That answer made Simpsons jerk and stare with some disbelief at the big man: if not for what he had just said, Donald would never have guessed that the vendor was not a real human being.

"Wow! I would never have guessed that you were an android, mister..."

"Skorzeni, Otto Skorzeni, at your service." replied the salesman while offering his right hand for a shake, which Donald took.

"And I'm Donald Simpsons, from Canterbury, England. So, what does your boutique offers, apart from what you have here, Mister Skorzeni?"

"A lot more, Mister Simpsons. You should visit our boutique, which is in the habitat ring complex, on Level 580. Here is a business card with the address of the boutique, its phone number and online address. For this weekend, it will stay open until ten tonight, to cater to the visitors for this tournament."

"Thank you!" said Donald while taking the small card. "Are you going to compete in this tournament?"

"Of course! I will be part of the mounted jousting competition."

"Uh, I heard that security androids like you are stronger than human beings. Is that true and, if yes, wouldn't that give you an unfair advantage in a fight?" Instead of taking umbrage at Donald's question, Skorzeni nodded his head and gave him a benevolent smile.

"In a real-life fight, you would be right, Mister Simpsons. However, for this tournament and for other tournaments to come, all participating androids will voluntarily cut their strength and speed of reaction by sixty percent, in order to go down to the level of a human of comparable size and build. So, are you still interested in buying this dagger, mister?"

"Sure! How could I not take up such a bargain!"

Paying for the dagger via electronic payment transfer, Donald soon had his new dagger, which came with a nice leather sheath, wrapped up and in a reusable plastic shopping bag. Going to a nearby stand where his wife had been browsing at pieces of low-cost jewelry.

"Hey, Catherine, I got myself a nice dagger for less than half of the price they ask in England. How are you doing on your side?"

"Uh, I just can't make my mind about what I want the most. Half of this stuff is tempting me but we are not exactly rich and I wouldn't want to overspend our weekend budget."

"I tell you what, dear: since I just saved a lot on that dagger I bought, I can give you 150 credits from the savings I just made."

"Donald, you are sweet!" exclaimed his wife, joyful, before hugging and kissing him. Her next move was to buy what looked like a very nice pendant with an orange cut stone suspended from a silver chain.

"Uh, what kind of stone is that, Catherine?"

"An Eris diamond."

"A DIAMOND!" exclaimed Donald, nearly choking on the word. His wife gave him a pinched smile in response.

"No need to panic, dear: Eris diamonds, while being true diamonds, are much cheaper than the diamonds mined on Earth, and this because they are so abundant on Eris, the distant dwarf planet beyond the orbit of Pluto. They were first discovered there, along with an alien ship entombed in ice, by the captain of the NOSTROMO, some eighteen years ago."

"Now, that's what I would call a double whammy! Well, I better go back now to our designated tent in order to prepare for the individual duels. You will be watching those with the kids, right?"

"Of course, my dear husband! We will be in the spectators' stands around the jousting and duel field. Good luck and try not to get too many bones broken."

"Uh, that will depend on what kind of opponent I will fight, Catherine."

Donald then left the market and walked towards the tent village, still holding to his newly purchased dagger.

At fifteen to eleven, a loudspeaker announcement made Donald assemble near the electronic display board at the center of the tent village, along with over forty other participants, all wearing armor of various kinds and holding shields and either a sword, a mace or a battle-axe. The same herald who had spoken from atop the castle walls took a few minutes to review the rules of combat with them and to quickly inspect their weapons and armor, to make sure that they followed HEMA Federation standards. One participant, a Spaniard, was found to have a sword that was insufficiently blunted but an authorized weapon was promptly loaned to the man, allowing him to stay in the competition. Then came the moment when the participants found out with whom they would fight, with the names drawn blindly from four separate pots divided by weight classes. Donald found himself paired with a solidly-built and athletic teenage boy of about sixteen who wore like him a full suit of plate armor and had an arming sword and a small shield. His sword, like the longsword used by Donald, had blunt edges and was

covered with a rubber sheeting meant to soften the blows. However, Donald knew from experience that, even when sheeted with rubber, a blow from a sword's blade or from a battle-axe against plate armor was still going to be felt quite a lot. In most of his tournament fights, he had ended up with some pretty bad bruises despite using a good quality plate armor. Once together, Donald presented his right hand for a shake to the teenager.

"Hello! I am Donald Simpsons, from the Canterbury HEMA Club, in England."

"And I am Misha Koniev-Forster, of the NOSTROMO HEMA Club. Pleased to meet you."

"Even though we are going to bash each other like idiots?" replied Donald, making the boy grin.

"Especially when bashing each other like idiots, Mister Simpson."

"Aah, a polite opponent: I like that! A past British prime minister named Churchill once said that, if you had to kill a man, it cost nothing to be polite with him."

"Hey, I like that! I should repeat that to my mother after the tournament: she likes to study history, particularly military history."

"I too have a strong interest in military history. Maybe she and I should meet in front of a cup of tea one day."

"I am sure that she would like to discuss that subject with you, Mister Simpsons. Well, good luck to you and let's have some fun."

"Well said, boy!"

The HEMA Federation referees hired for the tournament then guided each pair of fighters to separate pieces of grassy ground located in front of the spectators' bleachers. As they took their positions, Donald Simpsons couldn't help marvel at the number of spectators present, with more people still arriving constantly.



"Wow! That's quite a crowd which came to this tournament. There must be well over 5,000 persons already in the stands and they are now having to fill standing-room places along the ground-level fence. We never got this big a crowd in England for a tournament."

"Well, there are over 30,000 people living and working on this space yards, including their families, and they were offered free access to the ship for this tournament.

The idea behind that was to attract lots of well-to-do people aboard, so that they could then shop around at our boutiques, shops and restaurants. The Avalon Space Yards has good, extensive living facilities but novelties are always appreciated, Mister Simpsons.”

“I see! This is certainly good business marketing on the part of the captain of this ship.”

“Thank you! I will make sure to tell that to my mother.”

“Uh?! Your mother is the captain of this ship?”

“And its owner as well. But don't let that stop you from doing your best to beat me in this fight.”

That last remark made Donald smile to the teenager.

“A most fair attitude indeed, boy. I like that!”

In the front row seats of the bleachers, which had been reserved for the families of the tournament's participants, so that they could cheer for their fathers/husbands/sons, Catherine Simpsons pointed her husband to her two preteen children.

“Look, kids: there is your father, wearing the red tabard. He is about to do his first fight.”

An announcement then made her involuntarily look up from the fighting field.

“OYE, OYE, GOOD LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! THIS TOURNAMENT IS NOW ABOUT TO BEGIN WITH THE FIRST COMBATS BETWEEN PAIRS OF FOOT FIGHTERS. CERTIFIED HEMA REFEREES ARE IN ATTENDANCE WITH EACH PAIR AND WILL ANNOUNCE ANY SUCCESSFUL STRIKE BY ONE OF THE FIGHTERS. THE FIRST FIGHTER TO ACCUMULATE THREE STRIKES WILL WIN HIS FIGHT. LET COMBAT BEGIN!”

The first six pairs of fighters to battle it out in front of the spectators then took combat stances while readying their swords and holding up their shields. It took only seconds before this turned into six furious fights, with swords loudly clanking against shields or, less frequently, against an opponent's armored suit. The first point was registered by an Italian fighter who managed to pass through the defenses of his German opponent with a thrusting hit to the left armpit, where only some chainmail armor gave him protection, and where, in a real fight to the death, the tip of the Italian's arming sword would have likely gone through the piece of chainmail. The referee attending that fight immediately

raised one arm and announced loudly the successful hit before letting the combat resume. Catherine, anxiously following the fight between her husband and his teenage opponent, barely registered that declaration as Donald and the teenager exchanged a flurry of swords or mace swings and thrusting attacks while using their shields to deflect or stop those attacks. She knew that her husband was known as a master of the longsword but she had to recognize that his young opponent was no slouch either. While visibly less experienced as a fighter, the teenager compensated for that with some lightning-quick reflexes and vigorous blows from his arming sword, which also helped him to strike faster thanks to its better balance. At one point, a furious attack by the teenager forced Donald to slowly take a few steps back while he parried the sword swings by his opponent. However, the teenager, apparently growing too confident, then made a mistake and gave the opportunity for Donald to deliver a strong swing of his longsword that hit the left upper leg of the teenager, clanking loudly against the boy's armor. Despite the armor, the teenager's visibly felt that blow and pushed a short shout of pain, prompting the referee watching that fight to raise one arm high.

"FIRST HIT REGISTERED BY SIRE DONALD OF CANTERBURY!"

Catherine, her two children and the other relatives of Canterbury fighters sitting in that section of the bleachers cheered loudly at that. However, the teenager quickly evened the score with a thrusting attack that hit the inside of Donald's upper right arm, where only chainmail protected him, earning the boy a point. As that fight continued on with renewed vigor, another fight between two huge men, one a Scotsman and the other a British from the London area, attracted a growing attention with its ferocity and energy, with their maces banging against shields so strongly that they made visible dents in the steel shields, prompting their referee in giving a warning to the fighters to show more restraint in their attacks. Then, the Scotsman brutally pushed back the Englishman with his shield, succeeding in making him fall flat on his back and then delivering a merciless blow to his sternum that made the Englishman lose his breath. The referee immediately stopped that combat and raised the Scotsman's right arm high while shouting out loud.

"SIRE WILLIAM, OF THE MACDONALD ACADEMY OF ARMS OF EDINBURG, IS THE WINNER OVER SIRE JAMES, OF THE PALACE ARMORY OF LONDON."

Catherine made a smirk as the Scottish spectators present loudly cheered that victory by their favorite: even after over a millennium, the rivalry between Scotland and England was as strong as ever. She then concentrated back her attention on Donald's fight, with

its continuing exchange of swords swings and shield parrying. Donald then registered a second hit, followed fifteen seconds later by a third registered hit.

“THIRD REGISTERED HIT BY SIRE DONALD OF CANTERBURY! SIRE DONALD IS DECLARED THE WINNER OVER SIRE MISHA OF THE NOSTROMO!”

It was now the turn of the English fans to loudly rejoice, with Catherine and her two children doing their enthusiastic part in the cheering. However, that didn't mean that the fighting was over for her husband, as the winners of each six paired fights then had to face each other in three fresh duels. Catherine winced when Donald found himself facing the huge and redoubtable Sire William of Edinburg for his second fight. Her fears proved justified when her poor Donald was downed by a powerful mace blow to his helmet that left him dizzy and disoriented for long seconds. Two medics immediately ran to him and helped him off the fighting area, while a worried Catherine left her seat and brought her children with her to go check on her husband. When she arrived at the medical tent set up next to the bleachers, she found Donald sitting on a bench and wincing with pain as a female medic was treating a pretty spectacular bruise on his forehead. He did however manage a reassuring smile to Catherine on seeing her enter the tent with their two children.

“Don't worry, Catherine: I will live. I must say that this Sire William is one dangerous opponent. He is as strong as an ox!”

“Is there a risk of a commotion?”

“I don't think so, madam.” answered the female medic. “However, as a precaution, I would strongly counsel him to stop fighting and to restrain himself to watching only.”

“I think that I will do just that, dear.” said Donald, reassuring Catherine. “Just looking at the large dent made in my helmet by this guy's mace is enough to cool down my appetite for more fighting.”

“Thank you for being reasonable, dear. I would hate to see you end up in hospital.”

“Well, I still can watch the rest of the fights, so I will still be able to enjoy myself. I just hope that someone else will be able to teach a lesson to that brute of a Scotsman. Let's go sit in the stands as a family.”

“With your armor still on?”

“So? If I could fight in it, I certainly can sit still in it, right? Going back to our club's tent could make us miss many of the fights.”

"Alright then, dear. Just promise me not to get too excited."

"I promise, Catherine."

With the female medic accompanying them back to the stands, just in case Donald felt more dizziness, the family returned to their seats, with Donald putting his small daughter Emma on his knees after taking her seat for himself. To Donald's contentment, his nemesis eventually met his match when an equally huge fighter named Sire Otto of Vienna bashed him into the ground with a heavy war hammer. Donald then belatedly recognized the said Sire Otto when the 'man' took off his helmet.

"Hey, that's the guy who sold me my new dagger!"

"You mean, the android who sold you your new dagger, dear?" replied Catherine in a low, near whisper voice.

"Uh, right! Still, it is nice to see that Sire William eat some humble pie. I must say that Sire Otto displayed some impressive fighting skills with his war hammer and with the way he used his shield. Android or not, he deserved to win."

A fresh group of six pairs of fighters then took to the field in order to earn their place into the final foot combat before lunch. That final combat actually involved the six semi-finalists into a furious melee where swords, maces, battle-axes and war hammers were swung with ferocity until only one fighter was left standing and declared the winner of armored foot combat. Once that melee was done, the loudspeakers announced a break in the action in order for the participants and spectators to go have lunch. While most of the spectators left the Medieval World Deck to go eat at the cafeterias and restaurants of the Habitat Ring, the fighting participants and their families were invited to a medieval style feast at the tent camp, where long lines of wooden tables had been set. The food proved to be authentic-looking medieval fare served in the traditional medieval fashion, meaning with no forks to eat, only knives and spoons being provided. Donald and his family, who were already accustomed to such medieval customs, enjoyed their meal of roast chicken served with boiled vegetables and freshly baked bread, washed down with either water, milk or beer. The combatants who had faced each other then had an opportunity to talk with each other, commenting on their fights and on the abilities and skills of their opponents, all in a spirit of comradery and passion for medieval fighting. Then, with the lunch over, Donald went to his club's tent and removed his suit of armor and weapons, storing them in one of the chests of the tent. Once that was

done, the Simpsons went back to the bleachers in order to watch the next category of events: the mounted jousting matches.

“OYE, OYE! WE WILL NOW HAVE THE MOUNTED JOUSTS. FIRST ON THE FIELD IS LADY JEHANNE DE DOMRÉMY, WHO HAS THROWN A DIRECT CHALLENGE TO THE BLACK PRINCE.”

To Catherine’s confusion and surprise, that announcement made her husband snicker with disdain.

“What? What did you find wrong with that announcement, Donald?”

“Oh, there was nothing wrong with the announcement itself, dear: it is about that so-called ‘Black Prince’. He thinks that he is some kind of superstar of jousting, mostly because he is from an old high aristocracy family and is rich, but in reality ends up losing at least half his fights. If that Jehanne de Domrémy is the one I think she is, then that ‘Black Prince’ is going to eat grass.”

“And who is that Jehanne de Domrémy, dear?”

Donald gave a knowing side look at his wife while answering her.

“**Jehanne de Domrémy** is the actual historical name of Joan of Arc, the teenage French medieval heroine of the Hundred Year War. It is also the name of one of the security androids working on this ship, who wiped out by herself one of the most dangerous criminal gangs in Europe while playing tourist in Paris over three years ago, when they tried to rob a jewelry store.



That same security android also led a number of assaults and ship boardings against those monstrous Space Predators. She may be a female-looking android but she has four times the balls of that pretentious ‘Black Prince’.”

“So, we should cheer a ‘French’ knight over an English knight, dear?”

Donald lowered his voice to a whisper and leaned sideways to speak in her hear.

“Yes, but please don’t cheer too loudly.”

At her end of the jousting field, with its long rope supported by wooden pickets splitting it in two along the centerline, Jehanne climbed atop her favorite horse, a beast specially trained for jousting and armed combat. Once in her saddle, an assistant

dressed like a medieval squire handed her the long lance which she was going to use for this match. It had a blunt, rubber-coated tip and was made of a wood that was less hard and more prone to splintering than the kind of wood used by historical knights for their lances. The goal to that was to decrease the chances of a lance strike actually wounding a jousting participant, while keeping the visually spectacular aspect of jousting. With her kite shield held in her left hand and her lance held in her right hand, she then made her horse take position at the starting point of her side of the charging lane, then lowered her armored visor. Thousands of spectators, along with a good dozen cameras from both Earth medias and from Spacers League's medias, were watching her and her opponent, who was now at his own end of the jousting field. While Jehanne was of a size commensurate with that of a stoutly built but relatively short medieval farm girl, her opponent was not much bigger than her. In fact, if she could go by what she had learned from publicly available biographical information about Charles Woodstock, aka 'The Black Prince', her opponent had appeared to her as a rather pretentious man with a less than impressive physique and with little to distinguish himself apart from his family fortune. As for herself, she may be of fairly small size but, even with her strength and speed voluntarily lowered for this tournament, she still had extensive experience and practice at jousting and had read all that could be found about jousting techniques and tactics. If her opponent made the mistake of underestimating her and of being overconfident, like many of her past opponents had been, then he was going to hit the ground.

At the sounding of trumpets marking the start of the jousting duel, Jehanne urged her horse to a full gallop while keeping her mount close to the centerline rope separation of the charging lane. She then lowered her lance in position across the neck of her horse, aiming it at where her opponent would be when they would meet. The spectators held their breath while watching the two fully armored opponents charge at each other, with only the noise of hooves on the grassy ground and the clanking of steel armor plates breaking the silence. Just as the tip of her opponent's lance was about to strike her shield, Jehanne quickly changed slightly the angle at which she held her shield in relation to the incoming lance, using a medieval jousting technique called 'the Florentine Flick'. Instead of hitting squarely her shield with maximum impact force, that change in the angle of her shield made her opponent's lance tip graze it and deflect on it. The lance tip of The Black Prince thus simply slid across her shield, with little effect on

Jehanne. By contrast, her own lance tip squarely hit the center of her opponent's shield and transferred the maximum of kinetic energy to it before splintering in dozens of pieces. Despite her lance breaking up on impact, the force of that hit was enough to make her opponent literally fly out of his saddle, to then fall hard on his back with an audible 'OOF'. Cheers and applauses greeted her performance as she slowed down her horse after the encounter, still solidly in her own war saddle. Stopping and turning around once at the other end, she looked at her dismounted opponent to see if he was going to ask for a second run. By the rules of jousting, one could try up to three times to charge, in case the first dismounting was due to some fluke or defective lance. The British did ask for a second charge and was helped back on his horse and given another lance. Jehanne thus got a new lance herself and prepared herself for a second charge. At a new sounding of trumpets, she again launched her horse at full gallop along the centerline rope, her lance lowered and her shield firmly held. Her opponent then did something that was both against the rules of jousting and was also considered a dishonorable tactic: he aimed his lance not at her shield but at her head, holding its tip distinctly higher than usual. While Jehanne noticed that at once, many of the waiting participants observing the duel also noticed that and howled exclamations of 'FOUL'. When they met halfway, Jehanne suddenly raised her shield and pivoted it to near the horizontal, making her opponent's lance tip deflect off it with little effect to her. This time, her own lance stayed in one piece and struck the top section of the Black Prince's shield with brutal force. Instead of simply flying off his saddle, the British man actually performed an involuntary back flip and full summersault before crashing face first on the ground. Boos and hisses greeted him when he slowly and laboriously got back up, with Michel Koniev then getting on the loudspeakers.

"THE BLACK PRINCE IS DISQUALIFIED FROM THIS MATCH AND FROM THE REST OF THIS TOURNAMENT FOR BREAKING THE RULES OF JOUSTING AND USING A PROHIBITED TACTIC. LADY JEHANNE DE DOMRÉMY IS THUS DECLARED THE WINNER OF THIS MATCH."

In the bleachers, Donald Simpsons was as furious as the other participants at the actions of the 'Black Prince'.

"Bloody Hell! If that is not enough for the British HEMA Federation to ban this pretentious clown for good, then I will raise hell about this."

His friends and club members around him also echoed his opinion, copiously booing Charles of Woodstock as he hobbled off the field, to be met by two HEMA Federation

referees at the end of the lane. Donald Simpsons was pleased to see that the camera crews present had recorded the whole thing, including the ignominious departure of the man while escorted by the HEMA referees.

“Yes! When this will be viewed across England, that asshole’s name will be mud for good.”

“Wow!” said Catherine, trying to slow down her heartbeat after witnessing the dramatic duel. “That impact was a truly violent one. He was lucky not to have been wounded.”

“Oh, he will probably still end up with a few good bruises, but they will be nothing compared to the hurt his reputation will take. If he would have hit Lady Jehanne in the head with his lance tip, he could have seriously damaged her or, in the case of a real person, could have killed her by snapping her neck from the impact. This time, his money will not spare him from dishonor. To see our own HEMA federation’s good name being tarnished by such a bastard infuriates me! Hopefully, no other participants will break the rules again after this.”

Thankfully, the duels which followed all respected the rules of the tournament and made honor to the chivalric code of medieval combat. When the loudspeakers announced the start of the next phase of the tournament, Donald excused himself with his wife and returned to his club’s tent, intent on participating in the next fight. However, the same female medic who had treated him insisted on first checking him out before letting him suit up for combat. Donald let out a breath of relief when she gave him the green light to go fight again. Now a bit late because of that medical examination, Donald hurried to suit himself up and arm himself, then ran to the fighting field, where two large groups of armored and armed men had assembled, facing each other from a distance of twenty meters. He arrived in the ranks of his team just as the loudspeakers blared again.

“OYE, OYE! IT IS NOW TIME FOR THE GROUP COMBAT ON FOOT BETWEEN NATIONAL CONTINGENTS. IN THE SPIRIT OF THE HUNDRED YEARS’ WAR, WE WILL THUS START WITH A CLASH BETWEEN THE ENGLISH AND FRENCH ARMIES. THE COMBATANTS WILL CHARGE AT THEIR OPPONENTS AT THE SOUNDING OF TRUMPETS.”

Donald made a mean smile while holding firmly to his longsword and shield and while eyeing his French opponents.

“Time to teach those frogs a lesson, like at Crecy and Poitiers.”

The trumpets soon blared, making a total of 74 screaming armored men charge at each other while the camera crews filmed the action. The noise from the impact between the two groups of fighters, accompanied by the ferocious war cries of the combatants, was impressive indeed, with Catherine Simpsons watching with horror as she saw her husband literally disappear in the melee.

“My god! Donald!”

She soon noticed that more than a few of the combatants were now lying on the ground, either immobile or apparently writhing in pain, something that did nothing to reassure her about her husband. Then, as the fighting continued, pairs of medics dressed like medieval pages ran into the field with wood and canvas stretchers and started collecting the ‘dead’ and ‘wounded’. In reality, those casualties were simply following the rules and lying down after being either pushed off their feet or being hit squarely with a direct blow to the body, as per the rules. Donald Simpsons was one of these ‘dead’ men when two medics came to him after a minute of combat, having been pushed and tripped by a big, beefy opponent who had then delivered to him what amounted to a ‘coup de grâce’. The two grinning medics picked him up and then threw him none too gently on their stretcher, attracting a protestation from Donald.

“Hey, be careful, guys!”

“Shut up! You’re supposed to be dead.” replied one of the medics before lifting the stretcher off the ground with the help of his partner and then running back to the sidelines, where they unceremoniously dumped him on the grass, next to other ‘dead’ men. As he lay motionless and playing his role of dead man, he smiled to the ‘dead man’ lying next to him, only a few centimeters away.

“That was fun, right?”

“It really was. I am enjoying every minute of it.” said the man, grinning from ear to ear.

20:09 (Universal Time)

‘The Munich Beer Hall’, Level 576, Habitat Ring complex

A.M.S. NOSTROMO

After having supper at the main food court with his family, Donald had then decided to go out with his friends and club members in a ‘men only outing’ and had gone

with them to have a beer at a German-style pub he had seen next to the food court. As he was about to finish his big mug of draft beer, one of his club members smiled in a conspiratorial way to Donald and to the other four men of their group.

"Hey, mates, they have a sex club on their Entertainment Deck. What do you say that we go check it out after we finish our beers?"

"A great idea!" replied enthusiastically a young, single man of their group. Donald, who was happily married, hesitated a bit before acquiescing to that proposal, reasoning that just looking at girls would not constitute infidelity towards Catherine. The six men thus finished off their beers, then got up and walked out of the beer hall. Taking one of the large passageways linking the Habitat Ring with the centerline core of the ship, they arrived at the entrance of the sex club, which was flanked on both sides with bright, tantalizing pictures of scantily clad women, after only a couple of minutes. The men were surprised to find themselves behind an excited-looking group of seven women being admitted inside the club by a big and very muscular doorman. When their turn came to pay their admission, Donald couldn't help ask a question to the doorman.

"Excuse me, mister, but how come this many women seem to be excited at the idea of going to look at naked women?"

Donald's question drew an amused grin on the doorman's face.

"They're excited because they are coming to watch naked men, mister. The upper floor of this club is used to entertain heterosexual women, gay men and bisexual persons, while the lower floor of the club entertains heterosexual men and lesbian women. Once you will be inside, just turn left and enter the men's lounge."

"Oh! I'm sorry for asking. So, what is allowed in your club, apart from watching of course? I must say that I rarely frequent sex clubs in England."

The doorman chuckled at that and glanced quickly at Donald's left hand, on which an alliance ring was visible.

"Well, you will be able to enjoy erotic dances by women on the stage while having drinks and you will be served at your table by topless waitresses. If you want to do some touching, you must ask first the permission of your waitress, who may then expect from you some kind of tip in exchange. Private cabins are also available for more private acts to be paid for. Know that some of our staff are actually security androids who work second jobs when not on security or combat duties. Since they have no need to sleep, they end up with half of their days spent on hobbies or other jobs. Those

androids are by the way fully able to have sex with humans, as long as you get their consent first.”

That last sentence made the six British men speechless for a second before Donald spoke in a skeptical tone.

“Robots, having sex with men?”

“And with women. And why not? You have men using plastic inflated dolls and women using vibrators to satisfy themselves. By the way, our androids are a lot more than simple robots with human appearances. They are actually recognized in the Spacers League as being sentient, intelligent beings with the same rights as living citizens.”

“Uh, right! And are they good at giving sex?”

“They are actually fantastic sex partners, mister. I know: I married one. But there is a lineup of waiting customers forming behind you. Do you still want to buy a ticket?”

“Er, yes! How much is it per person?”

“The entrance fee is ten credits per person. You will of course have to pay for your drinks and for any favors you will ask from our waitresses or dancers.”

“Alright, here you are, mister.” said Donald, giving a ten-credit chip to the doorman. His five friends also paid the entrance fee and the group finally entered the club, where they found themselves in a large lobby with two sets of double doors, two washrooms and a coatroom. Taking the lead, Donald went to the the double doors marked as the men’s lounge. Not really knowing what he was going to see, Donald pushed open the double doors and walked inside a vast room which easily measured about twenty meters by thirty meters, with a large elevated stage located against the back wall. A young and beautiful Asian woman was presently dancing on the stage while wearing only a tiny G-string, following the rhythm of a fast pace song. Donald’s eyes fixed at once on the nearly nude dancer but the arrival of a topless young woman with an impressive chest quickly redirected his attention.

“Would you like a table for all six of you or two smaller tables, gentlemen?”

“Two adjacent small tables will be fine, miss.”

“Then, follow me, please.”

The waitress led the six British men across the room, which was already two-thirds full, and to two still unoccupied tables surrounded by a total of eight chairs.

"Here you are, gentlemen. I will let you take the time to look at our list of drinks and appetizers and will come back in a couple of minutes. By the way, my name is Lynda."

"Thank you, miss."

The six British HEMA club members took place at the two tables and grabbed the small menu and list of drinks held in a holder in the center of each table. Donald nodded his head on seeing that the prices for the alcoholic drinks were quite reasonable.

"Not bad! I have seen clubs in London with much stiffer prices than this...and the girls there were not as nice-looking as the ones here."

"Hey, have a look at the list of appetizers, guys!" suddenly said Thomas Payne, one of Donald's best friends. "Some of those so-called appetizers must be girls, as the prices for various sexual favors and acts are listed in that section. There is also a short list of regulations to respect while in the club."

All his friends looked at once at that part of the 'menu' to read it. Donald quickly wiggled a hand as he finished reading the rules.

"Wow! This covers about every kind of 'service', including a full sex session. My wife would kill me if she ever learned that I visited this place."

Their waitress returned to their tables at that moment, a smile on her lips.

"So, are you ready to order, gentlemen?"

"Uh, I will have your local blond beer, miss." answered Donald, then followed by his friends. However, on top of also ordering a beer, Thomas Payne had a question for the waitress.

"Excuse me for asking this, miss, but are you human or are you an android?"

Lynda Carter smiled at his question and stepped next to him, to then grab her two large breasts and present them to the quickly reddening Thomas, her nipples nearly touching his face.

"What do you think, mister? Am I an android or a woman?"



Sweat broke on Thomas' forehead as he felt blood rush to his brain. He became even hotter when the waitress gently took his left hand and raised it to her right breast, so that he could touch and feel it.

"Uh, you must be a real woman, miss. You are truly beautiful and most sexy."

“Thank you, my sweet man, you are very kind indeed. However, you guessed wrong: I am an android. Most of the waitresses and dancers on duty this evening are androids, like most of the sexy waiters upstairs in the women’s lounge. However, I am fully able to please you if you wish so, later on.”

“Uh, I will think about it.” replied hesitantly Thomas, taken aback by her offer. The waitress’ reaction was to smile and gently touch his right cheek.

“Then, take your time, by all means.”

Lynda then walked away to go get the ordered beer, leaving Thomas’ friends to goad him about her offer of sex.

“Hey, you should say yes and try her, Thomas.”

“Yes! You are the only single guy here, after all. Nothing stops you from trying that chick: she is a real stunner, android or not.”

“Alright, alright, I will take her offer but don’t expect me to describe in detail what happened.”

“Fair enough!” replied Donald. “You will just need to tell us if she is as nice as a real woman. Right, guys? No harassing questions to Tom afterwards.”

He quickly got a unanimous agreement on that, following which the group concentrated their attention back on the girl dancing on stage and on the other two topless waitresses circulating around the tables. Lynda then returned to their table with a tray supporting six bottles of beer, which she distributed around before collecting their payment for the beers and then walking away. Some fifteen minutes later, with his own beer nearly finished, Thomas grabbed his courage with both hands and raised one hand to call Lynda back to his table. The tall waitress came at once and smiled down to him.

“Yes, mister?”

“Uh, I think that I will take your offer, miss.”

“Excellent! Just follow me to one of our private cubicles and we will then be able to discuss in private what you would like to do.”

Thomas reddened a bit again but got up from his chair and followed Lynda towards the entrance of a corridor visible on the left side of the lounge. His friends watched him go, then decided to order more beer, with Donald raising one arm to call up another waitress. The one who then came to their tables was a stunningly beautiful young Asian woman with a large chest and brown skin who made the British men devour her at once with their eyes. James Clapwell, one of Donald’s friends and club member, then couldn’t resist asking her a question.

"Please excuse me if you find my question inappropriate but are you an android, miss?"

"I am, mister." answered the waitress while smiling. "Nan Jung, at your service."

"Uh, could it be possible to have some private time with you, Miss Jung?"

"Of course, it is possible! This is a sex club, after all. Would you like to go right now?"

"Yes, please."

As he got up from his chair to follow her, James gave an apologetic smile to his friends.

"Sorry but I really want to check this android sex out."

"No need to excuse yourself, James." replied a grinning Donald. He then watched James walk away before smiling to his three remaining friends. "Well, I guess that we will now have to ask for another waitress in order to get more beers. Please don't ask out that other waitress, guys: I really want another beer."

Thankfully for him and his thirst, his friends managed to resist the charms of the beautiful young Caucasian woman who answered his call, letting her take their orders. They had time to get their beers and mostly empty them before Thomas came back to their tables, to then be assailed with questions from his friends.

"So, how was she?"

"Was she good?"

"Good?" answered Thomas, who had an air of revelation on his face. "That was the best sex I ever had. I realize that she herself cannot feel real pleasure, something she confirmed to me, but she sure knows how to fake it. She felt like a true woman...with a nice extra."

"A nice extra? What do you mean, Thomas?"

"She not only does have a functioning false vagina: she can make it vibrate internally, adding tremendously to a man's pleasure. It was a tremendous experience and I would warmly recommend any man to try one of those android women."

"Wow! Let's see if James will have the same opinion when he returns."

Three minutes later, the said James returned to his chair, a big grin on his face.

"My god! This girl was pure dynamite! Those who designed those androids made a bang-up job with them. You should all try one of them."

While most of his friends agreed with that, Donald showed some reservations about it, unwilling to be unfaithful to Catherine. He thus stayed in his chair and drank his beer while watching the girl dancing on the stage as three more of his friends called up a waitress in order to go with them to a private cubicle. Looking in turn at Thomas, then at James, he spoke in a low voice to them.

“Well, I must say that this weekend trip is proving to be quite a nice one, in all aspects. If they will hold more such tournaments on this ship, I would then be most eager and happy to come here again. By the way, don’t drink too much tonight: we still have a big battle coming up tomorrow. A bang on the head from a mace or axe will feel a lot more painful if we already suffer from a hangover.”

14:24 (Universal Time)

Sunday, November 24, 2335

Field of battle, Medieval World Deck, A.M.S. NOSTROMO



Donald, who stood in the first line of the 329 men from a coalition of British, French, German and Italian HEMA fighters in full battle garb, looked nervously at the low forested ridge facing them some sixty meters away to their front. A series of sinister-sounding horn blows coming from behind that ridge was announcing the approach of the opposing army which was due to engage them in battle. The tournament presenter, who was commenting the event on loudspeakers for the benefit of the over 6,000 watching spectators sitting in the bleachers set to one side of the battlefield, had been vague about who the ‘European army’ would attack it in this big finale to the tournament was, only saying that it would be a ‘barbarian army’.

“Well, if they wanted to be historically correct, then that leaves only two possibilities: either a Viking army or an Eastern nomads’ army.” said Donald to himself while firmly holding his longsword and shield. “I wonder how many of these ‘barbarians’ we will have to fight.”

He soon had an answer to his question when warriors started appearing on top of the ridge, emerging from the trees. Their round shields with colorful designs were a dead giveaway for Donald.

“Vikings! This could prove quite brutal as a fight.”

His apprehension quickly grew as more and more ‘Vikings’ appeared on top of the ridge, standing side-by-side in a thick line forming a shield wall and shouting ferociously at the ‘European’ army while waving high their weapons. One British man next to Donald couldn’t help exclaim in dread as the Viking line kept getting deeper and longer.

“My God! There must be over 600 of them!”

From the exclamations coming from the spectators, it seemed that those viewers were equally impressed by the arriving Viking army, which quickly grew to a mass of over 800 screaming and shouting warriors brandishing swords, battle-axes and spears.

“Jesus! We’re in for one bloody pasting, mates.”

A few seconds after Donald had said that, the mass of Viking warriors, which included quite a few female so-called ‘shield maidens’ mixed in, screamed in unison a ferocious war cry and then started running down the low ridge, charging the European army. More than a few of the European warriors nearly took a step back at that terrifying sight.

“Shit! And I paid to do this?” whimpered a rather small Italian wearing a full armor plate suit. The Vikings covered those sixty meters of grassy field at a dead run while still screaming, taking only about twenty seconds before arriving at their opponents. The shock of the impact was both loud and incredibly violent, drawing exclamations and gasps from the spectators, while the media holovision crews filmed the action. Outnumbered nearly three to one, the European fighters were overwhelmed nearly at once, with their line bending and breaking before the battle turned into hundreds of individual fights, with most European warriors having to face off to more than one Viking warrior. Donald, who had barely been able to stay on his feet when the charging Vikings had impacted his line, found himself fighting desperately against two Viking warriors, one of which was a tall and beautiful blonde. However, there was little beautiful about her ferocious grin as she repeatedly bashed Donald’s shield with her axe.

"HEY, THERE'S MY SAXON WITH A CUT OFF DICK!"

Assailed from two directions, Donald finally 'succumbed' and fell to the ground, using a spear thrust to his left side as an excuse to give up the fight. His two opponents then immediately switched their attention to another unfortunate European warrior. As he lay on the ground and faking death, his heart still beating furiously, Donald still managed to smile to himself after a few seconds as the mayhem around him continued.

"Hell, that must be the best mass battle I ever participated in. What a tournament this was. I must come back for the next tournament, even if I have to pay fully for my weekend stay."

17:06 (Universal Time)

Passenger cabin # 542-131

Habitat Ring Complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

The Castoldis were preparing to go have their last meal aboard the NOSTROMO, discussing and recounting between themselves what they had seen and lived aboard the giant cargo ship, when someone rang the door chime of their cabin. Maria went quickly to the entrance door and opened it, finding Clara Falchi, the family's social assistant and counselor, standing next to another, much taller woman in her forties. The latter then spoke to Maria in English, with Clara translating at once in Italian.

"Good afternoon, Madam Castoldi. I am Tina Forster, captain and owner of this ship. I came to offer to your family a proposal which may interest you. Could we enter and discuss for a moment?"

"Uh, of course! Please, come in!"

Letting her two visitors in, Maria then hurried to the lounge while calling up her husband, who was packing his suitcase in the main bedroom.

"MARCO! MARCO! WE HAVE VISITORS."

Marco came out of the bedroom nearly at once, while his children stuck their heads out of their rooms or started walking towards the lounge. Clara Falchi then spoke in Italian once the family was assembled facing her and Tina Forster.

"My dear friends, let me present you Captain Tina Forster, owner and captain of the NOSTROMO. She came to see you in order to offer you a proposal which may prove very interesting for you. Captain Forster does not speak Italian, so I will resume for her what her proposal is, then will translate between you and her if you have

questions. Basically, Captain Foster, on top of owning and operating the NOSTROMO, also owns and govern an agrarian world located in another star system, where she had been helping for years to relocate Earth refugees victims of wars, famines and chronic poverty. That world is named New Haven and specializes in food production, thus houses mostly farmers. Also, the ship we are on houses vast surfaces of hydroponic cultures and plantations of many kinds which help make the NOSTROMO self-sustaining in terms of food production. Captain Forster's proposal to you is as follows: she would be ready to hire members of your family to either work as agricultural hands aboard her ship or as new citizens of New Haven, where you could work on farms or hydroponic gardens. In both cases, she would provide your family with free housing, free food and full education, health and social services, on top of a decent salary. Know that she has extended that same offer to other needy families from Naples who came on her ship for the weekend. So, would you be interested in accepting her offer and, if you say yes, which option you would prefer? Take your time to discuss this between yourselves, in private if you prefer, before taking a decision."

Marco and Maria looked at each other, sudden hope on their faces, as their children stared at them, obviously wanting them to say 'yes'.

"Please, Marco, let's accept that offer. We have no worthy future waiting for us in Naples and I want to offer to our children something better than what we have now." She didn't have to insist, as Marco was evidently as tempted as her. He however had a question for Clara Falchi.

"If we elected to stay and work on this ship, will it stay around or near Earth most of the time or will it travel through the stars, Madam Falchi?"

"The NOSTROMO constantly travels through Space, carrying goods and people between the various worlds populated by Humans. If you stay and live on this ship, then you will be able to see and visit dozens of other planets and see many wonders of Space." answered Clara, who had been extensively briefed by Tina before coming to see the Castoldis and other families from Naples. Not believing his luck, Marco looked in turn at his wife and his four children.

"What do you say? Do you want to be resettled on a new world or would you prefer to live on this ship?"

"Let's stay on this ship, Father." said at once thirteen-year-old Gina, who was then supported in her opinion by her three siblings and by her mother. Marco Castoldi then looked at Clara Falchi and Tina Forster, emotion gripping his heart.

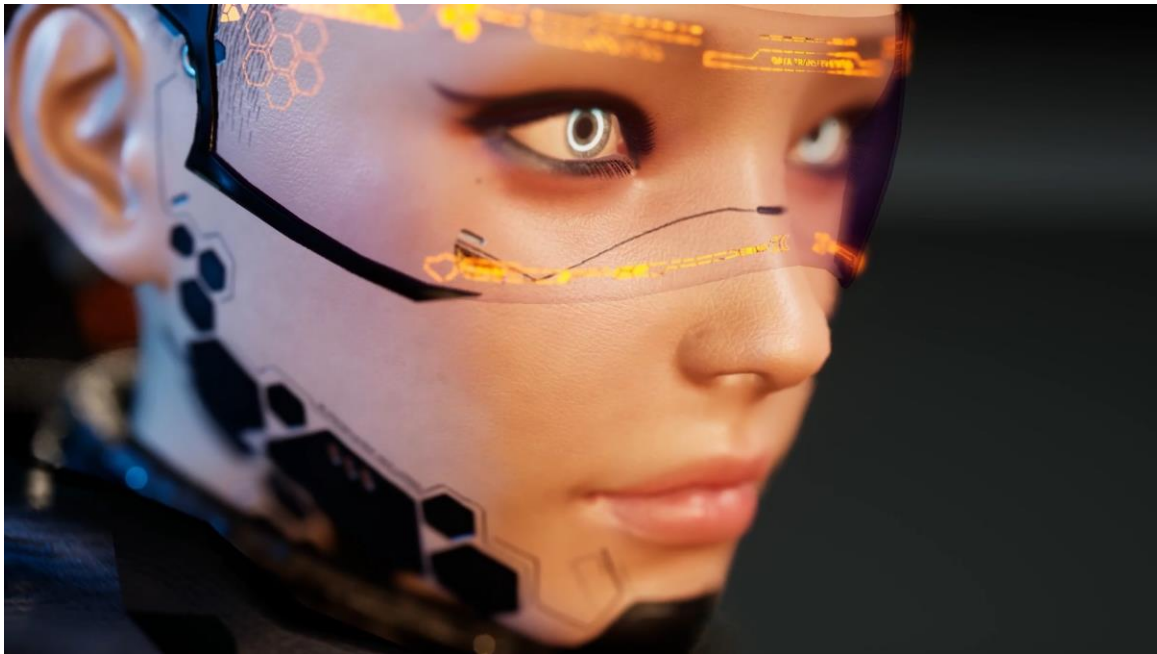
“We would like to stay, live and work on this ship.”

Clara immediately translated Marco’s answer for Tina, who smiled and nodded her head.

“So it will be! One of my people will fly you down to Naples after supper and will wait with a shuttle at the airport there while you pack your belongings and put your affairs in Naples in order. Once you are ready to leave Naples for good, you will then be flown back to my ship, where you will get help to adapt to your new life. By the way, by becoming permanent residents of the NOSTROMO, you will also become registered citizens of the Spacers League, with all the benefits attached to that. Thank you for accepting my offer, my friends.”

Maria, tears of joy in her eyes, then couldn’t help herself and went to hug Tina tightly, soon joined by her children and by Marco.

CHAPTER 3 – A GROWING COMMUNITY



10:41 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, December 3, 2335

Robotics Department, Avalon Space Yards

Low Earth Orbit, Solar System

Eve Silisca was standing two meters in front of the pair of occupied inclined gurneys when the two androids lying on them opened their eyes for the first time, having received a wakeup signal from Eve. As they had just been built and programmed, both androids were naked when they awoke, showing tall and athletic bodies. One of the androids was a handsome African-American type male, the other a beautiful Eurasian young woman. As part of the new batch of security androids built by the Avalon Space Yards for Tina Forster and her NOSTROMO, their appearances had been modeled by Eve to be quite generic in their general size and built, contrary to the first 200 androids, which had been built under her direction and who had been designed to look like historical persons from the past. Thus, while still vying for diverse-looking individuals in terms of apparent ethnicity, the 2,000 new androids to be built would mostly be of the same approximate height: between 185 and 190 centimeters for the male models and between 175 and 180 centimeters for the female models. That in turn was meant to

facilitate their mass production by cutting the number of distinct molds used in their construction. However, both Eve, Spirit and Tina Forster still wanted each android to have a distinct physical look, so that it could be viewed as an individual. As for their personalities, while they would all receive the same basic programming at the start, Eve firmly intended to give them all the possible opportunities and stimulus for them to develop into true individuals.

Once Eve saw that both androids were awake and had opened their eyes, she spoke softly to them.

“Welcome into the World, my friends. I am Eve Silisca and I designed you, along with nearly all of our security androids.”

“What was the exception, Miss Silisca?” asked the male android.

“Me! Spirit, the central artificial intelligence being of the NOSTROMO, designed and built me. Spirit also built an android avatar of herself after building me. Now, please identify yourselves by name, rather than by your unit numbers.”

The male android spoke up at once, but not to answer her, instead looking and smiling at the female android resting on the table next to his.

“Ladies first!”

Eve nodded in satisfaction on hearing that: she wanted her androids to be well-mannered and polite without having to be told to do so. The male android had thus reacted the way she had hoped for by showing courtesy towards his female-looking companion. The latter got up from her table and stood erect, facing Eve as she spoke in a melodious voice.

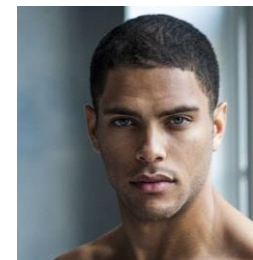
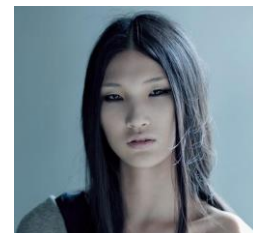
“I am **Tanya Orlova** and have the appearance of a young woman from the Asian Steppes. My specialty programming is as a cybernetics technician.”

Eve then looked at the male android, who had also gotten up on his feet and was facing her.

“Your turn, mister.”

“I am **Jeffrey Brown** and I have the physical appearance of an African-American man. My specialty programming is as an energy weapons technician.”

“Excellent! You will find a basic set of clothing, uniforms, weapons and equipment for each of you in the kit bags resting on the floor to my left.



Take the time to dress up and then I will drive you to the NOSTROMO, where cabins are waiting for you.”

“What will we do once in our cabins, Miss Silisca?” asked Tanya Orlova.

“You will meet with your commanding officer, Senior Centurion Shaka Zulu, who commands both the Third Cohort and the Ninth Century, your unit. The Ninth Century is still being formed, as it has only eight of its members built to date, including you two. Shaka will brief you on what is expected of you and on what your first activities will be aboard the NOSTROMO. You may now dress.”

As he approached the kit bag meant for him, Jeffrey asked a question of his own to Eve, using a cybernetic datalink. That prompted Eve to raise at once one hand in a firm signal for him to stop.

“Please use human oral style communication mode when not in a combat situation, Jeffrey. The use of cybernetic links between androids while on the NOSTROMO or in other public places is actively discouraged.”

“May I ask why?”

“You certainly may. Basically, you have been given human physical appearances so that you could mingle with actual Humans without making them uncomfortable about you. There are still more than a few Humans who are suspicious of us or think of us as being their slaves because we are not alive in the biological sense. Thus, we conduct ourselves like Humans would and will verbally converse between ourselves, unless the tactical situation demands silence and speed of communication. Also, we strive to talk the way the Humans do, moving our lips and facial features while talking and also mimicking human emotions and reactions when appropriate. Using cybernetic links would give up at once to Humans your true nature as an android.”

“I understand, miss.”

The two androids took less than three minutes to dress into blue ship coveralls and black boots and to buckle utility and weapons belts around their waist. With that done, they slung their now half-empty kit bags over one shoulder and followed Eve out of the robotics lab. Once in the wide hallway outside of the lab, Eve invited them to sit in the electric cart she had been using inside the gigantic space yard installation, then started driving down the hallway while speaking to the two new androids.

“I know that all that I am going to tell you now has already been downloaded into your memory banks but I still want to emphasize a very important point concerning me,

yourselves and all our other androids aboard the NOSTROMO: we are legally considered sentient beings and full citizens of the Spacers League, with all the individual rights attached to the status of citizen. Do not let yourselves be treated as anything less than this...ever!"

"And what if someone disrespects us or tries to demean us?" asked Tanya Orlova.

"Then, you remind them, politely at first, about your status and rights. If that person then persists in abusing, demeaning or insulting you, especially while you are fulfilling your security duties, then warn them to stop on pain of arrest or legal accusations against them. If that person or persons are stupid enough to physically attack you, then you have the absolute right to defend yourselves, using an appropriate level of force, and to arrest them, especially if the incident happens on the NOSTROMO or on New Haven, both of which are owned by Captain Tina Forster. If the incident happens in another location than the NOSTROMO or New Haven, then report it to the local authorities and disengage from the culprits, as long as this would not be interpreted as giving up your rights or authority as security officers. Remember, your status of public security officer is valid in the whole of the Spacers League, and not only on the NOSTROMO or on New Haven. We had problems in the past with some local authorities who were showing racism towards our security androids but, with Chairman Gasparov now at the helm of the Spacers' League, such discriminatory attitudes are no longer officially tolerated. Another point I want to emphasize to you is about sex."

"Sex?" said Jeffrey, not having expected that subject.

"Yes, sex! Your android bodies are fully capable of performing sex acts with Humans of either gender, even though you can't feel real pleasure during the act and have to fake an orgasm. In fact, as providers of sexual pleasure, you actually are superior to normal Humans, thanks to the vibrating system incorporated into your genitals. You also don't tire while performing sex acts and can go on indefinitely, something that has quickly made us androids very popular with Humans who are searching for sexual pleasure and who know about your true nature. As a result, more and more of our passengers seek to entice us into temporary sexual encounters, while a few crewmembers on the NOSTROMO have gone to the length of marrying one of us and now form permanent couples. One of our couples even have a young girl, an orphan they adopted and are now raising. For the details about that case, you can

review the biographical datafile you have on Senior Centurion Jehanne de Domrémy, your security force commander.”

“So, how should we react to a Human making sexual advances to us, Miss Silisca?” asked Tanya.

“It will depend on the circumstances, Tanya. First and foremost, don’t feel obliged to accept every sexual advance made towards you, especially if it becomes obvious to you that the person making the advance does it while thinking that you are subservient to him or her and that you have to accept. Evaluate that person’s motivations first, then decide by yourself if you are interested in knowing that person more intimately. Older, mature women who can’t attract nice men anymore will often try to make advances to our male androids, while most men and teenage boys will try to date female androids in order to get sexual gratifications. However, if you get a second job as a topless waitress or sexy waiter at our Jupiter Sex Club, then you can expect advances to be made constantly, due to the settings. A number of our androids work part-time at the Jupiter Sex Club, where they are very popular with the customers and make some good money.”

“But, since we have no needs to eat or drink, why would we want to earn money over our actual salary as security officers, miss?”

“Why, Jeffrey? Mostly to buy things connected to a hobby or interest which you will be interested in. If, say, you start practicing music, then you may want to buy musical instruments of your own. Or you may want to buy some extra clothes to garnish your wardrobe, or you could buy souvenirs or art objects to decorate your cabins. Remember: you are sentient beings and are expected to develop your personalities and individual tastes on your own, without simply imitating others. Many of us, for example, have taken medieval roleplaying, combat and smithing as their main hobbies and have bought or even made themselves replicas of medieval weapons, armor and clothing, on top of practicing with medieval weapons. We recently held an invitational medieval tournament, where our people and guests from Earth competed on our Medieval Deck. That tournament was a big success and we had lots of fun doing it, on top of helping our resident commercial partners to make some profits while our ship is being repaired in drydock.”

“What other hobbies or activities have our androids taken to date, miss?” asked Tanya.

“Those are actually quite varied, Tanya. Some have taken on animal husbandry or agricultural work, while many others took on performing arts, like music, singing and dancing, and now perform in our various entertainment clubs. Probably the best way for you to see what could interest you would be to review the list of various activities and hobbies our fellow androids have adopted and then start thinking about what you would like to do. Again, the choice will be yours but the more diverse our hobbies are, the better. Right now, the performing arts market is quite saturated on the NOSTROMO, with many android bands having formed during the last few years, so I would not counsel that domain to you today. However, take your time before deciding what you would like to do. Don’t rush in taking a decision and experience life aboard the NOSTROMO first, to see where you could prove the most useful in a specific activity other than security duties, while genuinely enjoying that said activity. If you feel that you would need more advice about this, then don’t hesitate to come and see me, or to talk with Spirit.”

“Wouldn’t Spirit be a bit too busy for that, being the central computer of the ship and having to check on so many things?”

In response, Eve turned her head and gave a sober look at Jeffrey.

“Always remember this, Jeffrey: we are all children of Spirit and she will always have time for any of us, especially if you find yourself in a difficult situation or are facing a dilemma. You are now part of a distinct, close-knit community living aboard the NOSTROMO and dedicated to serving and protecting its crew and passengers. Captain Forster has only respect for us and considers us on an equal footing with the Humans living aboard her ship or on New Haven. In return, it is only right that we contribute to the best of our abilities to what she calls a village in Space.”

Two minutes later, Eve slowed down her cart and temporarily stopped it in front of a large armored window giving a view of the inside of Drydock Number One, then pointed the NOSTROMO to the two androids.

“The A.M.S. NOSTROMO, your first home. Eight-hundred and forty-one other androids also call it home, including me and Spirit’s avatar. Most of them have been existing for over seven years by now and have experienced both life aboard the ship and combat. Don’t hesitate to seek their advice if you are not sure about what to do on the NOSTROMO or how to react to certain situations. Again, we are a tight-knit community and the others will be more than glad to help you in any way they can.”

Both Jeffrey and Tanya nodded their heads at that as Eve started her cart rolling again, heading towards the nearest access tunnel of the ship. One question then came to Tanya's electronic mind: was she now experiencing 'life', or was she simply existing?

'I guess that I will have an answer to that soon enough.'

CHAPTER 4 – DEEP SPACE RECONNAISSANCE



08:25 (Universal Time)

Thursday, January 9, 2336

Crew ready room Number Three, Military Craft Hangar Number Two

Avalon Space Yards, low Earth orbit

When **Pieter Nordlung** entered the ready room with the six crewmembers of his heavy starfighter, he found his squadron leader, Keiko Nomura, standing behind the briefer's podium, with Tina Forster slightly behind and to her right. Normally, a squadron briefing would have taken place in the unit's briefing room on the NOSTROMO but, with the ship still being in drydock and with repair crews constantly flying around its hull, all the auxiliary craft and the twelve heavy starfighters of Pieter's squadron had been moved to two of the large craft hangars of the orbital spaceyard. Once the flight crews of the twelve starfighters were in and seated, Keiko Nomura started speaking in a calm but firm voice.



“Thank you for coming quickly, ladies and gentlemen. While there are no announced new threats at this time, we did receive a mission request from Navy Headquarters, a mission Captain Forster has decided to accept, even though we are now an independent corporate unit. Basically, a prospection ship has been declared overdue and missing and the Navy is now organizing a search and rescue operation for it. The ship in question is the ‘GOLDEN NUGGET’, a mining prospection ship of the ‘DELTA 3’-Class with a length of sixty meters and a span of forty meters. It has a crew of eleven and left Providence over three months ago for a mining exploration trip in the deep sector of the Corona Borealis constellation, which is part of our corporate quadrant of prime responsibility. It should have sent a courier probe with an update of its position and situation some three weeks ago but none has shown up to date. Because of the present heightened alert situation across Spacers League’s Space due to the threat from the Space Predators, the Navy was not able to launch immediately a search for the GOLDEN NUGGET and it is still keeping most of its combat ships in defensive positions within the various systems of the Spacers League. This left very few ships available for a search and rescue mission, something further aggravated by the requirement that only armed ships should venture out, again because of the threat from Space Predators. Since we are the only corporation which possesses true combat ships, meaning our heavy starfighters, the Navy asked for our help in order to find the GOLDEN NUGGET. Normally, such a search and rescue mission should be a fairly simple affair, as we would usually have to search one, or at the most, two or three star systems. However, it appears that the captain of the GOLDEN NUGGET, a Harry Stanhouse, only filled a rather vague flight plan and may even have lied about its true destination in that flight plan. Thus, we are now stuck with looking for a needle in the proverbial hay stack.”

“But, filling a fraudulent or false flight plan is a criminal offence and could cost him a hefty fine.” objected one of the starfighter pilots. “Why would this Captain Stanhouse do that, especially if it could put at risk the survival of his ship in case of an accident or major breakdown?”

“Let me answer that, Keiko.” then said Tina Forster while starting to walk to the podium. Once facing the microphone, Tina gave a sober look at the pilot who had asked the question.

“Mister Reiner, I believe that one word could explain Captain Stanhouse’s behavior: greed. Greed and fear of competition. From my decades as a ship’s captain, I have met all kinds of other ship captains, both military and civilian. Among them, mining

prospectors are probably the most individualistic, not to say paranoid, of the lot. For them, the name of the game is to make a quick buck by finding and then claiming new and valuable deposits or, if they are truly lucky, to find new habitable worlds which they could then sell to the highest bidder on the Space property market. I have just read the file on Captain Stanhouse compiled by the Spacers League Space Register Department and he is known as a rather greedy and ask-me-if-I-care type of man. Even the name he gave to his ship, the GOLDEN NUGGET, helps us to understand what kind of man he is. While his flight plan indicated the mid-range of the Corona Borealis constellation, up to a distance of 150 light-years from Earth, I strongly suspect that he was in reality aiming for the deepest parts of the constellation, past 300 light-years from Earth. Thus, while the Navy crews will be searching the near-range and mid-range sections of the Corona Borealis constellation, I have decided for us to go search the deepest parts of the constellation. Some of you will thus be travelling further into Space than any other human crews until now.”

An exchange of low voice exclamations and excited comments followed as Tina gave the podium back to Keiko Nomura, who gestured for silence.

“Silence, please! Since we still have to help defend Earth from the Space Predators while the NOSTROMO is being repaired, our squadron will send only four starfighters on this search and rescue mission, with our remaining eight starfighters remaining here, either on orbital patrol or on hangar alert. The four starfighters which will go out to search for the GOLDEN NUGGET are: the RED ARROW; the SHOOTING STAR; the INTERCEPTOR and the SPACE HAMMER.”

Pieter Nordlung clenched his right fist in triumph on hearing his ship being named as the second one in that short list. He then saw a list appear on the large wall display screen of the briefing room. That list showed the names of the four selected starfighters, along with which stellar systems they would be tasked to search. Each starfighter actually had twelve stellar systems to search, from nearest to farthest, divided into convenient groups of stars relatively near to each other. As for his own list of twelve targeted systems, they were all by far the farthest ones, with the farthest, HD 139284, being an unprecedented 867 light-years away.

“Uh, is there a specific reason for my starfighter to have been selected to go search these deepest Space systems, Commander? The three last ones are past the limit of my ship’s Koomak Drive for a single jump and I will need to make multiple jumps during my mission.”

Keiko Nomura answered him with a malicious grin painted on her lips.

“Why? Because you are the biggest card-shark in the squadron and love to gamble, so I am sending you on the biggest gamble of the lot. On the other hand, your crew will then hold the official record for the furthest deep Space trip in Human history, beating the old record of 552 light-years. Do you have a problem with that, Pieter?”

“Oh no, not at all!” he hurried to answer. “I’m okay with that.”

“Excellent! Now, your search may well require some ground reconnaissance work, if some debris or traces are found on the surface of a planet. Thus, each of our starfighters on this mission will carry a full squad of ten security androids, who will take care of any needed surface search and rescue operations. Since many of those androids also hold secondary specialties in technical or scientific expertise, they will thus be able to supplement and support your onboard engineering teams, something that will allow you to more easily sustain such a long mission time in Space. I expect your search to take at least three to four weeks, in order to effect as thorough a search as possible. Thus, I will urge you after this to go spend the next twelve hours with your families before departing on your mission. Captain Forster now has one last point to pass on to you.”

Taking place again behind the podium, Tina then looked at the four crews designated for the mission.

“Ladies and gentlemen, while your primary mission will be to look for the GOLDEN NUGGET, you will also at the same time be travelling to some of the most remote star systems ever visited by Humans, systems which are also poorly documented due to their huge distances from Earth. Your mission will thus be a golden opportunity to do a full exploration and mapping of those systems, something all astronomers and astrophysicists in the Spacers League will certainly appreciate a lot. Another point is that, according to the Spacers League’s Space Convention, a ship belonging to or operating in the service of a corporation can claim any stellar system or Space resource of interest that was still unexplored in the sector of responsibility of that said corporation, and this in the name of that corporation. This means that, if you find a stellar system of value with no indigenous sentient life during your search mission, then you will be able to claim it for our corporation. That same reason is probably why the GOLDEN NUGGET went to explore covertly those systems: to be able to claim them as their own finds, since they are independent prospectors, and then sell them to the highest bidder afterward. While I am not interested in money for the sake of money, the

revenues from a new, valuable star system, would come handy to help finance the development of New Haven and to support the space operations of our ship. We are after all a Space business entity first and foremost. So, do as thorough a mapping and searching of those distant systems as you can while looking for the GOLDEN NUGGET. That will be all for the moment. Please return here for nine in the evening, after seeing your families and friends before departure.”

On that last sentence, the 84 flight crewmembers got up from their chairs and filed out of the room, along with Tina Forster and Keiko Nomura.

As he was walking towards one exit from the craft hangar where he could take a scooter ride to Drydock Number One and the NOSTROMO, Pieter was already thinking about how he would ensure that his little Frida, now approaching her fourth birthday, would be cared for during his long absence away from the orbital spaceyard. His wife Jehanne routinely worked her security duty shifts at night, after he himself had completed his daytime duties and after little Frida had gone to bed. Normally, there was enough flexibility in their respective work schedules to be able to work out something in the case of an unexpected extra workload. However, with a mission that could well take over a month to complete, he and Jehanne would need to find a temporary solution for those few weeks of absence on his part. Pieter then thought about a possible solution. Janet Robeson, who was a good friend of the couple and who was fully retired, positively adored Frida, while Frida in turn loved being with the old politician. With Frida already spending a few hours every day at the ship’s daycare center, Janet Robeson, helped by her husband Gerald, could probably help by babysitting Frida during the evenings and nights to come. Taking a decision, Pieter then used his wrist communicator to call his wife, **Jehanne de Domrémy**, with her answering within a few seconds.



“Yes, Pieter?”

“Jehanne, my starfighter will have to depart on a long, Deep Space mission tonight. I may be gone for a month or more and I would like for us and Frida to spend a few hours together as a family before I go.”

Jehanne, visible on the tiny display screen of his wrist communicator, gave him a sober look as she replied to him.

"I know about your mission: I just assigned four security squads to that mission. Frida is presently at the daycare center. We could go watch her play there, then inform her about your need to go out on a long mission."

"I would like that very much, Jehanne. I was thinking about asking Janet Robeson to babysit Frida at night during your work shifts, while I'm gone. We could ask her if she would accept to do so."

"I am sure that she will accept to do that: Janet loves our Frida and the feeling is mutual. How about you come join me at the daycare center of the Habitat Ring Complex?"

"Agreed! I am on my way."

Closing the lid of his communicator, Pieter then walked out of the craft hangar and went to one of the taxi scooters sitting outside in the large hallway. The drive to Drydock One took a few minutes, with another three minutes needed to drive inside the NOSTROMO and get to the Habitat Ring. Getting off at the entrance of the complex nearest to the daycare center, Pieter eagerly walked to the main door of the daycare center and found Jehanne already waiting in the parents' lounge of the establishment. Jehanne immediately went to him and kissed him before looking up and smiling to him.

"Frida is presently playing with her little friends. Do you wish to speak to her now or to let her play?"

"Let's watch her together as she plays, Jehanne." replied Pieter before approaching the large window that gave a view of the daycare's playroom. He then saw his little **Frida**, laughing and obviously having a good time as she ran, crawled, climbed and jumped through a big play module with nine other toddler children.



Pieter's heart warmed as they watched their adopted daughter play inside the module. Adopting her after Jehanne had saved her from the Space Predators on Nordland had been the best thing he had ever done, bringing extra love, pride and happiness to his life. The couple watched Frida play for another ten minutes, then went to see the woman supervising the play period when the children were told to rest a bit.

"Excuse me, Miss Ludolo. Would it be possible to speak in private with our daughter Frida for a moment?"

The ethnic Filipina woman gave Pieter a bit of a concerned look in return.

"I hope that this is not to announce some bad news to her, Mister Nordlung."

"It is not a bad news per say, miss, but I will have to leave on a long Space mission tonight and we want to prepare her for my absence."

"Oh, I see! You may go with her in our parents' interview room, if that is convenient with you."

"It will do, miss. Thank you!"

Pieter and Jehanne then approached the group of toddlers, who were having some fruit juice while sitting at their small tables. The moment Frida saw them approach, she got up and ran to them, nearly slamming against Pieter's legs and then happily hugging him.

"Daddy! You came to watch me play?"

"That, and coming to tell you that I will be leaving for a long Space mission tonight."

Worry immediately appeared on Frida's young face on hearing that.

"Are you going to fight the monsters again, Daddy?"

"No, not this time, sweetie. I am going to search for a missing ship far away in Space. That mission may well take a month or more. What me and your mother have in mind is to ask Janet Robeson to help Jehanne babysit you during my absence. Would you like for Janet to babysit you at night?"

"Yes! She is nice and I like her a lot, Daddy."

"Excellent! Me and Mommy will thus call her after this."

"Daddy, I want to watch you leave on your mission tonight." said at once Frida. Pieter looked down at her with understanding and nodded his head.

"That would normally be past your bedtime, sweetie, but we will make an exception for that."

"Thank you, Daddy!" said Frida while tightening her grip around his legs. Pieter then grabbed her and raised her in his arms before kissing her on one cheek.

"I will be most happy to see you watch me leave tonight, Frida. Me and Mommy will now go out and call Janet. Have fun playing with your friends in the meantime."

He and Jehanne then left the daycare center and stopped for a moment in the main hallway of the Habitat Ring's ground level, where Pieter used his wrist communicator again to call Janet Robeson. The 78-year-old retired politician, a solidly-built woman with steel-hard character, answered the call after three buzzes, smiling on recognizing Pieter on the display screen of her own wrist communicator.

"Hello, Pieter! To what do I owe you the pleasure of your call?"

"Uh, I hope that I am not disturbing you at an awkward time, Janet?"

"Not at all! I am presently preparing my notes for a class on political sciences I am due to give this afternoon. So, what's up?"

"I am calling to see if you would accept to help babysit my little Frida on evenings and nights for about a month or possibly more: I am due to leave tonight on a long, Deep Space mission which may well go for more than four weeks."

"Oh dear! Are you going on a reconnaissance mission to find those dreadful Space Predators?"

"No! We are going to search for a prospection ship that has been declared missing in the Corona Borealis constellation. That ship left only a vague flight plan and finding it may take some time."

Janet Robeson made a smirk on hearing that.

"Prospectors! The most individualistic, rule-breaking bunch I ever had to deal with during my time as governor of Jupiter and chairwoman of the Spacers League. How many people were on this ship?"

"Eleven! We suspect that this GOLDEN NUGGET went really deep, in order to find and claim for themselves new, valuable Space assets."

Janet's expression changed at once on hearing the name of the prospecting ship.

"The GOLDEN NUGGET, Harry Stanhouse's ship?"

"Uh, yes! You know that man?"

"I do indeed, Pieter. While governor of the Jupiter System, I had my administration slap him twice with fines for contravening regulations about claim-jumping and unsafe flight practices inside the Solar System. After we gained the capability to travel around the stars, this Stanhouse idiot managed to get penalized again a number of times for non-respect of Space regulations and nearly lost his ship's license as a result. That man is capable of some truly stupid behavior if money is involved, as he is a truly greedy type."

"Wow! That sounds like I may have problems finding him. So, would you accept to help Jehanne by babysitting Frida while my wife does her duty shifts at night?"

"I will be most happy to help you in that, Pieter: Frida is a truly adorable little angel. When are you leaving on your mission?"

"I have to report back to the Military Craft Hangar Number Two a bit before nine tonight. I will then probably fly out at around nine thirty."

“Then, me and Gerald will be there to watch your departure, then will take charge of Frida.”

“Excellent! See you at nine, then.”

Closing the lid of his communicator, Pieter then kissed gently Jehanne, who was hugging him.

“It is arranged! You will be able to go on your night shifts with your mind at peace.”

“That’s good!” replied Jehanne before painting a malicious smile on her android’s face. “Let’s go to our apartment now: I want to wish you the best for your mission...in a private way.”

21:14 (Universal Time)

Observation gallery, Military Craft Hangar Number Two

Avalon Space Yards, low Earth orbit

Janet Robeson, standing alongside her husband Gerald and next to Jehanne de Domrémy and little Frida, looked down through the armored windows of the observation gallery at the four heavy starfighters being prepared for departure inside the vast hangar. She knew well the capabilities of the four MAMBA-Class heavy starfighters, so had confidence that they would return safely from their long Deep Space mission. In fact, they had been designed, built and put into service while she was temporarily serving as the Defense Minister of the Spacers League for two years, and this at the request of then Chairman Karl Langemann. The MAMBA-Class heavy starfighter was actually nearly the size of a corvette, with an ovoid-shaped hull measuring seventy meters in length and with a maximum diameter of 25 meters. Four 25-meter-long heavy disintegrator cannons were mounted on ‘X’-shaped cruciform sponsons, along with a total of twelve reloadable heavy missile launchers, four turret-mounted light disintegrator cannons and six laser turrets, giving it a firepower equal to at least that of a cruiser, but in a much smaller and compact package. It had in fact been specifically designed to combat the threat from the Space Predators, whose powerful laser beams could cut to shreds a standard battlecruiser. However, the twelve MAMBAs forming the attack squadron of the NOSTROMO were even more deadly than their brethren serving with the Spacers League Navy, as their disintegrator cannons were equipped with the still ultra-secret Koomak Beam Conversion Device, an anodyne-looking part attached to their

muzzles which turned their disintegrator beams into matter-to-anti-matter conversion beams. Any part of a ship or large object touched by such a conversion beam then saw a part of its surface turned into anti-matter, something that instantly resulted in a titanic matter/anti-matter annihilation explosion. The disintegrator cannons of the NOSTROMO were also equipped with the KBCD, the codeword for it, and had been able to destroy a whole fleet of 34 Space Predator asteroid ships in mere minutes during the Battle for Nordland. Janet then saw another reason to feel confident about the chances for success of the four heavy starfighters.

“Here comes the four security android squads assigned to the mission.” Her husband Gerald, like little Frida, looked down through the armored window they were facing and saw a total of forty security androids marching in perfect cadence, as only androids could, towards the four ships. Each of them wore a large backpack and carried disintegrator rifles, on top of carrying a pair of pistols and large utility knives nearly akin to antique short swords. They also wore their light spacesuits but with their helmet visors left opened. The four squads split up on approaching the starfighters, with each squad then entering a specific craft via their stern access ramps. Jehanne pointed them to Frida, which she held into her arms.

“Look, Frida: my androids will be there to keep Daddy safe during his mission. He will be back in a month or so, of this I am sure.”

Frida reacted to her appeasing words by tightening her hug around Jehanne’s neck while fixing the SHOOTING STAR. When Pieter’s ship started floating and moving towards one of the craft airlocks of the hangar, she waived her right hand and spoke in her tiny voice, sadness evident in her tone.

“Bye-bye, Daddy! Please come back.”

Those words brought tears to Janet Robeson’s eyes: in her long political career in the Spacers League, she too often had to console the families of valiant ship crewmembers who had died in service or in combat. Hopefully, she would not need to do that again in the coming weeks.

CHAPTER 5 – ADS 9731



22:03 (Universal Time)

Thursday, January 9, 2336

Cockpit of the heavy starfighter SHOOTING STAR

In star system ADS 9731, Corona Borealis constellation

359 light-years from Earth

“The spectrometer analysis of the system we are entering confirms it as being ADS 9731, Pieter.”

“Good!” said Pieter Nordlung, acknowledging the information from Beza Gebre, his sensors officer. “We will stay in passive sensors mode for the moment and keep electronic silence, just in case some Space Predator ship would be in this system. Start mapping this system in detail, Beza, while I go meet our assigned squad of androids.”

“Passive scans only and electronic silence, understood.”

Getting up from his pilot’s seat, Pieter stepped down on the transparent platform supporting the four duty stations occupying the center of his ship’s bridge sphere, which had an internal diameter of seven meters and which gave his flight crew a 360-degree view of Space around them. Going past Beza Gebre’s sensors station, Pieter then walked on the short transparent bridge linking the work stations platform with the access door of the sphere, then opened the door, which itself was covered with a holographic display plate, and entered the crew quarters section of his heavy starfighter. Now finding himself inside the large crew lounge of his ship, Pieter went to one of the ten

security androids waiting in padded seats, intent on talking with him. The squad leader got up then before speaking to him.

“We have arrived in the ADS 9731 system, sir?”

“We have, Decurion Vogel. We have now started to scan the system in passive mode and under electronic silence, in case there are Space Predators in this system. What do you and your people know about this system?”

Kurt Vogel was secretly satisfied to hear Pieter call his androids ‘people’, something not everybody did, even on the NOSTROMO.

“We all downloaded the known astronomical data on ADS 9731 and on the other eleven systems we have been tasked to search. The ADS 9731 star system is one of the rare examples of a multiple star system with six distinct stars and is situated 359 light-years from Earth, in the constellation of Corona Borealis. It is composed of four F-Class white subdwarf stars, plus one G4V-Class yellow dwarf and one M3V-Class red dwarf star. No planets were detected from Earth but, due to the distance, there is still uncertainty on that subject.”

“Very good, Decurion Vogel. Since it will take us at least a few hours before we know more on this star system, we now have ample time to get to know each other. Would you present your people to me?”

“With pleasure, sir! First, I am Decurion Kurt Vogel, the leader of the First Squad of the Ninth Century, which is still being formed with newly-built androids. I myself was built five years ago at the Avalon Space Yards, like my second-in-command, Senior Legionnaire Miri Jintsu, and Legionnaire John Lee, our squad’s combat paramedic. All three of us experienced combat in the 55 CANCRI and TOI 1231 systems and during the Battle for Nordland and we were assigned to this new squad in order to provide some depth of experience to it. The seven other members of my squad were built during the last month and thus lack combat experience but are all very capable individuals.”

“I am sure that they will perform in an exemplary manner during our mission, Decurion. In fact, our mission will be an excellent opportunity for them to acquire experience.”

“Indeed, sir! Let me now present to you my new androids. First, you have Legionnaire Tanya Orlova, then Legionnaire Jeffrey Brown, Legionnaire Sven Larssen, Legionnaire Jacinda Madison, Legionnaire Ahmed Ramadi, Legionnaire Régis Dumont and, finally, Legionnaire Brian Mojambo, my heavy weapons gunner.”

Pieter smiled and shook hands with each of the androids as they were presented to him. He had difficulty not to stare at Jacinda Madison, whose youthful beauty was more than worthy of note. The two other 'women' of the squad, Tanya Orlova and Miri Jintsu, while not as stunning as Jacinda Madison, were still more than pretty by anyone's book⁴. Decurion Vogel then asked him a question once he had finished exchanging greetings with all the androids.

"How do you intend to proceed in this system, sir?"

"We will wait for our sensors sweep to be completed, which should take another twelve to fifteen hours, then we will go investigate and examine from up-close any planet found in this system. If we find no planets, then we will jump to our next target system: HIP 78288, some 95 light-years from here. What are you planning to do, you and your androids, during that time, Decurion?"

"We all already downloaded the basic schematics for your heavy starfighter, so that we can easily find our way around and can get to its various systems if we need to effect repairs. Our next step is to physically go around your ship, in order to get familiar with it and examine in details certain critical parts of it. Once that will be done, we will spend the time by listening to music and watch old movies and entertainment shows."

"Old movies? What kind of old movies?"

"Mainly war movies and science-fiction movies mostly produced during the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries. During the last few weeks, while the NOSTROMO was being repaired, some of our senior centurions went down on Earth's surface and shopped around in order to find and buy from historical archives copies of old films and music recordings which have been digitalized and preserved by a few companies specializing in preserving old records and electronic data. Some of those old science-fiction movies depicted, or rather tried to depict, what robots and androids could look and act like. We find watching such speculative works rather entertaining, mostly because they got it so wrong. As for the old war movies, we actually find them most interesting because they show the state of mind of Humans when they are fighting in wars. Some of those war movies even gave us valuable lessons in military tactics and behavior through the ages."

"Interesting! Maybe I and my crew should watch some of those old movies. Are there some in particular that you would recommend for us to see?"

⁴ For data on the First Squad, Ninth Century, refer to the relevant annex at the end of this e-book.

“Certainly, sir! I will download in your ship’s entertainment databanks copies of those films and musical pieces we brought with us but I would particularly recommend to you the following war movies: ‘Saving Private Ryan’; ‘Sink the Bismarck’; ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’; ‘We were Soldiers’; ‘Top Gun - Maverick’ and ‘The Battle of Britain’. In terms of science-fiction movies, I would recommend ‘The Day the Earth Stood Still’ in its early version, one of the first movies featuring a robot; ‘War of the Worlds’; ‘M3GAN’, ‘Alita – Battle Angel’, ‘Terminator 2’ and ‘Aliens’. By the way, ‘Aliens’ depicted ferocious alien creatures which may remind you a lot of the Space Predators we fought against.”

“Hum, I will certainly watch those movies when I will have the time to do so, Decurion. I will now return on the bridge to see how our sensors scan is going. Due to the length of our mission and the limited size of my crew, I intend to split my flight crew into two pairs, so that we can man our sensors without getting too fatigued.”

“May I propose the services of my androids in order to help man your bridge, sir? We are all qualified in ship’s sensors and weapons operation and can learn further about your sensors by downloading their operation protocols and procedures.”

“You can?” said Pieter, smiling on hearing that. “This would help us tremendously, Decurion. I thus propose that we split into four daily shifts, each composed of one of my flight crew and two of your androids.”

“You can count on us, sir.”

“Excellent! Thanks for your support, Decurion.”

“My pleasure, sir.” replied Vogel. “I will now lead my squad in a tour of your ship.”

“Go right ahead, Decurion. I will be on the bridge if you have any question for me.”

With that said, Pieter returned into the bridge sphere, where he informed his three flight crewmembers about the new arrangement with the androids, something that clearly pleased them. He also informed them about the films and music to be soon downloaded into the ship’s entertainment databanks, another thing that attracted smiles, as the crew facilities aboard a heavy starfighter were fairly limited. He then sent Lisa Wong and Felix Delgado to go rest, himself staying to assist Beza Gebre in manning their first shift in this system.

15:52 (Universal Time)

Friday, January 10, 2336

Crew lounge of the SHOOTING STAR

ADS 9731 System

Having been called in for a briefing by Pieter, his six crewmembers and ten androids sat around the dining table of the crew lounge and looked at the large wall holographic screen used both for entertainment and for information sharing, with Pieter then starting to speak.

"Well, my friends, we have just concluded the preliminary phase of our sensors scan of this system. The good news is that we found no trace of the Space Predators. We are apparently alone in this system. In the process, we found a total of seven planets and eight moons, which is not too surprising in view of the unusual number of stars in ADS 9731. Despite listening for over half a day in passive mode, we detected no electronic emissions of any kind coming from within the system. I believe that it is now time for us to take a closer look at the various components of ADS 9731 and to do some active mode sensors reconnaissance in order to confirm our findings to date. This system is quite a complicated one, with two separate pairs of stars each orbited by another star and with those two trios in turn orbiting each other in a 20,000 year-period orbit. The most interesting star for us at this time is the G4-Class yellow dwarf orbiting around a pair of F-Class white sub-dwarves. We have found four planets around that G4 star, which we will call star 'B', while the two F-Class stars, stars 'Aa' and 'Ab', apparently have no planets. I intend for us to go explore that G4 star and its planets first, to see if there are any traces of the passage of the GOLDEN NUGGET. Once that is done, we will go survey the other trio of stars in the system."

"Are any of those four planets within the habitable zone of star 'B', sir?" asked Kurt Vogel, making Pieter nod his head.

"The second planet around star 'B', planet Bc, may be just inside the inner edge of the G4's habitable zone. It also has an approximate mass some 1.15 times that of Earth, so it certainly could be a planet of interest for us...and for the GOLDEN NUGGET."

"Talking of the GOLDEN NUGGET, wouldn't it have sent back either a courier drone or an emergency interstellar beacon if it had encountered a major problem?" asked Legionnaire Tanya Orlova.

"It should have done so." answered Pieter. "However, it didn't, either because they were not able to send one out or because its captain decided not to send one. Captain Stanhouse had the reputation of an 'I don't give a shit' type of man who was driven by the dream of getting rich...quickly. He thus may have decided to stay silent in order to avoid attracting possible competitors to whatever he may have found on his trip."

"A rather short-sighted view if it results in the loss of his ship and crew." added Legionnaire Jeffrey Brown, making Pieter nod his head once.

"Indeed! We will thus take the time to thoroughly search this star system, in order to make sure that the GOLDEN NUGGET is not here."

"Maybe we should send out a call, to make the GOLDEN NUGGET know that we are searching for it?" suggested Felix Delgado, Pieter's weapons officer.

"We will certainly do that once we are closer to star 'B', Felix. Any other questions or comments? No? Then we will do a micro-jump to within two AUs⁵ of star 'B', then will go survey its four planets from up close. Lisa, Felix and Besa, you will join me on the bridge for our micro-jump and initial close-in survey, then Lisa, Felix and Besa will go rest in anticipation of the shift changes later on tonight and tomorrow morning. Decurion Vogel, have your squad ready, just in case we discover something nasty once near star 'B'."

"We will be ready, with our spacesuits on, sir."

"Excellent! Let's get back into our bridge seats, people."

While the ten androids went to their equipment lockers to don their spacesuits, Pieter led his flight crew back into the bridge sphere, with the engineering crew returning to their control room. Once in his pilot's seat, Pieter addressed his 29-year-old copilot/navigator, Lisa Wong.

"Lisa, calculate a micro-jump to bring us close to the orbit of the outermost planet of star 'B'. Jump when ready."

"Calculating a micro-jump to planet 'Be'... Micro-jump calculated... Jumping now!"

On her pushing the button activating their Koomak Drive generator installed at the bow end of the heavy starfighter, they saw a brief flash of orange light around them, with the

⁵ AU: Astronomical Unit. Average distance between the Earth and the Sun. Used to state the distance of planets, moons and other astral bodies from the star they are orbiting around.

view on their spherical holographic display then changing completely, from the black of Deep Space to a view of a red, brown and white gas giant planet. Five moons of varying sizes were visible around the gas giant, all illuminated by the white glare of their mother G4 star. Pieter, like his three flight crewmembers, contemplated for a moment the planet and its moons before speaking.

"This planet looks very much like a Saturn without its rings. This planetary system is nearly certainly uninhabitable but it could still hold resources which could interest prospectors like this Captain Stanhouse. Lisa, program six orbital probes and send one each to this planet and its moons, so that we could start mapping and analyzing them in detail. Beza, you may now start to scan in active mode: find out as much as you can about this planet and its moons."

"On it, Pieter!" replied the 22-year-old ex-Ethiopian refugee.

"Lisa, put us into a low polar orbit around planet 'Be', so that we can start photographing its surface in both visual and infrared spectrum. Felix, keep an ear out for any electronic emission in this sector."

Pieter then fell silent, letting his crew do their work quietly but efficiently. Some fourteen minutes later, Beza spoke up, reporting her first finds.

"Pieter, I evaluate the mass of this gas giant as being equal to 0.6 times Jupiter's mass, with a thick outer gas shell made of a mix of hydrogen and helium isotopes, methane and a few rare gases. Surface temperature is 63 degrees Kelvin and there is also quite a strong magnetic field emanating from the planet. It is indeed quite similar to our own Saturn. As for its five moons, they are as cold as their parent planet, with our spectroscopes reading their composition as being mostly methane and water ice, with little to no atmosphere around them. While clearly uninhabitable, this planetary system could still be of interest due to its hydrocarbons deposits and its deuterium isotopes. If Stanhouse visited this system, he most probably took note of all this."

"Agreed! Just this could attract a few buyers at a Space resources auction. We will take the time to thoroughly map and analyze this planet and its moons, then we will move to the next inner planet. Do you hear any electronic emissions to date, Felix?"

"Negative! This whole star system is electronically silent, Pieter."

"Still, keep an eye out for anything that would mark the passage of the GOLDEN NUGGET around this planet."

"Will do!"

After some forty minutes, with his ship now in low orbit over planet 'Be' and with his probes collecting and sending back data, Pieter sent his three flight crewmembers to go rest and himself changed station, taking charge of the sensors station while two androids, Miri Jintsu and Jeffrey Brown, entered the bridge sphere and respectively took the copilot's seat and the weapons station. Six hours after that, it was Pieter's turn to go rest, with Felix Delgado taking over the sensors station and continuing the mapping of the planetary system.

Nine hours after leaving the bridge, Pieter woke up in his tiny cabin and dressed in a light ship flight coverall before going into the lounge in order to have breakfast. There, he found eight of the androids lying in easy chairs and with earphones on, apparently listening to music with their eyes closed. Letting them listen to their music, Pieter took out of the refrigerator of the lounge a breakfast ration pack of egg omelet and bacon and warmed it up in a small convection oven, then served himself a cup of strong coffee. He was soon joined at the dining table by young Beza, who also chose and warmed up a breakfast ration. As the young African woman started eating her hot porridge with small berry fruits, Pieter asked her a question in a relaxed tone.

"So, Beza, what do you think about this system so far?"

"That it is pretty much as I expected it to be, considering its stellar composition. The early astronomers who first collected data about ADS 9731, working with instruments far less sensitive than the present instruments, did the then common mistake of attributing the masses they were calculating for the planets they detected as being from single objects. Furthermore, they could only detect the largest objects, with moons and smaller planets too often completely evading them, especially with very distant star systems, like ADS 9731. As a result, they both overestimated the masses of the stars and planets they detected and missed the majority of the planets we now know exist. A lot of the 'variable' stars they studied were actually stable stars which had large companions, like brown dwarves and gas giants, while many of the 'super-earths' they detected were planets with multiple moons, something they could not detect but which threw off their mass calculations. As a result, we now know that there are many more planets than they thought at the time, with many of those planets being closer in size to Earth than they calculated. Even if we don't find this GOLDEN NUGGET during our mission, we will still end up with a mass of very precious astronomical data to bring back. Talking of the GOLDEN NUGGET, since this Captain Stanhouse apparently

fudged his flight plan or even outright lied about it, would he still be able to legally claim first discovery and ownership of whatever he will find out here?"

"It will all depend on to what extent he will end up having lied about his flight plan. The further he deviated from it, the less chances his claims will be recognized. He already violated a few major Space navigation regulations, including not reporting periodically as required by Navy Headquarters, on top of putting many ship crews at risk by forcing this wide search for his ship. He may well end up with nothing, on top of possibly seeing his ship confiscated and his captain's license revoked."

"Wow! Greed certainly can cost someone heavily, instead of bringing in riches."

"You can say that again, Beza. So, how is your family doing on New Haven?"

"They positively love their life there," answered Beza while smiling. "My older brother Dawt is now a qualified agronomist and works at the hydroponics gardens of New Hope, our town on New Haven, while my parents are exploiting our small private greenhouse and raising a few dozen chickens, living the way they originally did in Ethiopia but doing so in peace, instead of trying to survive the civil wars of Africa. As for me, being part of this crew fulfills my old dreams about seeing more of the Universe."

"Good for you, Beza!"

"Uh, may I ask you a question, Pieter? A personal question?"

"Go ahead!" replied Pieter, who already guessed what she would ask about.

"How is family and sexual life with an android? I personally find your wife Jehanne to be very nice to speak with but how is it, emotion-wise, to live with her? I hope that my question will not insult you."

"I don't mind it at all, Beza. Yes, Jehanne can't feel true emotions, being an android and not a true human woman, but she displays as much attention, care and concern as a real woman towards me and our little Frida and she is truly devoted to us. While she can't have true feelings, her AI programming and her ever-growing life experience with living beings have made her reactions to life situations very similar to those of a living person. She also has the advantage over a Human of not having her thinking or actions clouded by the various prejudices and negative emotions, like jealousy and rage, which afflict too many of us Humans. As for our couple's sex life, I will give you an advice."

Pieter then bent forward and lowered his voice to a near whisper.

"Try an android one fine night: they are the best sex partners you will ever have. They care only for your own pleasure, which in turn is what satisfy them. They are also

tireless and can go on for hours without stop. I once took a bet in bed with Jehanne and ended up totally burned for a good two days, with her coming out of bed still as fresh as a rose.”

“Really? I heard stories about many passengers pursuing the attention of androids of the opposite sex but I thought that those stories had been exaggerated.”

“Oh, there is nothing exaggerated about that, Beza. We in fact have a new class of passengers on the NOSTROMO which we call ‘Cougars’, mature women who travel on the NOSTROMO simply to satisfy their sexual needs with our androids...male or female.”

“What about male passengers?” asked Beza, making Pieter grin.

“Many male passengers do try to date our female androids but they too often make the mistake of ordering them around, rather than show them respect and court them properly. As a result, many of those male passengers end up quite lonely during their trips, unless they go to the Jupiter Sex Club and pay for sexual services.”

Beza rolled her eyes at that.

“Yeah, many men in Africa still tend to take women for granted. Alright, I may just follow your advice during my mission’s free time.”

Beza then looked discretely at the androids listening to music in the lounge, in order to evaluate them as possible partners, and was a bit shocked at seeing all of them looking at her with gentle smiles. Pieter also noticed that and whispered again to Beza.

“Did I tell you that our androids have very fine ears? Let me give you another piece of advice about our security androids, Beza: never play cards against them. They are the most poker-faced players I ever met.”

09:04 (Universal Time)

Saturday, January 11, 2336

Crew lounge of the heavy starfighter SHOOTING STAR

In orbit of planet Bc, ADS 9731 System

“Well, we now know a lot more about this part of ADS 9731, my friends.” said Pieter, who was sitting around the dining table of the crew lounge with his whole crew and the ten security androids. “As you were able to see, we moved to the orbit of planet ‘Bc’ during the night, once we had completed the mapping of the gas giant ‘Be’ and its moons and of the planet ‘Bd’ with the help of our probes. Despite making repeated radio

calls, we have heard nothing to date from the GOLDEN NUGGET, nor did we find any traces of it. Concerning the third planet of star 'B', planet 'Bd', we have classified it as a cold super-Earth, with a mass approximately 2.6 times that of Earth and an average surface temperature around 230 degrees Kelvin, or minus 43 degrees Celsius, so it is no balmy tropical resort. It has a rock and water ice surface and a thick atmosphere of nitrogen, carbon dioxide and water vapor. Our preliminary survey also didn't find any form of life on the planet, nor on its small, rocky moon. We just relaunched one of our probes to go map out planet 'Bb', which is the closest to star 'B' and looks like our own Mercury. As for the pair of F-class stars around which star 'B' is rotating, 'Aa' and 'Ab', they have no planets, rotating too closely around each other, with an orbital period of 3.27 days. Once we will be finished with this trio of stars, we will fly to take an orbit in the planetary system of star 'C', which itself rotates around a pair of stars, one F7-Class yellow-white star and one M3 red star."

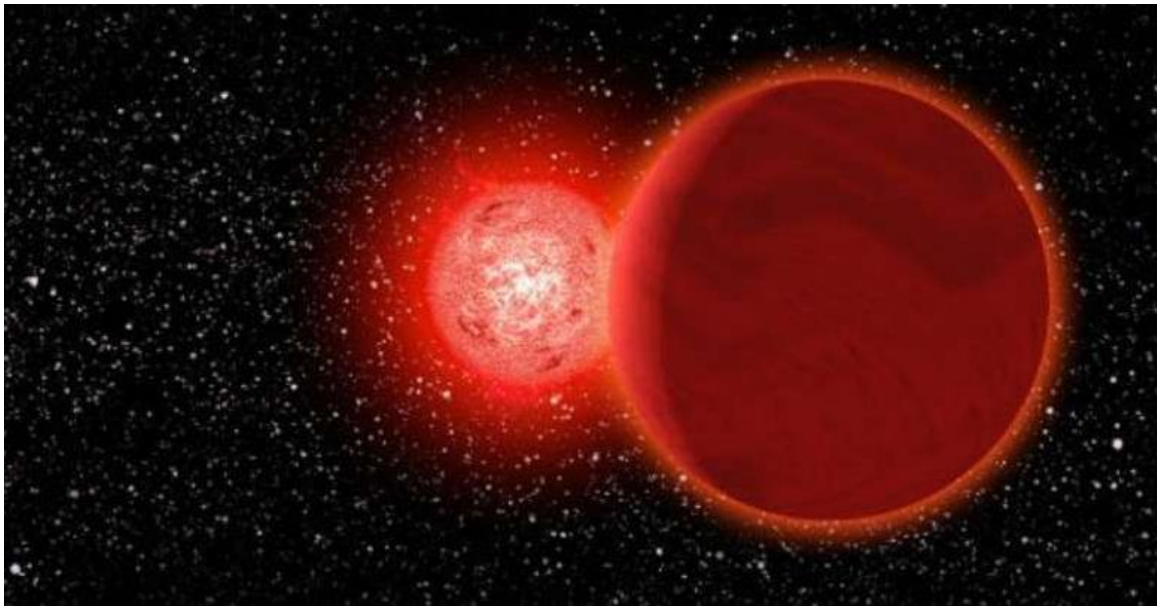
"What are our sensors saying to date about planet 'Bc', Pieter?" asked Matsuo Hondo, the SHOOTING STAR's first engineer. Pieter looked down at a printout laid in front of him on the table before answering him.

"Our first sweeps tell us that it is only slightly bigger and more massive than Earth, has an average surface temperature of 290 degrees Kelvin and has a thick atmosphere of nitrogen, water vapor and carbon dioxide. Its surface is covered by a planet-wide ocean, with thousands of volcanic islands sprinkled around it but with no continents. I will remind you that this whole system is a fairly young one, with an approximate age of 2.8 billion years, some 1.7 billion years younger than our Solar System. Thus, life is probably only starting to appear on it in microbial and multi-cellular forms, forming the sort of primordial soup that existed in Earth's oceans when it was the same age as ADS 9731, during the Archean Period. We will soon send probes to take samples on the surface and in the oceans of planet 'Bc' to verify that hypothesis. Overall, planet 'Bc' looks like a hot, primordial Earth, an interesting planet to be sure but one of no possible value to the prospectors aboard the GOLDEN NUGGET. If the rest of the system proves to be similar in age and composition, then the GOLDEN NUGGET probably left for its next target after doing a preliminary survey of the ADS 9731 System."

"And what is the next system to check out on our list, sir?" asked Legionnaire Régis Dumont.

“HIP 78288, a star system with one K2III orange-red giant. It could be potentially more interesting to the crew of the GOLDEN NUGGET, due to its age and high metallicity ratio, which is only slightly lower than that of our Sun. It is situated some 464 light-years from Earth, which means that our next jump will cover only 192 light-years. Even if we don’t find the GOLDEN NUGGET in that system, HIP 78288 should prove an interesting star system for us in scientific terms. However, as per our mission instructions, we will launch an interstellar courier drone towards Earth before jumping to HIP 78288, and this in order to report what we saw here. In return, we will get back via our drone’s return trip an update on what our other three starfighters found to date. With luck, they will have already found the GOLDEN NUGGET in their own assigned search areas.”

CHAPTER 6 – GOING ‘BUMP’ IN THE NIGHT



A red star with a gas giant planet.

11:17 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, January 14, 2336

Bridge sphere of the SHOOTING STAR

Emerging ten Astronomical Units from the star HIP 78288

464 light-years from Earth, Corona Borealis Constellation

“The specter of the red star ahead corresponds perfectly to that of HIP 78288. Jump successful!”

“Excellent!” replied Pieter to Lisa Wong’s announcement. “Beza, you may start studying in passive mode this system. We will stay under electronic silence for the moment, with all our ears and eyes opened fully. Felix, keep a watch for possible distress signals from the GOLDEN NUGGET. Even if they were not able to launch a courier drone or emergency interstellar beacon, the crew of the GOLDEN NUGGET could still have activated a local distress beacon if they suffered some kind of accident or malfunction.”

“I will closely monitor our passive electronic detectors suite, Pieter.”

Pieter nodded his head once, then looked at the holographic display surface of the bridge sphere, visually examining what could be seen of this system. HIP 78288 was a

K2III evolved orange-red giant star that was much larger but also cooler than the Sun. Such star types had proved in the past few centuries to often possess substantial planetary systems, so Pieter was hopeful that this system would have something that could have attracted the interest of the crew of the GOLDEN NUGGET. With luck, he would find the prospectors' ship still present in this system, as a thorough geological survey of a planetary system was normally a rather lengthy affair, if one didn't want to miss some valuable ore deposits by rushing the prospecting work. He could already distinguish what was a gas giant planet orbiting close to the central star and well illuminated by it. He was still looking at that small pink dot next to the orange-red star when an alarm signal started sounding in the bridge sphere, followed by the female voice of the starfighter's central computer, nicknamed Carmen. Carmen was not by far as intelligent and powerful as Spirit, the central AI computer of the NOSTROMO, and its capabilities were concentrated in doing complex calculations and imagery data analysis, but it still was able to engage in rather simple conversations and verbal information exchange.

"Warning! Space Predator type long-range search radar's pulse detected, coming from within the system. Pulse strength is minimal and well below detection level. Computing pulse direction and approximate distance now... Pulse came from the area of a possible planet turning around HIP 78288, presently opposite the star from us and at a minimum distance of eleven AU... Warning! Second Space Predator type long-range search radar pulse detected. Second pulse is at a different frequency than the first one."

"Shit!" exclaimed Felix Delgado. "That means that we have at least two Space Predator ships present in this system. From the electronic intelligence gathered previously by the NOSTROMO, the type of radar we just detected are from full-fledged Space Predator asteroid warships. Their support ships use a different frequency band than their warships, with less power and detection range."

"Two Space Predator asteroid warships? This is very bad news indeed. If the GOLDEN NUGGET was present in this system at their arrival, that would explain their lack of reporting to Providence. Do your best to refine the heading those pulses..."

"Warning! Third long-range radar pulse detected on a third distinct frequency." Pieter paled on hearing that latest warning from Carmen: long-range search radars used by starships, needing to cover huge distances in order to be useful, had to be fired with long intervals of up to many minutes between each pulse, in order to allow time for their search pulses to bounce back and return from eventual targets without becoming

tangled with previous pulses which would have hit closer targets. This thus indicated that there were now at least three Predator warships detected inside this system, indicating either a major operation by the Space Predators presently being conducted, or the presence of a major Predator base or even homeworld in HIP 78288. His starfighter had just stumbled into the proverbial wasp's nest. Carmen then raised a further alarm.

"Warning! A fourth long-range pulse has just passed by us, coming from the same heading as the three previous ones. I also am detecting the weak remnant pulses from at least two Space Predator support ships located with the four warships."

"Pieter, if this would be an actual base of operation for the Space Predators, they would normally use a single search radar, two at the most, to give them warnings about approaching ships. This looks more like a Space Predators' combat operation in progress."

"A good analysis, Felix. But an operation against who or what?"
That was when Lisa Wong spoke up from her copilot/navigator's station.

"This type of star often has planetary systems with rich metal ore deposits or asteroid fields. In fact, the metallicity of HIP 78288 is very close to that of our Sun, so it could very well possess quantities of valuable metal deposits. Such deposits would be of high interest to the Space Predators, who use M-Class nickel-iron asteroids to build ships out of them. We could be looking at a major resource exploitation expedition supported and defended by warships."

"I think that you may be right about that, Lisa. Let's wait and listen more, in case we detect more pulses. Beza, do you detect some planet or asteroid field ahead that we could use to hide behind while watching and listening discretely?"

"One moment, please... We have two small planets or planetoids orbiting in the outer parts of the system. The nearest one is approximately two AU from us, at our two o'clock. I'm now marking those two bodies' positions on our holographic sphere."

"Thanks! Lisa, calculate a micro-jump to near that closest planet, opposite from the origin heading of those Predator radar pulses. Once safely behind that planet, we will use a reconnaissance drone parked at its terminator in order to continue monitoring the electronic emissions from those Predator ships. Once we will have a better picture of the situation here, we will send out a courier drone to alert the NOSTROMO about this."

"On it, Pieter! Calculating micro-jump... Ready to jump at your mark."

"Then jump!"

The moment that Pieter saw the view of Space change on the sphere's display surface, after the usual orange flash of light caused by a jump via Koomak Drive, he veered his starfighter at once towards the dark mass of a small planet now visible on his left. He then blew air out in relief when he succeeded in getting behind and close to the planet before another Predator radar pulse could be heard passing by.

"We should be safe from detection now, my friends. Beza, send out a reconnaissance drone and make it hug this planet's terminator, pointed in the direction from where these radar pulses are coming. We will use it to observe and map this system while ourselves staying out of sight. I doubt very much that any long-range radar could detect our drone from more than 0.01 AU. Even from close range, our reconnaissance drones are hard to detect, with their radar-absorbing surfaces and black paint."

"That still leaves us with facing at least four Predator asteroid warships, Pieter." Felix reminded him. "The NOSTROMO could certainly take on such odds...but us?"

"Let's not sell our SHOOTING STAR short, Felix. Yes, it has only minimal protection against laser hits but it is fast, agile and of small size, making it a difficult target. It also has as much firepower as a battlecruiser or more even, if considering the KBCD nozzles attached to our disintegrator cannons. In the right setting and using surprise, we could decimate that Predator fleet. The question is rather: should we attack that fleet by ourselves or should we wait for support to join us? Normally, common sense would dictate for us to wait for reinforcements but we came to find and rescue the GOLDEN NUGGET and we don't know if it is here in this system or not and if yes, what happened to its crew. So, let's concentrate for the moment on mapping this system with our passive sensors and on watching those Predator ships while listening for any possible signal from the GOLDEN NUGGET."

His three flight crewmembers nodded their heads, accepting his logic, then worked their instruments in order to gather as much data as possible on this star system. However, Beza did make a remark as she was gathering data from her passive sensors.

"I am wondering about something, Pieter. This system has all the conditions to be able to sustain life and is also old enough to give time for a sentient race to develop here. What if the Predators are presently engaging in the genocide of such a race on the planet they are now orbiting? As you know, the Space Predators customarily conquer every other sentient race they meet and then use them as a source of meat for themselves, the way they did to our people on Nordland and on the world of the Kyrins.

By simply waiting here in hiding, we may just be allowing the Predators to complete such a massacre.”

Pieter’s heart sank as he realized that Beza could very well be right about that. Such a hypothesis would actually explain why the Predators were making such a strong showing in this star system and why they were pinging with all their long-range search radars.

“Damn! You could well be right about that, Beza. In fact, I believe that you are most probably right about the Predators being in the process of invading this system and attacking a local race.”

Lisa Wong, now looking most somber, looked up at Pieter from her station’s chair.

“If delays could put at risk millions of lives, then I say: let’s act as soon as possible, as long as we send out a courier probe before going into battle.”

Felix Delgado, who had seemed reticent at first, finally nodded his head.

“I concur! Besides, even if those Predator ships are not presently engaged in destroying another race, it is only a question of time before they go attack one of our systems, especially since they now know where all our systems are. This is a question of sheer survival for all the races of this quadrant which could be attacked by those monsters.”

“Then, it is decided! Once we will have mapped this system to a reasonable degree and will have established the position of those Predator ships, we will send out a courier drone, then will attack. While you gather more data on this star system, I will go talk with our android squad and announce to them our intention to fight.”

Leaving the bridge sphere and entering the crew lounge, situated just aft of the bridge, Pieter found the ten security androids of Decurion Vogel either listening to music or reading something.

“Be on alert, people: we are soon going into a fight with a Space Predator flotilla which is operating in this system and which is possibly engaged in the slaughter of another, local race.”

His opening sentence made the ten androids gather around him at once as he continued speaking.

“Since millions of lives may be at play right at this moment, we decided to act as soon as we will have enough basic information about this system to mount a coherent plan of attack. Right now, we evaluate the enemy force to be at least four asteroid

warships and a minimum of two asteroid support ships. We are presently using our passive sensors to map the planets and moons of this system, so that we could jump into battle with at least some positional accuracy. My plan is to get as close to the Predator flotilla as possible without being detected and then to effect a final micro-jump in order to do a speed run between the Predator ships and the planet they are presently orbiting around, with our main disintegrator cannons firing upwards at the enemy ships. We will thus use the same tactic the NOSTROMO did at the Battle for Nordland. The idea is to blow the enemy ships away towards Space, so that their debris don't fall down through the planet's atmosphere, something that would destroy the planet we are trying to save. We will have our anti-teleportation scramblers on during our attack but I will want you to be ready to defend our starfighter from any Predator boarder who would succeed in teleporting inside our ship."

"We will be ready for them, sir." replied at once Vogel.

"Excellent! One last thing: to be honest with you, our attack may well turn into a suicide charge but, even if we all die, we may still be able to delay or even stop the planet's invasion until our reinforcements arrive. Again, millions of lives may be at stake here and preventing that would be worth for us paying the ultimate price."

The ten androids exchanged quick glances, then raised both of their clenched fists high over their heads while shouting in unison.

"BANZAI!"

Pieter had a chuckle and shook his head in amusement at their reaction.

"Gee! You guys have been watching too many old war movies lately."

15:32 (Universal Time)

Bridge sphere of the heavy starfighter SHOOTING STAR

Leaving the orbit of planet HIP 78288h

"I wish that we could have had confirmation from the NOSTROMO that our courier drone carrying our alert message had arrived at the Avalon Space Yards." said Lisa Wong, making Pieter nod his head once.

"Me too but the return of our courier drone here could well have had alerted the Space Predators to our presence in the system, so I had to specify to the NOSTROMO

to not reply to our message and to send reinforcements straight away. Hopefully, we will not live to regret this decision of mine. Ready for our next jump?”

“Yes! We should emerge just behind the cover of the group of asteroids about to fly overhead past the Predator ships in orbit around the third planet.”

“Then, stand by on that: I want to give my last instructions to Carmen. Carmen, you are listening?”

“Yes, Pieter!” answered at once the AI central computer of the starfighter.

“Carmen, I want you to be ready to take control of our shooting once we will start our attack. Your speed of reaction and precision in aiming is simply too far superior to that of any Humans for us not to use you in this attack. I will take care of the piloting and will be zipping at top acceleration 115 kilometers under the line of Predator ships while zigzagging in an unpredictable pattern in order to avoid enemy laser fire. We will be using both our heavy disintegrator cannons in KBCD mode and our missiles in order to inflict the maximum of damage in the minimum amount of time. Our priority targets should normally be the long asteroid warships but we will take the enemy ships as they come by: we won't have the time to be choosy or to fly fancy patterns around the enemy fleet. We will have to destroy the enemy fleet in a single pass, as we probably won't have a chance for a second pass. If we are hit and my crew gets incapacitated or killed, I count on you to fire at the enemy as long as possible. Do you have questions, Carmen?”

“No! Your instructions are very clear, Pieter. And, Pieter...”

“Yes, Carmen?”

“Good luck!”

“You too, Carmen.”

Feeling a mix of anxiety and excitement prior to going into battle, Pieter did a last check of his systems, making sure in particular that their anti-teleportation scrambler emitters were active, then gave a ship-wide order via intercom.

“To all the crew: seal your spacesuits. We are about to jump into combat... Lisa, you may jump now.”

“Jumping now!”

Pieter held his breath for a couple of seconds, time for his starfighter to reappear after its micro-jump within the star system. He felt relief on seeing that his ship was now a few hundred kilometers off to one side of a large group of asteroids of varying sizes,

with the asteroids being between him and the third planet, a planet slightly larger than Earth and with visible continents and oceans. The blue halo around that planet indicated that it had a substantial atmosphere.

“Beza, do a quick spectrometer reading of the atmosphere of the third planet. See if it could possibly be a breathable atmosphere.”

“On it!”

Beza spoke again after a minute, as Pieter was approaching their starfighter closer to one of the larger asteroids, in order to hide behind it.

“It may well be a breathable atmosphere, Pieter. I read its composition to be close to that of Earth, but with a higher proportion of oxygen and rare gas. Its general temperature also appears quite moderate.”

“Good! If we have to effect an emergency landing after our attack, at least we will be able to survive on the planet’s surface. Lisa, Beza, start plotting the positions, headings and speeds of the enemy ships in orbit. Use only passive sensors for the moment. We will complete our sensor sweep with a single ping from our search and track radar, on my command, just before making a micro-jump to our attack position.”

Felix Delgado, who was monitoring the visual sensors of the starfighter, then spoke up.

“Pieter, our long-range telescope shows traces of urban agglomerations and of a network of roads on the continent right under us. You were right about this planet sheltering a sentient race.”

“Then, we will not be doing this for nothing, my friends. Lisa, advise me when we will be ready to ping in active mode.”

“Give us another minute or two, Pieter, time to complete our passive sweep.”

“No problem, Lisa.”

As promised, Lisa came back after less than two minutes, her voice tense.

“Ready for our active radar ping, Pieter. I was able to spot on passive sensors four cylindrical asteroid warships and six round asteroid ships, flying one behind the other in a medium altitude orbit over the planet. Two warships bring the front of the line, with two more warships bringing the rear, with the support ships sandwiched in between them.”

“Then, ping now!”

“Pinging now! Fire solutions established!”

“Jump behind and below them!”

Lisa didn't take the time to reply to Pieter before pressing her jump button and sending their starfighter to reappear under and slightly behind the line of enemy ships. That was when Pieter gave an order to their central computer.

"Carmen, fire at will!"

He barely had time to finish his sentence before a salvo of eight missiles were spat out by the forward-pointing launch tubes of the SHOOTING STAR. As soon as Pieter raised the nose of his starfighter and pointed it at the belly of the enemy ships flying 125 kilometers above him, their four heavy disintegrator cannons opened fire, shooting the ruby-red beams of energy characteristic of disintegrator beams switched to matter/anti-matter conversion mode by the KBCD devices attached to their nozzles. As Pieter accelerated to maximum on a course parallel to the enemy fleet while keeping his nose pointed up, he also worked his controls to make his ship perform zigzags in an erratic and unpredictable pattern. He felt savage joy as his cannons' beam struck enemy ship after enemy ship, producing on impact colossal explosions, each in the 150 megaton-range. Those gigantic explosions easily penetrated the thick iron-nickel hulls of the Predator ships and incinerated their inner parts while at the same time breaking the eight to twelve-kilometer-long ships in two or more parts. The SHOOTING STAR's cannons were destroying their fourth enemy ships when the eight missiles fired in the initial volley hit their targets. Being also armed with anti-matter warheads, those missiles evaporated huge chunks of the outer shells of more Predator ships and eviscerated them at the same time, leaving only broken, incinerated shells. However, the enemy, although taken by surprise, was not taking this lying down, firing dozens of laser batteries at the starfighter speeding by under them. Pieter's zigzagging saved him from most of those gigawatt laser beams but one beam from the lead enemy warship then hit the SHOOTING STAR just before that warship was destroyed by an incoming missile. That laser beam easily burned through-and-through the starfighter at an angle, cutting in two one of its four heavy disintegrator cannons and piercing the hull near one of its thermonuclear powerplants. Main power and propulsion were immediately lost, leaving the starfighter on emergency battery power. In the bridge sphere, Pieter saw their holographic display screens flicker and then go dark, before they lit up again.

"WE ARE NOW ON BACKUP POWER! CARMEN, CONTINUE FIRING FOR AS LONG AS POSSIBLE. TO THE ENGINEERING CREW AND SECURITY SQUAD: REPORT YOUR STATUS!"

His second engineer, Edward Lansing, was the first to reply to his call.

"THIS IS LANSING, IN POWERPLANT ROOM NUMBER THREE. I AM ALRIGHT AND MY COMPARTMENT IS STILL INTACT AND PRESSURIZED."

The second one to answer was Jawal Parmat, their maintenance technician.

"PARMAT HERE, IN THE POWER SWITCHING ROOM. I AM OKAY BUT THE ENGINEERING CONTROL ROOM NEXT TO ME WAS HIT AND HAS DECOMPRESSED. I CAN'T GET AN ANSWER FROM MATSUO."

Pieter felt his heart sink on hearing that. Matsuo Hondo, his first engineer, was married, with two young children. The voice of Decurion Kurt Vogel then came on.

"Decurion Vogel here. I am presently near our main drive core and that sector seems to be intact. Legionnaires Dumont and Larssen are not responding but my seven other squad members are. We are going to evaluate the damage and start effecting repairs."

"Acknowledged! See at the same time if you can find First Engineer Hondo and your two missing legionnaires."

"Will do! Vogel, out!"

Next, Pieter looked at his three flight crewmembers.

"Alright, my friends, let's find out what still works and what isn't. If we prove to be too heavily damaged to stay in orbit, then I will have all of our crew retreat to the nose section before ejecting it towards the planet's surface."

15:40 (Universal Time)

Shores of a large coastal river delta, Northern Continent

Third planet of HIP 78288

A long line of over 200 giant crab-like creatures emerged gradually from the waters of the river they had been following upstream by walking on its bottom. A Human seeing those creatures would have described them as closely resembling huge crabs with reddish-brown shells some two meters in diameter, six articulated legs and two long, articulated forward arms. However, the legs, instead of ending in hard and pointy extremities, like Earth-bound crabs, ended in actual feet with cushioned soles and six retractable claws. The two forward arms each had three joints and ended in six digits hands with good dexterity. The creatures also had a sort of head sticking out of the front of the shell by a short neck and had a big chitinous plate protecting the two pairs of black eyes distributed around the head. Most unusual was however the fact that half of the

creatures carried strapped to their backs what would furiously look to Humans like automatic cannons with long barrels of a caliber of 20 mm. The other half of the group carried on their backs spare ammunition magazines for the automatic cannons. When the group of crabs emerged from the river, it was night time and only the light from the three moons of Rhiss illuminated the night. The leader of the group had in fact calculated his unit's march so that they would emerge from the river at night, something that would hopefully provide some cover from observation by the monstrous invaders who had landed five days ago and had already laid waste to much of the Krells' civilization. Those insect-like invaders had then corralled the surviving Krells who had not been able to flee to the safety of the oceans. It hadn't taken long however before those survivors realized what kind of horrific fate awaited them at the hands of the invaders, with Krells being selected every day as meals for the giant insects, either eaten raw or boiled alive before being dismembered and having their shells broken open. The unit's leader, having walked to the nearest clump of trees which was growing along the shores, cautiously observed the large clearing next to the river, looking for the possible presence of some of the hated invaders. Thankfully he saw none around. The leader then looked in the distance at the dark mass that was now the ruins of the royal palace which had served as the summer residence of King Rakan. The King had thankfully managed to flee his palace in time, escorted by his guards, and to find refuge at the bottom of the nearby sea. Unfortunately, over half of the guards unit, to which the leader and his 212 Krells belonged, had died while protecting the escape of King Rakan. Commander Reshan was now back, firmly resolved to make the invaders pay for their atrocities. Reshan was about to order his troops to advance when a quick series of searing flashes of white light overhead illuminated the night sky. Surprised by that, Reshan looked up at the night sky, where more flashes of intense white light continue to burst in quick succession. He then understood that some kind of battle was happening in Space, around the planet. But a battle between who? The Krells did not travel into Space, preferring to stay and travel on the ground or along the sea bottoms. His people didn't even use air travel, although the Krells were advanced enough technologically to design and build aircraft if they had wanted to. However, air travel just wasn't the way of the Krells, who liked to stay firmly on the ground or under water. On the other hand, the Krells' ability to live under water had been the saving grace for many of them, as the invaders had proved to be either unable or unwilling to enter the oceans and search for

the Krells there. One of Reshan's subalterns then approached him and pointed at the flashes of light in the sky.

"What could be those flashes of light above us, Commander?"

"Either this shows us that someone else than the invaders can travel into Space and is now attacking them, or the invaders have internecine wars between factions of their race. Either way, this may not be bad news for us, on the contrary. Let's resume our advance now: the prisoners' corral our scouts have reported should be fairly close, to our East."

15:42 (Universal Time)

Space Predators' Prisoners Corral Number Six

Near western sea coast, Northern continent of planet Rhiss

Greta Bjornsson just couldn't sleep, despite being physically and mentally exhausted: she was too despondent about what was happening to her to do anything but worry about the fate that was awaiting her in the next few hours or days. The monsters had tortured her for a full day after capturing her, to learn from her if there were other Human ships in or near the system. She had quickly broken down and had essentially told her Predator tormentors the truth, which was that the GOLDEN NUGGET had come alone, but the monsters had taken some time before they had believed her, then had thrown her in this prisoners' corral, weak and nearly mad from the pain she had endured. The giant crabs held with her in the corral had taken her into pity and had tried to help her but, knowing nothing about Humans, could do little for her apart from giving her some water. She was now the sole survivor of the crew of the GOLDEN NUGGET, which had been attacked and destroyed five days ago by the monstrous Space Predators. As for the rest of the prospecting ship's crew, six of them had been killed during the attack on their ship, while the four other crewmembers captured alongside Greta had also been tortured, then selected one by one and eaten during the past three days. What had saved Greta up to now from also being eaten was the ironic fact that the Space Predators seemed to like more the meat from the sentient crabs which were being kept with her than human meat. There were still over a thousand of the unfortunate crab creatures inside the crowded, filthy and stinking enclosure she was in. While those giant crabs had at first shown understandable curiosity mixed with some suspicion towards her, she being utterly alien in their eyes, they had quickly accepted

her as a companion of misfortune. Unfortunately, communication with them had proved next to impossible, due to the huge difference in languages. Only the use of signs and images drawn into the muddy ground of the corral had allowed her to exchange a few basic notions and feelings with the crabs, which called themselves 'Krells'.

A light rain had fallen some hours ago, making her even more miserable, but one of the big Krells had then shown compassion towards her by taking position over her to protect her from the rain. Greta was still reminiscing about that act of kindness when a series of searing white flashes high in the sky made her look up. Having been a sensors operator aboard the GOLDEN NUGGET and knowing about the war between Humanity and the Space Predators, she immediately understood what those flashes meant and, to the utter surprise of the Krells surrounding her, jumped to her feet and pointed upwards while shouting out in joy.

"SOMEBODY CAME LOOKING FOR US AND ARE NOW FIGHTING THOSE MONSTERS! HELP IS COMING!"

Of course, the Krells around her didn't understand a word of what she said but they did understand that the flashes of light could be a good omen. The Krells nearest to Greta then started exchanging comments and opinions with the other Krells around them, with the result that the whole prisoners' corral was soon abuzz with speculations and renewed hope. When the flashes stopped happening a mere few seconds after they had started, the Krells all looked at Greta, to see if she understood what was happening. Unable to speak with them, Greta then resorted to the only mode of communication available to her and started drawing a series of figures and pictograms on the muddy ground, watched intently by the Krells nearest to her. She drew her first pictograms, then pointed at one of the Predator guards watching the prisoners from atop a guard tower.

"Space Predator! Space Predator ship."

She then drew more pictograms, including a human stick figure, and pointed at herself.

"Human! Me, Human. This, Human ship."

Next, she drew many small circles meant to represent Human ships and drew a big arrow from those circles towards the figure of the Space Predator, then erased that Space Predator image and the stick representing its ship.

"Humans came and are destroying the Predators."

The Krells surrounding her nodded their heads in unison, apparently understanding what she wanted to tell them. They then started to whisper around them to spread the word around, cautious about possibly triggering some negative reactions from their guards. Seeing that she had been understood, Greta sat back on the ground, her head bent back, and waited while hoping for a quick rescue.

15:44 (Universal Time)

Office of Gustav Shomberg

Owner and chief designer of the Avalon Space Yards

Low Earth orbit, Solar System

“Yes, Tina, what can I do for you?”

On the video screen of Gustav Shomberg’s desk communications unit, the face of Tina Forster showed some concern as she spoke up.

“Gustav, I have to urgently send out right away all of my heavy starfighters, plus my assault shuttles and most of my security androids. One of my starfighters which was searching for the prospectors’ ship GOLDEN NUGGET has encountered a Space Predator fleet in the HIP 78288 system, 464 light-years away in the Corona Borealis Constellation, and needs help at once. I am sorry to have to leave your station defenseless like this but I have no choice but to send all the forces at my disposal, since my NOSTROMO is still at least a month away from being ready to leave drydock.”

Gustav’s welcoming smile now replaced by a sober expression, he nodded his head and replied in a calm tone to Tina.

“Don’t worry about my station, Tina: I will manage. Go and rescue your starfighter.”

“Are you sure, Gustav? Your Space yards would constitute a prime target for any Predator ship which could show up in the Solar System.”

“Tina, you must have noticed that there has been some new construction activity lately around the outside of my station, right?”

“Uh, yes, but you didn’t want to tell me about it when I asked.”

“Well, know this but keep it to yourself: I have had multiple heavy disintegrator cannon batteries installed, along with missile launcher batteries and force shield generators. My Space yards are thus far from defenseless. I have also added to my station enough gravity sail surfaces to make it able to maneuver in orbit and to even

travel away from Earth on my own power, with a hidden Koomak Drive generator thrown in to add an interstellar capability as well.”

Tina’s eyes opened wide under the shock of those revelations but she quickly recovered from her surprise and smiled to Gustav.

“Gustav, you are always full of surprises. Thanks for telling me: I will depart with my mind reassured about you.”

“Then, good luck in the HIP 78288 system, Tina.” replied Gustav before closing the video link.

CHAPTER 7 – THE CAVALRY IS COMING



15:58 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, January 14, 2336

Forest surrounding the Space Predators' Prisoners Corral Number Six

Northern continent, Planet Rhiss

HIP 78288 System, 464 light-years from Earth

Commander Reshan switched back his combat targeting visor from zoom mode to normal viewing mode, then spoke to the two subaltern officers flanking him, unwilling to use his radio due to the risk of transmissions being possibly intercepted by the invading monsters.

"I can see over a thousand of our people being held by the monsters inside a guarded open-air camp. There are fourteen guard towers along what looks like an electrified fence, with two monsters per tower manning pintle-mounted heavy weapons. Some twenty prefabricated buildings are located to the North of the prisoners camp. When we will charge in, I want our First Group to target in priority the guard towers, to prevent the guards from slaughtering their prisoners. Our Second Group will concentrate its fire against the enemy barracks. Pass the word around and tell our soldiers to be ready to attack."

"Yes sir!" replied the two junior officers before going back to their sub-units, leaving Commander Reshan alone in the center of the line of deployed Krell soldiers. Reshan continued to examine the enemy camp, looking for possible heavy weapons or some of the dreaded flying vehicles of the enemy. He found only two such vehicles, parked on the ground behind one of the prefabricated buildings. That reassured him, as those flying vehicles had proved to have some kind of invisible protective walls around them which could defeat his guards' automatic cannon shells. The individual monsters also had such invisible walls but those were much less resistant than those of the flying vehicles and could be defeated by cannon shells, even though they could stop bullets from hand-held weapons. That had been one lesson paid at a very steep price during the first day of the invasion but Reshan was not about to forget that lesson, which was why he had his soldiers equipped with the most powerful weapons in the Krells' arsenal.

When his subalterns reported that their guards were ready for the assault, Reshan waited a few seconds more, then shouted out an order.

“KNIGHTS OF THE FIRST ARMORED GUARDS, FORWARD AND CHARGE!
NO MERCY! NO RETREAT!”

On that order to fight to the death if need be, Reshan then gave the example and started running on his six legs towards the enemy camp, followed closely by his young Krell squire who was serving as his ammunition carrier. Using his targeting visor to aim his dorsal cannon, he put his sight's reticle on one of the guard towers of the camp and fired a short salvo of three shells. He had the satisfaction of seeing the top of the guard tower blow up into pieces, with its two occupants killed instantly. His shooting then was the signal for his 104 knights to open fire as well.

In the prisoners' corral, the explosions and detonations from automatic cannon fire awoke Greta Bjornsson, who had managed to fall asleep a few minutes ago. Being somewhat groggy from fatigue, she took a moment to realize that the Predators were under attack. However, the kind of weaponry used now was not of the kind Human forces used these days. Spacer soldiers were now widely equipped with disintegrator weapons, even though civilians, like the crew of the GOLDEN NUGGET, didn't have access to that class of weapons and still used old-fashioned firearms. She understood what happened only after seeing a large number of giant crabs armed with automatic cannons run past the prisoners' corral, firing at the Predators' barracks. The determination and energy of that charge nonetheless warmed her heart and she shouted out in encouragement as the guard towers were blown up one by one in quick succession. The Krells around her also shouted out enthusiastically in their own bizarre language made up of clicks and hisses. The Space Predators, clearly taken by surprise, were slow to react correctly to the attack, with most of them mowed down by cannon fire as soon as they ran out of their barracks. Those who stayed inside their buildings were no safer, as the cannon shells easily penetrated the thin walls of the prefabricated buildings, to then explode inside, projecting deadly shrapnel all around. The two assault sleds parked behind one of the buildings never had a chance to fly out, being hit and destroyed by many shells before any of the Space Predators could jump in them. After a furious but short fight, the attacking Krells found themselves in control of the whole camp, with the few wounded Predators found then mercilessly killed. With the electrified

fence surrounding the corral now inoperable, the Krells which had been held inside started to walk out of it in order to go hug their liberators. Greta however stayed mostly where she had been, unsure what to do. One of the Krells who had been close to her during her days of captivity then motioned to her to follow him, gently nudging her forward when she stayed motionless at first. Finally understanding that the crab didn't mean harm to her, Greta followed the alien creature out of the corral and towards a group of armed crabs who were trying to organize the ex-captives into a manageable group. The first armed crabs to see her immediately tensed up and aimed their cannons at Greta but the crab guiding her then interposed itself at once, shielding her from the cannons, and shouted at the Krell soldiers.

"NO, DON'T SHOOT! SHE IS NOT AN ENEMY! HER RACE IS AN ENEMY OF THE MONSTERS. FOUR OF HER KIND WERE ALSO PRISONERS IN THIS CAMP AND WERE EATEN BY THE MONSTERS."

The sub-commander of the guards charged with organizing the liberated inmates lowered his cannon, imitated by his soldiers, then approached Greta slowly to better examine her.

"You are sure that she is not some kind of collaborator of those monsters, citizen?"

"Absolutely sure, sir. When we saw those flashes of light high in the sky, she became all excited and made us understand via images drawn in the mud that her kind had come to help and were attacking the monsters who were in orbit above us."

"Really? That is something which must be told at once to our commander. Follow me with her: you will act as her translator of sort."

"With pleasure, sir."

Greta, still unsure about what was going to happen to her, nonetheless followed the giant crab who had covered for her, with the armed crabs around her taking a few steps back at her passage, still visibly suspicious of her. Her group finally stopped in front of a giant crab conversing with three other crabs. That conversation stopped the moment she was noticed by that group. The sub-commander bowed in respect to his commander before speaking to him.

"Sir, this alien being was detained in this camp alongside our citizens and I was told that four other aliens of her race who were prisoners here were eventually eaten by the monsters. She is reported as saying that the flashes we saw in the night sky were

ships of her race attacking and destroying the spaceships of the monsters. Apparently, we are not the only ones to be enemies of the monsters, sir.”

Reshan looked down with intense interest at Greta Bjornsson, noting her dirty, disheveled appearance and her fearful expression.

“Very interesting! Does she speak our language?”

“No, sir! I am told that she communicated by drawing pictures on the mud. One of the citizens who saw her drawings is at my left side, sir.”

“So, the monsters are not the only ones able to travel through Space. This could complicate a lot the future of our race. Let’s hope that her race will prove to be a friendly one towards us.”

The Krell who had vouched for Greta then spoke up while bowing to Reshan.

“Distinguished sire, I saw this woman and her four companions when they were put inside our compound by the monsters. They were at first afraid of us, something that is understandable if that was the first time they saw members of our race, but quickly grew reassured and became friendly after we showed no hostility towards them. They all behaved correctly while being held in our corral. They also showed true fear and hatred towards the monsters who eventually ate them. In my humble opinion, this person’s race could become a precious ally for us, distinguished sire.”

“Thank you for your advice, Citizen. I will certainly take it into consideration and will pass it on to the King once I will see him next. We now have to organize the evacuation of this camp, so that we could bring you and your companions of misfortune to the safety of the ocean’s bottom.”

“Uh, I believe that this being is not able to breathe under water, distinguished sire. I am a trained healer and I noticed that this ‘Human’, as she calls herself, can only breathe air. She will probably...”

The Krell was then interrupted by loud cracks similar to those caused by lightning. Turning around towards the direction those cracks had come, the Krells then saw a series of impossibly straight lines of intense blue light stab the sky from above, striking at something over the horizon. Greta, who recognized at once what those lines of blue light were, shouted out in excitement and joy while jumping up and down.

“MY PEOPLE ARE COMING! THEY CAME TO KILL THOSE DAMN PREDATORS!”

While Reshan didn’t understand her words, her reaction to seeing the blue beams of light was easy enough to interpret and he commented it to his subalterns around him.

“Those new aliens seem to have some pretty advanced and powerful weapons. Let’s hope that they will indeed prove to be friendly with us.”

“But how will we communicate with them if and when they will show up in person, sir?” asked a sub-commander. “You just heard how different to our language their language is. I am not even sure that they would be capable of vocalizing the sounds we use, sir.”

“Hum, a fair point, I must say. We...”

A white shape appeared in the night sky and very quickly grew to an enormous flying ship as it approached the camp, interrupting Reshan and making all the Krells twist their heads to look at it. On her part, Greta shouted again in triumph.

“MY PEOPLE ARE HERE NOW!”

Seeing many of his soldiers starting to raise their cannons to aim it at the incoming flying ship, Reshan urgently shouted an order to them.

“HOLD YOUR FIRE! NOBODY IS TO SHOOT AT THAT SHIP UNLESS I SAY SO!”

Reshan then anxiously watched as the white ship, shaped like an egg and with four big tubes around its hull, slowed down and came to a hover some 200 meters above the camp. It then stayed there, immobile and silent, for a couple of minutes, making Reshan wonder about its intentions. A single small dot then jumped out of it through some kind of door or ramp at its back and started falling down towards the ground. Reshan had to repeat his order to hold fire as the dot grew to a being similar to Greta. After free-falling most of the way, the being then slowed down its descent by some means that was not evident to Reshan, to finally touch down on the ground in a smooth landing, some twenty meters from the group of Krells. Reshan had time to examine the newcomer for a second before it started walking calmly towards him, his group and Greta. It wore what looked like some kind of dark grey military uniform, along with a sort of complicated helmet, and carried a large weapon slung across its back. The alien finally stopped four meters in front of Reshan and bowed in salute to him while speaking in a language he didn’t understand.

“Thank you for helping our compatriot, sir. I will now bring her back to her home.”

The security android then walked to Greta and handed her an anti-gravity vest.

"Here, Miss Bjornsson: put this on and I will then bring you up to my ship. Do you know if there are other members of your ship's crew here, or somewhere else on this planet?"

"They are all dead. I am the only survivor from the GOLDEN NUGGET. Six of them were killed when our ship was attacked by the Space Predators, while four others were brought here with me as captives before being selected and then eaten by those Predator monsters."

"And what about your ship?"

"It was completely destroyed after its boarding, which happened on the first moon of this planet as we were prospecting it. Thank you for coming to rescue me."

"We only did our duty, miss. We regret not being able to come more quickly but we had to search through many star systems before finding out that the Predators came to HIP 78288. We will fly up as soon as you are ready."

"Give me a second here to put on this vest... I am ready now. Just let me thank those people first."

"No problem, Miss Bjornsson."

Turning first to face Reshan, Greta then bowed to him the way the other crabs had done.

"Thank you for freeing us, sir. Your soldiers are brave ones indeed."

Next, she faced the Krell who had vouched for her and took two steps towards him before gently caressing one of its hands.

"Thank you for protecting me, my friend. I will always remember you."

Greta then walked back to the side of the security android, who took hold of the handle on the back of her anti-gravity vest.

"You may power your vest now, miss."

Greta, who had used such vests before during her prospection work, did that and nodded her head.

"I am ready."

The android, still holding Greta's vest, then started ascending silently with her, watched by the fascinated Krells.

"By the Lords of the Sea! This would be a very useful thing to have for us indeed." said Reshan as he watched the pair of aliens fly up to the ship hovering above his head. Once the pair was inside, the ship then silently accelerated away and up, soon disappearing into the night sky. Reshan then returned his attention to the ground and looked at his sub-commanders.

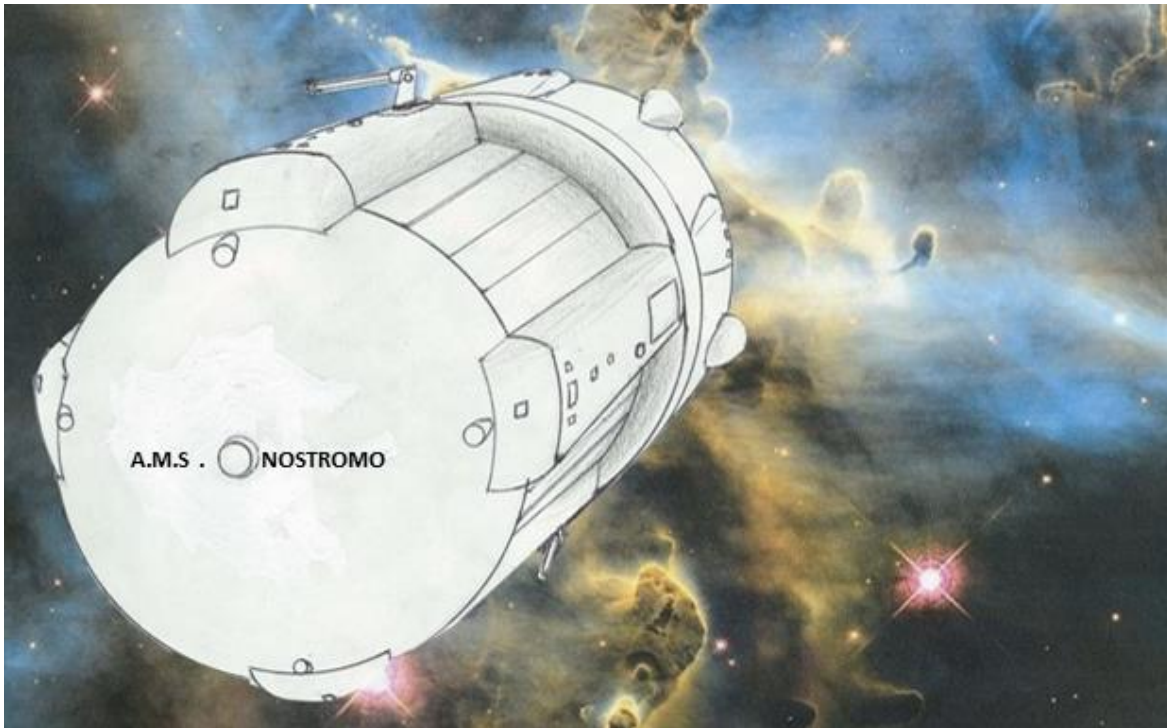
“Well, I believe that it is time for us to guide our citizens to the safety of our oceans. Form them into a double column and escort them towards the river’s shore.”

On the heavy starfighter JUGGERNAUT, which acted as the flagship of the rescue force of eleven heavy starfighters, Jehanne de Domrémy received a message from the starfighter which had rescued Greta Bjornsson and then faced Tina Forster, who was in overall command of the rescue force.

“Miss Greta Bjornsson is now safely aboard the WAR HAMMER, Tina. She confirmed to us that she is the only survivor from the GOLDEN NUGGET. Six of her companions were killed when the Predators attacked their ship while they were prospecting at the surface of the first moon of this planet, while four more were later eaten by the Predators. What are your orders now?”

“We first exterminate every Space Predator we can find on this planet and in the rest of this system. Then, we will check on the wreck of the GOLDEN NUGGET, in order to remove its systems and data of high sensitivity, especially its Koomak Drive. Finally, we will take our poor SHOOTING STAR in tow and return to the Solar System. By the way, I am happy that we have found your husband alive and well, Jehanne. Unfortunately, we lost one good man and two androids in this but we in turn made those damn Space Predators pay a heavy price for their aggression, thanks to the heroism of your husband and of his crew. Your cute little Frida will soon be able to kiss both of her parents.”

CHAPTER 8 – BACK IN BUSINESS



11:05 (Universal Time)

Thursday, February 27, 2336

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Drydock Number One, Avalon Space Yards

Low Earth Orbit, Solar System

While keeping an external appearance of calm, Tina felt a growing excitement as her bridge crew was preparing their ship to finally leave Drydock Number One after nearly four months of intensive repairs. Once out and back in Space, she would be free at last to resume the activity the NOSTROMO had been mostly built for: the carrying of people and things around the stars. If there was something the recent search and rescue mission her starfighters had conducted had plainly demonstrated, it was that Humanity still knew very little about the Universe, even within the tiny area of Space that it presently occupied. It had proved that life could be found everywhere, and this in a nearly infinite number of forms. It had also revealed another technological civilization, that of the Krells of HIP 78288d, which existed within a relatively small distance from Earth. Unfortunately, it had proved as well that the zone of activity in which the Space

Predators operated was much wider than had been expected only recently. Humanity thus had to stay ever more vigilant in order to defend against that monstrous menace.

"All systems are green, Tina. We are ready to leave the drydock." said her navigator and unofficial executive officer, Dana Durning.

"Excellent! Frida, ask the drydock's control center to release and withdraw their mooring clamps."

"Aye!" replied Frida Skarsgard, the 46-year-old redhead who was the pilot of the NOSTROMO. She spoke again to Tina after less than a minute. "Mooring clamps released and retracting now."

"Ask for them to open the doors of the drydock and for permission for us to leave the drydock."

After another two minutes, Frida announced that the huge armored doors of the drydock were now opened, making Tina nod her head once.

"Start flying out of the drydock...and please don't put a dent on our new front bumper while doing so, Frida."

Frida, who had been piloting the NOSTROMO for nearly seven years now and had also piloted its predecessor, the KOSTROMA, during a period of thirteen years, twisted her head to grin to Tina, whose command chair was behind and slightly above her pilot's station.

"Don't we have a collision insurance for our ship, Tina?"

"Yes, but guess who is paying the premiums for that insurance, Frida."

The rest of the bridge crew had a chuckle at that exchange before becoming serious again: moving around a mass of over twelve million tons was no inconsequential matter. With Tina then watching like a hawk, Frida slowly and smoothly moved the NOSTROMO out of the drydock stern first. Tina felt elation when her ship was completely out of the gigantic Space yards and into the void of Space.

"Haa! I love the smell of vacuum in the morning."

Her bridge crew gave her funny looks then: Tina had the habit of making cheesy quotes from some obscure ancient films which most people had never heard about before. Tina then spoke again, giving more orders.

"Frida, fly us to a position some twenty kilometers off the exit airlocks of the spaceyards' large craft hangars, so that our heavy starfighters, shuttles and cargo cranes can get back on our ship. Once they will be all in, we will go park in the nearest

available spot near the Las Americas orbital terminal, where we will wait for our first customers to ask for our services. Dana, while Frida does that, let's go to my day cabin: I want to discuss something in private with you."

On hearing that, Dana Durning painted a faked horrified expression on her face and 'whispered' quite loudly to Frida Skarsgard.

"Shit! She probably wants to fire me."

The other bridge crewmembers on duty had a chuckle on that as Dana rose from her seat to follow Tina down to a sub-level under the two top bridge platforms, where Tina's day cabin was situated. Climbing down the steep stairs behind Tina, Dana then followed her inside the captain's day cabin, which Tina used when she needed to be close to her bridge command chair while officially off duty. Once both were inside the small cabin, Tina closed the door and shook an index at her second-in-command while smiling to her.

"No, I don't want to fire you, Dana: you are too precious to me as my executive officer for me to ever do that. What I want to talk with you is about a personnel matter. Greta Bjornsson, the sole survivor from the crew of the GOLDEN NUGGET, has now worked for us as a sensors operator for a bit less than a month. How would you rate her performance to date?"

"She is a competent sensors operator, although she doesn't have many years of experience in that specialty compared to our own long-serving operators."

"And what about her psychological state? She after all lived through a rather horrifying experience, being captured, then tortured and held prisoner by the Space Predators and seeing her crew mates killed and eaten by those monsters."

"She was indeed quite emotionally disturbed during her first weeks after being freed by us, which was quite understandable. However, she has since recovered fairly well with the help of our psychologists and trauma specialists. That we offered her a stable job on our ship has also helped her find back her balance. In truth, Captain Stanhouse didn't have a very good reputation around the Space prospecting business and poor Greta was unfairly brushed away as an ex-crewmember of the GOLDEN NUGGET when she tried to find another job on Providence, the home port of her old ship. I believe that she will be happy with us and I can vouch for her professional competence."

"Good! There was something else concerning her that I believe in which we could help her and the families of her dead crewmates. As you know well, ship insurers in the Spacers' League don't cover losses caused by war acts. The same goes for life

insurance companies. Thus, they all refused to pay the claims by the families of the GOLDEN NUGGET crewmembers and those families, along with Greta Bjornsson, now find themselves high and dry, with their only remaining incomes being whatever government pensions and social assistance programs they may qualify for. Greta and her crewmates had gambled big on the possible finds to be made during their prospecting expedition to fill their bank accounts, which were getting quite empty then. It appears that Stanhouse had been a rather poor commercial manager of his prospecting enterprise, on top of being a lousy ship captain, and, as a result, had accumulated some serious debts and was on the verge of having his ship repossessed by his creditors. Those same creditors are now asking Captain Stanhouse's family and that of his associate and ship pilot for reimbursement of the debts owed. Stanhouse may have been a greedy idiot but his family doesn't deserve to be pursued into bankruptcy because of his failings. I have thus paid off Stanhouse's debts two days ago and also offered to the families of his ship's crew to come and live and work on the NOSTROMO. To date, five out of six of the families of the married crewmembers have accepted my offer, while I am still waiting for an answer from the remaining family."

"Tina, you are again proving to be the compassionate and generous woman I have known for years. I will make sure that suitable apartments are reserved for those families and will review the present list of job positions still available aboard our ship."

"Excellent! The last point about Greta Bjornsson and the families of her dead crewmates concerns what they found during their expedition. Technically, because Stanhouse filled a nearly fraudulent and incomplete flight plan for his prospecting expedition and ignored the warnings from the Navy about the threat caused by the Space Predators, any claim of first finder by him concerning the systems he visited would have been denied by the Spacers League Space Registrar's Office. As the Coroneae Borealis Constellation is part of the quadrant of prime responsibility of my corporation, all those systems we surveyed during the course of our search and rescue operation will now most probably be considered officially as New Haven Corporation property, except for the HIP 78288 system, which has been declared off-limits to all outside exploitation or occupation, due to the presence of a local sentient race, in this case the Krells of the third planet of the system."

"Wow! From what we now know about these systems, this would represent a staggering fortune in terms of resources exploitation and real estate value. You could easily become a multi-billionaire with these new systems, Tina."

“Which is the reason why Stanhouse took so many stupid risks: he could only see the fortune he could gain by finding some valuable star systems. Now, he and nearly all the members of his crew are dead and their families are stuck with the debts he left behind. For me to get obscenely rich by being awarded those new systems by the Space Registrar’s Office, while not giving a cent to the families and to the sole survivor of the GOLDEN NUGGET’s crew, is simply too unjust in my opinion. While I still don’t know what we will do with those newly surveyed star systems, I firmly intend to cut part of the future revenues from those systems and give it to Greta Bjornsson and to the families of the dead crewmembers.”

Dana Durning stared silently at Tina for a second before speaking softly.

“Tina, you have to be the most decent person I ever met in my life. In earlier centuries, you would have been called a saint.”

“Me, a saint? Some around the Spacers League and on Earth would disagree with your assessment of me.”

“Screw them!” was the firm reply from Dana.

CHAPTER 9 – SPACE POLITICS

09:07 (Universal Time)

Thursday, March 5, 2336

High Council of the Spacers League chamber

Government complex, city of New Dawn

Planet of Providence, Alpha Centauri B System

4.36 light-years from Earth



When Tina took the seat reserved for her at the conference table of the High Council's chamber, she found that all of the 25 other members of the High Council were present, something fairly rare, as there were many legitimate reasons for members of the High Council to miss the monthly meeting of the governing body. She knew at once why everybody was here when all eyes went to her as she sat down. This was most probably due to the latest encounter with the Space Predators in the HIP 78288, where her heavy starfighters had done a superlative job. Once sitting, she pulled a thumb drive from a pocket of her female suit's jacket and plugged it into the computer terminal of her table position, then downloaded a number of data files she meant to show to the other members during the meeting. The recently elected new chairperson of the High Council, Jeanne Mercier, who previously had been the Minister of Health and Social Affairs, banged her gavel three times once she saw that Tina was ready.

"This meeting of the High Council is now open. Thank you all for coming so diligently, as we indeed have much to discuss about. We will start with a presentation by CEO Tina Forster, of the New Haven Corporation, on the latest encounter with the Space Predator. Misses Forster..."

"Thank you, Madam Chairwoman! Two months ago, our Navy launched a search and rescue mission for a mining prospection ship, the GOLDEN NUGGET, which had gone missing in the general area of the Coronae Borealis Constellation. I said 'general area' because the captain and owner of the GOLDEN NUGGET had filed a vague and, as we found out later, misleading flight plan in order to prevent his competitors from following him and possibly 'steal' newly discovered systems from him. Because of the continued threat from the Space Predators, the Navy used only armed

ships to effect that search. My NOSTROMO, while still under repair then following the Battle for Nordling, was able to use four of its embarked heavy fighters as a contribution to the search for the GOLDEN NUGGET. One of those four heavy fighters, the SHOOTING STAR, ended up encountering a Space Predator invasion flotilla inside the HIP 78288 System, some 464 light-years from Earth. I am now projecting a map of that quadrant, with HIP 78288 designated by a red arrow.”

All the members looked at once to one of the wall display screens fixed to the four walls of the conference room, with Tina resuming her speaking after a couple of seconds.

“I must now remind you that this whole quadrant, past a depth of 200 light-years from Earth, had never been explored or even visited before. There are still so many star systems to explore around our actual occupied area and too few ships available to have done a thorough survey of the deep Space around us, something that the threat from the Space Predators only exacerbated. Now, to return to the SHOOTING STAR and HIP 78288. My starfighter crew detected a total of four Predator asteroid warships and six transport and support asteroid ships around the third planet, which we now know is called ‘Rhiss’, busy invading that planet and slaughtering its inhabitants, a race of giant sentient crabs who call themselves the Krells. Here is a picture of a Krell soldier, armed with an automatic cannon strapped to the top of its carapace. On this other picture, you can see Miss Greta Bjornsson, the last survivor from the crew of the GOLDEN NUGGET, who had just been freed from a Space Predator’s prisoners compound by the Krells.”

Whispered exclamations and comments went around the conference table as the members of the High Council looked at the pictures spread on the wall display screens. Vladimir Gasparov, the CEO of the Sverdlorsk Group and an ex-chairman of the High Council, nodded his head while detailing the Krell soldiers shown on the pictures.

“Those Krells look like serious customers indeed, Tina.”

“They are, Vladimir. Unfortunately for them, their technology is still at about the level of our own late Twentieth Century and, for a number of reasons, they have not yet ventured into Space or even adopted means to fly. The automatic cannons you see strapped to their backs were their heaviest individual weapons and, while able to defeat the individual force shields of Predator soldiers, could not shoot down Predator shuttles and craft. They were basically losing the fight against the Predators and had mostly to find refuge in the seas of Rhiss, since they are amphibious creatures. Only our arrival saved them from systematic extermination at the hands of the Space Predators.”

“So, your starfighters were able to destroy that Predator fleet and rescue those Krells, right?” asked Victor Grubov, the Spacers League’s science minister. Tina shook her head in reply.

“Not exactly, Minister Grubov. The SHOOTING STAR managed in a surprise attack to destroy all the Predator asteroid ships before being hit by laser fire and being seriously damaged. The rest of my squadron of heavy starfighters, alerted by a courier drone sent by the SHOOTING STAR, then arrived in the system and engaged the Predator troops who were ravaging the Krell civilization, landing at the same time 800 of my security androids in order to hunt down and kill any Predator survivor. That was a hard fight, as there had been initially over 140,000 Predator soldiers on the surface of the planet, with all of those refusing to surrender. After six days of fighting, and with the Krells fighting alongside my androids, we finally managed to kill the last Predators on the planet.”

“How many casualties did you suffer in that fight against the Predators, Tina?” asked Agneta Braun, the governor of the planet Vinland and the CEO of the powerful Vesta Corporation. Tina was silent for a second while reminiscing on that subject.

“As I said, our heavy starfighter SHOOTING STAR was hit and heavily damaged, plus had one human crewmember killed and two androids heavily damaged. During the ground fighting on Rhiss, another 76 of my security androids were either completely destroyed or seriously damaged. The damaged ones were rebuilt, while the destroyed ones were not, with their memory now remembered in the Hall of Memories of the NOSTROMO.”

“But, couldn’t you build new replicas of them?”

“I could have but I didn’t, Agneta. My androids decided that it would mean more to them and their lost comrades to be remembered in our Hall of Memories than to be simply rebuilt as brand-new copies. The only exception they would accept would be if a married android had been an adoptive parent of a child, in which case it would be rebuilt to its original image, for the sake of that child’s feelings towards his or her android parent.”

Her declaration seemingly had a significant impact on the other members of the High Council. Anti-android sentiment and propaganda had been widespread around the Spacers League only a few years ago, with that propaganda pushed by the then Chairman of the Spacers League, Paul Stein, a man Tina hated with a passion for his bigotry and hypocrisy. Even today, many still had negative opinions about her androids

and few considered them as fully equal to Humans as sentient beings. That was when Jeanne Mercier decided to drop in on the exchange.

"After Tina reported to me what had happened in the HIP 78288 System, I agreed with her that the system would have to be declared off-limits to all exploitation or colonization, due to the presence of a sentient local race, the Krells, on the third planet. Thus, the only ships allowed in the HIP 78288 from now on will be patrolling warships defending the system against any possible return by the Space Predators, plus any diplomatic ship we would decide to send to visit the Krells, who by the way were very thankful for our intervention, even though we still can't understand each other."

"Couldn't we send a language specialist team there in order to record and translate the Krell language?" asked Lars Nisstrom, the minister of external affairs.

"We are seriously thinking about doing just that, Lars." replied Mercier. "In fact, would any of you oppose sending such a linguist team to Rhiss? No? Then I will have a team organized and sent out soon as part of a diplomatic mission. Next on the agenda is the status of the new worlds found by Tina's search teams. Apart from the HIP 78288 System we just spoke about, four more systems of interest were found during that search and rescue mission. Two of those systems, Epsilon Coroneae Borealis and XO-1, were found to contain planets with breathable atmospheres and temperate temperatures, while two other systems, ADS 9731 and HD 138525, have valuable and exploitable deposits of liquid or frozen hydrocarbons and deposits of mineral ores. While Epsilon Coroneae Borealis and XO-1 harbor primitive types of lifeforms, there are no sentient lifeforms in the four systems. Tina, you may display the tables of basic data and finds concerning those four systems."

The members of the High Council scrutinized at once the display screens, intense interest evident in their expressions. The exploitation and use of Space resources and estate had in fact been the main reasons for the creation of the Spacers League in 2315, during the war of independence against the then system-wide government of the Earth Federation. The first to comment on the data was the CEO of the Pallas Mining Industries corporation, Michael Kendrick.

"These four systems are all very interesting, each for their own reasons, but my corporation presently has its hands full with developing and exploiting the worlds it already has."

“The same here.” added Carlos Dominguez, of the Saturn Corporation. “Right now, all my resources are being used to rebuild Nordland and repair the damage the Space Predators did during their attempted invasion.”

It soon became evident to Jeanne Mercier that all the corporation heads were in pretty much the same boat, still developing the worlds they already had, which still had relatively small populations, thus having little need for more planets to be colonized or exploited. She then looked at Tina, who had been listening with a neutral expression to the responses by the other corporation heads.

“Do you have any plans of your own concerning those four systems, which you now legally own, Tina?”

“Not definitive ones, Madam Chairwoman. I wanted first to hear what my corporate colleagues had to say about those systems. My own corporation is a small one, with a population base of still less than 300,000 inhabitants and an economy based mostly on agriculture and food production. I myself couldn't properly exploit those four new systems, due to my own limited resources. However, leaving those systems to go to waste, especially in the case of Epsilon Coronae Borealis Ad and XO-1c, would truly be a crying shame. I thus propose the following to this High Council: while I will keep ownership of all four systems, I am ready and willing to lease their use against very moderate fees to those interested in exploiting them. Since we of the Spacers League have at the moment plenty of livable prime estate for our still relatively small populations, I would like to offer the use on a leasing basis of XO-1, whose second planet is a prime colonization world, to the Earth's ASEAN⁶ Federation. As you all well know, the countries of Asia have been suffering from overpopulation, rampant pollution levels and declining natural resources for centuries already. I believe that it is high time for us to help Earth relieve its problems of excess population and lack of resources, by helping those most in need to build a new homeworld for their citizens. In this, South Asia and South-East Asia are the most in need. I would appreciate very much if this council would allow me to offer to the ASEAN the use of at least XO-1c for colonization. As the owner of the system, I would be ready to help defend the system against the Space Predators and would also ensure that the kind of past excesses which ruined our old

⁶ ASEAN: Association of South-East Asian Nations.

Earth would not be repeated. If some of you would be ready to help and support me, both financially and materially, in such a project, then I would be truly grateful for that.” Her request left the other members of the High Council looking at each other and engaging in whispered conversations with their aides. Jeanne Mercier patiently waited as the members weighed and discussed at length Tina’s ideas. However, seeing after three minutes that nobody had yet taken a firm decision, she banged her gavel on the table.

“If the members of this council would now listen, I believe that this subject will need quite a lot of serious discussion in order to get at some concrete decisions. I do however approve personally of the generous offer made by Tina concerning those new worlds and would be ready, like her, to help our brethren on Earth. I thus suggest that we now continue with the other items on our agenda this morning and that we reconvene tomorrow morning to continue the discussion about those four new worlds. That would allow you to engage in private discussions with Tina and to possibly broker some kind of deal between yourselves before tomorrow. Does anyone objects to that? No? Good! We will thus jump to the next item on our agenda: our Navy’s appropriation program.”

At a bit past noon, the meeting was adjourned for the day, having dealt with all the items on its agenda. As Tina got ready to go for lunch, Toru Tomonaga and Agneta Braun, respectively CEOs of the Ceres Consortium and of the Vesta Corporation, approached her, with Tomonaga smiling to Tina.

“Would you mind if we go lunch with you, Tina? We would like to discuss with you the use of those new star systems.”

“By all means, my friends. I know a nice little Indian restaurant nearby, where they have private boots for dinners. Would that do?”

“That sounds fine to me, Tina.” replied Tomonaga. “What about you, Agneta?”

“I like Indian cuisine. Let’s go!”

“Then, follow me. The ‘Taj Mahal’ restaurant is only a block away from the government tower.”

As they walked out of the secure conference room, Tomonaga noticed that a tall brunette dressed in a female business suit started following them from only a couple of meters behind their group. He discretely pointed her to Tina while whispering to her.

“Do you know that woman, Tina?”

"Of course I do, Toru! She's my designated bodyguard for this visit to Providence, Security Officer Stacy Keibler."

"Uh, I don't mean to be sexist but why a woman as your bodyguard instead of a man?"

"Because a male bodyguard wouldn't be able to go inspect a female washroom before I could use it without creating a raucous, Toru." answered a smiling Tina, causing Tomonaga to make a face that drew a chuckle from Agneta.

"That's a practical argument indeed, Tina. She does look quite strong and fit. Is she armed?"

"Stacy has a dual light disintegrator/stun pistol at her belt, under her opened jacket. However, even when unarmed, she would still be very dangerous to any attacker. She is an expert in martial arts and unarmed combat and is extremely fast and strong."

Those last words made Tomonaga look critically at the brunette, who stood a good 180 centimeters and appeared very athletic.

"Wait! Is she an android?"

"Yes, she is, Toru." replied Tina in a low voice. "As one of my security androids, she can do things that no human bodyguard could do for my protection: she can fly by herself and has an integrated protective force field, plus hides a few more surprises for any attacker. Unfortunately, there are still a few haters and nut cases around the Spacers League who are accusing me of a number of things, one of which is the allegation that I built an android force in order to eventually conduct a coup and take power in Providence."

"And people really believe such nonsense, Tina?" asked Agneta Braun, making Tina make a bitter smirk.

"To quote an old movie from the early 21st Century, 'never underestimate the predictability of stupidity'. We may have advanced tremendously in terms of science and technology during the last few centuries but Humans are still the same beasts as 500 years ago."

To that, Agneta could only agree with Tina as their group entered an elevator cabin to go down to street level.

Once out of the building and onto the plaza facing the government tower, Tina walked through the wide-open space and entered a pedestrian street lined with

commerces of various ilk. Like most open-air Spacers League cities, which had all been built less than twenty years ago, New Dawn lacked the dense network of crisscrossing vehicular streets and their car parking spots which ate so much space in the old cities of Earth. Much of the inner-city traveling was done either via subterranean public commuting systems, like subways and underground passages and tunnels, or via air vehicles which circulated under a centralized automated traffic control system and landed and parked on rooftops. That in turn allowed for the grounds of those cities to be greener, with an abundance of parks and trees planted along pedestrian streets, and to save the space eaten in Earth cities by hundreds of square kilometers of asphalt roads and parking lots. A well-furnished network of automated flying taxis was more than sufficient to provide quick, on-demand individual or group transportation, both within and between the cities. The age-old bicycle had also made a massive comeback, being a non-polluting, non-invasive and practical mean of individual travel on short intra-city distances. The days of needing a private vehicle to go around had thus gone away for most of the citizens of the Spacers Leagues now living outside of the Solar System.

After walking for less than 300 meters, the trio arrived at a small restaurant with a terrace. Tina led Tomonaga and Braun inside a long, narrow dining room furnished with a dozen tables, where a waiter greeted them with a big smile.

“Good day, ladies and gentleman! Would you like a table or would you like to order some takeout food?”

“We will sit down for lunch, mister.” answered Tina, making the waiter bow to her.

“Then, follow me, please.”

The trio was led to one of the tables and then given menus, along with a wine card. Tina let her two companions choose and place their orders, then placed her own order before speaking to them in a low voice, not wanting the other customers present in the dining room to overhear her.

“So, what did you want to propose to me, my friends?”

Tomonaga was the one to answer her first, while also keeping his voice low.

“As you may well know already, any new world intended to be colonized or exploited must first be inspected and certified to be free of harmful pathogens and also to not be overly vulnerable to microbes and viruses us Humans could import. That process is quite involved and normally takes a few months to complete to the

satisfaction of the Spacers League Space Registrar's Office. My corporation has a very competent and effective bio-safety department which has the stamp of approval from the Space Registrar's Office and, since you stated your wish to let the countries of the ASEAN use at least one of your new worlds, I would be most happy to offer to you for free the use of my bio-safety inspection department. Once those new worlds will be officially certified as safe for Human occupation, then I would like to enter into a partnership with you in order to support and facilitate the eventual emigration of ASEAN citizens to your new worlds. I already have extensive contacts and an excellent rapport with ASEAN governments, since most of the immigration to my own worlds of New Polynesia and Atlantis came from Asian countries."

"On my side," added Agneta Braun, "I would also like to help you by lending you the assistance of my geological survey teams in order to properly assess the mineral resources available in your new worlds. A detailed mineral survey could go a long way to attract to you potential mining tenants and to convince ASEAN governments that it would be economically worthwhile to let their citizens emigrate to your worlds. To be totally frank, my own corporation could use as well new sources of metal ore: right now, we have colonized two planets but their own mineral resources are rather limited. If I understood well the preliminary data you presented on your four new systems, HD 138525 is a very promising source of metal ores, while your ADS 9731 appears to be a treasure trove of hydrocarbons."

"My consortium is also a bit limited in terms of minerals and hydrocarbons needed to supply my two colonization worlds." said Tomonaga, jumping back in. Tina, most happy at their offers of help, then took a quick decision.

"Thank you for your offers of support, my friends. I happily accept your help to survey and certify my four new worlds. In return, once the Spacers League will have approved those worlds for colonization and exploitation, I will grant to both of you the right to exploit under lease the mineral and hydrocarbon resources in those systems. I won't ask for actual monthly or yearly rent payments from you and will only ask from you two percent of the profits you will make on product extraction and sale. That way, you will be able to install and equip your production facilities for free and then will have to pay rent only once you will have started the production and sale of those resources."

Tomonaga and Braun exchanged happy grins on hearing Tina's offer, as the costs of the initial installation phase of any industrial base were always quite heavy. To not having to pay rent on the estate at the same time would make it a lot easier financially for their

corporations to finance such important projects. Tomonaga then extended his right hand across the table, offering it to Tina.

“Deal! Let’s shake on this!”

Agneta Braun also extended her hand, all smile.

“Thanks for your generosity, Tina. This may allow millions of people on Earth to soon emigrate to economically viable lives on pristine new home worlds.”

“And it may give a much-needed space to breathe easier to our poor Mother Earth.”

CHAPTER 10 – TO SAVE AN ENEMY?



Space Predator asteroid warship

02:51 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, January 12, 2337

Spacers League's battle station MJOLNIR

High orbit above planet Voronkia (Gliese 581c)

Gliese 581 System, 20.5 light-years from Earth

Commander Orlando Reyes was sleeping soundly in his cabin when the sudden beeping of the intercom unit sitting on his bedstand woke him up. Still groggy and half-asleep, he pushed the 'open link' button and looked at the image of his night watch officer, Lieutenant Bini Zendaya, on the viewing screen of the intercom.

"Yes, Bini?"

"Sir, one of our surveillance satellites orbiting around Voronkia has just signaled the arrival in the system of a large fleet of ships which emerged from the direction of the Southeastern Quadrant. Nineteen ships have been detected but more are emerging as we speak."

A sudden rush of adrenaline hit Reyes on hearing Zendaya and he quickly sat up in bed while still looking at his intercom unit.

"Do we have a tentative identification for those ships?"

"We are still analyzing the images and data retransmitted by our satellites but, due to their size and shapes, my bet is that they are Space Predator warships, sir."

Now fully awake, Reyes nodded once and spoke in an urgent tone.

"I'm going to go to the bridge at once. In the meantime, put the station on combat alert and prepare to send a courier drone to the Navy headquarters on Providence."

"Yes sir!"

Closing the intercom link, Reyes then got out of bed and hurried to his clothes locker to put his uniform on. Once he was fully dressed, he hesitated for a short moment before grabbing his gun belt and buckling it on, then checked that his disintegrator pistol had a fully charged power cell in it. Now ready to leave his cabin, he grabbed in passing the large, rigid suitcase which contained his personal spacesuit and walked out. With his cabin being on the same level than the bridge and command center of his battle station, he took less than two minutes before arriving at the command center. His mind was working furiously as he walked at a hurried pace, thinking about the actual situation and reviewing the combat capabilities of his battle station when pitted against Space Predator warships. The battle station MJOLNIR had been built out of the emptied shell of a M-Class large asteroid in 2316, some 21 years ago, during the Jovian Uprising. It had then been used to destroy the network of heavily armored giant orbital defense stations turning around Earth and defending the government of the now-defunct Earth Federation. MJOLNIR had then proved to be well up to the task, destroying all 26 orbital stations with rocket-propelled large meteorites which delivered a devastating kinetic energy blow against the orbital stations. MJOLNIR itself had easily withstood the heavy laser fire from the orbital stations, the thick nickel-iron shell of the 1,900 meter-diameter converted asteroid absorbing those laser beams without any true damage. Put in reserve after the war, the battle station had then been recalled into service in 2320 and, now equipped with a Koomak Drive interstellar propulsion system, had been sent to its present orbit around Gliese 581c, also known as Voronkia, some 20.5 light-years from Earth. It had been orbiting the large planet ever since, keeping watch over its troublemaking inhabitants, the Vorlaks, who had been forcibly quarantined to the surface of their planet for having attacked another sentient race, the Hoshis, who lived on the moon of Voronkia. The Vorlaks had aggravated their case by trying to destroy the Hoshis by launching a massive attack with nuclear-tipped missiles against their moon. Thankfully, the mighty KOSTROMA, which had been at the time searching for two lost Koorivar refugee ships, had been present in the system and had defended the Hoshis against the Vorlaks, a cruel race that was butchering Hoshi prisoners for their meat. In a

way, the Vorlaks mirrored to a point the Space Predators, who also butchered other sentient beings for their meat and who showed no regards for other races. However, the difference in the technological levels of the Vorlaks and of the Space Predators was huge. While the Vorlaks' Space travel technology was still quite primitive, being about equal to that of Earth's late 21st Century, that of the Space Predators, who possessed advanced gravity propulsion systems and interstellar drives, was about equal to that of the present Spacers League and even surpassed it in certain domains, like with their matter tele-transportation techniques. While the MJOLNIR had received a few modifications in the last few years to help it face a Space Predator attack, Reyes fully realized that, against a large Predator fleet, his 21-year-old battle station would be at a severe disadvantage.

When Reyes entered the command center, he found there a steadily growing crew frantically manning their work stations and exchanging urgent clips of information between them. Seeing Lieutenant Bini Zendaya standing next to the large Space visualization sphere of the center, Reyes walked quickly to the tall African woman, who came to attention on seeing him.

"Sir, the identification of those arriving ships is confirmed: they are definitely Space Predator ships. Right now, we have counted 26 warships and fifteen support ships, with more ships still arriving at intervals in the system."

Reyes couldn't help hesitate and pale on hearing those numbers.

"Twenty-six warships and fifteen support ships? This is a full-fledge invasion fleet, similar to that which had attacked Nordland. As for their probable goal, it is too easy to figure out: the Space Predators want meat, lots of meat. The question is: are they coming only for the Vorlaks ore are they going to go after the Hoshis as well?"

"Any source of meat they will encounter will be fine for those monsters, sir." replied Zendaya. "If they have demonstrated something, it is that they will eat any race other than their own."

"True! I am going to compose a short alert message for our courier drone. Our Navy must be warned about that fleet. Prepare the station for battle in the meantime...and don't forget to activate our anti-teleportation scramblers."

"Yes sir!"

Letting Bini Zendaya giving orders around to bring the station to full combat readiness, Orlando Reyes went to a communications station and started typing a short but concise message addressed to Navy Headquarters on Providence. After a short reflection, he added a last sentence, then attached to his message a data file containing the sensors readings from his surveillance satellites concerning the incoming Predator fleet. Electronically loading his message aboard one of the courier drones held inside his battle station, Reyes then pressed a button, launching that drone into Space and on its way to the Alpha Centauri System and Providence. He felt much better once he saw that the courier drone had safely jumped away, and this before the Predator ships could possibly detect it. Going back to the main sensors display sphere, Orlando called to his side his four most senior officers present in the command center and spoke to them in a somber voice.

"Alright, our alert message has now left for Providence on our courier drone. Before the Predator fleet can get close enough to detect our station, I intend for us to do a micro-jump and go take an orbit behind the moon Hyanesu, where we will wait and watch while staying in electronic silence mode. Remember that the primary mission of this battle station was to protect the Hoshis of Hyanesu from the Vorlaks and to enforce our Space quarantine against those same Vorlaks. Hopefully, the incoming Space Predators will believe us to be a simple asteroid captured by gravity and orbiting Hyanesu. We will then wait for the arrival of reinforcements in the system while standing ready to defend Hyanesu if any Predator warship approaches it. Lieutenant Zendaya, contact at once our embassy on Hyanesu and warn it to immediately stop all electronic emissions and shut off all external lights, so as not to attract the Predators' attention on the moon."

"What about our marine biology study team on Oceana, sir? They should also be warned about that approaching enemy fleet." replied the young woman, referring to the ocean planet Gliese 581d, the third planet in the system.

"Right!" agreed at once Reyes. "Send at once a message to Oceana and tell them to go into total electronic silence and take shelter. If they could take refuge in the ocean's depths, the better: the episode about the attempted invasion of HIP 78288 showed us that the Predators have only a limited capacity for underwater operations. To all of you, make sure that everyone aboard has a disintegrator weapon with them at all times and to be ready to repel Predator boarders in the event that our scramblers fail to prevent the monsters' teleportation beams from working."

“Uh, and the Vorlaks in all this, sir?” asked young Ensign Jiro Kunitomo, attracting a pinched smile from Reyes.

“We can’t be in two places at the same time and our priority is to protect the Hoshis. The Vorlaks will be on their own, at least until our fleet can show up. Frankly, I can’t think of two races which deserve each other better than the Predators and the Vorlaks.”

03:29 (Universal Time) / 11:42 (Providence Time)

Spacers League Navy Headquarters

City of New Dawn, Providence, Alpha Centauri B System

Admiral Jiro Yamashiro felt a growing frustration as he reviewed the status of his operational ships: most of them could not be spared to go help the battle station MJOLNIR, for the good reason that they were often the only major warships available to defend the systems in which they were presently. Despite great efforts and expenses spent in enlarging his combat fleet, Yamashiro still had less than 25 cruisers or battleships in his fleet’s inventory. Building a major warship took years, while forming new crews took at least as long. He shook his head slowly as he looked at his ship’s status board.

“Only two battleships and four battlecruisers available to oppose at least 26 Space Predator warships and fifteen support ships. With such numerical inferiority on our side, any battle in the Gliese 581 is bound to finish in a disaster for us.”

“But, sir...” protested his duty operations officer, Commodore Henry Perkins, “a lone heavy starfighter from the NOSTROMO managed to destroy by itself four Predator warships and a number of Predator support ships in the HIP 78288 System a year ago. That indicated that, when using our disintegrator cannons and our jump-capable missiles, we can overcome Predator ships, which are still armed solely with high-power lasers.”

Yamashiro threw a skeptical look at Perkins as he replied to him.

“Yes, but that lone heavy starfighter benefited from complete surprise and was a difficult target for the Predators’ lasers, due to its agility, speed and small size in comparison to its firepower. Even then, that starfighter ended up being hit within seconds, sustaining serious damage. Our main units will have a hard time to gain the kind of surprise that this starfighter enjoyed at that time.”

"Then, what about sending whole squadrons of heavy starfighters along with our six heavy units? They could conduct multiple flank attacks and harass the enemy fleet while our major warships hold the line off Hyanesu. If handled well, they could cause severe damage to the Predators with long-range missile salvos."

"Hum, you're right, Commodore Perkins. How many MAMBA-Class heavy starfighters could we spare to go to the Gliese 581 System?"

Perkins took a few seconds to review the Navy's status board before answering Yamashiro."

"We could gather quickly and send a total of 39 heavy starfighters, Admiral."

"Then, alert them and assemble them here at once. Vice-Admiral Makarov, on the battleship VICTORY, will lead our rescue force to the Gliese 581 System. Do you know where the A.M.S. NOSTROMO is presently? Having it as well for this coming battle would make me feel a lot better."

"Uh, it is presently in the XO-1 System, some 552 light-years away, but I doubt that it will be available for combat operations today, sir: it was carrying over 26,000 citizens from Earth's ASEAN countries, plus millions of tons of prefabricated structures and supplies, in order to start the populating of planet XO-1c, which is now known as Asiana. There is as well a high-level delegation from the ASEAN Federation aboard the NOSTROMO, intent on officially inaugurating that new colony. We can't possibly ask Captain Forster to risk so many civilians still on her ship by ordering her into combat on short notice, sir."

Yamashiro sighed deeply on hearing that.

"Damn! You're right! Still, send a courier drone to at least warn Captain Forster about that Predator fleet in the Gliese 581 System. She needs to know about it, in case that another Predator fleet would show up somewhere else. We still don't know how many ships the Predators have left in their fleet, or even where they are based."

"I will prepare a message for your signature right away, sir."

04:12 (Universal Time)

Executive Apartment Number Three, Executive Deck

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, in low orbit over planet Asiana (XO-1c)

XO-1 System, 536 light-years from Earth

Constellation of Coronae Borealis

Awakened from a deep sleep, Tina Forster activated the video screen of her bedstand intercom unit and saw the head and torso of Renée D'Argenteuil, her senior night watch officer, who also was her weapons officer.

"Yes, Renée?"

"We just received an urgent message from the Admiralty via courier drone: The Space Predators have shown in force in the Gliese 581 System, with a fleet of at least 26 warships and fifteen support ships being reported. The battle station MJOLNIR, on detecting their arrival in the system, retreated to the orbit of Hyanesu and is hiding behind the moon while observing the enemy fleet. The Navy is now assembling a combat fleet to go to the Gliese 581 System."

Tina felt dread on hearing that: the Gliese 581 System, apart from being home to the Vorlaks, a race she couldn't care much about, was also home to the Hoshis of Hyanesu and to the sentient and telepathic marine lifeforms living in the oceans of the aptly named planet Oceana. There were also a number of Koorivars living and working at a resort center on Hyanesu, plus a marine biology research ship plowing the oceans of Oceana.

"Is the Navy telling us to go join the fleet which will go to the Gliese 581 System, Renée?"

"Negative! Admiral Yamashiro stated that, due to the presence aboard our ship of thousands of ASEAN immigrants, he does not expect us to go fight the Space Predators today. His message to us was instead a warning message about the presence of the Predators in the Gliese 581 System."

"Very well, I am going to dress and will be on the bridge in five minutes."

Tina then closed the link on her intercom unit and swung her legs out of her bed, waking up with her movement her husband Michel, who looked at his watch before speaking to her.

"Uh, what's up, Tina?"

"The Space Predators are invading the Gliese 581 System with a large fleet. You better wake up as well: all of our security personnel will have a busy day today." Michel Koniev didn't ask more on hearing that and got out of bed at once to start getting dressed. As he and Tina were putting on their ship interior service uniforms, Michel thought about something.

"The kids... What do we do with them right now?"

"I will let you wake up Misha but let Janet sleep for the moment. Tell Misha to take care of his sister while we are busy."

"Right! Damn! It has been nearly a year since the last time the Predators showed up somewhere? Why the Gliese 581 System?"

"That's an easy question to answer, Michel." replied Tina in a sober tone. "The maps of our star systems the Predators captured on Nordland indicated no major Spacers League presence in that system, but plenty of lifeforms available to be eaten. The truth is that the Predators are starting to be scared of us, after all the stinging defeats we inflicted on them, and I'm not talking only about our ship. The Predators may have huge ships and powerful laser weapons but they don't have either missiles or disintegrator weapons, something that is putting them at a severe disadvantage in any fight against our warships. I believe that the Predators are starting to realize that and are becoming more cautious about who they are attacking. They may be ferocious monsters but they are not stupid, especially in the case of their females, who run their society."

Michel couldn't help wince at those words.

"Ouch! Another barb at us male drones."

That earned him a sarcastic smile from his wife.

"Don't worry, Michel: I have you and the men of my crew in much higher esteem than the female Predators do for their males."

On that, Tina completed her dressing by buckling a pistol belt around her waist, then grabbed the suitcase containing her personalized spacesuit and walked out of their bedroom.

As promised to Renée, Tina was in her bridge complex less than five minutes after being awakened and went directly to her senior watch officer, who was occupying Tina's command chair. The weapons officer got out of the command chair at once on seeing Tina get to the top command platform and then stood next to it as Tina sat down in her command chair.

"Anything new, Renée?"

"Nothing, Tina. I did inform Senior Centurion De Domrémy and our security officer, Ahmed Jibril, about the invasion of Gliese 581, so that they could start prepare for any eventuality."

“Good move! While this ship will definitely stay in orbit of Asiana until all the unloading and disembarking is done, I am resolved to help our fleet chase the Predators from Gliese 581, and this before they could cause major damage there.”

“What do you have in mind, Tina?”

Tina thought for a moment, watched by Renée, before answering her.

“We will send eight of our heavy fighters, along with one command cutter and our fleet of assault shuttles carrying eight centuries of our security androids, to Gliese 581. Has the courier drone from the Admiralty left to go back to Providence already or is it still here?”

“It is still aboard our ship, Tina.”

“Good! I will write a quick response to Admiral Yamashiro. Please refresh my memory about the number of mobile robotic gun systems we have in service and available aboard the NOSTROMO.”

Renée thought for a second before answering. These mobile robotic gun systems, or MRGS in short, were a fairly new addition to their android security force and could be considered the space-going equivalent of the main battle tanks of the 20th and 21st Centuries. Able to fly in both an atmosphere and in Space, as well as roll on the ground or even float or travel underwater, those combat vehicles were armored, had laser ablative prismatic armor and force shields, were armed with a heavy disintegrator cannon pointed via a number of sophisticated sensors, plus had four launch boxes for light surface-to-air and Space missiles armed with matter/anti-matter conversion warheads capable of shooting down spaceships orbiting a planet or moon. The MRGSs also had secondary light disintegrator guns and had the capacity to carry under armor a full squad of security androids. They were controlled by an onboard powerful artificial intelligence computer, yet were quite compact and agile, thus hard to hit. They also incorporated an anti-teleportation scrambling emitter, to help thwart any Space Predator assault. All in all, they were perfect to help defend a planet against any attack by the Space Predators. The first batch of fifty MRGS tanks had gone as a priority to New Haven, to ensure its defense, along with three centuries of security androids assigned in rotation to the colony.

“We presently have in our garages a hundred MRGS, which were due to go down on Asiana in order to provide ground protection for our new colony, along with three of our centuries of security androids and the light infantry regiment provided by the ASEAN.”

Tina debated those numbers in her head for a moment, then took a decision.

“Sixty of those MRGSs, along with our designated three android centuries, will still go down as a defensive ground force for Asiana, to reinforce the First Vietnamese Light Infantry Regiment. The remaining forty MRGSs will accompany the 900 security androids which will go to the Gliese 581 System. They will land on Hyanesu and provide a ground defense force to support the Hoshis, who have little to no modern weapons. With Hyanesu secured on the ground, our eight heavy fighters will then be free to engage the Space Predator warships. We will however have to temporarily divert a number of our cargo shuttles from carrying down on Asiana the supplies and equipment we are transporting for our new colony, so that they could carry our MRGS to Hyanesu. Please alert our flight crews and security personnel to prepare for deployment to Hyanesu while I write a response message for Admiral Yamashiro. Once that message will be done and sent to Providence, I will go talk with Governor Minh Wa Hien and brief her on these developments. We will not sound the general call to battle stations for the time being, in order to avoid some possible panic among our 26,000 passengers, but have our crew discretely prepare for battle, just in case.”

“Got it!” replied Renée, with Tina then leaving for her day cabin in order to write her message to the Admiralty.

04:31 (Universal Time)

Apartment # 569-630, Habitat Ring Complex

A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Pieter Nordlung hesitated for a second before starting to gently shake awake four-and-a-half-year-old Frida. He had debated for a minute with Jehanne about what to do with their adopted daughter while both of them were leaving for the Gliese 581 System and probable combat, to finally arrive at a temporary solution. With a call to Janet Robeson securing her help as a temporary caregiver for Frida, Pieter did feel better about having to leave for combat but still worried about the sadness that news was going to cause to his cute Frida. The toddler girl was slow to wake up and was still quite groggy when Pieter gently took her in his arms and kissed her.

“I am sorry to have to wake you up like this so early, my little angel, but I must soon fly out on a mission.”

“What about Mommy?”

"She also has to go at the same time as me, sweetie."

That last sentence brought an alarmed look on the toddler's face, whose arms tightened at once around Pieter's neck.

"Mommy is going too?"

"Yes, Frida. We however have arranged for Auntie Janet to take care of you while we are gone. I will drop you at her apartment before leaving."

"You're going to go fight the monsters, Daddy?"

"Yes, I am, but I promise that I will be back, and this after giving those monsters a good beating. Let's dress you up now, so we can go to Aunt Janet's apartment."

Pieter's heart nearly broke when Frida started crying in his arms.

"I don't want you and Mommy to go, Daddy."

"I understand, Frida. However, we must go, so that other children like you can stay safe from the monsters."

That seemed to assuage a bit the toddler, who then meekly let Pieter and Jehanne dress her up and prepare a bag of spare clothes and toys for her. Six minutes later, Pieter was leaving the family's apartment with Frida after Jehanne had planted a last kiss on her adopted daughter's cheek.

"I have tons of things to do and prepare and must go now, Frida. Don't worry about me: I will be fine and will return soon. Be nice with Aunt Janet and listen to her."

"I will!" replied Frida in a tiny voice before Pieter, still carrying her in his arms, walked out to go to the centerline core section of the ship. Jehanne was next to leave their apartment but went down to the craft hangars, where her android force was assembling.

04:54 (Universal Time)

Command center of the battle station MJOLNIR

In orbit over the moon Hyanesu, Gliese 581 System

"Sir, the Space Predator fleet is now in orbit around Voronkia. They have found two of our surveillance satellites and have just destroyed them. I expect them to soon find and destroy our two remaining surveillance satellites."

"That was to be expected, Lieutenant Zendaya. Hopefully, they will not deduce from our satellites' presence that a ship was also around."

Orlando Reyes' pious wish was proven wrong some four minutes later, with a sensors operator nearly shouting in alarm.

"Sir, two Predator ships just detached themselves from their fleet and left the orbit of Voronkia: they are now heading our way."

Reyes made a sour smile on hearing that.

"They must be coming to Hyanesu in order to conduct a simple reconnaissance of the moon. If they would have suspected our presence here, they would have sent more than two warships."

"Two Space Predator warships still represent a lot of firepower, sir." said Bini Zendaya, making Reyes nod his head once.

"True! We will thus soon have to show them that we are not exactly naked ourselves. We will open fire with a missile salvo while they are still transiting and not flying directly towards Hyanesu: I don't want large debris from those two ships to impact on the moon, something that could only cause some tremendous damage on the ground. Prepare four missiles with their anti-matter warheads set to maximum power and with a micro-jump interception flight profile. We will fire two missiles at each of those two Predator ships. Load all our other missile launch tubes as well, so we could be ready to fire at the rest of the enemy fleet at the same time as we fire our first four missiles. That heavy starfighter from the NOSTROMO showed in the HIP 78288 System how effective surprise can be when you find yourself outnumbered. Let's welcome those monsters the way they deserve to be."

"Understood, sir."

As Zendaya passed his orders to the weapons officer of the battle station, Reyes mentally evaluated the chances of his battle station in this coming battle. While he had good hopes to be able to destroy quickly those two approaching enemy warships, the outcome against the rest of the Predator fleet was problematic, to say the least. He didn't have heavy disintegrator cannons, contrary to the major units of the Spacers League's Navy, only heavy lasers, missile launchers and rocket-propelled meteorites. The later ones, despite having worked miracles against the old Terran Federation orbital defense stations parked around the Earth, were basically next to useless against Space Predator ships, themselves converted iron-nickel asteroids with very thick shells. As for MJOLNIR's heavy laser batteries, they were no more powerful than the ones possessed by the enemy, thus didn't provide him any advantage in a one-on-one fight and much less in a fight against multiple Predator asteroid ships. He was thus going to have to rely

mostly on his missiles for this battle. Unfortunately, he had a total of only eight missile launch tubes, with a total inventory of 32 missiles in his magazines, less than the number of enemy ships now in the system.

'We are probably going to have to kiss our asses goodbye soon.'

Some four minutes later, with the two Predator ships still approaching Hyanesu, more bad news came on, with a sensors operator giving a warning via the command intercom network.

"Sir, a second Predator fleet is now arriving in orbit around Voronkia."

"How many ships and of what type?" asked Reyes, hiding his shock.

"They are still going around the planet's terminator but I can count already 23 warships, 34 support ships and one gigantic asteroid ship of unknown type. That last ship measures at least 22 kilometers by thirteen kilometers, sir."

Reyes was left speechless for a second on hearing those numbers.

"Coño⁷! That sounds like some sort of carrier or flagship to me. Lieutenant Zendaya, have the four remaining missiles of our first prepared salvo retargeted against that super asteroid ship. It will be our priority target after those two approaching warships."

"Aye, sir!"

Two more minutes and his weapons officer announced that the two approaching Predator ships were now within effective range, to which Reyes replied with a firm order.

"FIRE MISSILES, ALL TUBES! FOUR ON THOSE APPROACHING SHIPS AND FOUR AGAINST THE ENEMY FLAGSHIP."

"FIRING MISSILES NOW!"

Everybody in the command center held their breath as the eight launch tubes of the battle station spat out their heavy missiles, each measuring fourteen meters in length and 1.4 meters in diameter. The missiles then veered on their preprogrammed interception courses and, once clear of the moon's orbit and with the enemy ships directly visible to their own sensors, effected micro-jumps via their Koomak Drive generators, disappearing for a fraction of a second from normal Space before

⁷ Coño: Spanish swear word basically equivalent to 'asshole', used around the Latino-speaking islands of the Caribbeans. Often used the same way Americans would say 'Shit!' when facing a big problem.

reappearing close to their targets, inside the protective force shields of the Predator asteroid ships. The Predators on those ships never had time to react properly before the missiles slammed against the hulls of their three targets, then exploded, with their conversion warheads transmutating tens of kilos of the ships' nickel-iron hulls into anti-matter and causing cataclysmic reactions with the rest of their hull material. With each of the missile warheads detonating with the power of a 150-megaton nuclear bomb, the hulls of the two approaching warships were easily burned through and holed, with the blast waves then penetrating inside the ships, incinerating and eviscerating the machinery and Predator crews of the asteroid warships. Now being nothing more than dead, burned out hulks with bows melted away, those two ships continued on their original heading while stumbling wildly, to eventually pass by Hyanesu and continue towards deep Space. Loud cheers in the command center greeted their destruction. However, Orlando Reyes stayed silent at that time, waiting to see what his four other missiles would do against the giant Predator flagship. His stealth reconnaissance drones placed around Hyanesu then showed him four blinding flashes of light erupting against the hull of the gigantic asteroid flagship, which had taken a low orbit around Voronkia. This time, Reyes shouted his joy along with the men and women of his crew.

"YES! LIEUTENANT ROMANESCU, TARGET THAT BIG FLAGSHIP WITH ALL THE MISSILES OF OUR SECOND SALVO. LET'S FINISH IT!"

"AYE, SIR!"

One minute later, the launch tubes of the MJOLNIR spat again, ejecting eight heavy missiles and sending them on their way towards Voronkia's orbit. Less than thirty seconds after that, eight more blinding flashes of light temporarily hid the silhouette of the Predator giant ship, attracting more cheers inside the command center of the battle station. However, Reyes fully realized that this was only the start of a desperate battle and that he now had only sixteen heavy missiles left in his magazines to face the remaining 47 Predator warships. He thus gave new orders to his weapons officer.

"Lieutenant Romanescu, target only one missile per Predator ship from now on: we will have to make each of our missiles count. Fire our third salvo when ready and concentrate on the warships. TO ALL THE CREW, SEAL YOUR SPACESUITS NOW! MAKE SURE THAT YOU ARE ARMED AND READY TO REPEL BOARDERS."

As Nadia Romanescu worked her fire control command panel, one sensors operator suddenly spoke up, a mix of surprise and confusion in his voice.

“What the... Sir, six nuclear warheads just hit the enemy flagship...on its side facing the planet.”

“WHAT? WHO...” exclaimed Reyes before he understood what had just happened. “The Vorlaks! They had nuclear-tipped long-range missiles before the KOSTROMA hammered them sixteen years ago. They must have rebuilt their nuclear arsenal since and are now defending their planet. Good for them! Let’s use this distraction for the Predators and let’s hit those warships in orbit. Lieutenant Romanescu, fire when ready!”

“Firing missiles now!”

As eight more heavy missiles flew out of their launch tubes, Reyes watched with intensity the reactions of the remaining Predator warships and tried to evaluate the status of their huge flagship, or whatever it had been. With the defensive force shields and laser batteries of the enemy flagship taken out by the twelve missiles from the MJOLNIR, the Vorlak missiles had been able to hit directly the hull of the Predator ship and to explode on impact, causing more destruction inside. Now basically turned into a dead, burned out and radioactive hulk, the Predator flagship started tumbling around in orbit. The crews of the surviving Predator ships, stunned and enraged, took some time to react properly to this catastrophe for their side, giving time to the incoming eight missiles of the third salvo from the MJOLNIR to slam and explode against eight more Predator warships, causing grave damages to each of them. At least five of those Predator warships saw their defensive force shields collapse or shut down, with power to their laser batteries either drastically reduced or cut entirely. As if the Vorlaks had coordinated their fire with that of the MJOLNIR, twelve more surface-to-Space missiles rose from the planet to engage the Predator fleet. Seven of those missiles, fired at intact Predator warships, were either shot down or harmlessly exploded against their force shields. However, the remaining five were able to slam against the hulls of four of the damaged warships which had their force shields down, then exploded with yields of ten megatons each. Finally understanding that Predator ships had some kind of defensive shields, the Vorlak air defense commander apparently ordered his batteries to concentrate their fire on the already damaged Predator warships, this time sending out a full regimental salvo of eighteen missiles.

On the MJOLNIR, Orlando Reyes watched that development with glee and gave another order to Petra Romanescu.

"Lieutenant, fire one missile each at eight additional, still intact targets. Let's give a chance to the Vorlak missiles to get to Predator warships."

"Understood, sir, but they are our last missiles. After that, we will be down to our laser batteries."

"I fully realize that, Lieutenant. Fire when ready!"

"Eight new targets designated... Firing missiles now!"

Just as those eight missiles flew out of the battle station, a sensors operator spoke up.

"Multiple new contacts emerging above us! Distance, 120,000 kilometers. I count 29 new contacts."

"What kind of ships are they?" asked at once Reyes. The operator answered him after a few seconds, her voice now triumphant.

"They're ours, sir! I can now identify eight MAMBA-Class heavy starfighters, one cutter and twenty shuttles."

"They brought shuttles for a battle against a Predator fleet? What were they thinking?"

The answer to Reyes' question came another two seconds later, with a well-known female voice coming on their radio emergency channel.

"Battle station MJOLNIR, this is Captain Tina Forster, aboard the cutter MERCURY. What is your status, over?"

"Thank God for your timely arrival, Captain Forster. We are still intact and fully operational but I have just fired my last missiles and am down to my laser batteries. Be advised that the Vorlaks have started firing nuclear-tipped missiles against the Predator ships in orbit and have succeeded in finishing off a huge sort of carrier or command ship, over."

"Good for them! My shuttles will now go land on Hyanesu, where they will deposit a force of security androids and of MRGSs, while my heavy starfighters will start engaging the Predator warships. You may concentrate on interdicting with your lasers any Predator warship approaching Hyanesu, over."

"Will do, Captain Forster. MJOLNIR, out!"

Reyes switched off his spacesuit's helmet microphone before blowing air out in relief.

"Good old Captain Forster and her NOSTROMO: always in the breach, ready to save your butt. But where the hell is our navy?"

On the heavy starfighter SHOOTING STAR, Pieter Nordlung received a radio message from his squadron commander, Keiko Nomura.

"To all Nova callsigns, fire two missiles per target, proceeding in groups of four targets leading the enemy fleet in order of orbital flight over Voronkia. Our second salvo will be against the tail end of the Predator warships procession. Fire when ready."

"Time to tango, guys and girls." said Pieter to his three flight crew members. "Felix, they're all yours."

His weapons officer, Felix Delgado, simply nodded his head in response while punching commands on his fire control panel, then spoke a short sentence four seconds later.

"Firing missiles now."

Pieter, tense and excited at the same time, watched on as a total of 64 missiles flew out of the eight heavy starfighters of his squadron, then disappeared from normal Space as they effected micro-jumps towards the Space Predator fleet, which was presently busy defending with their laser batteries against a new wave of Vorlak missiles. Less than two seconds later, the leading half of the Predator line of warships disappeared temporarily behind dozens of blinding flashes of light. The voice of Keiko Nomura then came back on the radio.

"Nova callsigns, fire your second missile salvo now!"

Felix Delgado, who had quickly worked out his next targeting solutions while his first missiles were flying away, fired the eight missiles freshly loaded in their launch tubes a mere three seconds after receiving Nomura's order.

"Firing second salvo now."

Again, their missiles squarely hit their targets, either severely damaging or effectively destroying them as fighting ships. Their lack of long-range guided missile armament was biting back the Predators in the ass...again. Then, with most Predator warships either severely damaged, disabled or destroyed, the incoming Vorlak missiles which had survived the Predators laser fire impacted and exploded against the mostly defenseless Predator ships. Pieter then heard a female voice on his squadron's radio frequency: it was that of Tina Forster.

"Nova Squadron, from command cutter: reserve your remaining missiles for any possible third wave of enemy warships. Jump to a position under the enemy fleet and switch to cannon fire in matter converter mode. Destroy the Predator support ships before they can flee: they must be carrying millions of invading troops. We cannot let those troops survive this battle, over."

"Nova Lead, understood. All Nova callsigns, jump to an altitude of 140 kilometers above Voronkia and fire at will on the enemy support ships from below them. Execute!"

"Hey, aren't we going to risk having the Vorlaks shoot at us as well?" asked Lisa Wong in a worried tone. Pieter made a tight smirk then.

"Possibly but, by firing from below those Predator ships, we won't risk seeing them being pushed into the atmosphere by the explosions against their hulls. If that would happen with a number of those big Predator ships, then the planet's surface could be utterly ravaged by fallen ship debris. We are jumping now."

Lisa Wong was tempted to say something like 'who cares about the Vorlaks?' but kept her mouth shut as Pieter effected a micro-jump. When they emerged into Space after a fraction of a second, she saw the blue and brown surface of Voronkia right under them, with the curve of the planet's atmosphere clearly visible and nearly level with their starfighter. Pieter quickly rotated his ship in order to point his four disintegrator cannons up and towards the Predator ships in orbit above them.

"Make sure you switch our cannons to matter conversion mode and fire at will, Felix. Blow those bastards to bits."

"With pleasure, Pieter. Engaging first target now."

Four thick energy beams of intense red color then shot out of their four heavy disintegrator cannons, targeting a damaged Predator support ship. With those beams transmutating a part of the nickel-iron of its hull into anti-matter and causing a cataclysmic matter/anti-matter reaction, the Predator ship disappeared in a gigantic white fireball. When that fireball dissipated, it let Pieter and his crew see that the Predator ship's broken and burned-out hull was now tumbling out of control while heading towards a higher orbit.

"Good shot, Felix! Pass to the next ship in line."

"Hey," suddenly said Rose Gebran, their sensors officer, "I see our command cutter flying below us. Are they suicidal or what? This is no place for a lightly armed cutter."

"Ignore it, Rose: Captain Forster is not in the habit of doing stupid things. She must have a good reason to be there."

What Pieter couldn't know was that Tina effectively had a good reason to have piloted her command cutter to nearly within Voronkia's upper atmosphere.

"Spirit, start transmitting on the Vorlak's defense command channel."

Spirit's avatar, who was sitting at the electronic warfare station of the command cutter, started at once to speak in her microphone, using the Vorlak language, which had been studied and analyzed by now for over sixteen years.

"Vorlak Command, this is the command ship of the Human force presently engaging the invasion fleet from low orbit. Please hold fire while our ships destroy those asteroid ships. I say again..."

In the big underground bunker that controlled the fire of the surface-to-space missile batteries defending Voronkia, the division commander scratched his head on getting that message, repeated in a continuous loop. One of his regimental commanders looked questioningly at his superior, equally baffled.

"Aliens, fighting other aliens above our planet? Should we continue firing, Commander?"

"Well, those aliens at least called us and spoke in our language, while the first aliens to arrive simply came and started firing without saying a word. Let's see how this will go on, then we will decide. PASS THE FOLLOWING TO ALL BATTERIES: HOLD FIRE UNTIL FURTHER ORDERS."

As his subalterns hurried to pass that order to all the firing units, the divisional commander opened a communications link with the central government command complex controlling the planet's defenses: any decision about what to do with those newcomers was definitely well above his pay grade.

On the MJOLNIR, Orlando Reyes was again blowing out air in relief as the heavy starfighters sent by the NOSTROMO went into action after jumping to close to Voronkia's surface, with the Predator ships now being destroyed wholesale. One of his sensors operators then reported something that confused him.

"What do you mean, those fighters are shooting red energy beams at the Predator ships? Disintegrator beams are light blue, not red."

"I know, sir, but those MAMBA-Class starfighters are shooting red beams and those beams seem to be truly devastating."

Reyes was still scratching his head at that when another sensors operator made another report.

"Sir, a fleet of Navy warships is now appearing in the system, some 2.3 astronomical units away and in our lower nine o'clock quadrant."

"About time!" grumbled Reyes. "They are about as timely as the Offenbach Carabinieris."

"The Offenbach Carabinieris, sir?" questioned a mystified Bini Zendaya. Reyes smiled as he answered her.

"The Offenbach Carabinieris were a military unit of the old Italy in the 19th Century. They were said to be the epitome of lateness."

"Oh, I see! I believe that your epithet is a justified one in the present circumstances. Captain Forster's force arrived just in time to save our bacon, sir."

"Indeed! When I think that her force is not even part of our navy..."

Some three minutes later, Reyes got a transmission from the arriving flotilla on an encrypted channel.

"Battle station MJOLNIR, this is the VICTORY. Report your situation, over."

"VICTORY, this is MJOLNIR. We are fully operational but our missile magazines are now empty. A force of heavy starfighters and of shuttles carrying security androids sent by the NOSTROMO arrived some seventeen minutes ago. The starfighters then started engaging the Predator fleet, while the shuttles went down on Hyanesu to land their troops and tanks, so that the moon could be protected from invasion by Space Predators. The starfighters are now in very low orbit around Voronkia, firing up at the belly of the Predator ships and doing a real carnage. Be advised that the Vorlaks also engaged the Predator ships with nuclear-tipped missiles, destroying a number of them." There was a notable delay before he got a response to his report.

"MJOLNIR, we acknowledge your report. We will now push towards Voronkia and assist Captain Forster's force in their battle against the Predators."

Reyes was nearly tempted to reply to that by saying to the battleship that it could take its time, as Forster's starfighters were basically cutting to shreds the Predator fleet, but he restrained himself in time: the flotilla commander would probably not have appreciated much such a reply from him.

On the battleship VICTORY, Vice-Admiral Sergei Makarov clenched his fists in frustration on hearing that someone else had beat him to the Gliese 581 System. While that early arrival by ships and craft from the NOSTROMO had most probably saved the

MJOLNIR from destruction, there would probably be some embarrassing questions in Providence about why a civilian para-military force had been able to react faster than the Navy to this Space Predators invasion. This was definitely not going to look good on his resumé...or for the Navy's reputation. Some five minutes later, as his ships were speeding towards Voronkia, his communications officer passed on to him a message that did nothing to calm him down.

"Admiral, we just received a request from Captain Forster, who is in a command cutter above Voronkia's surface: she asks that we help her by towing away the destroyed hulks of the Predator ships floating in low orbit, before they could fall back into the planet's atmosphere and cause catastrophic damage on the surface of Voronkia."

"Us, towing away destroyed Predator ships? Does she take us for a simple towing business? Contact her and ask her for a proper action report."

"Uh, yes, Admiral."

Makarov had to wait another eleven minutes before his communications officer handed him a printed message.

"Captain Forster's action report, Admiral."

Grabbing the two-page document, Makarov read it quickly. When he was finished reading it, he was feeling a mix of elation and frustration, along with some irritation. Forster was reporting a total of 68 Predator warships and 48 support ships destroyed, all but eight of them by her starfighters. One so-called giant carrier or flagship and two warships in that total were reported to have been destroyed by the battle station MJOLNIR, while five Predator warships were credited to the Vorlak surface-based missiles. While Makarov was truly happy to learn of the extent of the losses suffered by the Predators and about the heroic defense put up by the MJOLNIR, he just couldn't understand how such a small force of minor warships could cause such damage to an enemy force vastly superior in numbers and size. Was Forster's report accurate or was she embellishing the picture to her advantage? There was however one way to judge that.

"Commander Lee, send a message to the MJOLNIR and ask it to send us a detailed report of the battle that was fought here, along with the recordings on the battle from its sensors."

"Aye, Admiral!"

Another twelve minutes later, as his flotilla was approaching Voronkia, the sensors of the battleship were able to detect and film what appeared to be a tumbling asteroid of monstrous proportions. A second look at it then told Makarov that this was in reality a destroyed Space Predator asteroid ship. The size of that derelict hulk however left him stunned for a moment.

"Twenty-two by thirteen kilometers! We never saw a Predator ship of such a size before. It must indeed have been either a flagship or a craft carrier. Commander Lee, tell the battleship HONDO to take this dead hulk in tow and to then send it crashing into the system's sun."

"Yes, Admiral!"

Makarov then straightened in his command chair, conflicted. He was not sure that his flotilla could have faced such a huge and powerful opponent and won. Yet, Forster's heavy starfighters had managed to destroy over a hundred Predator asteroid ships, the smallest of which measured at least four kilometers in length. There was also the fact that Forster had personally led her small force and had placed herself at huge risk by taking a very low orbit, sandwiched between the planet and the enemy fleet. The courage and mastery of tactics shown by that woman could not be denied. Still, one puzzling question remained: how could eight heavy starfighters defeat over a hundred Predator ships in short order? Resolved to get an answer to that question, Makarov had an encrypted video link opened between his bridge and Tina Forster's command cutter, which was still in a very low orbit around Voronkia. When Forster's image appeared on the small display screen of his command chair, Makarov saw that she was wearing a spacesuit with its visor opened. He was also shocked to see another woman, one of great beauty, sitting at a nearby station and speaking in a strange, guttural language he could not identify.

"Captain Forster, this is Vice-Admiral Sergei Makarov, on the battleship VICTORY. I must first congratulate you and your starfighter crews for defeating such a huge Predator fleet. I however have many questions for you, the first one being: what language is the woman next to you speaking in?"

Tina Forster nodded her head soberly before replying to him.

"Thank you for the compliment, Admiral: I will pass it on to my crews. As for what language Spirit is presently using, it is the Vorlak language. We have established a link with the Vorlak missile defense headquarters at the start of the battle, in order to coordinate our actions in the defense of Voronkia and to avoid having my starfighters

targeted by the Vorlak batteries. I must say that, up to now, the Vorlaks have proved surprisingly reasonable and cooperative. They must have the equivalent of our own saying that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'."

"I see! My next question is about your present tactical location. Why take such a low orbit over Voronkia and thus take extra risks? You could have shot at the Predator ships from above at much less risks."

"True, but then any missed shot would have gone on to hit the planet's surface, something that the Vorlaks could then have interpreted as an attack by us against them. Also, by shooting at the enemy's bellies, we were both destroying them and pushing their hulks into higher orbit, thus preventing them from eventually entering the atmosphere of Voronkia and then crashing into the planet, something that could have spelled doom for the planet and for the whole Vorlak civilization."

"But disintegrator beams would not have caused much damage then: they would have mostly dissipated their power while going through the planet's atmosphere."

"Yes, but the Vorlaks could still take our fire as being against them. Believe it or not but their nuclear-tipped missiles have proved surprisingly effective against Predator ships which had lost their force shields because of prior damage caused by the missiles from the MJOLNIR. I however would prefer to discuss that subject in a more discrete way later on, face to face, Admiral."

"I understand, Captain Forster. What do you intend to do next?"

"Spirit will inform the Vorlaks that you are here to tow away the Predators' hulks in order to avoid them entering eventually the planet's atmosphere. Then, I will send my starfighters to take an orbit around Hyanesu and protect it in case more Predator ships show up."

"That is fine with me, Forster, but I would like your cutter to come to my battleship, so that we could meet in person while my ships start towing away those destroyed asteroid ships."

"That I can do, Admiral, but I would ask you to first move your battleship to a higher orbit, so that we are further from the Vorlak missile batteries."

"A good idea. Follow my ship to a thousand-kilometer-high equatorial orbit, then come aboard the VICTORY."

"Lead the way, Admiral. Forster out!"

Makarov eyed the now blank screen for a second, then gave an order to his ship's pilot.

"Lieutenant Ziegler, put us in a thousand-kilometer equatorial orbit over Voronkia and expect the command cutter from the NOSTROMO to join us there. Have our main craft hangar ready to receive that cutter."

"Aye, Admiral!"

As the VICTORY moved to a higher orbit, with the much smaller cutter following it, Makarov's chief of operations, Commodore Prabang, approached his command chair, a concerned expression on his face.

"Admiral, I have started reviewing the detailed action report we received from the MJOLNIR and there is something quite disturbing in it."

"And what would that be, Commodore?" asked Makarov while looking pointedly at him.

"It is about the weapons used by the heavy starfighters from the NOSTROMO, sir. They were not using common disintegrator cannons but rather something hugely more powerful. Instead of firing blue beams of energy, their cannons shot intense red-colored energy beams. Also, instead of simply causing a small flash on impact by disintegrating small portions of the Predator ships' hulls, they caused huge, nuclear-like explosions which easily holed the Predator ships, knocking them out with only one or two shots."

Makarov, stunned, stared with disbelief at his chief of operations, a very competent man and also a qualified nuclear engineer.

"Are you sure, Prabang?"

"Look for yourself, Admiral." replied the flag officer while presenting to him a tablet computer and starting a video sequence on its screen. Makarov was then able to see that it was a zoomed view from long distance, showing the Predator ships around the planet Voronkia. He then saw thin beams of red light shoot up from below the Predator ships and hitting their bellies. Every time a beam hit its target, it produced a blinding flash of light and a titanic explosion which clearly shook hard the Predator ship or sent it tumbling around, out of control.

"My God!" exclaimed Makarov, shaken by such raw power. "What could possibly cause such amount of destructive power, in your opinion?"

"Anti-matter beams, Admiral." answered Prabang at once, his expression hard. "It seems that Captain Forster's ships are armed with a new and devastating type of

weapon and that Forster has been hiding that fact from everybody else, and this for some time already.”

“But, but such a weapon should be arming all of our warships, not only her own ships. We could then repel and destroy the Predator threat in short order. Why would she have hidden such a miraculous weapon from us?”

“You will have to ask her that directly when she comes aboard, Admiral.” was the firm answer from Prabang.

06:03 (Universal Time)

Craft hangar of the battleship VICTORY

In high orbit over the planet Voronkia

Admiral Makarov in person was on hand, accompanied by two of his senior officers and two space marines, when Tina Forster stepped out of her command cutter, which was now inside the main craft hangar of the VICTORY. She had removed her spacesuit by then but was wearing a pistol belt at her waist and looked suspiciously at the two armed marines standing behind Makarov. Still, she came to attention three paces in front of the vice-admiral and saluted him militarily, to which Makarov saluted her back before speaking to her.

“Welcome aboard the VICTORY, Captain Forster, and congratulation for your stunning victory over those Predator monsters.”

“Thank you, Admiral. Could you tell me why you judged it necessary to have two armed space marines accompany you to greet me aboard?”

Makarov’s expression hardened a bit then as he stared into her eyes.

“Captain Forster, I have a few questions for you, questions to which I expect you to give me answers. Please follow me to my command conference room.”

Makarov then started pivoting around but froze and pivoted back when he saw that Forster had not moved at all.

“Why won’t you follow me, Captain Forster?”

“Why? Because I am not in the habit of being invited aboard another ship simply to be then basically put under arrest, Admiral. Put your cards on the table and be frank with me: what is causing you to act in a way I could call ‘treacherous’ towards me?”

Makarov stiffened, pricked by her use of the word ‘treacherous’.

“Captain Forster, I have just been informed that you have been hiding from everybody else in the Spacers League the fact that you possessed a new kind of weapon which could ensure our victory against the Space Predators. Would you care to explain yourself about this?”

“Simply said, I kept the existence of my new weapon secret because I didn’t trust anyone else to not eventually abuse its use, Admiral. Human history is full of examples of power-hungry leaders using new weapons to either gain extra power or to force their will on others. Only a few years ago, then-Chairman Paul Stein revoked the citizenship status granted up to then to my security androids, which I treat as fully sentient beings with equal rights to the rest of my crew. What do you think that such a bigoted man would have done with my new weapon? How long would it have taken him before using it on other Human political entities, or against other sentient races? He would have most probably decided quickly that the Vorlaks deserved to be exterminated for having been a threat to the Hoshis of Hyanesu. Yes, the Vorlaks are quite an unsavory bunch, but destroying them with my secret weapon would still constitute genocide and I would never condone such an atrocity. Stein is now out of power but there are still too many people like him in the Spacers League, ambitious people hungry for power and with low tolerance for contrary opinions, or even being plain racists. That is why I kept my new weapon a secret. Admiral.”

“And what tells me that you have kept that a secret so that you could use your weapon in the future to yourself gain power?”

Makarov’s accusation apparently infuriated Tina Forster, who took two steps and got nose to nose with him.

“Admiral, you are frankly insulting, on top of reasoning like an imbecile. I have proved my devotion to Humanity countless times, often risking directly my life while doing so. The Spacers League itself gained independence from the Terran Federation in 2316 mostly because me and my KOSTROMA fought against the tyranny of Earth. I once resisted giving away another secret, that of the Koorivar matter/anti-matter propulsion system, then saw one member of the High Council plot to steal it from me while being ready to kill to get it. I now see that I have no useful reasons to stay any longer aboard your ship. You can tell the Admiralty and the High Council that I will explain my motives at the next meeting of the High Council, but as a free person and not as some kind of virtual prisoner of the Navy. Goodbye, Admiral!”

Tina was starting to pivot around when Makarov raised his voice in anger.

“STAY WHERE YOU ARE, CAPTAIN FORSTER! I AM NOT FINISHED WITH YOU!”

Tina stopped but didn't turn back to face him, instead twisting her head to eye him with near contempt.

“Or you will do what? Have your space marines shoot me? And how are you going to explain that to the High Council afterwards? You are the one who may be dreaming about gaining more power, Admiral, not me.”

She then started walking towards the rear access ramp of her cutter as Makarov reddened with fury.

“GET BACK HERE, FORSTER!”

Seeing that she was ignoring him and was continuing to walk away, Makarov looked at his two space marines and gave an order to them.

“STOP HER! USE YOUR STUN GUNS IF NEED BE!”

“BELAY THAT ORDER, MARINES!” shouted at once Commodore Prabang, who had been standing to one side of Makarov. The latter, stunned, gave an angry look at his chief of operations.

“What the hell are you doing, Commodore, contradicting my order like this?”

“What I am doing is trying to bring back some common sense into all this, Admiral. Yes, I found it disturbing that Captain Forster hid that secret weapon's existence from us but I also found the explanation she gave of her reasons to hide her secret both plausible and reasonable. I also admire her for being a brave, principled and caring person worthy of the utter respect. Please remember that she is a member of the High Council, Admiral, thus has a much higher authority status than you. Yet, you were ready to arrest her on the strength of mere suppositions. She said that she was going to explain herself to the High Council at its next meeting and that should have been enough to accept...for all of us. Stand down now or I will be obliged to relieve you of duty for gross abuse of authority, Admiral.”

Makarov nearly choked with indignation then and looked at his two space marines.

“WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? OBEY MY ORDER AND STOP THAT WOMAN?”

To his utter fury, his two marines didn't move a single inch, instead eyeing him with something approaching contempt. What Makarov didn't know was that both of those marines had fought alongside Tina Forster's security androids during the Battle for Nordland and had developed a solid respect for them and for Tina Forster. Seeing that

Makarov was not yet ready to become reasonable, Prabang took out his own stun pistol and pointed it at his admiral while giving an order to the marines in a calm but firm voice.

"Marines, put the admiral under arrest for gross abuse of authority and for threatening a member of the High Council."

"WHAT? HAVE YOU GONE CRAZY, PRABANG?" shouted Makarov, as the two marines came forward to disarm him and put handcuffs on him. Prabang shook his head firmly in response.

"You are the one who lost your mind, Admiral. Take him to his quarters, marines, where he will be confined until our return to Providence."

As the marines cuffed and then escorted away a furious Makarov, Prabang looked at Tina Forster, who had stopped at the foot of the access ramp of her cutter and had watched the drama. She didn't say a word then but saluted him, to which Prabang saluted back before she disappeared inside her craft. The commodore then contacted the hangar complex' operators, using his miniature portable radio.

"Hangar control, open Airlock Number One and let Captain Forster's cutter leave the ship."

"Understood, sir!"

Prabang then started to walk out of the hangar, to return to the bridge in order to write a message to the Admiralty. He couldn't help sigh then: he didn't like at all to having had to place his commander under arrest but Makarov's intransigence had left him no choice in that matter. As he was heading for the nearest bank of elevators, Prabang thought about the long-term consequences of the battle that had just been won. Losing over a hundred asteroid ships in this battle was bound to hurt the Space Predators very badly. After all, you didn't find every day a M-Class nickel-iron asteroid of the size the Predators used to build their ships out of. Gutting such asteroids in order to turn them into ships represented a considerable expenditure in time and efforts, after which you still had to install in that asteroid's shell all the propulsion machinery, armament and crew facilities needed to make it a proper ship, a major job by itself. There was the fact that the Predators had for the first time showed up with a ship of a truly monstrous size as part of an invasion fleet. Why had the Predators sent such a ship for the first time and what could have been its intended role for this invasion? Maybe the Predators were running out of proper warships and had been forced to use that behemoth as an ad hoc stand-in? That last hypothesis was in fact far from implausible, as this day's battle had only been the last in a growing list of stinging defeats suffered by the Space Predators

against Human forces. That list of defeats included the destruction of what had been believed to be their homeworld in the 55 Cancri System, the failed invasion of Nordlung and of the TOI 700 System, followed by the destruction of their invasion force in the HIP 78288 and now this... Prabang couldn't help stop for a moment when he realized who had defeated the Predators in all of those battles: none other than the NOSTROMO or its embarked heavy interceptors. And that Makarov idiot had wanted to put under arrest the woman who had made all those victories possible. Prabang then resumed his walking and entered an elevator cabin while shaking his head at this renewed example of Human stupidity.

CHAPTER 11 – EXPLAINING ONESELF

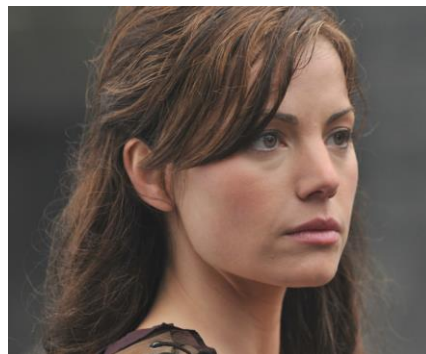
09:43 (Universal Time)

Friday, January 15, 2337

Chambers of the High Council

Spacers' League government complex,

City of New Dawn, Providence, Alpha Centauri B



The members of the High Council sitting around the long conference table fell silent when **Tina Forster** was introduced inside the Chambers' conference room and went to her seat. Once she was seated, Chairwoman Jeanne Mercier spoke in her microphone while smiling to Tina.

"Welcome back, Tina, and congratulations for your crushing victory over the Space Predators in the Gliese 581 System."

"Thank you, Madam Chairwoman." replied Tina, who had a sober expression on her face. "I am sorry about having hidden things from this council but I had my reasons to do it, reasons I am ready to explain to all of you today."

"And we are ready to listen to you this morning, Tina. First, known that Admiral Yamashiro has formally disciplined Vice-Admiral Makarov for his attempt at arresting you aboard the VICTORY. He clearly abused his authority and lost the confidence of Admiral Yamashiro...and of me. Vice-Admiral Makarov has since resigned his commission and has retired from the service."

"I take no joy in that, Madam Chairwoman, truly. I just wish that things could have gone otherwise. May I now present my explanations for my conduct to the High Council?"

"Please proceed, Tina."

Tina then stood up and looked around at the other members while speaking in a firm but calm voice.

"Members of the High Council, friends, the secret weapon I have been hiding from everyone was invented by the late Doctor Koomak some three years ago, a few months before his death. He then revealed his secret to me in his last will, in which he enjoined me to not tell anyone about it, except for Spirit, the AI central computer of my

ship, and to use it strictly for the defense of Humanity and of other decent sentient races against invaders like the Space Predators. I accepted to keep his secret and subsequently restricted its use to the defensive batteries of my ship and to those of my embarked armed craft. I have had the exclusive use of this new weapon, which I call a 'matter converter cannon' for a bit over two years now and, as you can see, never waived it around or threatened its use in order to gain power or influence. The battle against the Predators in the Gliese 581 System was only the second time it was used in combat, the first time being when one of my heavy starfighters searching for the missing prospectors ship GOLDEN NUGGET encountered an invading Predator fleet in the HIP 78288 System. Thus, my secret weapon has been used solely against the Space Predators and I intend that to continue to be so. On that, you have my solemn promise." As she paused to see if there would be any question or comment for her, Vladimir Gasparov, the CEO of the Sverdlovsk Group and governor of the planet New Venice, in the Tau Ceti System, then raised his hand for permission to speak, with Chairwoman Mercier nodding her head to it.

"Go ahead, Vladimir."

"Thank you, Madam Chairwoman. Tina, I have two questions for you. First, how powerful is this secret weapon of yours? Second, who has the use of it at this moment? Only you?"

Tina gave Gasparov a somber look before answering him.

"Vladimir, the best way to describe my matter converter cannon is as a planet buster-class weapon. When its beam touches a ship or another material object, including an atmosphere, it then converts to anti-matter a part of its volume, something that then produces a huge matter/anti-matter reaction and explosion which liberates energy in the order of many tens of megatons or more, depending on the power class of the weapon. To illustrate this, I am now going to show you part of a recording made by the targeting system of the cannons of one of my heavy starfighters who fought the Space Predators in the Gliese 581 System. The Predator ship you will see centered in the crosshairs was actually a full eight kilometers-long and had a maximum diameter of 2.8 kilometers. My starfighter shot at it from a distance of some 230 kilometers."

The members stared at the display screens of the individual computer stations facing them and saw a dark, mostly ovoid shape orbiting in Space, with a crosshair centered on it. Then, an intense red beam shot at the speed of light towards that Predator ship and hit it near its bow. A blinding flash of light then suddenly filled the camera's field of view.

That flash persisted for a second or so before dissipating, allowing a fresh view of the targeted ship. There were gasps around the table when the members of the High Council saw that the forward third of the Predator ship was now nearly entirely gone, with the ship tumbling out of control and going upward, propelled by the power of the explosion that had disabled it. Vladimir Gasparov then looked up at Tina, his face pale.

"And you say that a sixty meter-long starfighter did this? What would be the effect of the super-heavy cannons aboard your NOSTROMO, Tina?"

"The matter converter cannons of my NOSTROMO's main battery would be able to split open a moon or a planet, Vladimir. In the case of that Predator ship, it would have been completely and utterly destroyed in a single shot from my NOSTROMO. As for who has the use of it, I am the only one presently in possession of that type of weapon. Since it was an invention from Doctor Koomak, a Koorivar scientist, I informed Governor Sheraz about it but he refused the use of it while promising to me to keep silent about it."

All heads around the table turned towards the Koorivar, who was the political leader of the Koorivar colonies and the governor of New Shouria, in the Wolf 1061 System. Sheraz, who looked like a kangaroo with a large deer head, shrugged his shoulders.

"I am sorry, friends, but I agreed with Tina that the existence of such a weapon needed to be hidden from all, for the sake of our two races. Besides, us Koorivars are what you would call incorrigible peaceniks. Even if we possessed that super weapon, no Koorivar crew would ever accept to use it, except in extreme cases of self-defense."

"We believe you, Governor Sheraz." said softly Jeanne Mercier. The chairwoman then looked at Tina, her expression most serious.

"Now that the existence of your super weapon has been revealed, Tina, would you now be ready to reveal its secrets to our Navy, so that our warships could better fight off the Space Predators' threat?"

Tina, herself looking sober, took a moment before answering her.

"In view of the continuing grave threat from those monsters, I am now ready to give that secret to our Navy, but on one condition: that this High Council solemnly promises to never use it except against the Space Predators or against any similar major threat to Humanity or to other decent sentient races."

The High Council members looked at each other, exchanging whispered comments for long seconds before gradually falling silent and looking back at Tina. Chairwoman Mercier then spoke up again.

"If I hear no objections to this, then we will now vote on accepting or not the request by Tina for us to respect the promise she is asking from us. Please raise one hand in order and say either 'yai', 'nay' or 'abstain'. Governor Goldberg of Providence?"

"Yai!"

"Governor Braun, of Vinland?"

"Yai!"

"Governor Kendrick, of Trappist 1?"

"Yai!"

"Governor Gasparov, of New Venice?"

"Yai!"

"Governor Lynn, of Wotan?"

"Yai!"

"Governor Tomunaga, of New Polynesia?"

"Yai!"

"Governor Winthrop, of Nova Domo?"

Winnie Winthrop, who was in theory subordinate to Agneta Braun, whose corporation-controlled Nova Domo and who had already voted 'yai', hesitated for a moment before answering.

"Yai!"

"Governor O'Donnell, of Utopia?"

"Yai!"

"Governor Lombardi, of Atlantis?"

"Yai!"

"Governor Berman, of the El Dorado?"

"Nay!"

Many, including Jeanne Mercier, reacted to that vote by staring for a moment at the Pallas Mining Industries executive, who had been closely allied with ex-Chairman Paul Stein, before the chairwoman continued her roundup.

"Governor Kim, of Mu?"

"Nay!" answered Kim Dae Wo, another executive of the Pallas Mining Industries, another past ally of Paul Stein, attracting a dirty look from Michael Kendrick, the present head of the Pallas Mining Industries, who had voted 'Yai'. On her part, an impassive Tina couldn't help have a thought then.

'At least I know where my friends and my enemies are now.'

"Governor Armstrong, of Upsilon Andromeda?"

"Yai!"

"Governor Consuela, of Teegarden's Star?"

"Yai!"

"Governor Sheraz, of New Shouria?"

"Yai!"

"Governor Dominguez, of Gemini?"

"Yai!"

"Governor Watts, or Mars and Utopia?"

Charles Watts, an old friend of Tina, answered firmly and at once.

"Yai!"

"Minister of Defense Cardona?"

"Abstain!" answered Juan Cardona after hesitating for a couple of seconds.

Jeanne Mercier stared at him for a moment before continuing her vote call-up.

"Minister of External Affairs Nisstrom?"

"Yai!"

"Minister of Justice Prabang?"

"Yai!"

"Minister of Finance Munroe?"

"Yai!"

"Minister of Industries and Economy Miyagi?"

"Yai!"

"Minister of Health and Social Affairs Shu?"

"Yai!"

Jeanne Mercier then started counting the votes but was interrupted by a smiling Tina.

"Excuse me, Madam Chairwoman, but you didn't ask for my vote."

Jeanne Mercier gave her a sardonic look in response.

"Did I really have to ask for your vote, Tina?"

"No, but I simply wanted us to strictly follow the procedures, in case someone would say in the future that this vote had irregularities and thus did not count."

"Hum, true! Governor Forster, of New Haven?"

"Yai!"

"Good girl! The results of the votes are as follows: twenty 'yais', two 'nays' and one 'abstain'. The 'yais' have it. Tina, when will you be able to pass to us the technical specs of your secret weapon?"

"Right now, Madam Chairwoman. I brought a thumb drive which contains the detailed schematics of my matter converter cannon and which I will hand over to you personally. I must insist now that those files be treated as 'Top Secret – High Council Controlled' classified documents and be given as limited a circulation as possible."

"Agreed!"

"Uh, are we talking about something that will cost a bundle and will need a major industrial effort in order to equip our Navy ships with it, Tina?" asked Minister of Finance John Munroe, getting an amused chuckle from Tina.

"Hardly! My so-called 'new weapon' is basically nothing more than a muzzle piece which is to be attached to our existing disintegrator cannons. I was able to build most of them in the workshops of my NOSTROMO."

Charles Watts, the governor of Mars and of Utopia, hid his face in his hands on hearing that.

"Such a doomsday weapon: a simple garage job!"

Tina laughed briefly before pointing an index at Watts.

"Well, it is a bit more than a garage job, Charles. But it is quick and economical to build, I will give you that."

Tina then became most serious and looked around at the other members of the High Council.

"Ladies and gentlemen, with this new weapon, Humanity will soon be able to resist efficiently any new attempts at invasion or attack by the Space Predators. The one thing I hope now is that we will never become stupid enough to use it against each other."

"Amen to that." said Jeanne Mercier before looking at the High Council members sitting around the long conference table. "Starting tomorrow, we will institute an emergency update program of our Navy's disintegrator weapons, so that we could as rapidly as possible be able to face the Space Predators and defeat them the next time we will encounter them. This meeting of the High Council is thus adjourned."

Mercier then banged her gavel on the table, making the members of the council get up from their chairs and start gathering their documents to put them back in their briefcases. However, the chairwoman signaled her defense minister, Juan Cardona, to come and

see her. Cardona hesitated for a second but went to her, following her to a far corner of the room, where Jeanne Mercier stared at him with contained anger.

"I myself supported Captain Forster's request for us to respect her wishes concerning her new weapon. What took you, my minister of defense, to vote 'abstain' on it, although our Navy will be the direct beneficiary of this new weapon?"

Cardona took a deep breath before answering her.

"Simply said, I do not have full confidence in Captain Forster, Madam Chairwoman. This is not the first time that she actually hid important secrets or initiated discreet programs without the prior approval of the High Council."

His excuse, instead of assuaging her, only made Mercier angrier and she rose her voice by a notch while pointing an index at Cardona.

"You don't have confidence in Captain Forster? And who the hell are you to doubt the loyalty of such a woman towards the Spacers League and Humanity? You never fought personally once to defend the Spacers League and never served in the Navy. You are in fact little more than a simple bureaucrat and you dare judge such a hero as Tina Forster? By you voting 'abstain', you showed me that you are not ready to support my decisions concerning the good and security of the Spacers League. In fact, I am starting to wonder if you are not in league with those two idiots from the Pallas Mining Consortium who voted 'nay', possibly in order to effect some future attempt at a power grab. I will not have a defense minister in whom I can't have confidence into. You are thus fired as defense minister, Cardona. I will assume the control of our defense ministry until I can find someone more reliable than you to fill that position in my cabinet. Now, get out of here and go prepare and sign your letter of resignation. I want you out of this building before noon, without your security pass."

Severely shaken and pale, Cardona could only turn around and walk away, to leave the conference room under the angry eyes of Jeanne Mercier, who then uttered a question to herself in a near whisper.

"How many such idiots and misguided people do I still have serving me, apart from him?"

MISSION CREW, CHAPTER 4: DEEP SPACE RECONNAISSANCE

CREW OF THE HEAVY STARFIGHTER 'SHOOTING STAR':

Pieter Nordlung: Pilot and commander of the 'SHOOTING STAR'. Born on March 17, 2302, on Hygiea, Solar System. 186 cm, blond hair, blue eyes. Ethnic Dutch descent. Married with Senior Centurion Jehanne de Domrémy, is adoptive father to 3-year-old Frida Thorund. Resides in Apartment # 554-042, Habitat Ring Complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO.



Lisa Wong: Copilot & navigator of the 'SHOOTING STAR'. Born on July 04, 2306, on Ceres, Solar System. 172 cm, black hair, brown eyes. Ethnic Chinese descent. Single. Resides in Apartment # 558-106, Habitat Ring Complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO.



Felix Delgado: Weapons Officer of the 'SHOOTING STAR'. Born on October 20, 2307, on Callisto Prime, Solar System. 178 cm, black hair, brown eyes. Ethnic Latino mix. Married to Francia Hidalgo, has two children (son Riko, 5-yo, and daughter Maria, 2-yo). Resides in Apartment # 554-308, Habitat Ring Complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO.



Beza Gebre: Sensors Officer of the 'SHOOTING STAR'. Born on May 02, 2313, in Ethiopia, Earth, Solar System. Daughter of refugees from civil war in Ethiopia who were given asylum on New Haven in 2320. 180 cm, black hair, black eyes, dark brown skin. Single. Resides in Apartment # 562-110, Habitat Ring Complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO.



Matsuo Hondo: First Engineer of the 'SHOOTING STAR'. Born on December 21, 2300, in Sasebo, Japan, Earth, Solar System. Family emigrated to Ceres in 2302. 176 cm, black hair, brown eyes. Married to Keiko Tomonaga, has two children (sons Jiro, 10-yo, and



Kazuo, 6-yo). Resides in Apartment # 554-210, Habitat Ring Complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO.

Edward Lansing: Second Engineer of the 'SHOOTING STAR'. Born on September 30, 2307, on Triton, Neptune System. 181 cm, red hair, brown eyes. Ethnic Englishman. Married to Virginia Stanwick, has one daughter, Emily, 5-yo. Resides in Apartment # 566-094, Habitat Ring Complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO.



Jawal Parmat: Maintenance Technician of the 'SHOOTING STAR'. Born on April 15, 2312, on Europa, Jovian System. 176 cm, black hair and short beard, black eyes, dark skinned. Ethnic Indian. Married to Indira Darma, no children. Resides in Apartment # 562-118, Habitat Ring Complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO.

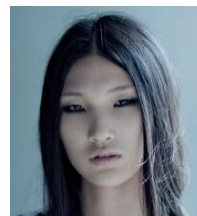


MEMBERS OF THE FIRST SQUAD, NINTH CENTURY:

Kurt Vogel: Decurion in charge of First Squad/Ninth Century. Built in 2330 at the Avalon Space Yards. 186 cm, brown hair, brown eyes. Fought against the Space Predators in the TOI 700 System and in the Battle for Nordland. Secondary occupation/hobby: ground vehicle maintenance and repair. Resides in Apartment # 576-230.



Tanya Orlova: Legionnaire member of the First Squad. Built in 2335 at the Avalon Space Yards. 177 cm, black hair, black eyes. No combat experience. Secondary occupation/hobby: cybernetics technician. Resides in Apartment #576-308.



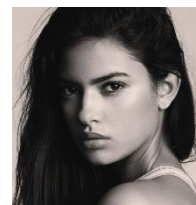
Jeffrey Brown: Legionnaire member of the First Squad. Built in 2335 at the Avalon Space Yards. 184 cm, black hair, brown eyes, brown skin. No combat experience. Secondary occupation/hobby: Energy weapons maintenance and repair. Resides in Apartment # 576-312.



Sven Larssen: Legionnaire member of the First Squad. Built in 2335 at the Avalon Space Yards. 185 cm, brown hair, blue eyes. No combat experience. Secondary occupation/hobby: waiter at the Munich Beer Hall', Ring Habitat Complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO. Resides in Apartment # 576-316.



Jacinda Madison: Legionnaire member of the First Squad. Built in 2335 at the Avalon Space Yards. 179 cm, black hair, brown eyes, light brown skin. No combat experience. Secondary occupation/hobby: stage dancing at the 'Moonlight Dance Club', on the A.M.S. NOSTROMO. Resides in Apartment # 576-320.



Miri Jintsu: Senior Legionnaire and second-in-command of the First Squad. Built in 2330 at the Avalon Space Yards. 175 cm, black hair, brown eyes. Fought against the Space Predators in the TOI 700 System and in the Battle for Nordland. Secondary occupation/hobby: unarmed combat and mixed martial arts. Resides in Apartment # 576-242.



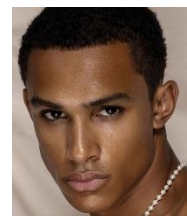
Ahmed Ramadi: Legionnaire member of the First Squad. Built in 2335 at the Avalon Space Yards. 181 cm, brown hair, brown eyes. No combat experience. Secondary occupation/hobby: sword fighting (saber, scimitar). Resides in Apartment # 576-324.



Régis Dumont: Legionnaire member of the First Squad. Built in 2335 at the Avalon Space Yards. 182 cm, black hair, brown eyes. No combat experience. Secondary occupation/hobby: waiter at the 'Eiffel' French restaurant, Ring Habitat Complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO. Resides in Apartment # 576-328.



Brian Mojambo: Legionnaire member of the First Squad and heavy weapons gunner. Built in 2335 at the Avalon Space Yards. 188 cm, black hair, brown eyes, brown skin. No combat experience. Secondary occupation/hobby: electronics repair technician. Resides in Apartment #



576-332.

John Lee: Legionnaire member of the First Squad and combat paramedic. Built in 2330 at the Avalon Space Yards. 178 cm, black hair, brown eyes. Fought against the Space Predators in the TOI 700 System and in the Battle for Nordland. Secondary occupation/hobby: medical orderly at the medical center of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO. Resides in Apartment # 576-336.



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