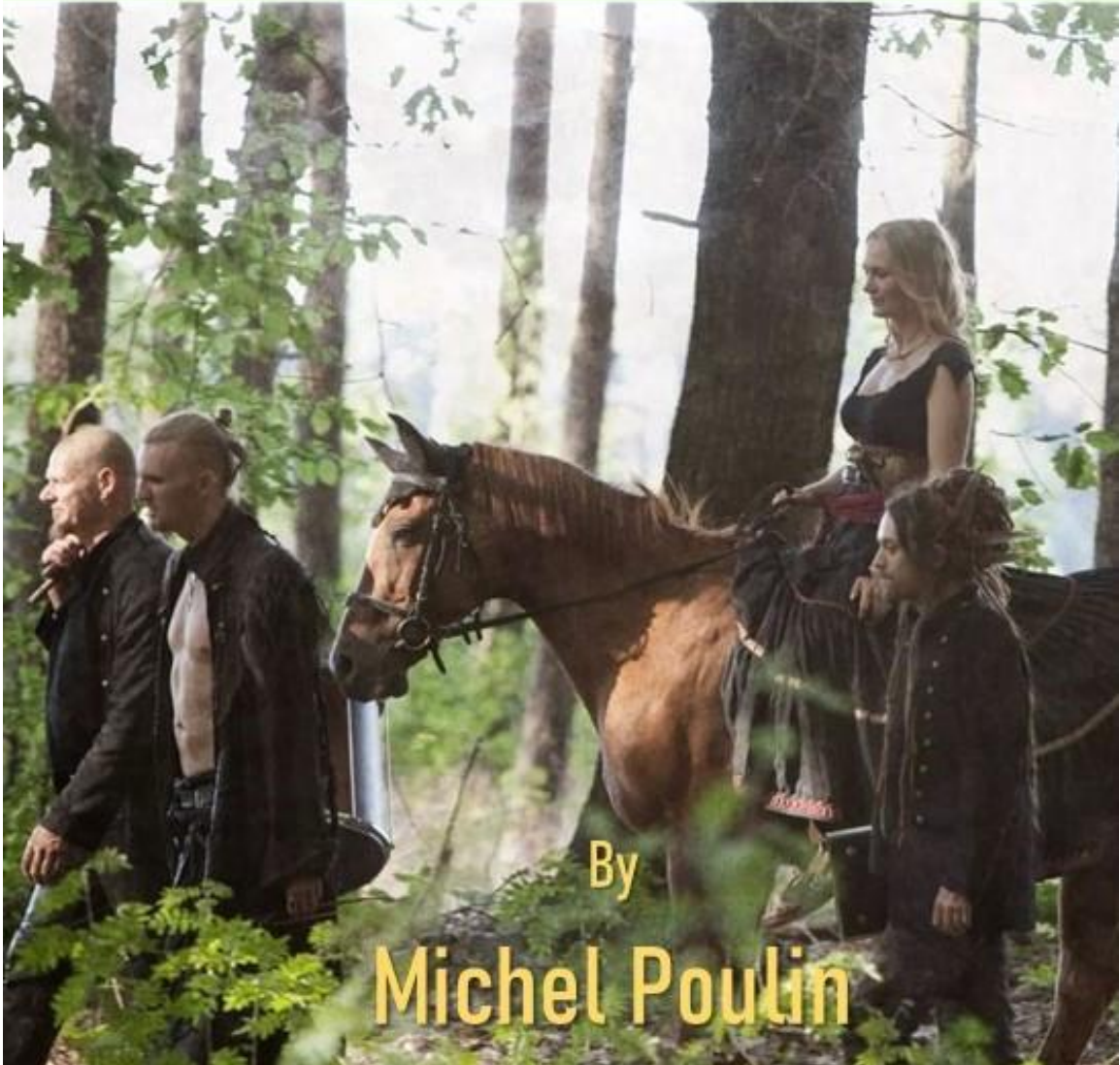


# ON THE ROAD TO EDEN



# **ON THE ROAD TO EDEN**

Science-fiction novel

By

**MICHEL POULIN**

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## **WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS**

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

### **ABOUT THIS NOVEL**

ON THE ROAD TO EDEN is a science-fiction novel and the sequel to SPACE-TIME ODYSSEY. In 4021, a Human Expansion space fleet loaded with refugees fled the Alpha Centauri star system just before alien invaders destroyed it. However, the Human fleet was then hit by an enemy experimental weapon which unexpectedly projected the fleet to the distant past. Finding themselves in the year 861 C.E., the fleet's occupants then decided to build a new home for themselves on Medieval Earth and settled unoccupied lands in New Zealand, plus established a major outpost in Toulouse, in Southern France, where they arrived at an understanding with a number of local nobles. However, the reactions to the arrival of these newcomers from the future among the various rulers of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century were far from being all positive.

### **SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I wish to pay a special tribute to the German pagan-medieval musical group FAUN, which is featured on the cover of this novel, for having partly inspired me in writing this present book and whose music enchanted me. They truly capture the spirit of past medieval traveling minstrels.

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**TABLE OF CONTENT**

CHAPTER 1 – AN EMPTY PARADISE .....	6
CHAPTER 2 – ON THE ROAD TO EDEN.....	16
CHAPTER 3 – MEETING IN TOULOUSE .....	41
CHAPTER 4 – WHEN IN ROME, BE CAREFUL .....	75
CHAPTER 5 – AN UNWELCOME VISIT .....	78
CHAPTER 6 – PATROLING THE AMERICAS .....	85
CHAPTER 7 – SAILING TOWARDS THE UNKNOWN .....	99
CHAPTER 8 – ARRIVING IN EDEN.....	116
CHAPTER 9 – ENFORCING NEW RULES.....	127
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	138

## **CHAPTER 1 – AN EMPTY PARADISE**



**11:18 (Hawaii Time)**

**Wednesday, October 14, 861 C.E. (Common Era)**

**Southern coast of Oahu**

**Hawaii Islands, Pacific**

Jenna Chong, standing on the sandy beach next to her landed corvette, took in with delight a deep breath of the pure air brought in from the sea by a moderate wind. The beach she was standing on could also be described as 'perfect'. All in all, this cove on the southern coast of the island of Oahu could be rightly described as a corner of paradise. It also strongly reminded Jenna of her native world of Alpha Centauri A-2. That thought then brought tears to Jenna, as her native planet had been destroyed a mere four weeks ago, according to her personal biological clock, by those monstrous Morgs who had waged an extermination war against the worlds of the Human Expansion in the year 4021 C.E. Over two billion Centaurians had perished in the destruction by the Morgs of the Alpha Centauri System, along with nearly a fifth of a million men and

women of the Human Expansion Navy who had fought ferociously to defend the Alpha Centauri System against the Morg invasion fleet. That Human fleet, which had represented nearly all that was left of the Human Expansion Navy, had caused huge losses to the Morg fleet but had still lost in the end, overwhelmed by the enemy's crushing numerical superiority. However, their sacrifice had given enough time for the huge exploration cruiser H.S.S. MARCO POLO to load up over sixteen million Centaurian refugees, either in its cryogenic vaults or aboard its emergency quarters, along with millions of tons of equipment, prefabricated building elements and supplies, and then flee the doomed Alpha Centauri A-4 with an escort flotilla and two large cargo ships transporting another two million refugees. Unfortunately, the Morgs had time to unleash an experimental weapon against the MARCO POLO and its escort flotilla as it sped towards Earth, the last surviving Human-occupied system left. That Morg weapon had made a direct hit on the flotilla but had then a totally unexpected effect, throwing the MARCO POLO flotilla back in time, all the way to the primitive early medieval period of the Ninth Century C.E. Now, everything that Jenna had known was 32 centuries in the future, with the MARCO POLO and its escort flotilla stuck in the Ninth Century and utterly unable to return to the future. Administrator Lynn Tsu, who was the political leader of the MARCO POLO flotilla and of the millions of Centaurian refugees brought aboard the exploration cruiser, had then grudgingly decided that Medieval Earth would have to become the new home of her citizens and had directed the flotilla to start settling New Zealand, a land which was still completely bereft of Human occupants in the year 861 C.E., as the first Polynesians would only start arriving there in about 200 years. In order to help feed the 1.2 million refugees which had not been put into cryogenic sleep aboard the MARCO POLO, Administrator Tsu had also directed that an outpost and commercial exchange point be established next to the medieval city of Toulouse, in Southern France, so that foodstuff could be bought. That outpost, with a giant residential tower now known as the 'Toulouse Tower' being its centerpiece, had proved to be an inspired initiative, with hundreds of tons of precious foodstuff regularly bought or collected from traveling merchants there. Still, the refugee flotilla could use more of both foodstuff and usable, unoccupied lands. That last need was why Jenna Chong and her 110-meter-wide corvette, the H.S.S. LA PÉROUSE, was presently in Hawaii, on the island of Oahu. Jenna Chong was about to turn around and return to her ship, shaped like a flattened sphere with a maximum diameter of 110 meters and a height of seventy meters, when her wrist videophone buzzed, making her raise her left forearm to the level



of her face. Punching the 'talk' button, she saw the face of her executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Erwin Markus, appear on the tiny viewing screen of her videophone.

"Yes, Mister Markus?"

"Commander, we have just completed the analysis of the survey data and images that our drones collected around Hawaii."

"And?" asked Jenna, tensing up: that survey mission of hers had the potential to seriously improve the prospects of the refugee flotilla in this century.

"And it is now confirmed without a doubt, Commander: the whole of the Hawaii Archipelago is still empty of human presence, if you except of course our own corvette. The historical data that indicated the 11<sup>th</sup> Century as the arrival date for the first Polynesians to reach Hawaii was thus correct."

Jenna felt both relief and triumph on hearing that: the people of the MARCO POLO flotilla now had a new place that they could occupy without infringing on other Humans, a place that could rightly be described as a paradise.

"Prepare that data and analysis for my review: I am returning now to the ship. I want to make doubly certain that we didn't miss anything before I pass the good news to Administrator Tsu."

"Understood! Markus, out!"

Walking off the band of beach sand, Jenna arrived at her corvette and went to the retractable land access lift tube hanging down from the underbelly of the ship. Pushing a button, she made the outer door of the access airlock of the tube open up and walked in, then closed the outer door and waited a few seconds, letting time for the security and decontamination systems of the five-meter by four-meter airlock compartment to ensure that no foreign insect, small animal or germs had entered with her. The LA PÉROUSE, one of the 110 corvettes normally carried by the exploration cruiser MARCO POLO, had been designed and built mostly for missions of exploration, survey and reconnaissance within a planetary system and was superbly equipped with a full array of sensors, cameras and exploration drones. It was also designed to be able to work in hazardous environments and was built to prevent accidental contamination of its interior and crew while on a planet surface, thus its various access airlocks were protected by multiple decontamination systems. After a ten second wait, Jenna Chong got the green light to open the inner airlock door and stepped inside the lift tubes

compartment, which contained two personnel lifts and one cargo lift. Using one of the two personnel lifts, she went up to the command deck of the corvette and, exiting the lift, went to the reconnaissance and survey center, where she found her executive officer, Erwin Markus, waiting for her.

“Okay, Erwin, show me what you got!”

“I have prepared our data for review at this workstation, Commander. Our central mission computer, plus our various scientists and specialists, have already reviewed it and unanimously concluded that no traces of past human presence or occupation existed in the whole of the Hawaii archipelago.”

“Good! I will do a final review, then will pass on our data to our administrative headquarters in New Auckland. Have we scanned the ocean around the archipelago for the presence of any human embarkation?”

“Yes, Commander, and we still have six early warning drones deployed and flying around the Central Pacific, covering a zone extending out by 2,000 kilometers around Hawaii. The only things they detected on the surface were whales, dolphins and orcas.”

“Very well! I should be done with my review in less than one hour.”

Jenna was sitting down at the work station when Markus spoke further.

“Uh, Commander, I got a number of requests from our crewmembers to get permission to go out and use the nearby beach during their off time.”

Jenna only had to think that over for a second before nodding her head: her crew, like herself, had been struck hard by the destruction of the Alpha Centauri System and by the news that they were now stuck in the distant past. Her men and women definitely could use some recreational time in a nice natural setting.

“I have no problems with that, Erwin. In fact, put the ship on minimal manning status and let our crew go out. Just make sure that we post a few combat robots outside to protect the perimeter around this beach area, just in case. And that includes you, Erwin. Be ready to take over bridge watch at four.”

“Yes, Commander!” replied the happy officer before walking away, leaving Jenna alone at her workstation.

**10:45 (New Zealand Time) / 12:45 (Hawaii Time)**

**Human Expansion Administrative Center**

**Mitsumoto Tower, New Auckland, New Zealand**

"What do you have for me, Lana?" asked Chief Administrator Lynn Tsu, a 52-year-old Centaurian, to her aide, Lana Tensing, who had approached her table at the cafeteria of the administrative center. The younger woman smiled and handed her a data pad.

"Some very good news from Hawaii, Lynn. This is a report sent by the corvette LA PÉROUSE some twenty minutes ago. It will probably make your day."

Putting down her fork and knife, Lynn Tsu took the data pad and started reading the first page displayed on its screen. She only needed to read the three first sentences of the executive summary of the report before nearly squealing with joy.

"YES! This is positively fantastic news! We are now free to use the whole Hawaii archipelago for the benefit of our people. Has Commodore Ferguson, on the MARCO POLO, been informed of this?"

"He got an info copy at the same time as us, Lynn."

"Then, we must exploit this with most of our resources still available for deployment. Do you know what we have available at this time in terms of prefabricated ground habitation and community services units?"

"I took the time to check quickly on that with our chief of logistics before coming to see you. We still have available in storage 23 emergency habitation unit modules which have not yet been allocated to specific projects, plus three communal services modules. They are still aboard one of our two cargo ships, the CONFUCIUS. In total, they could help settle a total of up to 4,232 persons in Hawaii within a couple of days."

"That would be a good start, but I am really impatient to see more habitation and services modules being produced in the industrial plants of the MARCO POLO."

"Well, the production facilities aboard the MARCO POLO are already working non-stop at maximum capacity, producing both basic industrial elements and extra habitation facilities for our people, plus ground infrastructure elements. Those facilities are impressive by any standards, but they still have a finite production capacity. As the saying goes, Rome wasn't built in one day. Right now, our Phase Two Infrastructure Program will take another seven months before it will be fully completed. Only then will we be able to truly expand our building programs in order to be able to wake up from their cryogenic sleep the more than ten million people still aboard the MARCO POLO. The good news is that our herds of cattle planted in our various grazing areas in New Zealand are multiplying quite rapidly."

Lynn Tsu nodded at those words, encouraged by them. The New Zealand that they had found at their arrival three weeks ago, apart from being devoid of any human occupants, also had been devoid of any predatorial land species. It had thus been the perfect place to augment the local indigenous population of birds and small mammals with various types of cattle animals which could then develop and multiply in free-grazing areas of New Zealand, with little human interaction apart from periodic, controlled culling. Small herds of buffalos, dears, caribous and moose, picked up from the grassy plains and forests of North America, had thus been added to the original moas and emus native of New Zealand, soon augmented by sheep, pigs, chickens and cows either bought from medieval farmers or raised inside the farms of the gigantic MARCO POLO, which had been built to be self-sufficient in food for its crew. Also, one of the ultimate acts of Grand Administrator Djael Anaker before Alpha Centauri A-4 was destroyed by the Morgs, which was to have a number of flying fishing vessels loaded aboard the MARCO POLO, had proved to be a truly inspired one. Those twelve flying fishing vessels, each of them over 110 meters-long, had early on proved to be a godsend, providing enough fish to help feed the initial two million Humans who had been awake and functioning aboard the fleet at its arrival on Ninth Century Earth.

“Well, let’s call a planning meeting of our urban and industrial committees for two o’clock. There, we will review the best ways to start using the Hawaii islands to settle some of our people.”

### **16:57 (New Zealand Time)**

#### **Industrial Production Planning and Coordination Center (IPPC)**

#### **Industrial production sector, exploration cruiser H.S.S. MARCO POLO**

#### **In low Earth orbit**

Command Engineer Klaus Grundig was waiting for his assistant to show up and take over from him for the evening when a new tasking showed up on his computer screen. That tasking was marked ‘Top Priority’ and had been sent from the office of Chief Administrator Lynn Tsu, with Commodore Henry Ferguson signing on it. That meant that Klaus now had to reprogram his production schedule to give first priority to that new tasking. Klaus couldn’t help grumble a bit at that: the industrial production facilities of the MARCO POLO, which occupied a volume of over 800 million cubic meters inside the gigantic exploration cruiser, had already been working at maximum

capacity for over three weeks to build various types of structures, machinery and equipment needed to help resettle on Earth the Centaurian refugees still in cryogenic sleep inside the ship. Those facilities, controlled via sophisticated computer programs and extensively using industrial robotic systems, could produce about anything, including small spaceships, as long as they were provided with the needed basic construction materials. In turn, those basic construction materials were provided via 24 giant flying mineral extraction and processing plants, each 300 meters long, 130 meters wide and eighty meters high, which could fly out to a known source of the desired ore or chemical, be it on a planet or inside an asteroid, where they would let out excavating machines which would dig out the ore. Right now, all 24 of those flying extraction and processing plants were out of the MARCO POLO, either landed at chosen sites on Earth or busy mining M-Type ferrous-nickel asteroids. The raw metal ingots or chemical compounds that these flying plants produced were then regularly sent to the MARCO POLO via cargo shuttles, where they fed the various industrial complexes of the exploration cruiser. All that helped the MARCO POLO to fill its original main mission: to open new worlds to Human colonization and support those new colonies by building an industrial base for them on a chosen planet or moon. With Ninth Century Earth having possessed next to no industrial capacity worth mentioning, the facilities of the MARCO POLO were now working at maximum capacity in order to produce more habitat and industrial modules in order to resettle the eighteen million refugees from Alpha Centauri.

Klaus was still reading carefully the new tasking order he had just received when his assistant, Senior Engineer Lena Sarsgaard, showed up. A tall, 38-year-old Scandinavian blonde who was both a top production engineer and a certified genius, Lena also happened to be quite pretty. However, Klaus appreciated her mostly because of her competence and knowledge, not for her physical beauty.

"Aah, Lena! You are just in time to review with me a new top priority tasking order I just got from Chief Administrator Tsu."

"Oh? And what do we now need to produce so urgently, Klaus?"

"A variety of medium-sized habitat and urban services modules destined to establish new population centers, this time in the Hawaii Islands. Such modules were already high in our list of priorities but they are now at the top of our list."

"Hawaii?" said Lena, a grin appearing on her face. "Yes! Let me switch on my work station and I will review that new tasking with you before you go off shift."

Sitting down at her control station, which was next to Klaus' station, Lena switched on her computer and opened the tasking message received by her comrade and supervisor, studying it carefully before speaking again.

"Hum, that tasking is actually relatively modest, compared to what we already have on our plate. Let me check on our onboard reserves of steel, concrete, glass and polymers, to see if we will need to order more raw materials."

A couple of minutes were enough for her to answer her own question.

"We have enough aboard the MARCO POLO to fill this production tasking, now that it has top priority over our previous taskings. Since standard module designs have been specified for this order, we will be able to immediately launch their production. I calculate that the first modules will be completed in 72 hours, with the full order filled within fifteen days. Did our construction crews also receive this tasking order?"

"I am going to contact them now and advise them of this, Lena. In about three weeks, our first people will be able to go live in Hawaii. Damn, I wish that I could be part of them! Hawaii is such a beautiful place."

"I wish that I also could end up there." agreed Lena. "Well, I could always book my next vacation period there. To be able to tan myself on those nice beaches..."

**09:06 (Universal Time)**

**Friday, November 6, 861 C.E.**

**Reanimation center, cryogenic sleep vaults**

**H.S.S. MARCO POLO, in low Earth orbit**

Nina Le Ming was nearly in tears as she watched medical technicians at work and in the process of waking up the members of her family from their cryogenic sleep. She was holding her eight-month daughter Suzy in her arms while standing next to the cryogenic pods containing her husband Lee and her five-year-old son Kwang. Nina had been separated from Lee and Kwang for nearly two months now while taking care of her little Suzy in the emergency living quarters section of the exploration cruiser. Due to the fact that small babies were sensitive to the effects of cryogenic sleep, the babies and very young toddlers who were part of the eighteen million Centaurian refugees evacuated from Alpha Centauri aboard the MARCO POLO and two cargo ships had been separated from their siblings and fathers and had been kept with their mothers in the emergency living quarters section. Nina had to care alone for Suzy during those

weeks while living in crowded conditions, all the while crying for the destruction of her home world of Alpha Centauri A-4 by the monstrous Morgs. Now, however, Nina was going to be able to reunite at last with her husband and her son, having been selected with another 20,000 mothers and babies for resettlement in the new installations in Hawaii.

The medical technician assigned to the awakening of the Le Ming let Nina approach the pod containing young Kwang when the latter's eyes fluttered open. Still weak from the cryogenic sleep process, the boy could only turn slowly his head to look at his mother and baby sister.

"Mom? Where am I?"

"You are aboard the exploration cruiser MARCO POLO and we are in orbit around Earth, Kwang."

"Earth? What about our planet?"

"Alpha Centauri is gone, destroyed by the Morgs. We will have to start another life on Earth. Your father should wake up in a few minutes, at which time I will be able to inform you better about our present situation. Now, stay still and follow the instructions of the medical technician, who will guide your return from cryogenic sleep."

Nina then stepped back by a couple of paces to let the technician do his work.

Some twenty minutes later, Lee and Kwang were transferred to an adjacent recuperation lounge, where Nina was able to sit with them around a small table, her baby girl still in her arms, and discuss with them their family's situation. Lee took hard the news of the destruction of Alpha Centauri A-4 but the news that they were now stuck in the distant past left him in disbelief and shock.

"We're in the Ninth Century? How could that be possible?"

"Our scientists don't really know, but it resulted from the fleet being hit by an unknown type of Morg weapon. Our scientists are unanimous in saying that returning to the 41<sup>st</sup> Century is impossible. The good news is that the Morg threat is now three millenniums in the future. We can now resume safely our lives without fear of seeing the Morgs show up again."

Lee lowered her head and stayed silent for a moment while digesting all this. He finally looked back at Nina, who was cradling little Suzy in her arms.

"And where are we going to live exactly on Earth, Nina?"

“In Hawaii, more exactly in Oahu, at the location where Honolulu was...or rather would be in the future. The fleet has by now built and installed a habitat center there and one apartment is waiting for us in New Honolulu.”

“New Honolulu...” said Lee in a rather discouraged tone. “Will I be able to work there and earn a living, or will we be simply idle refugees in a near virgin land?”

“We won’t be idle, Lee. We, like the other refugees selected to go to Hawaii, were chosen according to our personal skills and past occupations. As an experienced agronomist, you will be able to work in the hydroponic gardens tower that was built as part of our new community, while I will be able to resume teaching once Suzy will have grown up more.”

Her words seemed to bring some relief to her husband, who however still felt immense sadness at the thought of all the souls who had perished in Alpha Centauri. Nina then patted his shoulder in encouragement.

“Come on, Lee! The important thing is that we survived and will be able to resume our lives as a family. They showed me pictures and videos of our new place on Oahu and it is truly a splendid place, while our new community center includes all the communal services and facilities we would have expected on Alpha Centauri. Let’s resume our lives with a positive attitude, for the sake of our children.”

Lee could only nod his head at that, realizing the wisdom of her words.



## CHAPTER 2 – ON THE ROAD TO EDEN



Western Europe after the splitting of the empire of Charlemagne between his three sons in 843.

**14:03 (Rome Time)**

**Tuesday, January 3, 862 C.E.**

**Via Appia (old Roman imperial road), 132 kilometer southeast of Rome**

**Principality of Benevento, Italian peninsula**

The group of seven men, women and teenagers walking along the old Roman road while pulling a small, rickety cart loaded with their baggage and supplies, formed a rather heteroclit band, with some of them wearing cheap but colorful clothes and with a young teenage boy playing a flute while walking next to the group's cart. The man pulling the cart, who was obviously the oldest member of the group and who appeared to be in his early thirties, was a tall, strongly-built man with blond hair and blue eyes somewhat atypical of the local Southern Italy natives, for the good reason that he was

not a local native. He had been born in a village near Regensburg, in Bavaria, which was part of the Kingdom of King Louis the German, one of the three sons of deceased Emperor Charlemagne. Karl had left his native village a long time ago, sixteen years ago to be exact, fleeing it with his beloved wife Greta, whom he had married against the wishes of his father, a poor farmer who had wanted to marry him to the daughter of a more prosperous man. He and Greta had then lived as wanderers, playing musical instruments, singing and dancing in public squares in order to collect some money and survive. At first, the living had been tough and meager but, with traveling entertainers like them being about the only kind of entertainment available to the people of the time, be they peasants, bourgeois or nobles, and with Karl's and Greta's skills improving with practice, they had managed to survive reasonably well while traveling from place to place along the routes and trails of Europe. On the way, Karl and Greta had two sons, fourteen-year-old Eric and ten-year-old Cedrik, plus one daughter, thirteen-year-old Ingrid. Along their route, they had also been joined by Judith, a Hungarian Jew who was now 22 years old and who had been saved from Church persecution by Karl and Greta, and by Markus, a young man from a small village near Ancona, in the Duchy of Spoleto, who had fled his abusive family. The progressively larger troupe had continued its endless trek, going down the eastern coast of the Italian peninsula after crossing the Italian Alps via the Brenner Pass, then reversing course along the western coast once at the bottom of the Italian boot. Now, the troupe was heading towards Rome, where they hoped to make good money by entertaining rich nobles and merchants.

Karl's troupe was advancing along a portion of road flanked on both sides by plantations of olive trees when young Eric suddenly shouted out loud while pointing excitedly at the sky above them.

"LOOK, ABOVE US! SOMETHING IS FLYING VERY FAST!"

The whole group stopped at once and craned their necks, looking up and following with their disbelieving eyes some kind of large, round object speeding silently by at high altitude while creating a white condensation trail. Greta signed herself as she looked at the impossible sight.

"Dear Mother of God! What could that be?"

"I frankly don't have a clue about that, Greta." replied her husband Karl. "However, it doesn't appear to be some kind of flying animal: its round shape is too regular and it doesn't have wings."

"Could it be a manifestation from God...or from the Devil?" asked hesitantly young Ingrid. Karl took some time before answering her while continuing to follow the flying ball as it sped away towards the East.

"I just don't know, Ingrid. It looked like a ship sailing by, if I would have to compare it to something. However, it is now gone and we still have some way to go before arriving in Gaeta, so let's resume our trip."

They barely had time to travel another 600 meters along the old paved road when the sound of approaching cavalymen coming from the direction of Naples made them stop and turn around, alarm filling them: too many times, men on horses meant either soldiers on the move or some noble and his escort ready to sweep them off the road in order to continue at speed. What Karl saw made him tense up at once: nine armed men were riding towards them, dressed like members of some noble family's retinue.

"Quick, let's get off the road to let those men pass!" ordered urgently Karl to his troupe. They just had time to do so before the riders came to their level. However, instead of galloping past them, the riders stopped next to the troupe, with the leading cavalryman asking a question in a harsh tone to Karl, using Neapolitan.

"YOU! HAVE YOU SEEN A TEENAGE ARAB GIRL LATELY?"

"Uh, no, Sire!" replied Karl, telling the truth. "Is she wanted for some crime?"

"SHE SURE IS! THAT AĪSHA IS AN ESCAPED SLAVE GIRL WHO MURDERED HER OWNER. IF YOU FIND HER AND RETURN HER TO NAPLES, THERE WILL BE A GOOD REWARD FOR YOU."

"Then, I will keep an eye for such a girl, Sire."

"DO THAT! FORWARD, MEN!"

Karl, like his family and troupe members, let out a sigh of relief as the riders continued northward on the road. Greta waited until the riders were way too far to hear her before speaking to her husband.

"Whatever reason that Arab girl had to kill her owner, I can't blame her for it, Karl: slavery is an insult to God."

"I agree with you, Greta, but there is nothing we can do about that cruel institution. Only the Pope could possibly have the power to ban that practice. However, I am not going to hold my breath for that to happen. The Church has already proved too

often that it is the first to violate Jesus' commandment to be kind and tolerant towards others."

Judith, whose family had been burned at the stake as heretics by the Church in her village south of Salzburg, could only nod her head at that. Karl then had 18-year-old Markus replace him at pulling the group's cart before they resumed their trip.

### **17:41 (Rome Time)**

#### **Via Appia, 128 kilometers southeast of Rome**

Making first Markus and the cart stop, Karl looked up at the Sun, now quite low on the western horizon, then looked around him at the woods flanking both sides of the old road. Seeing a small stream running parallel to the road at some distance and visible through the trees, he pointed it to the members of his troupe.

"We won't get to Gaeta before nightfall: this old road's pitiful state slowed us down too much. Let's get our cart off the road and go towards that stream. We will then establish our camp for the night near the stream, where we will be able to get some fresh water. Follow me, Markus!"

"You would think that those damn aristocrats and Church leaders would have collected enough money with their crushing taxes to at least pay for some road maintenance, hey?" said Markus while pulling the cart off the road to follow Karl between the dispersed trees. That attracted a snicker from Greta.

"You are dreaming, right? Those fat nobles, spending their precious gold on something else than their banquets, palaces and various luxuries? They don't give a damn about us little people and never will."

"But Churchmen must care more for us than the nobles, no?" asked 10-year-old Cedrik to his mother Greta, getting a shake of the head in response.

"The only difference between Church leaders and nobles is that the Church leaders are fatter, Cedrik. They make their pious prayers and speeches only to get more money from us during masses. I will however concede that monks, who have made vows of poverty, tend to care more about others, but that's about all. Once we are in Rome, you will be able to see how 'poor' the Church is."

Making Markus stop the cart a few paces from the stream, next to a tree, Karl waved at a small clearing surrounded by trees.

“This looks like a fine spot for our camp. Erik, Ingrid and Cedrik, you go collect deadwood for our fire. Greta, collect loose stones to build our campfire while me, Markus and Judith erect our tents. And don't I see anybody pee in the stream! I want that water to stay fresh.”

That made Ingrid giggle before she went off through the woods to collect dead branches for their fire, accompanied by her two brothers. Out of the experience from long practice, the group took less than half an hour to build their camp, with their two tents and light cart surrounding a small fire contained within a circle of stones. Thankfully, while the darkening sky was covered with clouds, no rain fell. However, the heat from the fire was most welcome in fighting off the cold air of January. Having earned little money lately from singing, dancing and playing music in public, the only food available for supper that night was some bread and cheese, which the group ate mostly in silence. While eating his bread, Karl thought about what his troupe could expect once in Rome. As one of the richest cities in the region, they could reasonably hope to earn some fair amount of money there by playing in the various squares of the city and in the homes of nobles and rich merchants. Maybe they would be able to earn enough to finally be able to buy some new clothes and, particularly, new shoes, to replace the well-worn and holed ones they presently wore. However, as hard and uncertain that their life as a traveling entertainers' group was, Karl did not regret the choices he had made in the past, starting with fleeing his native village near Regensburg, in Bavaria. He may be a poor man, but at least he was a free man. The same could be said of Greta, Judith and Markus, who also had fled their original homes to escape either abuse or persecution. His sixteen years on the road, from his native Bavaria, across the Italian Alps and down the Italian Peninsula, had shown him that the vast majority of the people he had seen and met was about as poor as him and his troupe, with peasants and farmers often indentured to their farms and enduring heavy taxes, while a tiny minority of nobles, churchmen and rich merchants profited from their people and lived in luxury, eating to their content. Karl then couldn't help feel some discouragement as he contemplated his long-term prospects. What he was most worried about was the future of his three children. He was still healthy, thank God for that but, at the age of 32, he was already well advanced into the kind of life expectancy he could hope for. Greta's future was even more uncertain, as any new pregnancy for her could well mean her death in labor, a fate that struck too many women in all the countries they had traveled through. Once he and Greta would be dead, then their three children would have to survive and grow

on their own, with little or no assistance from others, especially not from those selfish nobles. If any of them fell sick, then the most they could hope for was a place in some Church-run hospice, while it was more likely that they would simply die or starve because they couldn't entertain others anymore. The troupe's future prospects would also grow gloomier as they progressed northward, reaching colder regions where Winter would mean more misery for all of them.

Karl was still in his morose thoughts when an alarmed shout from his son Erik suddenly made him stiffen.

"HEY, SOMETHING MOVED OVER THERE, IN THE WOODS."

Grabbing at once the javelin he had put beside him on the grass, then jumping on his feet, Karl scanned the dark forest in the direction indicated by his son, while the rest of the group grabbed whatever weapon they had, be they knives, improvised clubs or small stones. Cautiously advancing with his javelin pointed forward, Karl walked slowly towards the bushes indicated by his son Erik while shouting in Neapolitan.

"WHOEVER YOU ARE, COME OUT IN THE OPEN!"

Still not sure if what Erik had seen was a person or simply an animal, like a boar or a deer, Karl stopped some five paces from a bush whose leaves had just shaken. After a few tense seconds, a small human shape stepped out in the open, facing Karl with both hands raised to face level. That shape proved to be a young teenage girl with brown skin wearing a simple short white tunic. She was also barefoot. Karl was then able to guess rather easily who she was and spoke again in Neapolitan.

"Is your name Aïsha?"

The girl nodded her head slightly before speaking, also in Neapolitan.

"Yes! How do you know my name?"

"Riders from Naples looking for you told us that a slave girl was on the run after killing her master. Is it true that you killed your master?"

The teenager, who was quite beautiful and appeared of Arabic blood, answered him in a nearly defiant tone.

"Yes, I did! The fat bastard wanted to rape me and I was able to grab a dagger and stab him as he lay over me. I do not regret killing him. Are you going to hand me over to his family?"

Karl did not reply to that question immediately, his mind racing through the possible repercussions of this encounter. If he did return to Naples and handed her to the family

of her master, he would probably be rewarded with a fair sum of money, money that his family and troupe could certainly use to survive and continue their road trip. If he sheltered her, then he would put himself and his whole family at risk if someone recognized her in the next few days, in which case he would be accused of harboring a fugitive slave and murderer. One last option to him would be to chase her away and forget that they had met, which was a fairly safe option. Karl then detailed more carefully the girl, noting how thin she was: like many slaves he had seen in the past, she had probably been kept close to starvation while being worked hard and being beaten from time to time. That last point finally decided him and he lowered his javelin's tip while speaking in a soft tone to the girl.

"Are you hungry, girl?"

Seeing her nod her head, he then pointed his family's campfire to her.

"Then, come sit near our fire, Aïsha. We don't have much but we have some bread and cheese."

"Thank you!"

As she followed him back to the campfire, Karl motioned to his family and companions to lower or let go their weapons.

"Calm down: we will offer her hospitality for tonight."

"But we risk a lot if found with her, Karl." objected at once Markus, who was still holding on to his camp knife. "Those riders who passed us earlier on will most certainly have alerted the people in Gaeta about that girl. If we are seen with her there, we could all be hanged for harboring a fugitive slave and murderer."

"And what did we do when we first met you near Ancona, two years ago? Did we return you to your abusive family? Did we refuse to help you?"

Markus, a rather short and thin young man, hesitated, then sheathed back his knife while lowering his head.

"No! You are right, Karl. But what will we do with her? She still could be recognized in Gaeta when we will arrive there tomorrow."

"I don't know yet, Markus. At least, let's give her some food and shelter for the night, then we will see."

Greta, smiling gently to the girl, showed her a place next to their campfire.

"Come and sit here, Aïsha. I will get some bread, cheese and water for you."

"Thank you! You are really kind people, to help me like this despite of the risks. Are you pilgrims going to Rome?"

“No! We are traveling musicians and entertainers and we have been on the road for years, stopping in villages and towns and playing to earn enough money to survive. My name is Greta and this is my husband Karl. The young man there is Markus and this is Judith, a Jewish girl whom we saved from Church persecution in Carinthia<sup>1</sup>, when she was only eight-years-old. We have two sons, Erik and Cedrik, and a daughter, Ingrid. Me and Karl originally came from Bavaria, quite far from here to the North. How about you? Where were you from?”

“I am from Sicily, but the boat transporting my family and me sank and I was then captured and enslaved by passing Neapolitan fishermen, who then sold me to the owner I killed. I was eleven at that time.”

“Reduced to slavery at eleven...what a cruel fate!”

Greta then hesitated before continuing.

“You said that you were from Sicily. Are you a Saracen<sup>2</sup>?”

“Yes, I am! My ex-master often beat me up to force me to renounce Islam but I resisted him.”

That confession attracted a frown on Markus' face, who had just sat back next to the campfire.

“A Muslim girl? That could aggravate our case if we are caught with her.”

“And helping a Jewish girl like Judith did not put us at risk, Markus?” replied Greta, her voice hardening. “Stop worrying about yourself and show some true Christian charity and compassion towards other unfortunate people, Markus.”

That seemed to chastise into silence the young Lombard man, who clamed up and resumed his eating as Greta fetched some bread and cheese for Aïsha, along with a cup of water.

After they all finished their meager, frugal meal, Greta borrowed an old robe that had belonged to her daughter Ingrid, who had since outgrown it, and accompanied Aïsha to the nearby stream, so that she could wash and change out of her slave's tunic, which could betray her to the people of Gaeta. As she was about to slip her tunic off over her head, the teenage girl handed her a dagger she had been hiding at her belt.

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<sup>1</sup> Carinthia: Old region of Eastern Europe now part of Hungary.

<sup>2</sup> Saracen: Name given to the Arabs of Sicily and North Africa by Christian Europeans.



"This is what I used to kill my master. I suppose that it could attract trouble on me...and you, if someone found it."

Greta, taking the dagger offered by Aïsha, examined it for a few seconds: it was a high-quality blade and had obviously belonged to a rich person. It also was smeared with blood. Greta then threw out the dagger into the woods, as far as she could, then looked down at the girl, who was a good half-head shorter than her.

"You were right: it could have brought us only trouble. Now, let's clean you up." Using a sponge dipped repeatedly into the stream, Greta rubbed it over Aïsha's young body, removing the grime and sweat covering it. She then used her old slave's tunic to dry her before slipping Ingrid's old dress over her head. In these hard times, and with the stiff price of new clothes, one used old clothes to the maximum and also kept them in case a new child would one day wear it. Unfortunately, they had no spare shoes for this new girl: all the shoes worn by the troupe members were already well-worn and often sported holes. Once Aïsha was dressed, Greta crouched in front of her and smiled to her.

"As I said earlier, we are a group of traveling musicians and entertainers. If you are to stay with us, you might as well join our troupe and learn a skill. Do you know how to play an instrument, or sing or dance?"

"I am good at dancing, something I liked doing."

"Excellent! About our visit to Gaeta tomorrow, don't worry: we will find a way to keep you safe. By the way, which language can you speak apart from Neapolitan?"

"My native language is the Arabic dialect spoken in Sicily. I learned Neapolitan during my two years as a slave in Naples. And you, Greta?"

"Me? I was fifteen when I fled my Bavarian village with Karl and have been traveling ever since. As a result, apart from my native Alaman, I learned Hungarian, Lombard and Neapolitan, plus know some Latin. My husband Karl also speaks the same languages as me. Uh, do you mind if I asked you a very personal question?"

"What question?"

"While a slave, did men ever take you?"

The teenager lowered her head at that and nodded once.

"The fishermen who retrieved me from the sea after my boat sank took turns on me before selling me off into slavery."

Greta couldn't help flinch on hearing that: to be gang-raped at the age of eleven! She could only imagine the kind of cruelty and abuse the poor girl had to go through. That

however only reinforced Greta's resolve to act like a true, kind and compassionate Christian, contrary to what too many hypocritical Christians she had met behaved. Getting back up, she gently took the hand of the Arab teenager and led her back towards the camp.

"You will sleep in the women's tent tonight, Aisha, so don't worry about being abused again."

### **07:09 (Rome Time)**

**Wednesday, January 4, 862 C.E.**

**Via Appia, 128 kilometers southeast of Rome**

"COME ON, PEOPLE! TIME TO HIT THE ROAD AGAIN!"

Spurred by Karl's shouted commands, the members of his troupe quickly packed away their tents and utensils and loaded them on their tiny cart. Unsure what to do, Aisha went to Karl, who dominated her by a good head.

"What do I do now, Karl? Are you going to hide me?"

Karl gave her a gentle smile while brushing her long black hair with one hand.

"First, your name is now Maria and you are a Neapolitan dancer I hired as part of my troupe a month ago, while in Naples. You will do your best not to react if someone calls out your real name, possibly as a test of your identity. Second, you will hide in our cart until we are inside Gaeta, so that the riders we met yesterday won't see you on their way back to Naples. Third, when facing other people, look and act as if you are a half-dumb girl, so that it would excuse your less than perfect Neapolitan. If you are recognized in Gaeta or elsewhere during our trip, then we could all be killed, so take your roleplaying seriously from now on. Do you understand me, Maria?"

"Yes! Thank you for helping me like this."

"Thank me by being a great dancer and helping us earn plenty of money while we do our shows. Now, get inside that big bundle containing our tents and move as little as possible. If you need to relieve yourself, then you better do it now, before we start rolling."

"Then, give me a minute, Karl!"

As the teenage girl started running into the trees, Karl suddenly called her up.

"AISHA!"

The girl stopped and turned around, then realized her mistake on seeing the sarcastic look on Karl's face.

"Oh! You mean 'Maria'?"

"Exactly! Now, go but be more careful from now on. Our lives will depend on that."

After about two minutes, the girl came back at a run, with Karl nodding his head.

"That was indeed fast, Aïsha."

"Who?" replied the Arab girl, looking confused and making Karl grin.

"That's better! Climb in and stay as still and mum as you can until I say so. We should arrive in Gaeta at around noon."

Once Aïsha was hidden on the cart, Karl went to its pulling bar and started moving it out of the woods and onto the old Via Appia, with the rest of the troupe walking alongside or behind it. It wasn't long before they started passing by other travelers, either merchants driving donkey or ox-drawn carts or chariots or pilgrims going to or returning from Rome.

The troupe had been traveling for about one hour when Karl stiffened and gave a warning to Aïsha.

"Be still, Maria! The riders who were looking for you yesterday are now approaching, coming from Gaeta, where they probably gave the alert about you. Whatever happens in the next few minutes, don't speak and don't move."

With the whole troupe now on alert, Karl noticed that they were not the only travelers crossing path with the riders to act with sudden caution by keeping their distances: aristocratic messengers and guards like them were known for their often arrogant attitudes and brutal ways. Thankfully, the riders simply trotted by him and his cart without even one look and continued south on the road, allowing Karl to breathe in relief once they were out of sight.

"Phew! Thank God that they were not more suspicious."

Raising a corner of the big bundle in which their two tents were wrapped, he spoke in a low voice to Aïsha.

"Those riders from Naples I met yesterday on the road just passed again, going back to Naples. I believe that it can be safe for you to come out by discreetly sliding back and then walk next to the rear of the cart. However, be ready to hide back on the cart the moment I tell you to."

“Okay!” replied the teenage girl before sliding out of her hiding place, ending one pace behind the cart and with a long scarf wrapped around her head and hiding the lower half of her face. Karl then pulled his cart back on the road, which he had left to let the horsemen pass, and resumed his trip to Gaeta.

Some three hours later, as the town of Gaeta was becoming visible in the distance, sitting on the slopes of a hill crowned by a castle, a huge shape suddenly sped by at low altitude, flying roughly from North to South. The troupe, like a merchant driving a heavily loaded chariot crossing paths with it at the time, was both stunned and terrified by the fleeting flyby, which was accompanied by a noise similar to that of a strong rush of wind. Before they could ask each other what that had been, a second similar giant object sped over them, following the first one. Greta, following with her eyes the two extremely fast flying objects as they disappeared in the southern sky, put one hand on her furiously beating heart.

“DEAR MOTHER OF GOD! WHAT WAS THAT?”

While Karl and the others could not answer her question, the merchant they had been level with on the road at that time spoke up, looking enthusiastic rather than scared.

“Those, my good woman, were two of the flying ships of the people from the future.”

“The people from the future? What the hell are you talking about, man?” asked Karl, completely flustered. In turn, the merchant, who had a teenage boy sitting next to him in his chariot, looked at him with some surprise.

“What? You never heard about the people from the future? In which hole have you been in during the last couple of months?”

“Uh, in and around Naples and Salerno.” answered Karl, making the merchant smile.

“Those are holes alright! Big holes but still holes. To make a long story short, I landed in Ostia by boat a few days ago, coming from Narbonne, where I had boarded a ship after visiting the Frankish city of Toulouse. Well, believe me or not but, some three months ago, a fleet of gigantic flying ships coming from the far future visited Toulouse. There, the people from the future concluded an alliance with the Count of Toulouse, who gave them some lands next to his city. Those people from the future, who possess some incredibly advanced knowledge and use extremely powerful weapons and machines, in turn built overnight a giant tower that reaches the clouds. That tower is

incredibly beautiful and can be seen from afar, both at day and night. These people also massacred the Vikings who were approaching Toulouse at the time and also destroyed the other Viking armies busy burning and looting other Frankish cities. They now operate a fabulous open marketplace next to Toulouse, where they trade a variety of advanced goods against foodstuff like cereals, fruits and olive oil. I was on my way back from Bordeaux, where I had bought many barrels of fine wine, and stopped for two days in Toulouse, where I exchanged part of my wine for a mountain of steel tools and products that I will assuredly be able to sell at great profit in Capua.”

“What kind of steel tools and products?” asked the astounded Karl, his mind in turmoil. In response, the merchant searched in one of the wooden boxes loaded in his chariot and extracted a 75-millimeter-long nail, which he handed to Karl.

“Like steel nails of various sizes. They sell these steel products at incredibly cheap prices, despite their high quality. In fact, a box of 200 such nails, all completely similar, cost me only three silver deniers.”

“ONLY THREE DENIERS?!” exclaimed Karl. “But one handmade nail normally costs close to one denier. Yet, this nail of yours is the best-looking one I ever saw. What about the goals of these people from the future? Did they come as conquerors?” The expression on the merchant’s face became sober then as he shook his head.

“They didn’t come as conquerors, but as refugees, if I could believe the stories I heard in Toulouse.”

Karl’s jaw dropped wide open at those words.

“As refugees? When they have flying ships and can massacre whole Viking armies? You don’t make sense, my friend!”

“Well, feel free to believe me or not, my good man, but I will tell you this: go to Toulouse! What those people from the future are building there is like the Garden of Eden. I have to go now, so that I could go sell my nails before someone else returns to Capua from Toulouse. You can keep the nail. Tata!”

Karl, like the members of his troupe and young Aïsha, watched the merchant’s chariot roll away for a long moment before they formed a tight circle next to their cart, examining in turn the nail given by the merchant.

“That man must have been drunk!” said Markus, agitated. “His story is too fantastic to be believed.”

“Well, we are not drunk and we still saw those two huge flying ships, Markus.” shot back Greta, making Karl nod his head slowly.

“You do have a point there, my dear Greta. Maybe we will learn more about these supposed people from the future once in Gaeta. Let’s continue our trip: asking ourselves many questions about such fantastic things now will get us nowhere.”

His troupe members could only agree on that, thus resumed their trip once Karl switched place with Markus in order to rest a bit from his cart pulling.

### **13:11 (Rome Time)**

#### **South gate of Gaeta**

Thankfully for the troupe, the local guards dressed and equipped in Byzantine fashion and manning the southern gate of the town of Gaeta did not ask them or other travelers to pay a gate toll, contrary to many other towns in the region. What the troupe found, though, was a flurry of conversations, discussions and even verbal confrontations among the population of Gaeta about what the merchant they had crossed path with had called ‘the people from the future’. As they slowly made their way towards the central marketplace of the town, still pulling their cart, the members of the troupe could see that the recent passage of the two swift flying ships had reinvigorated what was obviously a hot subject locally. What also quickly became obvious to Karl and Greta was that, despite all that talk, little solid information about these people from the future was factually known, apart from the fact that they had flying ships and were present in the Frankish city of Toulouse. That made Karl scratch his head in both confusion and frustration.

“Damn! How are we supposed to make out what these ‘people from the future’ really are, if what we have is only wild rumors and some fleeting appearances by flying ships?”

“And why don’t we go ourselves to Toulouse to see what is true about them, Father?” proposed young Ingrid. “We are already on our way towards the Northwest. Why not follow up the coast and go past Genoa and Massilia<sup>3</sup> to go to Toulouse?”

That made Karl smile while pointing an index at her.

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<sup>3</sup> Massilia: Old name for Marseille.

“Ingrid, you are indeed a smart girl! I think that we will do just that. First, though, we need to earn some money in order to be able to buy something to eat. Once in the town’s central marketplace, we will set up a show for the passersby.”

January being off-season for the growing of local crops, the troupe found the town’s central market half deserted, with only the temporary shops and tents of merchants selling imported items and products occupying it and with a few dozen people milling around. Going to an unoccupied corner of the market place, Karl had his troupe park their cart and break out their instruments in order to provide a public show. However, he had to say ‘no’ to young Aïsha when she proposed to help by dancing for the public.

“Thank you for your eagerness to help, Maria, but the passage of those riders from Naples is still too fresh and someone could point you out if you make yourself plainly visible. Keep that scarf over your face and stay near the cart for the moment. You will be able to dance once we will be in Rome.”

Karl then took out his lute, while Greta prepared her Celtic harp and Markus sat down with his goblet drum. On their part, Judith grabbed her flute while Ingrid prepared herself to dance and Erik took hold of a wooden bowl meant to collect the coins the spectators would be ready to give after the show. Their preparations quickly attracted a small crowd around their cart, a crowd that increasingly grew in size after they started playing, singing and dancing. Karl prided himself in being a good entertainer and sang along his wife Greta while playing his lute. Greta also sang while playing her harp, her favorite instrument, accompanied by Judith on the flute and by Markus on the drum. Ingrid, who had taken off her long, roughly-made travel dress, revealing her much shorter show light dress, proved at once very popular with the male spectators, with much of her long and well-shaped legs now exposed to their eyes. Their first number attracted genuine applause from the forty or so spectators watching the show and Erik was able to collect quite a few coins from the crowd. Encouraged by this initial success, Karl made his group play a second song, livelier than the first one. Ingrid also became more energetic with her dancing, twisting and turning in ways that made her short skirt fly up, revealing even more of her legs. This time, that second dance and song earned the group a few silver coins on top of the more usual copper coins. An aristocrat lady and her suite then joined the crowd of spectators as a third song and dance followed. That noblewoman obviously liked the group’s show and warmly applauded at the end, stunning young Erik

by dropping a gold coin in his wooden bowl. As Karl announced a short break in order to rest a bit, the aristocrat woman went to him, prompting Karl in bowing to her.

“What may I do for you, my lady?”

“I liked your show and I would like for your troupe to come entertain my family this evening.”

“We would be most pleased to do so, my lady.” replied Karl, hiding his satisfaction: entertaining nobles was by far the best way to make good money. “Where should we show up and at what time, my lady?”

“Show up at the Hypati<sup>4</sup>'s castle, up the hill, before supper. Tell the guards then that you came on the invitation of Lady Livia, the daughter-in-law of the Hypati.”

“We will certainly be there at that time, Lady Livia.” said Karl, who couldn't believe his luck. The noblewoman smiled, then turned around and walked away with her small suite of servants and guards. The other members of the troupe then gathered around Karl, eager to learn what the woman had told her. Greta was particularly ecstatic on learning that they would play for the family of the local consul.

“That is great news! We will be able both to make lots of money and eat a good supper. With luck, we will be offered a place to spend the night at the castle.”

That attracted a concert of pleased reactions: while their two tents were fairly sturdy, they still made for cramped accommodations where heavy rains could and would flood the ground on which they had been pitched and which were quite cold in Winter.

Getting back into their act, the troupe performed for another hour or so, earning in the process more coins. Then, with all of them being quite famished, the troupe went to one of the popular soup kitchens established around the market place, where they ate a reasonably good chicken and vegetable stew and drank some local ale and cider. In that, they were doing like a large number of common people who were too poor to buy their own cooking utensils or pay for firewood to feed a stove or kitchen fire. Such popular soup kitchens were in fact a common occurrence in the towns and cities of the time, with the practice dating at least as far back as the ancient Roman Empire. Those popular soup kitchens also often had a rather bad or at least suspicious reputation for often spoiled or overpriced food, with a popular saying declaring that food came from God, while the Devil provided the cooks.

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<sup>4</sup> Hypati : Old Byzantine title of 'Consul', equivalent to that of a Duke.



With the Sun starting to go down and with their stomachs filled, with a fair amount of coins now in their purses, Karl led his troupe up the hill, helped by Markus and Erik in pulling their cart towards the castle. They were stopped at the main gate by two guards, with one of them eyeing the group before speaking to Karl.

“What are you doing here?”

“We are a group of entertainers and we were invited to come here by Lady Livia, who wanted us to perform at supper time this evening.”

The senior guard, who had obviously received some instructions about the group, then nodded his head.

“Stay here! I will go get one of the Chamberlain’s<sup>5</sup> assistants.”

The guard then walked away, to return a few minutes later with a middle-aged man who eyed the troupe before gesturing with one hand.

“Please follow me!”

Following him past the fortified entrance gate, Karl and his group walked across an internal courtyard and soon entered a stable, where they found large stacks of hay and a few horses. The assistant chamberlain then pointed one of the stacks of hay.

“You can use that corner of the stables for the night. You will find both water and a chamber pot in the nearby stable boys’ dependency. Who is in charge of your group?”

“I am!” said Karl while stepping forward. “My name is Karl and I originate from Bavaria. I have been a traveling musician for sixteen years now.”

The man nodded his head, obviously pleased at hearing about his amount of experience.

“Then, make yourselves comfortable here for the time being. You may even practice with your instruments in the meantime. I will come and guide you to the main hall when your time to perform will come. After you will be finished performing, you will then be able to eat supper at a separate table set in a corner of the main hall. Be ready to play again if one of the guests asks so during the evening.”

“Of course, Sire!”

With the man then leaving the stables, Karl looked around him and pointed at an empty spot next to the mound of hay.

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<sup>5</sup> Chamberlain : One of the main staff members in a castle or noble household, in charge of running and maintaining it.

“Okay, lets push our cart against the wall, next to the hay. Then we will go clean up and prepare for our show. Maria, I will especially want you to practice your dancing with Ingrid, so that you can learn about the kind of music we play and the rhythm to follow.”

“But, Karl, you told me earlier to be discrete and stay out of sight.”

“Yes, I did, while we were in the marketplace. Here, the Consul or some of his people could wonder why a pretty girl like you is traveling with us but not performing with us. We will have to take our chances on that this evening.”

“As you wish, Karl.” said Aisha, only half convinced.

Some three hours later, the assistant chamberlain came back to the stables to get them and led the troupe inside the castle proper, to finally introduce them into a large, vaulted high-ceiling hall where servants were busy setting up tables and benches for the coming supper. The assistant chamberlain then pointed at a solitary pair of tables set in a far corner.

“You will be able to sit at one of those two tables, along with the Hypati’s servants, when it will be time for you to eat. The Hypati and his family and guests should start arriving in about half an hour. Be ready to perform by then. I will be the one to introduce you and your troupe. Remind me of your name again.”

“I am Karl, from the area of Regensburg, in Bavaria.”

“Then, Karl the Bavarian and his troupe it will be.”

The assistant chamberlain then left them to go direct some of the servants in the hall. On his part, Karl led his group to the table assigned to them, where he looked straight into Aisha’s eyes while speaking to her in a near whisper.

“Listen to me, Maria: this is very important. One of the cardinal rules for people like us when invited inside a castle, mansion or palace is to never jump into a conversation between our hosts and his or her guests, unless you are directly asked to speak. Doing otherwise is considered extremely impolite and inappropriate and could get us thrown out, often after being punished. So, even if you hear something that you think you should talk about, don’t! Also, I know that you Muslims can’t eat pork, like Judith, who is Jewish. If we are served pork for supper, don’t say a word and nibble at the side dishes or eat bread, while we take care of making at least part of your portion of pork disappear discretely. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Karl! About eating pork, I won’t mind that: during my over two years into slavery, my ex-master took pleasure into starving me by giving me only pork to eat. After a few weeks of that treatment I gave up, figuring out that Allah, in his infinite wisdom and kindness, would understand my reasons.”

Karl shook slowly his head at this story of cruelty and sadism. Too many so-called Christians conducted themselves in a way that would have displeased the good Lord Jesus.

“Still, we will be ready to help you if you need it, Maria.”

“And I thank you for that, Karl. You and your troupe are truly good people.”

“You’re welcome, Maria.”

The troupe’s wait wasn’t very long, actually, with the first supper guests arriving only a few minutes later and with the Hypati and his family entering the hall some twenty minutes later. The costume worn by Hypati Constantine however surprised Karl, who nearly did a doubletake.

“The Hypati is a man of the Church?”

A servant passing near him at the time gave him a benevolent smile.

“He is! Hypati Constantine was the Bishop of Formiae before his enemies chased him out years ago, forcing him to flee to Gaeta. Now, he is the Bishop of Gaeta...and the Hypati.”

“And...does he still have many enemies?”

The servant nearly laughed at his question.

“Does he have enemies? My poor man, every nobleman or ruler in Italy has his lot of enemies and rivals, including the Pope himself.”

The servant then walked away, leaving Karl to digest his words. Actually, it was easy to believe that servant, as what he had said was true about the local rulers and nobles of nearly all the lands and countries Karl had gone through during his years of traveling.

As soon as the Hypati had arrived, he clapped his hands twice together just before sitting at the head table.

“Please sit, my friends, and let’s have supper together.”

Everybody else waited until Constantine had sat before imitating him. Karl couldn’t help notice then that no woman was sitting next to the Hypati. Maybe he was a widower, Karl reasoned, something that was far from rare for mature men of the time. A procession of

six servants then entered, carrying soup bowls which were then distributed to the Hypati, his family and his guests. Aïsha was about to ask why the troupe was not being served as well when Karl spoke to her in a low voice.

“We will be served after we give our show, Maria: we are supposed to entertain the guests while they eat.”

Effectively, the assistant chamberlain approached them as soon as all the others had received their soups.

“I am going to announce your troupe. Be ready to start performing.”

As the man then turned around and walked to a position a few paces in front of the head table, Karl signaled to his troupe members to grab their instruments and go take position in the middle of the hall. Karl grabbed a stool as the assistant chamberlain bowed to the Hypati and his family and spoke.

“Your Excellency, it is my pleasure this evening to announce that the troupe of Karl the Bavarian will be playing and entertaining us tonight with music and dancing.”

“Then, let’s hear them!” pronounced Constantine, a slightly overweight man of rather short stature who was in his late forties. The assistant chamberlain bowed to him again, then turned around and nodded to Karl, who spoke briefly to Judith, Ingrid and Aïsha.

“We will start with a round dance. One, two, three!”

Karl then started playing his lute, accompanied by Markus’ goblet drum and Greta’s flute, while Judith, Ingrid and Aïsha started dancing an old form of pagan dance, holding each other’s hands. Karl, who had a nice voice, also started singing in Alaman while playing his lute. The Hypati and his guests watched on while eating their soups and exchanging a few words and comments, to applaud warmly at the end of the first dance. Constantine then looked at Karl, speaking to him in Neapolitan.

“That was a nice piece, Karl of Bavaria. Do you know any ballad in Neapolitan or Latin, to which your girls could do a slow dance?”

“I certainly do, Your Excellency!”

Taking a second to select a song in his mind, he then nodded to Greta.

“Get your Celtic harp, Greta. We will play ‘Lothar’s Ballad’.”

Getting her harp and a stool, Greta then sat next to Karl and Markus, while Judith quickly explained in whispers to Ingrid and Aïsha the kind of moves to do for that dance. With Markus switching to a sort of early guitar fiddle named ‘cithara’ and with both Karl and Greta singing, Judith led Ingrid and Aïsha in a slow, whirling dance around the hall,

passing close by the guest tables and the high table, smiling to the dinners as they passed by them. Aïsha, who had done many such dances during her time as a slave girl and who knew well the effect she could have on men, made her moves as provocative as possible without becoming offensive to the noble women present, with the idea of earning as much tips as possible for Karl's troupe. She did not miss the fact that the Hypati seemed especially captivated by her and gave him an extra warm smile when she waltzed in front of him. Her charms and those of Ingrid and Judith, who were also quite beautiful in their own rights, apparently won the appreciation of the Hypati, who applauded warmly at the end of that ballad. Calling his chamberlain to him, he whispered to him while giving him a few coins which he took from his belt purse. As the chamberlain then went to Karl, the latter noticed that Constantine quickly conversed in whispers with his son Marinus and his daughter-in-law Livia, who nodded their heads and smiled in response. Karl was wondering what was going on when the chamberlain stopped in front of him and gave him a fistful of coins while whispering to him.

"His Excellency liked very much your ballad and your girls' dancing. There will be more coins like these if your girls could, uh, spice up the next dance for the enjoyment of His Excellency."

Looking at the coins he now had in his hand, Karl's eyes opened wide on seeing that they were gold solidus coins, each of which equaled twelve silver denarii. Not being a fool and having heard such 'wishes' before, what the Hypati truly wanted was not difficult to figure out. His long experience on the road had also taught him that nobles and churchmen of high rank were often far from immune to the temptations of the flesh and were accustomed to get what they wanted.

"Uh, give me time to speak to my girls first. They may have to go change before their next dance."

"Do that, but don't disappoint the Hypati."

On that less than subtle warning, the chamberlain walked back to his own place at the guest tables. Calling his troupe members close to him, Karl looked at Judith, Ingrid and Aïsha.

"Look, girls, I do not wish to force you to do this, but the Hypati is ready to give us gold if you could make your next dance more, uh, revealing. He already gave me five gold solidus and is promising more if we satisfy him. On the other hand, refusing his request would most probably get us booted out of the castle. What do you say?"

Judith, obviously not too pleased by that, nonetheless decided to go with the flow: the amount of money they could earn tonight would easily sustain the whole troupe for weeks on the road. Ingrid also agreed with a nod, sighing in resignation. The reaction from Aïsha however surprised them all.

"I had to dance naked many times for my ex-master. I am ready to do my best to please the Hypati tonight, for the good of the troupe."

"Then, go to the stables and change into lighter attires. Make it quick!"

As the woman and two teenagers nearly ran out of the hall, Karl hurried to the chamberlain and spoke to him in a low voice.

"My girls have gone back to the stables to change and should be back in a few minutes. Me and the rest of my troupe will play some music in the meantime."

"Excellent! That will give us time to have the main course served."

Letting Karl return to his seat, the chamberlain then clapped his hands together and shouted out to the servants present in the hall.

"BRING IN THE MAIN COURSE!"

Once they arrived in the stables, Judith and Ingrid searched at once in their meager collection of spare clothes, kept in their cart, trying to decide what to put on. Seeing them both reluctant about showing their bodies and undecided about what to wear, Aïsha, who had nothing else to wear but her old slave's short tunic, took on her to help them.

"Look, girls. I can perfectly understand that you don't like this and are not eager to show your bodies to those so-called 'nobles' but I had to do this constantly while I was a slave, so I can live with that. I think that I have an idea about how to please the Hypati without shaming you."

"What do you have in mind, Maria?" asked Judith, whose Jewish upbringing had taught her modesty. The Sicilian girl then spoke quickly, exposing her idea to her and Ingrid and making them nod in agreement.

Back in the main hall, the guests got served the main course, which consisted in roast beef served on thick slices of dry bread called 'trenchers' and covered with some sauce, plus an assortment of steamed vegetables, the lot served with wine. Karl was eating with gusto his portion of juicy meat while Greta played her harp when the girls came back from the stables. He frowned a bit on seeing that their new outfits were not

much sexier than their previous ones but nodded his head once Judith whispered a few words into his ears.

“That could work. Let me wipe my hands clean and get my lute and you will be able to start dancing.”

Using a corner of the table cloth to wipe his hands and mouth, Karl then signaled to Markus to interrupt his eating as well and told Greta to switch to her flute before telling them what piece of music to play to accompany the dancers. As he did so, Judith whispered a few sentences into the young Erik’s ears, making him smile in anticipation. The Hypati, watching all that while eating, bent sideways to speak to his son Marinus.

“I wonder what their next dance will look like. These girls’ dresses are not much more immodest than the ones they wore before.”

“Maybe their wardrobe is limited, Father. After all, they are obviously fairly poor. However, their girls are definitely worth the look. Aah, I believe that they are about to start to dance.”

Karl, Greta and Markus effectively started playing a new piece of music, this one starting on a relatively slow rhythm as Judith, Ingrid, Aïsha and Erik started dancing. Hypati Constantine, surprised at first to see a boy join in the dancing, quickly understood the theme of the dance and smiled in amusement as Erik whirled around the girls, touching their buttocks and chests and attracting false cries of protestation.

“The boy is flirting with the girls. They turned this dance into a vaudeville. I like that!”

It was soon evident to all the guests that the older Judith was rejecting poor Erik’s advances, with the boy then trying his luck with Ingrid. Ingrid in turn gave him the cold shoulder despite some quite audacious caresses from Erik, who then started buzzing around Aïsha while she danced around. To the titillation of the Hypati and of his male guests, Aïsha seemed more receptive to the boy’s advances and let his hands go up and down her body, while her own hands rubbed a few times against his groin. As the rhythm of the music accelerated, Erik’s moves became even more audacious and he pulled down one of the shoulder straps of Aïsha’s short tunic, making her young left breast pop out and also making the Hypati’s eyes pop out. Continuing to dance around Aïsha, Erik very visibly fondled her left breast a few times, then pulled down the other strap of her tunic, making her topless and then fondling both of her breasts. With falsely offended exclamations and more than a few laughs coming from the guests, Erik then pulled on one end of Aïsha’s loincloth, undoing it and leaving only the lower part of her

short tunic to cover her closely shaved groin and her buttocks. However, she then started whirling around, supposedly to escape the boy's preying hands but also making her tunic fly around, giving tempting glimpses of her lower body to the Hypati and his guests. By now, Constantine had creamed his robe and couldn't take his eyes off her. Aïsha then finished her dance by throwing her right foot up and resting it on the head table while performing a wide split in front of Constantine and giving him a wide, inviting smile, her breasts still exposed and her groin most visible to him. Constantine, completely seduced by Aïsha, got up on his feet and applauded wildly.

"BRAVO! BRAVO! Come join me at the high table, girl."

"Right away, Your Excellency." replied Aïsha before letting her right leg come down and then crawling quickly on all fours under the table, with Constantine then sitting her very close next to him and having a cover added for her. She then gave her a mischievous smile.

"Should I cover back my chest, Your Excellency?"

"Hell no!" replied at once the Bishop. "You are perfect just as you are now, girl. And what is your name, my child?"

"Maria, Your Excellency."

"Then, Maria, I think that we will get along just fine tonight. In truth, it seems that your dance fired up many of the married men among my guests. We may have a rather torrid night around the castle tonight."

At the table assigned to his troupe, Karl mentally thanked young Aïsha for offering herself as bait the way she did, saving both Judith and his own daughter Ingrid from having to expose their bodies in public. The chamberlain soon walked to him as he was resuming eating, along with his troupe member. Stopping at his right side, the chamberlain discretely gave him a small leather purse which clinked with metallic noises when he took it.

"For your troupe's latest number, from the Hypati. One of you is now free to walk around and collect tips from the guests while they are still all warmed up."

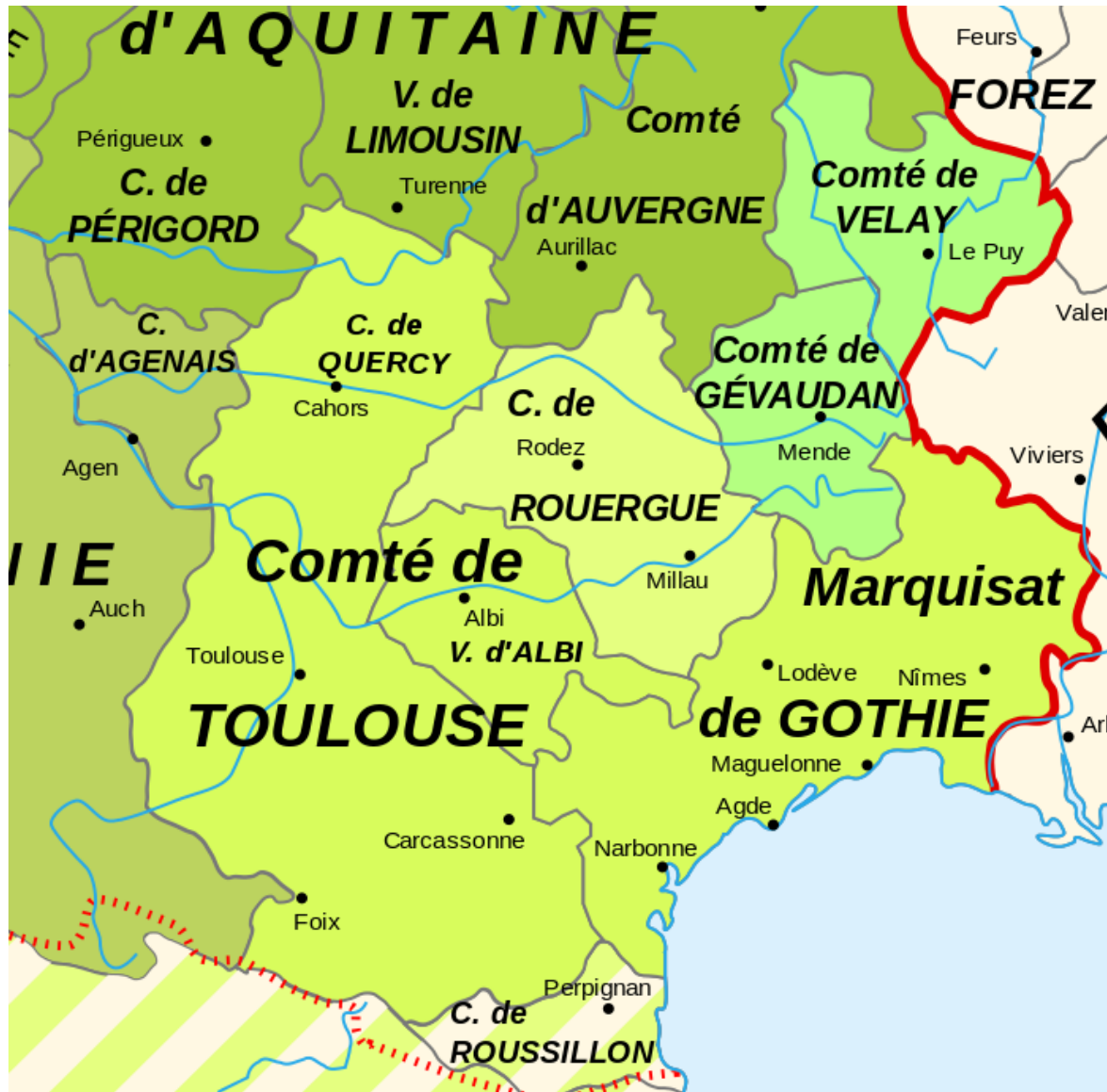
"Thank you very much, Sire."

As the chamberlain walked back to his seat, Karl told Ingrid to do the tour of the tables and collect the tips but to avoid trying to collect from the Hypati. The blonde teenager jumped to it right away and walked around the tables with a wooden bowl, making sure to frequently bend down quite low and thus give a good view down her cleavage to the

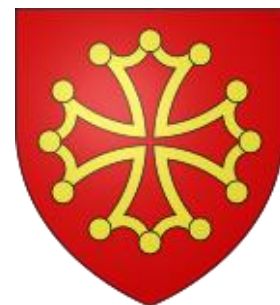


male guests, something that more than often made their tips more generous. As for the purse given by the chamberlain, Karl found fifty silver denarii in it. Overall, this made for a truly excellent night for his troupe, which would now be able to afford new shoes before they continued on their way to Rome.

## CHAPTER 3 – MEETING IN TOULOUSE



County of Toulouse in 1030 C.E. (Slightly larger than in 862 C.E. Count Raymond the First of Toulouse possessed the counties of Toulouse, Rouergue and Quercy, plus the vicounties of Albi and of the Limousin.)



07:52 (Paris Time)

Thursday, January 5, 862 C.E.

Toulouse municipal wood construction shop

Next to the Toulouse New Market, outside of the Narbonne Gate

Independent County of Toulouse, Francia

Ranulf was happy to enter the large combined warehouse/hangar/shop that housed the Toulouse municipal wood construction shop, which was heated: while the outside temperature was well above freezing, it was still chilly for him. Taking off his woolen cape and hanging it in the coatrack of the shop's entrance lobby, he then put his right hand flat on the small screen of a digital print recognition unit fixed to a nearby wall and which would register the time he had entered the shop. Once that was done, he gave a warm smile to the very pretty Oriental young woman from the Human Expansion who worked as the secretary and receptionist for the municipal wood construction shop and who sat behind a reception counter.

"Good morning, Kimi!"

"Good morning, Ranulf! How are your wife and kids?"

"Just fine, thank you. I just accompanied Régis and Marie to their school and they should now be eating breakfast there before starting their classes."

Kimi Matsuda nodded her head in comprehension at those words: the Toulouse Primary School, a wooden building Ranulf had helped build, was situated nearby, next to the vast open-air marketplace built just outside of the city's Narbonne Gate. The children of the Carolingian citizens of Toulouse frequented it and benefited from free and nutritious breakfasts and lunches, on top of getting a fresh fruit at the end of the day, something meant to encourage their parents in making them attend school. That had proved successful at once when the school program had been introduced three months ago, with the medieval citizens of Toulouse jumping on that chance to have their young children fed for free. The local church authorities had then blasted verbally what they called 'a blatant attempt at bribing the citizens of Toulouse with free food' but had quickly found out that their strident accusations had only turned their old worshippers away from them, on top of getting them much lower offerings at regular masses.

Walking out of the reception lobby and into the construction shop proper, Ranulf then went to see his foreman, Fidel Ramirez, a Human Expansion man in his late thirties who had taught him and fourteen other carpenters from Toulouse how to work with modern tools, measurements and methods. A short session in a mnemotronic chair at the knowledge assimilation center of the giant Toulouse Tower, which sat on the Island of the Ramier, next to the old city, had taught Ranulf how to speak English, read, write and count, thus giving him the basic knowledge he needed to learn about modern

carpentry. As a result, Ranulf and his companion carpenters were now able to read architectural plans and follow them to build wooden structures, typically prefabricated houses and communal buildings or small wooden bridges and pieces of furniture. Fidel Ramirez smiled to him on seeing Ranulf approach.

“Aah, Ranulf, nice to see you this morning! I will have a new, priority project for you and the team today. We will suspend for a couple of days the construction of park equipment and communal latrines huts, time to urgently build a small family house.”

“Oh?! And what prompted that change of priorities, Fidel?”

“Last night, a farmer and his family lost their house near Moissac<sup>6</sup>, when it accidentally burned to the ground. Thankfully, nobody was hurt but those poor people had to find shelter with a neighbor in the middle of the night.”

“Poor people! Since we got the job of building a new home for them, I suppose that Count Raymond is paying for it?”

“He is!” replied Fidel, nodding once his head. While he himself was paid by the Human Expansion as one of its citizens, the Count of Toulouse, Raymond the First, owned the municipal wood construction shop, built for him by the Human Expansion, and paid its Carolingian employees, on top of deciding the priorities in terms of what to build. That collaborative effort between Count Raymond and the Human Expansion’s representative in Toulouse, Ann Shelton, had proved most beneficial to all and had already resulted in the building of schools, an hospice for old people, a communal medical clinic and dispensary, communal latrine huts meant to make Toulouse a much cleaner and sanitary city and, most important of all, the Toulouse open-air market, which was now attracting an ever growing number of merchants from all over Francia and beyond. Fidel then unrolled a blueprint on top of a work table and explained it to Ranulf.

“That family in Moissac counts three adults and four children. We will thus build for them our standard model of four-bedroom prefabricated rural house, to which we will add a small barn. Kenneth and his specialist team will take care of the electricity and plumbing parts, while a robotic team is already on the site, clearing the debris and digging new foundations.”

Ranulf nodded at those words, being well knowledgeable by now with the very efficient construction methods and working robots of the Human Expansion.

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<sup>6</sup> Moissac: small town on the River Garonne, situated in the Northwest corner of the County of Toulouse.

“Then, we should be able to build the elements of that house and barn within three days and to assemble it on the spot within an extra day, Fidel.”

“That was my assessment as well, Ranulf.”

“Do we have sufficient stocks of cut and dried wood for that project?”

“We have still plenty of cut and dried wood in stocks at this time and we are due to receive today more cut wood from overseas, which will then be stored inside our wood drying warehouse. As for the nails and glass panes, we also have plenty of them. We can thus start building this house right away. Robots already brought in the needed wood and parts from the construction materials warehouse. We now just need to start the cutting and assembling as soon as the others are in.”

“Then, I will go measure and mark in advance the wood beams to be used.”

That made Fidel smile to Ranulf, most satisfied with him: despite having been a basically illiterate man only four months ago, Ranulf had since proved to be an intelligent, energetic and strong worker with a solid common sense. In that, he had proved yet again that ignorance was not synonymous with stupidity.

“Excellent! Let’s get to it, then!”

### **09:07 (Paris Time)**

#### **Castle of Vienne, Cisjuranian Burgundy**

#### **On the Saone River, thirty kilometers south of Lyons**

#### **Kingdom of Provence**

Girard de Vienne, Duke of Lyon, Count of Vienne and preceptor to King Charles of Provence, was discussing with Aurélien, the notary of young King Charles, the state of the food provisions for the castle when a guard came to them at a run, completely agitated.

“YOUR EXCELLENCY! YOUR EXCELLENCY! A FLYING BOAT JUST LANDED IN THE CASTLE’S COURTYARD!”

Normally, Girard de Vienne would have smacked that guard on the head for saying nonsense but the last few months had been much less than normal. Despite the typical slowness at which news and information traveled around in the Middle Ages, Girard did know that such flying boats and ships were more than just wild visions. The news that King Charles of Francia had been to all intents and purposes defanged and deposed in last October by powerful people from the future who used flying ships had reached

Vienne in November, along with the news that the various Viking armies ravaging and looting Francia had been massacred by those same people from the future. That had been a moment of intense celebration in Vienne, as Girard de Vienne and his protégé, young, sickly and feeble-minded King Charles of Provence had been fighting both King Charles of Francia's army and the Viking pirates, on top of fighting off incursions by the Muslim forces of the Emir of Cordoba, Muhammad the First. Then had come only days ago news about the rather forceful visit those same people from the future had paid to Pope Nicholas the First in early December. Of those enigmatic people from the future, Girard de Vienne knew only two things for sure: first that they used flying ships and had terrifying weapons; second, that they had established an outpost in Toulouse and had concluded some kind of pact with Count Raymond of Toulouse. That some of them had now come to this castle had to be treated with both very cautious diplomacy and utter seriousness. Girard thus asked a question to the guard in a firm but neutral tone.

"How big is that flying boat?"

"It is actually not that big, your Excellency: it is at most some eight paces long and two paces wide."

That actually helped Girard in relaxing a bit: the people from the future possessed much larger flying ships and such a small boat could possibly mean that they had come with peaceful intents.

"Has anybody come out of that flying boat?"

"Not yet, Your Excellency, but ten of our guards are now surrounding it and are ready for anything."

"Go tell them to leave the courtyard at once!" said Girard, tensing up again. "I want no provocative action made against that flying boat or its occupants. I am going to go down to the courtyard to deal with this personally."

"Understood, Your Excellency!" replied the guard before running away. Aurélien, who was also the Abbot of Ainay, in Lyon, gave him a sober look.

"Be careful, Your Excellency: we still don't know if those people from the future are manifestations of the Devil or not. They already humiliated Pope Nicholas and are said to be atheists."

Girard nearly laughed in his face in reaction.

"Anybody who massacres Viking armies wholesale can't be evil in my mind, Aurélien. Those people may be atheists but I will ask you not to prejudge them because of that. They represent too much power to be denied or rejected out of hand without

good reasons. Go alert King Charles but make sure that he doesn't panic or becomes incoherent at the sight of that flying boat."

"Uh, yes, Your Excellency!"

Letting the royal notary walk away at a quick pace, Girard de Vienne, still a vigorous man at the age of 51, an advanced age for the average man of the time, started climbing down the nearest staircase, coming down from the upper floor of the castle to the ground level. He arrived at the courtyard just as some sort of door pivoted upward on one side of the mysterious flying boat, which was shaped a bit like a flattened teardrop. Girard couldn't help then to hesitate and stop, while his left hand got hold of his sword's pommel, when a gigantic shape stepped out of the flying boat. That person wore a sort of elaborate and complicated armored suit and stood higher than Girard, who was considered a big man in Vienne. However, the newcomer was not holding any kind of weapon and simply closed the door of the flying boat before starting to walk calmly towards Girard. The latter had to make an imperious gesture to the four guards standing behind him, who had pointed their spears.

"STAND DOWN, MEN! That newcomer is probably here to talk. Go back by a good ten paces."

The nervous guards obeyed him and stepped back to the end of the hallway, letting Girard be alone to greet the person from the future, who stood a good half head over him.

"Good day to you, Sire! I am Girard de Vienne, Duke of Lyons, Count of Vienne and preceptor of King Charles of Provence. What is the purpose of your visit?"

The newcomer responded by first unlocking and opening up the opaque facial visor of his helmet and then speaking in good but accented Occitan.

"And good day to you, Your Excellency! I am Corporal Diane Champagne, sent by Lady Ann Shelton, Plenipotentiary Representative of the Human Expansion in Toulouse. I came to deliver an invitation to an important meeting."

Girard stayed frozen for a good second as he contemplated the face of a pretty young woman smiling down to him.

"A...a woman?"

"The last time I checked myself, I was." was her facetious reply. She then became serious and presented a sealed envelope held in her right hand. "If we could go

inside, I could then explain to you the goal of that meeting, Your Excellency. Be assured that I came with only peaceful intentions.”

“Uh, alright, Lady Diane.” said Girard while taking the offered envelope. “Please follow me.”

Girard then led her down the hallway and went up the staircase he had just used, coming off it one level up and bringing her to a study, where a large table and ten chairs stood.

“The private royal council room.” explained Girard after Diane Champagned entered it behind him. “I will now have someone inform King Charles, so that he could listen to your words.”

“Go right ahead, Your Excellency.”

Somehow, her relaxed attitude and tone did a lot to reassure Girard, who went out in the hallway long enough to pass an order to a guard.

“Go tell King Charles that he should come to the private royal council room, along with his notary. A person from the future came to deliver an invitation to a meeting.”

“Right away, Your Excellency!”

The guard ran away, returning a few minutes with young Charles de Provence, who was only sixteen-years-old, and his notary Aurélien. Girard frowned when he saw that no less than twenty guards and knights were following them closely, probably alerted by Aurélien.

“Hold there, men! Only the King and Abbot Aurélien will enter the council room.”

The senior knight leading the men-at-arms nearly objected but kept his mouth shut on seeing the frown on Girard’s face. The latter let King Charles and Aurélien enter, then closed the thick wooden door behind them before going to the council table, where he sat next to King Charles, facing Diane Champagne. Diane, on her part, examined for a moment the young and frail-looking king before speaking up.

“As I said earlier to Duke Girard, I came to deliver an invitation to a meeting with Lady Ann Shelton, Plenipotentiary Representative of the Human Expansion in Toulouse. For your information, we of the Human Expansion accidentally arrived from the 41<sup>st</sup> Century on September 23 of last year and are now stranded in this century. We were then fleeing a race of alien invaders who were destroying the worlds inhabited by Humans. Before you could panic at this piece of news, be reassured: those alien



invaders don't know how to travel through time, so are incapable of coming here, as incapable as we ourselves are of returning to our original time period. We are thus refugees of sorts, but we do not intend or even wishes to act like invaders and seize by force new lands for ourselves. Instead, we occupied faraway overseas lands which were still devoid of human occupation and are presently rebuilding cities there."

"Then, why come to Toulouse?" asked Girard de Vienne.

"We sent first a team in Toulouse in order to ascertain the exact date we had ended in. We also concluded an accord with Count Raymond of Toulouse after finding him to be a caring and reasonable man, so that we could open a public market there and thus be able to attract merchants and buy food from them and from the Count. While they are not in danger of starving at this time, the refugees carried by our fleet are presently rationed, until we could develop our own crops in the lands we settled overseas. In exchange, we sell products that we know how to produce in huge quantities, typically products made of steel or glass. Since the Vikings were approaching Toulouse at the time of our arrival there, we decided to get rid of them and of the other Viking armies ravaging Europe."

"And in exchange for what did you do that?" asked Aurélien in a skeptical tone, prompting Diane in eyeing him severely.

"We did that simply to stop and prevent the systematic murder of thousands of innocent people by those Vikings, not simply to gain some reward. Yes, Count Raymond thanked us then by giving us the nearby Island of the Ramier, on which we subsequently built our outpost, but our biggest reward was to save countless innocent lives. The Human Expansion stands for the welfare and care of all, irrespective of race, sex, social conditions or beliefs. The meeting to which King Charles and Duke Girard are invited to is meant to conclude an entente between the various landowners and noble leaders in Francia, in order to cement a durable peace around the country. Other important Carolingian leaders will also be invited to that meeting, which will be held tomorrow in Toulouse."

"Tomorrow, in Toulouse?" said Girard, tensing up. "But we can't get there this fast!"

"We know!" replied Diane while smiling. "That's why we are going to provide transportation to Toulouse and back for you. If you accept to attend this meeting, we will send tomorrow morning a flying aircar like the one I came in, which will then fly you to Toulouse. Before you decide on whether you will come or not, know that there will be a

few conditions attached to our invitation. First, you will not bring any weapons with you. You may dislike some of our other guests attending the meeting and we don't want to see it degenerate into a brawl. Second, religious beliefs will not be discussed at that briefing, except for us to state that we will not tolerate any acts of religious intolerance or persecution by anyone, be they Christian or Muslim. We are steadfast atheists and we do not wish to waste our time on futile religious debates. The only thing we wish to accomplish is durable peace around the whole of Francia. Finally, we will keep the number of attendees to a reasonable number: the more people around a table, the more intractable the discussion becomes. However, we will be happy to welcome the wives and children of attendees, who will then be able to visit our installations in Toulouse while we talk. Countess Berthez of Toulouse will be guiding them around. In your particular case, we are extending our invitation to King Charles of Provence, to Duke Girard, to King Charles' scribe and to up to six of your relatives. Please do not bring bodyguards or armed knights with you, as anybody who is armed will be refused seats aboard our aircar."

Girard then asked a question on behalf of young Charles of Provence, who obviously had problems following properly the conversation because of his slow mind.

"And who else exactly is invited to this meeting, Lady Diane?"

"The list of guests and attendees is attached to our invitation, Duke Girard. You may take your time to review it before giving me your answer to our invitation."

Breaking the wax seal of Count Raymond of Toulouse on the envelope, Girard then opened it and extracted a two-page document made in a type of thin, white paper he had never seen before. Reading quickly the first page, which was the actual invitation to the meeting, he then switched to the second page, which gave the list of attendees. Girard couldn't help tense up on reading a few of the names and he looked up at Diane, misgiving on his face.

"You invited the sons of the late Humfrid of Gothie? Wasn't Humfrid killed by one of the sons of Count Raymond three months ago? How do you expect them to not react violently to your invitation when they will receive it?"

"Well, they will be free to ignore it or to refuse squarely to come to the meeting, which would be a stupid and shortsighted decision in my opinion, but attacking our messenger would not only be stupid on their part: it would prove to be their deaths."

Girard couldn't help eye her with some contempt then. For him, a simple messenger and a woman to boot offering her personal opinion to a nobleman like him was at a minimum displaced on her part, at least here.

"Does your lord often listen to your opinion on such high-level political matters?" Diane, having expected in advance some level of sexism and snobbery, returned his stare at once, while her voice cooled down noticeably.

"Let's make something clear right away, Duke Girard. I may appear to you to be only a low-level messenger and a woman but know that Doctor Ann Shelton listens to everyone around her, and not only to those of comparable rank or function. In fact, we consider everyone in our society to be equals and our leaders are elected to serve the public, not to get rich or powerful. I am the personal bodyguard of Doctor Shelton, who considers me as one of her friends, and have fifteen years of formal schooling and military training to my credit. I am thus no illiterate tart. If you decide to accept Doctor Shelton's invitation, then you better treat with respect everybody that you will meet in Toulouse, irrespective of their ranks or functions. Also, in my society, there is absolute equality between the two sexes. In fact, our political leader, who presides over the destinies of over eighteen million of our citizens, is a woman. Now, do you need some time alone with King Charles to take a decision about our invitation? If you do, I will then go out in the hallway and wait there."

Girard didn't need much time before grudgingly nodding his head. This meeting in Toulouse sounded too important to be missed, while getting on the wrong side of these powerful people from the future could quickly prove disastrous, if he could go by what had happened to King Charles of Francia.

"Very well: you may tell Lady Shelton that we will come. How long will that meeting be? Could it go on over a number of days?"

"Doctor Shelton is hoping to conclude the meeting on the same day. Anything longer would basically mean that we failed to get to a common understanding."

"And what if that happens?"

"Then, we will help and support those ready to listen to us, while we will ignore the others." replied at once the commando. "Our aircar will return to this castle early tomorrow morning. Please bring only the minimum of luggage with you. If you will now excuse me, I have many more invitations to deliver."

"And where are you going next, if I may ask?" said Aurélien, attracting a sardonic smile on Diane's lips.

“To Narbonne, to deliver invitations to the sons of Humfrid of Gothie. If they react too stupidly and attack me, I just may end up having to kill them today.”

“You, kill them while yourself are being unarmed?”

In response, Diane raised her armored right fist in a flash before smashing it down on one corner of the table, which was made of thick wood. To the shock of the Carolingians, that table corner was ripped away cleanly by that strike, with Diane then smiling to them.

“I don’t need weapons to kill them, Abbot Aurélien. See you again tomorrow.”

Diane then left the council room, leaving Girard and Aurélien to look at each other in disbelief.

“By the Devil! No wonder that those people could massacre Viking armies wholesale!” exclaimed the abbot.

**08:40 (Paris Time)**

**Friday, January 6, 862 C.E.**

**Aircar on approach to the Toulouse Tower**

**Independent County of Toulouse**

Girard de Vienne, traveling with his wife Berthe, son Thierry and daughter Eva, plus King Charles de Provence, Abbot Aurélien and three servants, had thought that the moment at which the vehicle he had taken place in had lifted off from the courtyard of his castle was the most memorable moment of his very active life. However, he now had to revise his opinion as their flying vehicle was approaching a gigantic tower of steel and glass dominating the nearby city of Toulouse. That tower, whose summit literally pierced the few clouds in the sky over Toulouse, had been visible nearly at once in the distance after the flying boat Diane Champagne called an ‘air limousine’ had climbed to what was for Girard a vertiginous height. That mere men could have built such a mountain of steel and glass was nearly impossible for him to believe, much less comprehend how they had done such a feat. However, that giant tower was not only big and impossibly tall: it was also truly beautiful, with gently curving vertical sides and light blue reflective glass and shiny steel surfaces. His wife Berthe and daughter Eva were presently fawning about it, while his son Thierry had given him a quick, stunned glance. As for young Charles de Provence, to say that he was overwhelmed by that sight would have been a gross understatement. As their air limousine approached a vast, round sort of platform

near the top of the tower, Girard de Vienne then fully understood how these people from the future could have massacred whole Viking armies with apparent ease: their technological prowess simply put them in a league of their own, way above anybody else around Europe. Also, from what he had seen up to now, Girard did not believe that those people were some kind of magicians or sorcerers, contrary to the beliefs Abbot Aurélien was still trying to desperately cling to. He had not seen or heard to date anything resembling incantations, spells or other elements of witchcraft. His attention was then caught by Diane Champagne, who was now speaking to her passengers from the front passenger seat.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are now about to arrive at the Toulouse Tower, the main Human Expansion outpost in Europe. It measures a total of 5,742 feet in height at the top of its central needle antenna assembly, while the landing platform on which we will land stands at a height of 5,082 feet above the ground. The Toulouse Tower is presently home to over 165,000 Human Expansion citizens living in a total of nearly 33,700 apartments spread over 216 stories. It also contains vast gardens where a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, herbs and cereals are being grown, helping to feed the population of the tower. You will also find in the Toulouse Tower many commercial shops and boutiques, a number of schools, a hospital, an amusement park, a sports complex, various light industries, repair shops and administrative offices. Basically, the Toulouse Tower was designed and built to be a nearly self-sufficient city. The tower is also where Doctor Ann Shelton has her offices. She will be greeting you on arrival after we land.”

“My God!” exclaimed Berthe while looking down through her side window. “Someone better not fear high places if living in this giant tower.”

“That’s a fact, Lady Berthe.” replied Diane Champagne, smiling. “However, living in this tower is perfectly safe, while the view around can’t be beat.”

“And how long did it take your people to build this tower, Lady Diane?” asked seventeen-year-old Thierry de Vienne. Diane Champagne answered him as the air limousine overflowed the outer ledge of the top landing pad.

“The people of Toulouse, which watched on as we assembled the tower at its present location, will tell you that we took only three days to build it. However, what they saw was the putting together of prefabricated modules, already fully equipped and furnished and ready to be assembled together. In reality, the construction of the various modules forming this tower was made on another, faraway world and took over ten

months. Most of our buildings are built using such prefabrication methods, which greatly speed up the total construction process.”

Somehow, that explanation sounded truthful to Girard de Vienne, who then switched his attention to the three persons visible on the landing pad, near the base of the central needle-like tower's top structure. One was a woman with long black hair, while the other two were respectively a man of seemingly mature age and a younger man holding the handle of what looked like a sort of small cart. The three persons came forward as soon as the air limousine had landed and were on hand to greet the Carolingians as they stepped out of the vehicle, while Diane Champagne took care of taking out and putting on the cart the three chests containing the spare clothes of the Carolingians. The woman, who clearly stood taller than even Girard de Vienne, bowed her head briefly while speaking in a fluent Occitan.

“Welcome to the Toulouse Tower! I am Doctor Ann Shelton, Plenipotentiary Representative of the Human Expansion in Toulouse and Francia. To my right is Mister Ben Corbin, General Manager of the Toulouse Tower, who will do his best to make your visit as agreeable as possible. Young Shinzo to my left will drive your baggage chariot.” Girard de Vienne, imitated by Charles de Provence, returned her bow, then pointed in turn at the other members of his group while discretely admiring the beautiful woman, whose green eyes sparkled with intelligence.

“Thank you, Doctor Shelton! Let me present to you King Charles of Provence, Abbot Aurélien, notary of King Charles, my wife Berthe, my son Thierry and my daughter Eva. We also brought with us two male servants and one maiden.”

“Pleased to meet you!” replied Ann Shelton before pointing at a door on the façade of the central structure. “Let's go inside before continuing this conversation: the winds can be fierce at this altitude.” The Carolingians were too happy to oblige, as the January wind was quite chilling indeed around the platform, and they walked behind Ann Shelton towards the door, with Shinzo and his baggage cart holding the tail position. The Carolingians hesitated a bit when the door slid open apparently by itself once Ann Shelton came close to it but followed her in, walking into what they considered at once to be a luxuriously furnished kind of lounge. Once the door slid close behind the group, Ann faced the Carolingians and painted an apologetic smile on her face.

“Pardon me if the next thing I will say may appear trivial or even insulting to you but it is concerning an important rule of hygiene we follow here. Basically, we do not use chamber pots or outhouses to relieve ourselves. We instead use what we call toilets,

which you could consider as the equivalent of your outhouses but of a much more luxurious and cleaner standard. If you feel the need to relieve yourselves during this visit, then you must use the facilities inside one of our restrooms or bathrooms, which are widely distributed around our various buildings and not only in this tower. Urinating in some isolated corner or down a staircase would be considered the height of impropriety here. We happen to have restrooms here in this lounge, so I will show you how to spot them and then use them. I will now take with me Duchess Berthe, her daughter Eva and their maid, while Mister Corbin will show how to use our restrooms to the men of your group.”

Thankfully for Ann, the Carolingians took this in stride and didn't seem offended by her announcement and subsequent visit to a pair of individual restrooms which were situated along one side of the lounge. If anything, Berthe of Vienne was positively impressed by the typical 41<sup>st</sup> Century toilet she saw, which could wash, dry and perfume one's bum at the command of simple buttons, with pictograms making it easy to understand the process and use it.

“My God! I wish that I had a few of those things around our castle in Vienne: I would not need any more to watch for puddles of urine while going down staircases.”

That remark made Ann Shelton giggle in amusement.

“Well, that is one nice side of modern technology. Now, after using the toilet, you can use this sink to wash your hands. It has both cold and hot water on demand, plus you have a liquid soap distributor here and an air dryer. Let me show you.”

A couple minutes later, the group reformed inside the arrival lounge and was then guided by Ann towards one of the elevators connected to their present level. As the group entered one of the elevators, Ann spoke again while showing to her visitors a display screen near the sliding doors which showed multiple numbers and words.

“We are now inside what we call an ‘elevator’, or ‘lift’. We extensively and routinely use such elevators to go up and down our buildings, using cabins travelling inside vertical shafts. You will understand that simply using stairs in a building as high as this tower just won't do. The concept and technology of elevators has been in widespread use for over 2,100 years in our history from the 41<sup>st</sup> Century, so it is a well-honed and very reliable technology which is completely safe. In tall buildings like this tower, we use two types of elevators: so-called local ones, which travel at relatively moderate speeds and only travel between given portions of the total height of a building,

and high-speed lifts, used to connect the base level of the building with the various vertical sub-sections of it or go directly to the top levels. This elevator is of the local type and will carry us down by ten levels to the one where the tower's hotel is situated. You will then get rooms at that hotel, the 'Toulouse Sheraton', where you will be accommodated during your stay."

"And how many levels are there in this giant tower of yours, Doctor Shelton?" asked Berthe de Vienne, making Ann smile.

"In absolute terms, this tower counts 502 levels above the ground and another 42 levels below ground. However, the ceiling height of many of those levels vary from our standard height by combining two or more levels together to form more voluminous spaces. In particular, our apartments, like the hotel rooms you will occupy, have their various rooms distributed on two sub-levels while technically sharing a single circulation floor. The indications on this information panel thus show only a total of 310 levels above ground and 22 levels below ground, with many of those levels being split, with letters designating each of their sub-levels. In our case, we are going down to Level 230, which is the one where the Toulouse Sheraton Hotel reception desk can be found. I will now touch the number 230 displayed on this command screen to activate our lift."

The Carolingians watched Ann lightly touch the number 230, displayed in dark blue over a bright yellow background. The sliding doors of the cabin then closed and they felt a smooth sensation of downward movement that went on for a few seconds before their cabin stopped and the doors slid open, showing a long and large hallway opening unto a rotunda at the center of which was their elevator shaft and other shafts and emergency staircases. Ann led her group out of the elevator and pointed down the hallway entrance facing them.

"This hallway leads to the Toulouse Sheraton Hotel, whose rooms are distributed around the periphery of the saucer forming the landing platform of the tower. We are..." She then stopped talking for a moment while apparently listening to something for a few seconds before seemingly speaking to herself.

"I will be there in a minute."

Ann then looked at her visitors, who were visibly wondering what had just happened, and gave them an apologetic smile.

"I am sorry about this interruption. I was just advised that another important participant to our meeting is about to arrive at the landing platform. If you will please



excuse me, I will leave you in the good hands of Mister Corbin, who will get you hotel rooms and will explain to you the schedule for today's meeting."

As Ann stepped back inside the elevator cabin, Ben Corbin smiled to the Carolingians while pointing at the nearby hallway entrance.

"If the ladies and gentlemen would please follow me."

As the nine Carolingians and Shinzo followed the manager down the large hallway, whose floor was covered with a blue-green carpet, Berthe de Vienne couldn't help make a remark while eyeing her surroundings.

"This is all so luxurious! Compared to this, our castle in Vienne looks like a simple peasant's hut. If this is indeed the normal level of comfort those people are accustomed to, then they are indeed a rich people."

"We prefer to think of ourselves as simply a society that takes adequate care of all of its citizens by sharing equally its resources, Lady Berthe." interjected Ben Corbin. "However, this building was constructed before we had to flee from the Morg invaders and the buildings we are now producing here on Earth for our refugees, while more than adequate in terms of facilities and comfort, are being built to more austere standards, out of urgency and necessity. Only some two million of our citizens, out of a total of a bit over eighteen million people, are presently awake and active. The rest are still deep in cryogenic sleep, a sort of artificially-induced sleep which allowed us to pack as many refugees as we could aboard our ships before we had to flee the Alpha Centauri System. Now, our industries aboard our ships are working at maximum capacity to both build new accommodations for the rest of our citizens and to build a new industrial and economic infrastructure base for them on Earth. By helping procure more foodstuff via commerce with the merchants of this time, our outpost in Toulouse is helping feed the constantly growing number of our citizens being awakened every day. We may appear all-powerful to you but we still are in essence a people busy rebuilding a new home for itself after seeing its old home destroyed by invaders. From what I read of the history of this century, you are probably quite familiar with the plight of refugees."

The Carolingians exchanged glances then, struck by the brutal honesty of Corbin's words. Girard de Vienne nodded his head once.

"Thank you for your frankness, sire Corbin. Most leaders of this time would rather hide their weaknesses and problems in order to either not attract an invasion by a greedy neighbor or to keep their own people from revolting."

“We know. However, we have no wish to invade others or attack them in order to steal resources from them. Instead, we are presently settling ourselves in distant, overseas lands which had no human occupants before our arrival. That way, we can rebuild a new home for ourselves without bringing prejudice to the other people of Earth. The main goal of today’s meeting is not to push you out of power but simply to ensure that peace comes to all around and that an end is brought to the various wasteful wars needlessly ravaging Europe. Those wars have caused way too much blood and destruction to our taste, on top of significantly reducing the amount of foodstuff you produce. For us, a peaceful Earth means a more just and productive Earth, which in turns will help us reestablish ourselves on Earth.”

The Carolingians again exchanged glances, with Berthe whispering to her husband.

“Those people sound like a bunch I could trust, Girard.”

“I am starting to believe that myself, my good Berthe.”

After walking for over 200 meters down the corridor, the group finally arrived at the connection with what was apparently a wide, circular hallway following the outer ring of the platform structure they were in. Facing them was a long reception desk and office set in front of huge windows giving a fantastic view of the countryside around the tower. Leading the Carolingians to the reception desk, where two pretty young women officiated, Corbin looked at Girard de Vienne and Charles de Provence.

“We have an executive suite with four bedrooms and a central lounge area for King Charles, you, your family and your maiden, plus a separate room for Abbot Aurélien and your two male servants. Would that be satisfactory for your needs, sirs?”

“Those bedrooms, do they have two beds in each of them?” asked Girard, making Corbin nod his head.

“Two of the bedrooms in the suite each have a large double bed, while the two other bedrooms have two separate single beds each. As for the separate room to be occupied by Abbot Aurélien, it has a large double bed main bedroom and a secondary bedroom with two single beds.”

“Then that will do just fine.” decided Girard without hesitation. Corbin nodded his head at that and looked at one of the young receptionists, who had been monopolizing young Thierry’s attention.

“Please assign Executive Suite 3 to the following names: King Charles de Provence; Duke Girard de Lyon and his wife Berthe; Thierry de Vienne; Eva de Vienne

and one royal maid, plus an adjacent two-bedroom suite for Abbot Aurélien and two royal servants. I will need nine access and services cards for them as well.”

The female receptionist typed quickly that information into her computer, then put on the counter nine hotel cards with extendable wire clips, which Corbin distributed to the Carolingians.

“Keep those cards clipped to your belts or clothes during your stay at the tower: they will give you access to your suite and will also allow you to go eat at one of the restaurants of the hotel, free of charge. Don’t worry about being at a loss about what to eat at meal times: me and Doctor Shelton will be eating with the guests to our meeting and will help you with the vegetables and fruits with which you may be unfamiliar. Quite a few of the staples we use are still unknown here in Europe, being from the Far East or from overseas.”

“That promises to be an interesting experience, Sire Corbin.” said Berthe de Vienne, making the manager smile.

“Indeed! If you will now follow me, I will lead you to your suites.”

The group was about to follow Corbin down the circular hallway but fourteen-year-old Eva hesitated while looking outside through one of the giant windows behind the reception section.

“Am I crazy or did this tower turn a bit to the right in the last few moments?”

Corbin smiled in response and showed to the Carolingians a thin but clear space between the inner circular wall of the outer rotunda and the inner ledge of the hallway’s floor.

“You are a very perceptive girl, Lady Eva. While this tower is solidly fixed to the ground, the outer section of this structure in which the hotel is housed rotates slowly around the tower’s central axis, accomplishing four complete rotations per day. That way, the hotel guests can admire from their rooms or from the restaurants and lounges of the hotel complex the whole area around Toulouse, and this from a height of 5,000 feet. That rotation stops only once per day, briefly, during the late hours of the night, in order to allow the transfer of fresh water into the local water tanks of the rotating structure and the flushing out of the liquid and solid waste produced during the day.”

“My God! I can’t wait to admire such a view.” exclaimed Berthe de Vienne.

“It is indeed a feature that our hotel guests appreciate a lot, Lady Berthe. If you will now follow me.”

The tower manager could only do a few steps down the five-meter-wide carpeted hallway that ran inside and around the circumference of the landing platform structure before all the Carolingians suddenly halted, with many also taking a step back in apprehension. Corbin understood at once what had caused their reactions: a cleaning robot was going its merry way up the hallway and was going to pass only a couple of paces away from the group. Deciding to deal with this potential problem at once, he shouted an order at the robot.

“CLEANER 163, STOP AND HOLD IN PLACE!”

The robot, a squat machine some 1.4 meter-tall which rolled on four small wheels, stopped at once and stood immobile in the middle of the hallway. Corbin then walked to it and opened a mechanical inspection panel on one side of the robot before waiving at the Carolingians to approach, which they did with some misgivings.

“Please do not be afraid of this machine, good people. It is a type of machine we call a ‘robot’ and which we use to do manual labor of various kind. There is no magic or sorcery involved in it, just science and technology which evolved over thousands of years. This model of robot is designed to sweep and clean large floor and wall surfaces, like in this hallway. If you will get closer, you will be able to look inside and see parts of its mechanism. By the way, such robots have been programmed with a limited kind of intelligence and can speak, understand and read up to six languages. However, they are programmed to be non-violent and to obey verbal orders falling within specific limits. In your rooms that you will occupy, you will find a model of robot that we call ‘robotic maids’. Those robotic maids will automatically take care of cleaning your rooms, do your beds and perform any other kind of cleaning job needed inside your rooms. You may also have periodic visits by other types of robots in charge of doing maintenance or repair work or coming in to pick up your dirty clothes and then bring them back once cleaned.”

Hesitantly at first, the Carolingians bent down a bit to look through the opened maintenance panel of the robot, with Girard de Vienne being the first to have a look.

“By God! This looks very complicated to me. And you say that this is a simple machine, with no magic or witchcraft involved?”

“Well, it is only a machine but it is not very simple, as you can see, Duke Girard. In fact, it takes a minimum of twelve years of general schooling, plus at least two years of specialized schooling and training, before someone can be qualified to maintain and repair such robots.”

“Fourteen years of schooling!” exclaimed young Thierry de Vienne. “How many of your people spend so much time in school, sir?”

“Nearly all of them, sir.” replied Corbin, straight-faced, making the Carolingians look at him with near disbelief. “Even the least skilled of our people, including persons with mild mental retardation, can read, write and count at a minimum. Education is provided free to all of our citizens, along with all the basic necessities of life, like adequate food, complete health care, an adequate home or apartment and a standard minimum of clothing allowance. When our people finish training or learning to fill a job or produce things or a category of service, they can then earn money and be able to afford for themselves what are considered luxury products or services.”

While the Carolingian nobles present stared with disbelief at him, Corbin didn’t miss the looks exchanged between the two male royal servants and the one maiden, a teenage girl who was maybe fifteen or sixteen-years-old. Those looks conveyed envy, not shock. Corbin let time for all the Carolingians, including the servants and the maid, to look inside the robot, before closing back the maintenance panel and giving an order to the robot.

“You can resume your duties, Cleaner 163.”

“Yes sir!” replied the robot in a normal human voice before starting to roll again, watched by the overwhelmed Carolingians. Abbot Aurélien couldn’t help sign himself then, attracting a mild chiding from the tower manager.

“No need to sign yourself, Abbot: no evil is involved in our technology. Now, let’s get you to your rooms.”

The Carolingians did follow him then, but more than one of them glanced back at the robot rolling away down the hallway.

After a very short walk, Ben Corbin stopped in front of a door and opened it with his own access card, then invited the Carolingians to go in. Girard de Vienne, following close behind Charles de Provence, did six steps down a corridor past the entrance, which had a number of doors along its sides, then had to stop, stunned. He now could glimpse at the central lounge area of the suite, which had a high ceiling and huge windows giving a view of the old city of Toulouse and of its surrounding. His wife Berthe also had to stop, equally stricken by the utter luxury and apparent comfort of what she was seeing.

“My God! I have to correct myself: compared to this, our castle is a pigsty.”

That made Girard wince and chide her in a low voice.

"Come on, Berthe! Our castle in Vienne is also the royal residence of King Charles. It isn't that bad."

"Well, this is certainly much cleaner and the view of the outside can't compare."

"True!" recognized Girard as Ben Corbin started describing the suite to their group.

"This executive suite, designed mostly for visiting groups of businessmen and merchants, is comprised of four separate bedrooms, each of them with their own bathrooms, plus a common lounge area, a dining corner, a private conference room, a private fitness training room and a communal hot tub."

"Uh, what is this 'hot tub', Sire Corbin?" asked Thierry de Vienne, making Corbin nod his head once.

"A hot tub is a kind of large, deep bath where hot water is constantly circulated, forming whirlpools. It is a very nice way to relax after a hard day of work. We will visit it together after I will have shown you the rest of the suite. First, though, I will show to King Charles his room."

Going to a nearby door on one side of the lounge area, next to a 'U'-shaped staircase leading to the upper level of the suite, Corbin opened it and invited in Charles de Provence. The latter reacted like a kid given a nice new toy when he saw the vast, luxurious and very comfortable-looking bedroom assigned to him.

"This is a marvelous room, Sire Corbin. Thank you very much."

"I am glad that you like it, Your Majesty. Shinzo, please drop the King's foot locker next to the closet."

Helped by one of the royal servants, the young porter lifted the large wooden chest containing the effects of Charles de Provence off his baggage cart and dropped it next to the long closet covering nearly all of one side wall of the bedroom, opposite to the side where big, high-ceiling windows gave a fantastic view of the outside. Ben Corbin then described the inside of the bedroom to the awed Carolingians.

"This is one of the two main bedrooms of this suite. By the way, your own bedroom is similar to this one, Duke Girard. As you can see, the bedroom proper has a big double bed with drawers along its sides, a large closet, two chests of drawers, a work desk, a desk with mirror for taking care of one's appearance and a reclining chair. Near the entrance door, you will see the door to the bathroom connected to this bedroom."

Corbin then led the Carolingians inside the bathroom, where they were able to admire the tile-covered floor and walls, the large bathtub, a long two-sinks counter and a toilet. Then leaving the room altogether and returning to the lounge area, he pointed at the large flat screen television sitting on a low table set against the large windows of the lounge.

“This is what we call a television. We use such devices to watch various entertainment shows, movies, news programs or even play video games. Don’t worry about how to understand and use such novelties: Shinzo here will stay with you for the next hour in order to show you how to use the amenities of this suite. While we are still together as a group, I will now cover some ground rules that apply to all the occupants of this tower and which constitutes legal laws in the society of the Human Expansion. First, and most important, is that all persons, irrespective of race, sex, social status or personal beliefs, are equals in the eyes of our laws. This means that physical violence, verbal, physical or sexual abuse towards others will not be tolerated. In normal circumstances, the perpetrators would be arraigned in front of a judge and either fined or given some kind of communal work as a punishment. However, as guests and non-citizens of this tower, the less serious infractions will only result in your expulsion and forced return to Vienne. In the case of the more serious infractions, like physical and sexual assaults, then Doctor Shelton may decide to have you prosecuted or not. Please understand that, while our clothes may appear very provocative to you, this does not mean that a girl or woman wearing a revealing outfit is some kind of whore. It simply happens to be the kind of fashion we use. Secondly, nobility titles and privileges have vanished from our history for over three millenniums and bloodlines mean nothing legally to us. Only personal merit, skills and competence count as factors of advancement in our society. So, please do not assume that your nobility titles will give you special rights here. You will be treated like everybody else in this tower is treated: with regard, respect and politeness.”

The Carolingians exchanged bemused looks on hearing that, with Charles de Provence looking offended, but Girard de Vienne hurried to whisper in his ear.

“Please do not protest this, Your Majesty: we are on their territory and it is their laws which apply here.”

“Very well, but I find this business of ignoring noble titles quite offensive.”

“I will discuss this later on with Lady Ann Shelton, Your Majesty.”

Charles de Provence, half-convinced, nodded his head, to the relief of Girard de Vienne, who had feared some angry and uncontrolled reaction from the young monarch. In turn, Girard replied to Corbin in a polite tone.

“We understand your rules and laws and will abide by them during our stay here, Sire Corbin.”

“Excellent! Now, let’s continue the tour of this suite.”

That tour took another ten minutes, at the end of which Girard de Vienne and his family, plus the royal maiden, had been assigned rooms, with the young royal maiden sharing a two single-bed room with young Eva de Vienne and with one of the male servants sharing Thierry de Vienne’s bedroom. As for Abbot Aurélien and the remaining male servant, they were assigned an adjacent, two-bedroom suite. Before leaving the Carolingians, Ben Corbin spoke to Girard de Vienne and Charles de Provence.

“Your Majesty, Duke Girard, the meeting you were invited to is due to convene in a bit over half an hour. Someone will come at that time to guide you to the conference room, while someone else will offer a guided tour of this tower to Duchess Berthe, Lady Eva and your servants and maid. In the meantime, feel free to freshen up and install yourselves comfortably. I hope that you will like your stay in the Toulouse Tower. I will see you again at the meeting.”

### **09:51 (Paris Time)**

#### **Executive Suite # 3, Toulouse Sheraton Hotel**

##### **Toulouse Tower**

Girard de Vienne and the royal servant named Jean were about finished helping young Charles de Provence to prepare for the incoming meeting when someone knocked on the door of the King’s bedroom.

“Come in!”

The door slid open then, revealing the young porter named Shinzo.

“Excuse me, sir, but the participants to the meeting have just been called in. I will lead your group to the conference room where Doctor Shelton is waiting for you.”

“We will be ready to follow you in a short moment, young man. What about my wife and daughter?”



“Doctor Shelton has sent a guide for them, so that they could tour the tower while you attend the meeting, sir.”

Girard nodded his head at that: those people from the future may know nothing about proper court etiquette but they were at least polite to a fault.

“Excellent! Just give us a little moment and we will follow you.”

Girard soon declared King Charles ready and led him out of his bedroom, linking up with the waiting porter.

“Are my wife and daughter already gone? I don’t see them.”

“They left with their guide and the servants a minute ago, sir.”

“Then, show us the way to that meeting, young man.”

Leaving the suite via its main entrance door, the group was joined by Abbot Aurélien before starting to walk down the large hallway. They nearly bumped at once into another group of Carolingians led by a man from the Human Expansion. Girard the Vienne and his son Thierry instinctively had their right hands go for their belts when they recognized two of the Carolingians before remembering that they had no weapons on them. Those two nobles reacted the same way at their sight, prompting the big, athletic man guiding the other group into giving a verbal warning in Occitan.

“Hold your tempers, gentlemen! You have been brought here to discuss, not to fight each other.”

Girard de Vienne gave a cold look at the two young sons of deceased Margrave Humphrid de Gothie, Guifred and Miron, before signaling to his son Thierry to calm down. Humphrid de Gothie had been a troublesome neighbor of the Kingdom of Provence for years and had been trying constantly to grab more territory from its neighbors, until he had made the fatal mistake of threatening the people from the future, a mistake that had cost him his life.

“The man is right, Thierry. Let’s keep our peace while in this tower.”

He then bowed politely to salute the mature woman accompanying Humphrid’s sons.

“I don’t have the pleasure of knowing you, my dear lady. Are you also part of Humphrid’s family?”

“I am his widow, sire, and my name is Elmessandre. My sons are still quite young, so I decided to accompany them to this meeting in order to ensure that they keep calm and steady heads.”

“And I am Duke Girard de Lyon, preceptor of King Charles de Provence, present to my left, Marquess Elmessandre. This is my son Thierry and Abbot Aurélien, the notary of His Majesty Charles de Provence.”

The marquess bowed back to him and to Charles de Provence, but her sons conspicuously stayed straight and kept an icy attitude, prompting their guide to hurry them on.

“If you will now follow me: the meeting is about to start.”

Girard waited until the group from Narbonne had walked away before telling his own guide to resume walking as well while keeping a healthy distance with the other group.

They did not have to walk for long before each of the two groups took place in separate elevators and went up by three levels, to emerge onto another rotating peripheral hallway lined with doors. However, Girard de Vienne noticed at once the difference between the hotel floor he had been on and this floor, which looked more like a place of administration and business, with many of the rooms lining the hallway having transparent walls showing people sitting at desks or circulating around. Their porter, Shinzo, confirmed that impression once they were out of their elevator cabin.

“We are now on Level 232, which is occupied by the various administrative and executive offices managing this tower. It is also a rotating level, like your hotel. We are now going to go to the main conference room on this level.”

The Carolingians followed the young man while eyeing with intense curiosity the various offices they were passing by. Abbot Aurélien then made a remark to his companions as they were still walking along the peripheral hallway.

“These people seem to employ women as much if not more than men in those offices. How important are women in your government’s administration, young man?”

“They have completely equal status and importance in it compared to men, like in all aspects of our civilization, Abbot Aurélien. In fact, our top leader, Chief Administrator, Lynn Tsu, who governs our eighteen million citizens here on Earth, is a woman.”

“And may I ask how she gained that position?”

“You certainly may, sir. Like all our high-level administrators in our civilization, she first had to pass various tests and competence exams to become part of a small group of no more than six candidates vying for the post she presented herself for. Then, a democratic vote by all our adult citizens chose her to fill the post she had on Alpha

Centauri A-4 before the planet was destroyed by the Morgs: Governor of Kyoto Alpha, the capital of the planet. We use this form of government candidates' selection to ensure that, first, all the candidates are fully qualified and competent to fill the open position and, second, to ensure that the public approves the candidate who best meets its expectations. High level leadership positions are typically voted in for periods of five years, renewable via public elections. If, however, some administrator proves to be inadequate for the job, he or she can then be unseated by a new vote called for via a public referendum.”

The three Carolingians exchanged bemused looks at those words: such a type of government could not be further from their own system of aristocratic government ruled by bloodlines and violent overthrows. Girard de Vienne then asked a question of his own to Shinzo.

“And your elected leaders, why do they vie for their posts? Is the pay or rewards attracting them?”

“Well, there always is the factor of holding significant power, which may be described as a kind of reward by itself, but that is not the predominant one: we don't want megalomaniacs to be in charge of our society. As for the pay, it is actually limited to a specific level that is no more than four times the minimum salary in our society. Since all the basic requirements of life, like food, lodging, clothing, health and education are provided free to all of our citizens, one does not really need to earn a lot of money to live well. There are of course perks attached to leadership positions, like an official residence, government-provided private transportation and a more extensive wardrobe allotment, but the main motivation for gaining a leadership position in our society is to serve the public and make its dreams and expectations become reality. The only high-level positions not subject to public elections are military command positions, which are strictly governed by competence, skills and valor.”

Girard, like his son Thierry, could only nod at the last sentence, with which they could only agree: they had too often seen some royal prince or count be put in charge of an army based simply on their aristocratic rank and then prove on the battlefield to be either incompetent, foolish or even cowardly.

“You do seem to know a lot about your government system, despite being a simple porter, young man.”

Shinzo smiled at that, rather than taking offense with the remark by Girard.

“Well, classes on public administration were part of my thirteen years of schooling, sir. I took this job of porter when our administrators asked for posts in this tower to be filled. I do like the human interaction involved with the job. In Kyoto Alpha, I was working in a junior public relations position. This may be a bit lower in terms of professional level, but we have sixteen million of our citizens still in deep cryogenic sleep, waiting for enough new resources and infrastructures to be built for them on Earth before they could be awakened and then be able to resume their lives. I thus can count myself lucky in a number of ways to be here.”

Girard nodded his head to himself, sobered by such a modest and altruistic explanation. He then gently patted Shinzo’s shoulder.

“I like you, young man. I hope that you will realize your dreams one day.”

That made the young Oriental man sigh.

“Right now, my only dream is to find a nice girl to my taste who will also like me, sir.”

That made all three Carolingians grin with understanding: women were also a subject of high interest to most male aristocrats around Europe.

After walking for about sixty meters, Shinzo then led his small group into a large, fifteen-by-ten-meter room with a high ceiling and with giant windows giving a fantastic view of the outside. The middle of the room was filled with a large, long conference table with 32 padded captain’s chairs distributed around it. More chairs, apparently meant to seat aides and assistants, were distributed along the walls, while one separate section of the vast room contained service tables and food counters. The level of luxury and comfort of the room struck Girard de Vienne, but not as much as the identity of the various Carolingians already present in the room, milling around and munching on cold food from the buffet.

“My God! Nearly all of the top nobles of Europe are here. I see Margrave Robert le Fort of Neustria, Adalard the Seneschal, Margrave of the Normand March, Count Raymond of Toulouse, King Solomon of Brittany and King Louis the German of Eastern Francia, among others.”

“I see my brothers Louis and Lothaire!” exclaimed Charles de Provence, who then walked quickly to them and started an animated conversation with them, watched from a distance by Girard, Thierry and Aurélien. A Carolingian man in his late twenties then came to Girard and bowed his head politely to him as he spoke.

“Duke Girard, I am Jean de Chambriand, personal advisor to Doctor Ann Shelton. If you will follow me, I will show you the places assigned to you and King Charles of Provence at the conference table. Abbot Aurélien and your son Thierry will be able to take seats installed along the wall behind your seats. The conference is due to start in a couple of minutes. If you will please follow me.”

Girard nodded his head and followed the man to the long, large table, where de Chambriand showed him one of the high-back captain’s chairs. A small plaque resting on the table in front of the seat bore Girard’s name.

“You may sit now or stay up until the meeting is called to order, Duke Girard.”

“Thank you!”

With Jean de Chambriand then walking away to greet more participants arriving for the meeting, Girard de Vienne looked at the plaques lining the table next to his own seat. Charles de Provence’s seat was directly to his left, next to the seats assigned to King Lothaire II of Lotharingia and Louis II the Younger, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Italy, both brothers of Charles de Provence and rulers of kingdoms adjacent to Provence. To the right of Girard’s seat were the chairs of Marquess Elmessandre and of her sons Guifred and Miron, followed by the chair reserved for Fourrat, the Count of Arles, who was no friend of Girard or of Charles de Provence. Going slowly around the oval table while reading the plaques on it, Girard saw among others the names of King Louis the German of Eastern Francia, King Solomon of Brittany, Duke Sancho-Sanchez of Vascony<sup>7</sup>, Count Bernard of Auvergne, Count Salomon of Barcelona, King Ethelbert of Wessex, Viscount Olibia II of Carcassonne, Bivin de Gorze, Count of Metz and of the Ardennes and Count Baudouin Iron Hand of Flanders. Not surprisingly, one chair at the presiding end of the table was reserved for Ann Shelton. Girard however stiffened on seeing that the chair directly to the left of Ann Shelton’s seat was reserved for Chief Administrator Lynn Tsu. He was still digesting that fact when a concert of exclamations from the Carolingians around him in the room made him turn around and look outside through the large windows of the room. Girard froze instantly as he stared in awe and disbelief at what looked like a flying mountain of metal now approaching Toulouse at low altitude, approximately level with the top of the Toulouse Tower. The flying ship, as it could only be a ship, soon stopped to a hover directly over the old city of Toulouse, with its shadow completely covering the medieval town and its immediate surroundings.

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<sup>7</sup> Vascony: Old name for the region of Gascony in the High Middle Ages.

“My God! What is that?”

“The exploration cruiser H.S.S. MARCO POLO, the flagship of our fleet.” said a male voice near him, making Girard turn around to face a tall, powerful man wearing what looked like a sort of military uniform, along with a belt supporting some kind of holster. The man smiled to Girard while presenting his right hand for a shake, the way Girard was becoming accustomed to see from the people from the future.

“Let me present myself: Major Lars Nierman, Chief of Security for the Toulouse Outpost.”

“And I am Duke Girard of Lyon, preceptor of King Charles of Provence. I must say that I am having a hard time believing that such a huge mass can fly.” said Girard while shaking the man’s hand.

“That is strictly through advanced science and technology, Duke Girard. The MARCO POLO is bringing in Chief Administrator Lynn Tsu, our political leader on Earth. She will preside with Doctor Shelton over this meeting.”

“I see! Your ship could intimidate any hardheaded monarch around the World just by showing up.”

“That’s effectively part of the idea, Duke Girard.” replied Nierman, smiling. That was when Jean de Chambriand asked out loud for the participants to take their seats. Girard thus went back to his chair, imitated by the other Carolingians guests.

They waited, sitting, for only a few seconds before Ann Shelton spoke in Occitan, her voice slightly amplified by a microphone.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to this conference in Toulouse. I am Doctor Ann Shelton, Plenipotentiary Representative of the Human Expansion in Toulouse, with responsibilities for the European continent, Asia and Africa. Chief Administrator Lynn Tsu, the head of the Human Expansion on Earth, will soon join us, at which time we will be able to officially start this meeting. Before she arrives, I would like to precise a few things to all of you. First, the Human Expansion has no plans or even intentions to invade and take away your fiefdoms and territories. Our main goal today is to create a durable and effective peace across Europe, so that we could put an end to this wasteful and bloody war nonsense. As long as you will govern legally and with fair regard to the wellbeing and prosperity of your subjects, you will have nothing to fear from us. However, if you allow your people to suffer because of neglect, greed or blatant abuses, we will pay you a visit to convince you to mend your ways. If you ignore our advice then,

our next visit may be less polite. That's what happened to King Charles II of Western Francia, whom we stripped of his royal powers and sent him packing to his personal lands, due to his utter failing to protect his people from the Viking threat and for his propensity to heavily tax his subjects and then waste the money collected in a succession of unnecessary fights with other Carolingian nobles, instead of building an effective army to repel the Vikings. From now on, the borders which exist today will stand and we will not tolerate any attempt by anyone to grab by force additional territory. If you have a border dispute, then come and see us and we will be most happy to mediate your dispute. If some outside invader threatens your fiefs, then be assured that we will deal with those invaders harshly, the way we dealt with the Vikings."

A visible wave of relief went around the table then, with the various kings, dukes and counts not already allied with Ann Shelton noticeably relaxing on hearing her words.

"Second, and as a follow-up to establishing peace, another of our goals is to encourage free commerce and exchange of both goods and ideas throughout Europe. This will help the common people prosper and have more comfortable lives. For this, we will help by gradually building a network of modern roads, first across the counties controlled by Count Raymond of Toulouse, then extending those roads outwards through the neighboring counties and territories. These roads will be for the good of everybody and will not represent efforts by us to annex parts of your lands. We will only ask you to let our construction teams go through your lands while they build those new roads. Third, and this point is extremely important to us, we want to bring a stop to the worst human rights abuses and injustices presently perpetrated across Europe. I am talking about slavery, the use of torture and religious persecutions. To us, every human life is equally valuable, irrespective of sex, social rank, bloodline, ethnicity or beliefs. We will be very severe with anyone perpetrating such types of abuses, including those committed in the name of religion. There will be no more torture and burning at the stake of supposed witches and sorcerers, nor will we permit the continuation of slave trafficking and holding. If you own slaves now, then you better free them within the next few weeks and give them the same rights as free citizens. If you don't do that, then you will get a forceful visit from us. Also, warn your local churchmen to stop inciting hatred and intolerance against people with different religious beliefs or who say things that contradict your so-called 'sacred books'. If they don't, then they will pay for that. Know that both slavery and torture, which have not occurred for millenniums in our history, are capital crimes punishable by death, according to the laws of the Human Expansion. We

intend to soon apply those specific laws everywhere in this World and not only in Europe. So, take our warning to heart. Finally, if you wonder why we want to do all this, the answer is simple: we want to see a more peaceful, just and prosperous Earth where everybody will be able to live free, decent lives. Call it a sort of 'Pax Humana', if you will."

Looking around the table at the various reactions to Ann Shelton's speech, Girard de Vienne saw a lot skepticism, along with some frustration and irritation, but little actual acceptance and welcoming, except with the Carolingian allies of Ann Shelton. While Girard could easily live with her rules and wishes, it appeared that many around the table were going to pay only lip service to her declarations. The next few weeks and months could thus prove interesting around Europe.

A few seconds after Ann Shelton had finished speaking, a mature woman of fair height walked in the conference room, accompanied by a younger woman and by a huge man wearing the sort of armor that had brought grief to the Vikings. Girard immediately pegged the man as a bodyguard for the mature woman, who was then announced out loud by Jean de Chambriand.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, GRAND ADMINISTRATOR LYNN TSU!"

Seeing Ann Shelton get up from her chair at the arrival of the woman, Girard did the same while discretely urging Charles de Provence, who tended to be slow on the uptick, to do the same. The other Carolingians also got up, albeit some hesitated and took longer to get on their feet, probably because they thought that their own royal titles put them on a par or above that woman. Ann Shelton obviously took good notice of who was slow to pay respect to Lynn Tsu before going to her and whispering words with her for a moment. That discreet exchange went on for a few seconds before Lynn Tsu walked to the chair reserved for her and sat down, while the younger woman accompanying her sat on one of the chairs lining the walls of the room, behind but close to Tsu's chair at the table. Girard de Vienne was then able to notice that both Lynn Tsu and the woman who had come with her had the kind of slanted eyelids seen on people from the Orient. Lynn Tsu then started to speak, her voice amplified by a microphone at her station.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. You will probably notice that I will not use the terms 'Your Majesty' or 'Your Eminence' when addressing some of you, using instead their generic titles, like 'King', 'Duke' or 'Count'. That will not be meant as an



insult but rather will be to mark the fact that I intend to treat all of you equally during this meeting. As Doctor Shelton told you already, this conference is meant to bring a lasting peace in Europe and to put a stop to the most egregious violations of human rights that had been plaguing this World. I will again emphasize that we of the Human Expansion did not come here to conquer and have no wish to seize power from you. However, we will deal harshly with any of you who will threaten peace or indulges in gross violations of human rights, like using torture, continuing the enslavement of people or persecuting others who hold different beliefs than yours. This will apply equally to aristocrats and churchmen: don't come and try to justify your acts by telling us that you acted in the name of God, as this will only attract an even harsher response from us. For us, religions are pure superstitions which faded from Human history millenniums before our own epoch in the 41<sup>st</sup> Century. We simply believe in true science and in the laws of nature and of the Universe. Our technology is based strictly on pure science and has nothing to do with magic, sorcery or other kind of superstitious nonsense. Those who may try to raise their people against us by accusing us of being some kind of demons or sorcerers, or who will use religion to smear us, will then experience what our technology is capable of in terms of weaponry.”

That not so veiled threat was not missed on the Carolingians sitting around the table, many of whom exchanged nervous glances with the others near them before Tsu continued speaking.

“Many of you may wonder why we are ready to intervene in the affairs of Europe. The answer to that is both simple and straightforward: we consider every human life on Earth as equally important and worthy of respect, irrespective of sex, race, ethnicity or beliefs. The life and basic human rights of a peasant from, say, Provence or Brittany, are as important in our eyes as the life and rights of one of our own citizens from the Human Expansion. We do not consider ourselves to be more worthy of living than your peasants and certainly do not intend to claim ourselves superior just because of our technology and science. A criminal from the Human Expansion will be treated by us as harshly as a criminal from one of your fiefdoms. It just happens that violence and crimes are rarely seen in my society, the product of millenniums of social progress. Unfortunately for us, we then encountered an alien race who considered all other sentient races as simple vermin to be exterminated on sight. From living in peace for centuries, we had to defend ourselves for sheer survival, while our worlds were being invaded and destroyed one by one until my world in the Alpha Centauri system was left

alone with Earth. Then, the Morgs came to Alpha Centauri to invade it. We resisted fiercely with all our available ships but still lost due to the overwhelming superiority in numbers of the Morgs. Despite causing tremendous casualties to the Morg fleet, we had to flee Alpha Centauri with as many refugees as we could carry in the flotilla which carried us to Earth. However, the Morgs then used an experimental weapon which projected our flotilla back in time, all the way to this century. We now have no way to return to our original time period, but that also means that the Morgs, who are now over 3,000 years in the future, can't come and harm this Earth. You can thus rest easy about the Morgs showing up here. In turn, we firmly intend to rebuild our industrial base here on the Earth of the Ninth Century and will then send our ships to find and destroy the Morgs' home world before it could become a threat to all other sentient races in this galaxy."

Girard de Vienne, his curiosity piked, then raised a hand before speaking in turn.

"Dame Tsu, could you show us what these 'Morgs' look like?"

"I certainly can, Duke Girard." replied Lynn Tsu, who then typed something on the computer keyboard of her station. Four giant display screens then emerged from the ceiling of the conference room, close to its walls and allowing everybody to look at a screen without the need to twist their necks around. Tsu then spoke as a video started to play.

"What you will now see is a battle scene showing our ground troops fighting against a Morg army that had landed on one of our planets. You will be able to see some of the Morgs then killed by our soldiers. Unfortunately, we ultimately lost that fight and had to evacuate that planet due to a numerically superior Morg fleet."

The video, which had a live soundtrack set at a reasonable volume, then showed what appeared to be the streets of a ruined city, parts of which were burning. The Carolingians all stared at the screens as Human Expansion soldiers wearing their intricate armor suits were advancing along a street, supported by a big, intimidating armored vehicle on tracks. Both the soldiers and the armored vehicle were firing repeatedly with disintegrator guns at some opponents down the street, with beams of blue-green lasers firing back at them. More than one human soldier fell, hit by the laser beams, but the remaining soldiers kept advancing and firing, eventually passing by the half-incinerated carcass of what looked like a giant spider measuring a good three meters from end to end. At that point, Lynn Tsu paused the video to let the Carolingians have a good look at the dead giant spider.

“This, ladies and gentlemen, is a Morg, wearing a protective suit. We learned during the course of our two-year war against them that they actually ate the humans they either captured or killed, as they are carnivorous and feed on other living creatures.”

A concert of horrified exclamations went around the table as the Carolingians had a good look at the dead Morg. Girard de Vienne, while as horrified as the others, could not help register then the awesome combat power of the Human Expansion soldiers and of their support vehicle. That in turn made him realize that an alien race able to defeat such an army had to be itself extremely dangerous. Lynn Tsu then started playing again the video, showing the human soldiers fighting and advancing until a flying ship started firing at them with an incredibly powerful weapon which created huge explosions on impact, forcing the human soldiers to retreat after their support tank was destroyed by a direct hit. Tsu then stopped the video and spoke up in a grave tone.

“You now have seen what kind of enemy we had to face. During the course of two years of war, we endured devastating losses and learned to fight with a ferocity that we had not experienced for centuries. As a consequence of that war, all of our soldiers and ship crews are war-hardened veterans ready to fight to the death to protect what remains of our society. That includes protecting the values which govern our society and protecting the rights of our citizens. We may want peace on Earth, but don’t push us around or ignore us, or you will regret it bitterly. I have now said what I wanted to say to you, ladies and gentlemen. I will now leave and let Doctor Shelton continue with this meeting. Please remember that she is my representative for Europe, with plenipotentiary powers. If you piss her off by your future conduct, then you will be pissing me off equally and there will be consequences for your actions. On this, I wish you a good day to all.”

Tsu then rose from her chair and left the room with her assistant and bodyguard. The Carolingians sitting around the table were silent for a moment, digesting her ultimate warning, until Ann Shelton took over once Tsu was gone.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I will now explain to you our infrastructure program planned for the county of Toulouse and the adjacent counties and kingdoms, starting with our road construction projects...”

## **CHAPTER 4 – WHEN IN ROME...BE CAREFUL**



The Appian Gate in the Wall of Aurelian, Rome, now called the Gate of Saint-Sebastian.

**14:39 (Rome Time)**

**Thursday, January 12, 862 C.E.**

**Appian Gate, Wall of Aurelian, Rome**

**Papal States**

“Rome, at last!” exclaimed Markus as he and Karl’s little troupe entered the famous city of Rome via the Appian Gate, pulling their small cart along. “I was getting worried about wearing down my new shoes on these old pavements.”

“Don’t rejoice too fast, Markus.” countered Greta. “We still have a long walk to make before arriving in Toulouse. We will be lucky if we take less than three months to get there.”

That deflated somewhat the young man, who then clamed up and concentrated on pulling their cart. While the troupe advanced along the Via Appia inside the walls, it

encountered a sparse but varied crowd of people, mostly merchants with loaded carts and pilgrims. They also saw plenty of evidence that the city of Rome had seen much better days in the past, with many monuments and buildings abandoned, in ruins or badly neglected and with quite a few other buildings having been destroyed by fire and then never rebuilt. The population level, at least in this part of Rome, also appeared quite low. All that left Karl, who had dreamed for a long time about seeing the famous city, both perplex and disappointed.

“THIS...is the famous city of Rome?”

A man running a roadside small vending stall nearby heard him and answered him in a sarcastic tone.

“If you wanted to see a great city, then you are late by at least a few decades, friend. The Saracens attacked Rome some fifteen years ago and looted Saint-Peter’s Basilica, on top of devastating the fields around the city. Right now, the population of the city is down to a ghost of its ancient self, while you will find only corruption, greed and neglect around the city. As if this was not bad enough, the Pope died a few days ago and the rumors are that he was poisoned. Right now, the papal palace is a shitpit of intrigues and backstabbing.”

“Pope Nicolas is dead?” could only reply a shocked Karl.

“That’s what I said, friend. Here is one counsel to you and your companions: while in Rome, keep your purses tight against you. With the anarchy presently reigning inside the city, purse-snatchers and thieves of all kinds roam the streets, especially at night, while the municipal watch couldn’t care less about public order and safety.”

“Uh, thanks for the counsel, friend.” said Karl before making his troupe resume its advance. His wife Greta then got close to him in order to speak to him in a near whisper, clearly worried.

“What should we do, Karl? You know how vulnerable we could be to thieves while sleeping at night in the open. Also, we don’t have the kind of money that would allow us to stay overnight in an inn. And even if we did take rooms in a hostel, what about our cart?”

Karl was silent for a moment while swallowing the bile forming in his stomach. He had hoped for his troupe to make some good money in Rome, but his wife was unfortunately too right: their stay in Rome could prove to them to be both dangerous and ruinous. He finally took a decision and spoke up in a bitter tone.

“Alright, let’s forget about staying in Rome! We will exit via the next gate with a bridge over the Tiber River, then will continue north on the Via Francigena towards Suteria<sup>8</sup>, Seocine<sup>9</sup> and finally Luna, where we will try to find places on a boat going to Massilia<sup>10</sup>. Shit! Shit! Shit!”

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<sup>8</sup> Suteria: Old name of the city of Sutri in the Middle Ages.

<sup>9</sup> Seocine: Old name of the city of Siena in the Middle Ages.

<sup>10</sup> Massilia : Old name of Marseilles in the Middle Ages.

**CHAPTER 5 – AN UNWELCOME VISIT**



Female Viking warrior of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century C.E.

**10:14 (Denmark Time)**

**Friday, January 13, 862 C.E.**

**King's longhouse, Ribe, Kingdom of Denmark**

King Horik II of Denmark, a fit young man of 21 sporting a short blond beard, was in the small barn attached to his royal longhouse, brushing his favorite horse, when one of his royal guards came to him with a message.

"Excuse me for disturbing you, Your Majesty, but a delegation from the settlement of Lindholm Høje, near Aalborg, is here to see you."

Stopping his brushing for a moment, Horik eyed questioningly his bodyguard.

"Did they say what they wanted to discuss with me?"

"Their leader, a woman named Thorrún, said that their settlement desperately needs your help, Your Majesty."

Horik stiffened at once on hearing the name told by his guard.

"Thorrún? As in the widow of deceased Björn Ironside?"

"She's the one, sir."

Horik put down his brush and walked out of the barn and into his longhouse, followed by his guard. Stopping in his private room long enough to quickly clean up his face and hands with the help of a sponge and of a basin full of water, he then put on his belt, which supported his sword, dagger and purse, and went from his room to the large common room where his wooden throne sat in front of a central fire pit. He took the time to sit down on his throne before giving an order to a guard.

"Let Thorrún and her delegation in!"

"Right away, Your Majesty!"

Horik got a bit surprised when the delegation from Lindholm Høje entered the longhouse's hall: it was only composed of women. However, Horik got over his surprise quickly, as he should have expected that: over 23,000 Danes who had left two years ago to attack and loot various parts of Francia and of England had never returned, massacred nearly to the last by men supposedly from the future who used fantastic flying ships made of steel. He then noticed the thin, nearly gaunt looks of his female visitors, probably the result of slow starvation. Horik was actually too familiar with such looks, as the whole of Denmark was cruelly suffering from the loss of so many men and teenage boys, which had left too few people available to do the necessary fishing and farming needed to properly feed the population.

"Welcome to Ribe, Thorrún of Lindholm Høje. What may I do for you and for your companions?"

Thorrún, who wore a sword at her belt, bowed her head in salute before answering him.



"Your Majesty, our settlement desperately needs your help with two things. First, the lack of men in our village has left us short of people to do enough of the fishing and farming needed to feed our people, let alone produce enough to give us surplus to sell to others. As a result, we have been suffering from hunger in the last month. However, we now have another, even more severe and urgent problem: two weeks ago, a Swedish flotilla attacked us and looted our settlement and Aalborg, taking away our reserves of food for the Winter and also taking a number of our younger women and girls with them before leaving. Since they sank all the boats moored in Aalborg, we could not come here by sea and had to travel by land, which is why we couldn't come here faster."

That news instantly made Horik angry, not at those women but at the Swedes, who were now profiting from the overseas military disasters that had struck his kingdom.

"That Erik Refilsson bastard! He calls himself King of Sweden but acts like a vulgar thief! How many Swedes attacked Aalborg?"

"There were over 600 of them, Your Majesty. We did our best to resist them but they overwhelmed us and then looted our houses before burning them. Those of us who still survive had to flee and hide into the woods."

Horik then belatedly noticed at that moment the dirty and bloodied bandage Thorrun wore around her left forearm and nodded his head soberly. His own warriors now numbered less than 200 men, a pitiful number by the standards of only two years ago. However he had to do something to help those women, if he wanted to avoid losing the respect of his people.

"Unfortunately, I myself am cruelly short on warriors, Thorrun, but I can give you some reserves of grain and dried and salted fish, so that your people could have something to eat during the Winter. I will have a chariot loaded with food supplies at once."

"Thank you, Your Majesty! That is..."

Some kind of noise from outside the longhouse then interrupted her, making her and King Horik look towards the main entrance of the building. Thorrun's eyes widened in horror when she saw a tall, fully armored dark gray silhouette walk in as if it owned the place. She had seen a number of such armored warriors three months ago, in Bordeaux, when she and the few Viking survivors in town had been unceremoniously booted out of Francia.

"THE MEN FROM THE FUTURE! THEY ARE HERE!" she shouted in alarm while grabbing her sword and pulling it out of its scabbard. Strangely enough, none of

the royal guards apparently reacted to her alarm. Equally strangely, the armored warrior, whose face was hidden by an opaque face shield, appeared to be alone. Then, as Thorrún and King Horik stood ready to defend themselves with their swords, the armored warrior stopped and raised both hands to the level of its shoulders before speaking in a kind of Norse dialect that, while a bit different from the Eastern Norse spoken in Denmark, was still intelligible.

"Hold on and listen! I simply came to deliver a message from my leaders."

Thorrún involuntarily lowered her sword from the surprise on hearing the warrior: it had a female tone of voice. The sex of the warrior became more evident when it opened its face shield, revealing the face of a young woman. However, that woman stood a good half head taller than Thorrún, who was considered a tall, strong woman even by Viking standards.

"Like I said, I came to deliver a message to King Horik, not to attack Ribe."

Going over his own surprise, Horik slowly sat down on his throne but kept his sword out, holding it at the vertical, tip down in front of him.

"Go ahead and deliver your message, woman."

"I will actually show you my message, as prepared by my leaders. Just give me a minute and you will be able to see it."

Taking out of a large pouch slung across her armored torso a sort of thick flat plate, the woman then put it down on the ground, one pace in front of her, then pushed a button on its top surface. To the Vikings' amazement, the plate seemingly split in two in relation to its thickness, with the top half plate then silently rising to a height of two meters above the ground before stopping in a hover position. Thorrún and Horik nearly jumped back when a colored, ghost-like human shape appeared between the top and bottom plates, showing a tall young woman with long black hair and a pair of green eyes. The ghostly woman apparently could see them, as she looked directly at King Horik before starting to speak in the same kind of Norse dialect spoken by the female warrior in armor.

"Greetings, King Horik of Denmark! My name is Doctor Ann Shelton and I am the plenipotentiary representative of the Human Expansion for Europe, with base in Toulouse. I sent you Corporal Diane Champagne so that you could listen to my message. Please listen to its entirety before asking me any question. The Human Expansion, which you call 'the people from the future' has now decreed as illegal and criminal the practice of capturing, trafficking and holding human beings into slavery, along with the practice of torture in whatever forms. Both slavery and torture will now be

considered by us as capital crimes subject to the death penalty, and this anywhere in the World. We know that you and many of your subjects hold many slaves captured during past raiding expeditions against Francia, England and Ireland. We want these slaves freed and handed to us, so that we could repatriate them to their original homes. My soldiers will return in force in ten days, by which time we will expect to see your slaves assembled and ready to leave in the towns and cities in which they are presently held. Any non-compliance or attempt at hiding slaves from us will be harshly dealt with by us. You may now ask questions to me if you have any before acknowledging my message.” Horik, taken off balance by this magical-like talking image, could only nod his head, knowing full well that resisting those people from the future would only bring him disaster.

“I...I will pass your message around Denmark, Ann Shelton.”

Ann Shelton, who was transmitting in direct her message via holographic projection, nodded her head in satisfaction. She however did not tell Horik then that her message was presently being announced by loudspeakers mounted on ships to all the main towns and settlements in Denmark.

“Excellent! We honestly didn’t want to have to hurt your people unless you hurt in turn your slaves. Make sure that no slave owner retaliates against them by killing them.”

“I will pass that word as well, Lady Shelton.”

Ann Shelton was about to terminate the link when Thorrhun suddenly shouted at her holographic image.

“WAIT! WHAT ABOUT OUR OWN PEOPLE TAKEN AWAY BY THE SWEDES?”

That earned Thorrhun a sharp look from the hologram.

“What are you talking about, Thorrhun?”

While Thorrhun was a bit taken aback by the fact that the ghost knew her name, she still answered its question at once.

“I am talking about the dozens of women and girls taken away from Aalborg two weeks ago by Swedish raiders, who also burned down our houses and stole our reserves of food.”

The ghostly woman stared at her in silence for a few seconds, with her expression softening noticeably before she spoke.

"I hear your plea, Thorrún, and sympathize with your plight. I will have my ships and soldiers look for those Swedish raiders and their captives. I will be able to give you an update on this in ten days, when we will collect your slaves. I will see you then."

The holographic image then disappeared, with the top plate of the projector system then slowly flying down to reattach itself to its base plate. Diane Champagne then picked up the projector unit and put it back in its transport pouch before looking at Horik.

"Remember, King Horik: all the slaves assembled in ten days and with no acts of retaliation against them. We sincerely hope that our relations will become more correct after this."

She then turned around and walked out. Following her out at a near run, Horik and Thorrún were in time to watch Diane Champagne fly off by her own and start climbing quickly towards a huge metallic sphere floating over Ribe. As for the guards Horik had posted at the entrance of his longhouse, they lay unconscious on the ground on each side of the door. Horik passed a hand on his forehead to wipe the cold sweat now covering it.

"By Odin! How could anyone fight people with such powers? I hope that they will keep their part of this deal."

**10:08 (Denmark Time)**

**Monday, January 23, 862 C.E.**

**Port area of Aalborg, western delta of the Limfjord**

**Northern Denmark**

Thorrún, who had grown impatient with the waiting while guarding the dozen or so Frankish slaves due to be freed in Aalborg, stiffened when she saw a gray spherical shape appear far away in the western sky. The local women and the few old men waiting around her also reacted to that sight, but with near panic, prompting a shout from Thorrún.

"HOLD YOUR GROUND AND STOP SHAKING LIKE SHEEPS! THIS DEAL MUST BE RESPECTED."

Somehow her invective was enough to make her compatriots stay and wait while the gray flying ship made its approach, finally landing silently and smoothly in a field next to the port area. Thorrún held her breath as a sort of ramp lowered under the belly of the flying ship and a number of people started coming down the ramp. She and her

compatriots pushed savage screams of joy when they recognized the first persons coming down the ramp as being some of the women and girls taken by Swedish pirates. The Danes in the crowd then ran into a mad rush to go meet the newcomers with kisses and open arms. Thorrún couldn't help feel some belated remorse then as she eyed the Frankish slaves due to be released in the care of the people from the future: she now could understand the kind of grief and despair they must have felt when they had been taken into slavery by Thorrún's compatriots. Her attention was then attracted to two warriors in gray armored suits now coming down the ramp. Those two warriors walked calmly to her, stopping a few paces from Thorrún. One of them, a man judging by his voice, then spoke to her.

"Thank you for honoring this deal, Thorrún. As you can see, we were able to trace back and find those Swedish raiders and the women and girls they enslaved. We also found the foodstuff they stole and will be unloading it from our ship shortly. Be advised that we will also unload at the same time some extra foodstuff, along with a number of large tents which will help shelter your people until you can rebuild new houses."

"I suppose that I should still hate you and your people for killing my husband and so many of our men, but I can now start to see your side in all this."

"And we understand that all these past atrocities were basically a common occurrence around this world...until now. However, things are now going to change, fast! Hopefully, our future relations will be more friendly from now on. Those are the only slaves you were holding in Aalborg?"

"Yes! We didn't have that many of them around here. They are now yours to pick up."

"Thank you!"

The man in gray armor then spoke successively in Occitan, Saxon and Old German, addressing the slaves and making them move towards the waiting ship. Once they were aboard the ship, some machines rolled out and dropped in the field a number of crates and bundles before returning inside the ship. The latter then silently flew off the ground and quickly gained altitude before speeding away in the sky, watched by Thorrún.

## CHAPTER 6 – PATROLING THE AMERICAS



Pink: Mayan Classical Period (250 CE – 900 CE). Orange: Aztec Empire (1325 CE – 1519 CE). Green: Inca Empire (late 1400s CE – 1532 CE). Teotihuacan (100 CE – 650 CE). Chichen Itza (end 7<sup>th</sup> C. CE – 1200 CE). Tikal (300 BCE – 870 CE). Uxmal (750 CE – 1000 CE). Tiahuanaco (100 CE – 1000 CE). Tenochtitlan (1300 CE – 1521 CE). Tula (800 CE-1160 CE).

09:35 (American Eastern Time)

Wednesday, January 25, 862 C.E.

Cockpit of Interceptor AC 3027, overflying the southern tip of Greenland  
North Atlantic area, close to the Arctic Circle

“Still no ships or boats detected in the Atlantic up to a range of 400 kilometers, Robert.”

“Thanks, Sylvia!” replied Robert Busson, the pilot and commander of the interceptor AC 3027. “Time for us to do a turn towards the West and do a reconnaissance flight along the American land mass. Anybody else in the air over the Americas at this time?”

“Only two game hunting and culling teams operating around respectively the Labrador region and the central prairies and one tree harvesting team operating near the southern portion of the Hudson Bay. Once south of the Great Lakes, we will be the only Human Expansion presence over the continent.”

“Then, I believe that we can do this patrol at leisure, at our own pace. After all, we have no other task for this day.”

“Sound fine with me.” said Sylvia Morgan, the sensors officer of the interceptor. The AC 3027 was a mean-looking ship measuring some 110 meters-long and shaped like an elongated egg flanked in cruciform fashion by four large weapons pods armed with heavy disintegrator cannons, high-power lasers, electro-magnetic rail guns and missile launch tubes. It had been designed mostly for battle fleet actions but was also used a lot for reconnaissance, a role in which its extensive sensors suite made it excel. A hundred such interceptors had traveled to Earth from Alpha Centauri as part of the MARCO POLO's fleet, embarked either on the MARCO POLO or on one of the six battleships of the evacuation fleet, and they constituted a redoubtable strike force, something the Viking armies ravaging Europe four months ago had learned the hard way.

Turning his interceptor towards the South, Robert Busson accelerated his ship to hypersonic speed, heading towards the main continental landmass of North America. It didn't take them long before reaching the Arctic coast of Labrador, a vast region covered with frozen tundra in the North and dense forests in the South and teeming with animal life. This was their first American patrol and he personally didn't know much about the Humans populating it in this century which, for most people from the 41<sup>st</sup> Century, was a very old and obscure period of history. The one thing that he knew about the Americas of the early Middle Ages was that the civilizations of Central America at this time, the Toltecs and the Mayans, practiced human sacrifices, something another interceptor's

crew had confirmed during a previous patrol. That had engendered reactions of horror and revulsion in New Auckland and had prompted in turn a strong new policy concerning such human sacrifices: to stop them by killing from a distance the priests and executioners caught in the act. The Mayans and the Toltecs had already had a taste of that new policy in a few of their cities but there was still a lot left to be done in order to eliminate such barbaric customs. Robert then spoke again to Sylvia.

"Sylvia, review our historical files on the North American human populations in this century and tell me what we know about them."

"Well, I already had that info up on one of my computer screens and it isn't much, to be frank. The various people occupying North America are mostly nomadic or semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers and fishermen. They are not yet fully sub-divided into the numerous tribes present on the arrival of the first Europeans and can be best described as small, independent sub-groups belonging to their local regional culture. In the case of the people of Labrador and of Northern Canada, there are only a few tens of thousands of nomadic hunter-gatherers split into small groups belonging to the Subarctic Culture. They mostly live off hunting and, along the coasts, fishing and shellfish gathering. The people living in the region we are about to overfly will eventually become the Naskapi, in Labrador, and the Cree, in the Prairies. Back in Newfoundland, we have the Beothuk, the indigenous people with which the first group of Norsemen to reach North America around the year 1000 will clash, forcing the Norsemen to eventually reembark and leave. Presently, the population density in these regions is still very low, with groups of a few dozen people at most widely dispersed around and moving frequently their campsites in order to follow the herds of caribous on which they feed. Our hunting/culling and wood-cutting teams operate here because of this low population density and also because the resources here are so abundant that controlled and reasonable exploitation can be done without endangering the ecosystem."

"Thanks, Sylvia! That was very helpful. Let's go visit first our hunting/culling team in Labrador."

Using the radar beacon of that hunting/culling team to fly towards its present position, Robert was careful to stay at high altitude, where his interceptor would be more difficult to spot from the ground once he would slow down to subsonic speeds, when the directed-gravity propulsion of the ship, by pushing forward the air surrounding the interceptor, would prevent the formation of a telltale condensation trail. Some twenty



minutes later, Robert slowed down his interceptor to a speed of only 600 kilometers per hour as they approached the location of the hunting/culling team.



**Human cultures in North and Central America, prior to the arrival of the Europeans.**

“Sylvia, do a thermal search of the ground area around our team, to see if some natives are close by.”

"On it!" replied the pretty sensors officer of the interceptor. She got back to Robert after about a minute.

"No human presence within a good ten kilometers from our team, which is presently on the surface and loading up a few caribous in their shuttle."

"Excellent! Let's call them, to see if they need anything."

Switching to the operational radio frequency of the day for the area of the Americas, Robert soon had the face of a mature man wearing a graying beard appear on a side viewing screen, making him grin.

"Eh, isn't it that old bastard of Jack Fleming down there!"

"That old bastard will send you off to do something if you go on like this, Robert. How is your patrol going, to date?"

"Very uneventful up to now, Jack. So, how do you like going native like you do now?"

"I love it, truly! This job is just what I wanted. On top of helping to provide meat to our citizens, it allows me to get back close to nature and live in the true sense of it."

"And how is your hunting going up to now?"

"Very well indeed. In the last four days alone, we stunned and captured a complete caribou extended family of one alpha male, fifteen female caribous and nine young ones. We then sent that extended caribou family to New Zealand, where it will augment our steadily growing herds of free-roaming cattle and game animals. Presently, we are busy collecting a few male caribous soon destined for slaughter and butchering."

"And the remaining caribou herds here in Labrador, are they in any danger of tinning out and disappearing?"

"Are you kidding, Robert? The herd from which we culled those caribous still counts about a quarter of a million animals. Since we kill mostly the old males and with the very low number of nomadic hunters present in this area, that herd will in fact continue to grow steadily until it becomes too big to sustain itself. By culling only a few beasts every day, we are simply preventing the herd to become too big for its own good. The same goes with Stinson's team in the prairies, which is busy culling buffalos according to the same rules as we follow. The big difference between my team and his team is the amount of meat they collect on each of their buffalos: those beasts are huge and their meat is excellent."

"Have you or Stinson encountered some local nomads up to now?"

“No, and we are doing our best to avoid that. That’s why we mostly hunt and work at night, to avoid attracting the locals’ attention.”

“And if you do meet some of them, what are your orders? Couldn’t they become angry at seeing some foreigners hunt what they consider to be their designated preys?”

“We are very conscious about that and so are the food program managers in New Auckland, which is why we do our best to stay under the radar. However, in the case of a surprise encounter, we have with us a number of gift items, like steel knives and tools, deer skins, frozen meat and some fresh fruits, enough to make them accept our presence here.”

“That sounds like a good policy to me. Steel knives should be like real treasures for them.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that, Robert: those silex points and blades they use can be surprisingly sharp and durable.”

“I see! Well, we will leave your team free to continue its work here. I will now go see how Stinson’s team is doing. Don’t hesitate to call if you need anything from me.”

“I will! Have a nice patrol. Hunter Team One, out!”

With that conversation concluded, Robert accelerated again to hypersonic speed, heading West towards the Canadian Prairies. However, he first slowed down again after half an hour in order to check on the woodcutting team operating south of the Hudson Bay. There, amidst immense forests of pines, firs and birch trees, a few forest management technicians directing a robotic work team were cutting and collecting individual trees, using a highly dispersed collection plan. The oldest, biggest and best trees were first selected and marked by the managers, with a minimum distance of a hundred meters between the selected trees, then flying lumberjack robots descended on each selected tree, with one robot first cutting off the branches of that tree and with another robot taking hold of the denuded trunk. A robot armed with a huge chainsaw then cut the trunk very close to the ground. As the flying robotic crane lifted off the cut tree to place it into a flying transport sled, the chainsaw robot did more cuts, these ones at near vertical into the ground, in order to free and extract the root of the tree, leaving a small, shallow crater in the ground. Both the massive central root and the cut branches were then collected and carried away, in order to eventually produce with them plywood sheets used in small buildings’ construction or to use the cellulose to produce synthetic materials. Before leaving each cut tree location, the team planted a young tree in the clearing just created, to ensure the continued renewal of the forest. With the whole tree

harvesting program carefully planned by computer and based on aerial survey maps, the authorities in New Auckland were able to harvest tens of thousands of trees per month, and this without endangering the forest habitats of the planet.

The visit to the bison hunting/culling team in the Prairies equally went in a routine manner, with Stinson's team in the process of preparing to return to their base in New Zealand. That left Robert free to switch to another phase of his patrol. He however consulted Sylvia Morgan again before heading in a new direction.

"So, Sylvia, what is there of interest to check on before we go pay a visit to the Central America and Caribbean areas?"

"To be frank: not much, unless you are interested in observing the hunting methods of nomadic hunter-gatherers across North America. The only group of interest would be the Mississippian Cultures of the American Southeast. They have just switched to fixed habitat centers and to an agrarian economy centered on the culture of corn, beans and squash. However, little info on them can be found in our datafiles."

"Is there a specific location in their zone of occupation that would be worth a look, Sylvia?"

"Yes! One of their main known historical centers is Cahokia, in Missouri. I am now sending you a map with its historical location."

"Thanks!" Cahokia, here we come!"



**Reconstitution of the Mississippian Culture site of Cahokia, as it was around 1000 CE.**





Mississippian Culture areas (700 CE – 17<sup>th</sup> Century CE). Cahokia is southwest of the Great Lakes, near the future site of St-Louis and was part of the Middle Mississippian Culture.

11:43 (America Eastern Time)

Interceptor AC 3027, 15,000 meters above Cahokia

Area of future St-Louis, Missouri, American Southeast

Stopping his interceptor and making it float stationary at high altitude, Robert looked down at Sylvia Morgan's sensors station, situated slightly below and to the right of his pilot's station.

"Alright, Sylvia! It's now all yours!"

"Thanks, Robert! I will first initiate a detailed mapping of this local area via our mapping radar and cameras, then will check the activity on the ground with the help of our high-resolution telescope."

"Sounds fine with me."

Programming a cartography coverage of the area they were overflying, including the culture fields surrounding Cahokia, Sylvia then coupled their high-definition observation telescope with a thermal camera, with the goal of being able to count later on the number of inhabitants living in Cahokia. It didn't take long before she noticed something unusual.

"That's strange: it seems that about everybody in Cahokia is presently assembled around what appears at first to be an earth mound under construction."

"Well, since they don't have any machinery, I would guess that it would take a lot of manual labor to build such mounds, no?" suggested the weapons officer, Jorge Canseco.

"Could be! I..."

Sylvia's prolonged silence after that made Robert twist his head to look at her.

"What? Do you see something special, Sylvia?"

When it came, her response was made in a voice filling with anger and disgust.

"THESE BASTARDS ARE IN THE PROCESS OF EXECUTING PEOPLE! I can see fourteen bodies already lying in a freshly dug trench."

"WHAT?" nearly shouted Robert before switching one of his display screens to the view given by their telescope. Passing in normal visible light mode, he then went to maximum magnification. With a trench effectively half filled with the bodies of fourteen half naked women now evident on his screen, he saw a man wearing some kind of ceremonial head covering strike a kneeling woman with what appeared to be a stone object. The woman then collapsed on the ground, to be then pushed into the trench, where two other men grabbed her body and carried it a few meters before putting her down next to another dead woman. That scene both revolted Robert and made him slam a fist on the left armrest of his pilot's seat.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH ALL THESE PEOPLE IN AMERICA MAKING HUMAN SACRIFICES? FIRST, IT WAS THE TOLTECS IN TULA, THEN THE MAYANS IN TIKAL, NOW THESE PEOPLE TOO? JORGE, I WANT PRECISION TARGETTING WITH OUR LASERS ON THOSE PRIESTS AND THEIR AIDES DOING

THE KILLING! DYY, I WANT YOU TO SEND DOWN A SMALL RECONNAISSANCE DRONE, SO THAT WE COULD GET A CLOSE-UP VIEW OF WHAT EXACTLY IS HAPPENING DOWN THERE.”

“Setting up the launch of a drone now.” replied Dyy Jonan, the Centaurian female flight engineer of the interceptor. “Drone launched! It should be down near the surface in seven minutes.”

“Good! I will use that time to alert our base in New Auckland about this and transmit to them what we see. Jorge, make it quick with your lasers: every extra minute will mean another dead woman.”

“Targeting sequence programmed, with five individuals selected and designated. Firing now!”

Firing in the ultra-violet spectrum, which was invisible to the naked eye, the five-megawatt laser beams from the interceptor’s three high-power laser batteries having a field of fire that covered Cahokia instantly heated the air they went through, the same way a lightning bolt would, creating loud thunderclaps.



**Ritual mass human sacrifice of 53 native women in Cahokia.**

On the ground next to the trench, 22-year-old Makita, wearing only a short skirt and kneeling in the dirt, closed her eyes tight, trembling with fear as the priest next to her raised his stone mace to strike her on the head and kill her. She thus didn’t see the priest’s head and the right half of his body being incinerated in an instant, but she certainly heard the thunderclap of the laser beam when it struck both the priest and the ground under him. She jumped with fright at the ear-splitting ‘CRACK’ and opened her

eyes, in time to see the incinerated remains of the priest collapse on the ground next to her. Four more thunderclaps then resonated in quick succession and the remaining priest and three assistant executioners were also incinerated into cinders. Makita, like the rest of the assembled population of Cahokia, could only look on at the fuming bodies for long seconds, unable to comprehend what had just happened. King Nookat, who had ordered the sacrificial ceremony in order to 'honor' his deceased younger brother, also starred with disbelief at the bodies while sitting on his ceremonial chair, which had been put down next to the trench containing the bodies of the women already executed. Stupefaction in Makita then turned quickly into a mix of new hope and resentment. Hope, for it appeared that she would now be able to live on. Resentment at King Nookat for having designated Makita to be one of the women to be sacrificed, and this as a punishment for Makita's husband attempt at refusing to give away half of the produce from his field to the King. Nookat had then ordered her husband killed as a punishment, with her to be sacrificed at the next offering to the Serpent God. Pointing an accusing finger at the King, she shouted out at the top of her lungs.

"THE GODS ARE DISPLEASED WITH THE KING AND HIS PRIESTS! LET'S KILL HIM!"

Giving the example herself, Makita grabbed the stone mace dropped by the dead priest and ran towards Nookat while screaming her thirst for revenge. The few royal guards forming a thin cordon meant to contain the crowd watching the ceremony were quickly submerged and overrun by the vindictive inhabitants, who had been enduring for years the excesses of King Nookat. The latter, with dozens of his people also joining Makita in running at him, tried his best to run away but his intricate ceremonial robe hindered him, cutting his speed by nearly half. An enraged Makita was the first to reach him, slashing his back with her stone mace as soon as she was within arms reach of him. Nookat screamed out in pain and slowed down for a moment, allowing Makita to get close enough to hit him on the back of his head. Half knocked out, the King tripped and fell on the ground. Before he could get back up, Makita was on top of him, delivering savage blows with her stone mace. Half a dozen men then joined her in turning Nookat into a bloody pulp.

Aboard the interceptor, Robert and his crew watched on the death of the king with undisguised satisfaction, with Jorge Canseco then making a comment.



“That little woman who just escaped execution seems to be quite a firebrand. I wonder what she said to the crowd.”

“Probably something like ‘LET’S KILL THE FUCKER!’” replied Sylvia, a smirk on her face. Dyy Jonan, ever the most level-headed one in the crew, looked at Robert.

“What do we do now? Should we leave and let these people manage along without their priests and king?”

“Our directives about first contact with local natives in the Americas are strict, Dyy. We should avoid such contacts in order to prevent the transmission of diseases to which those natives possess no biological immunity. We also want to avoid showing ourselves in person, in order not to fuel new beliefs about more gods.”

“These damn religions!” said in turn Sylvia. “They all do only one thing: bring power and control over others to the ones advocating those religions.”

Robert could only nod his head at that. What Ann Shelton and her assistant administrators were encountering in Europe was also heavily tainted by the scourge of religious abuse and intolerance, minus the human sacrifices practiced in Central America and Mexico. He then had to correct himself: in Europe they did not make human sacrifices but they burned heretics, sorcerers and witches at the stake.

“Sylvia, have our drone take close up pictures and facial scans of that young woman we saved, so that we could recognize and find her in the future: she looks like a good prospect to become one of our designated local translators.”

Sylvia nodded at that and sent commands to the drone she had sent down to Cahokia. To circumvent the fact that many of the languages and dialects spoken on 9<sup>th</sup> Century Earth were not recorded into the linguistic data banks used to teach new languages via mnemotronic techniques, Ann Shelton had the idea that they could recruit local volunteers who would then be made to assimilate via mnemotron Modern English. Once fluent in speaking, reading and writing English, those local translators could then start helping to progressively build a new language dictionary, on top of serving as interpreters in face-to-face encounter situations. That method had already proved most practical in providing quickly the capability to understand and converse with many people and races who would otherwise be unintelligible to the citizens of the Human Expansion. Sylvia was able to report to Robert a few minutes later.

“That young woman’s physical profile is now recorded. From the conversations she is having with other people of Cahokia, her name seems to be ‘Makita’.”

“Hum, Makita... Nice name actually. Well, time to see if those Mayans have learned their lessons in Tikal. However, it is now time for lunch, so we will first eat in rotation while flying high at subsonic speed towards Mexico. Sylvia, Jorge, you go eat first.”

**12:06 (Mexico Time)**

**Bridge of interceptor AC 3027**

**Overflying the Mayan city of Tikal**

**Yucatan Peninsula (in modern Guatemalan territory)**



**Parts of the ruins of Tikal in modern times. At right is Temple 1, 47 meter-high. Tikal had up to 92,000 inhabitants at its peak in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century CE. The last monument was built in Tikal in 869 CE, with the city abandoned a few years afterwards, mostly due to prolonged droughts.**

All four crewmembers of the interceptor were back at their posts by the time their ship arrived over the Mayan city of Tikal, still flying at high altitude and low subsonic speed in order to be hard to spot from the ground. While Sylvia used the interceptor’s high-definition telescope to survey the city, Jorge and Robert used the close-up views provided by a spy drone sent down to low altitude.

“Hum, I see nothing out of the ordinary up to now, folks.” said Robert after some fifteen minutes of observation. Sylvia however did notice something a minute later.

“Look at the farming fields around the city: they look about as dry as bones. This would concord with the historical archives, which said that the region suffered severe, repeated periods of drought in this decade and the next ones. Maybe they were trying to implore their gods for some rain when the AC 3268 caught them doing human sacrifices.”

"Maybe, but that still wouldn't excuse them for sacrificing human beings, Sylvia. They have only themselves to blame if they overexploited their natural resources, especially if done mostly to satisfy the fancy of their royal families and of their priests. I believe that we shouldn't waste more time on them and go further south to check on the Incas in Peru."

"WRONG!" exclaimed at once Sylvia in a facetious tone, attracting a dubious look from Robert.

"What? Why did you ding me like that?"

"Because you were in the wrong century...and in the wrong millennium, Robert." replied Sylvia, a grin on her face. "The Inca civilization appeared around the year 1,300 C.E. You were thus off by a good 400 years. Presently, you have in South America, along the west coast and the Andes, three main cultures: the Tiwanaku Culture, established in the southern half of the Andes; the Sican Culture, situated along the coast of Northern Peru; and the Huari Culture, established along most of the coast of Peru."

"And is there something worth looking at there, apart from local farmers and fishermen?"

"Of course, Robert! You may not have the Incas there yet, but Tiahuanaco is presently the largest city in South America, with around 100,000 people living in it."

"Then, Tiahuanaco it will be, Sylvia."



## **CHAPTER 7 – SAILING TOWARDS THE UNKNOWN**



**Va'a pahi Polynesian high seas catamaran canoe.**

**08:41 (Central South Pacific Time)**

**Thursday, January 26, 862 CE**

**Village of Taiohae, Nuku Hiva Island**

**The Marquesas islands (future French Polynesia)**

**1,400 kilometers to the northeast of Tahiti, Central South Pacific**

The strongly-built Polynesian man was about to launch his canoe in the beach's surf in order to go fish when his teenage son, who was accompanying him, looked up and pointed at the sky while shouting excitedly.

**"FATHER, ANOTHER SHIP OF THE GODS!"**

Looking up at the sky, Ariki then saw an egg-shaped object flying high and crossing the sky at high speed, coming from the Southwest. He didn't panic or get agitated then, as this was not the first such sighting, far from it. He however couldn't help think that the flying thing was coming from the same direction than on the other occasions, where other flying objects were also seen passing overhead while flying towards the Southwest or coming from that direction. Thinking quickly, Ariki gave an urgent order to his son.

"Quick, Nikau! Go get four fair-sized stones or coconuts and bring them to me!" While he didn't understand at first why his father was asking him to do that, the twelve-year-old boy did not waste time in asking questions then and ran away across the sandy beach, heading for the treeline. Nikau was back a couple of minutes later near their canoe, carrying four coconuts in his arms.

"Here you go, Father. What shall we do with these coconuts?" In response, Ariki extended his left arm towards the tree line, oriented in a specific direction.

"Go line up those coconuts some ten paces apart along the direction I am now pointing, Son. I want to mark the precise direction that flying object was going." While not understanding the reason for his father to ask him this, Nikau again obeyed without question and walked in the direction pointed at by Ariki, dropping one coconut every ten paces and then realigning them carefully, following the commands of his father. By then, other villagers were coming to them while looking up at the flying egg, which was now nearly out of sight to the Northeast. One man with graying hair, an old fisherman and master navigator named Rawiri, approached Ariki to ask him a question, curiosity on his face.

"Why are you marking the path of the gods' ship, Ariki?" Ariki gave a sober look at the old fisherman and navigator: if he actually went along with the idea forming in his head, then Rawiri would be a precious companion to take with him.

"This is the seventh time this month that we see flying ships pass overhead, Rawiri, all of them either coming from or going towards the same direction: Southwest. Could you tell what exactly is in that direction?"

"Uh, I would have to wait for the night to fall, so I could look at the stars, but I would say that it came from the approximate direction of Tahiti, or from beyond Tahiti. But why would you want to know that, Ariki?"

"To possibly sail towards the Southwest and find the land of the Gods."

“Then, you will need our largest boat to do such a trip, along with the permission of our chief.”

Ariki nodded at that, having already realized that.

“That is well understood, Rawiri. However, finding the land of the Gods would amply justify the efforts and the risks. If I leave on such a trip, could I count on you to help guide our navigation?”

Rawiri only needed a couple of seconds to make his mind about that and nodded his head while smiling at Ariki.

“You definitely can count on me for such a trip, Ariki. I suggest that we now go pay a visit to our chief and ask for his support.”

“An excellent suggestion, Rawiri. Nikau, stay here and make sure that nobody touches or moves those coconuts.”

“Uh, what about our fishing trip, Father?”

“It will have to wait! Let’s go see Manaia!”

With his son staying behind on the beach, Ariki, followed closely by Rawiri, walked towards the largest house of their village, situated just short of the treeline. Like the other huts around it, it was built out of coconut tree trunks and straw and was not much larger than the typical hut in the village. There, they were greeted near the entrance by the wife of Chief Manaia, a woman still most beautiful at the age of 47.

“Hello Ariki! Hello Rawiri! To what do we owe your visit this morning?”

“Hello, Tui! We came to see your husband about the latest sighting of a ship of the gods.”

Tui, who was sitting on the ground next to the door of the house and was weaving a basket out of long leaves, instantly became most serious: the sightings of flying ships, which had started about four months ago, was the subject of a hot debate in the village about what they meant and about their significance. Stopping her weaving work, Tui got up and went into her house, while Ariki and Rawiri politely waited outside. She was back less than a minute later with her husband, Chief Manaia, a small but robust man in his early fifties. Despite his age, Manaia was still vigorous and healthy and his strong character and intelligence was acknowledged by all in the village. He looked inquisitively at his two visitors as he addressed them in a neutral tone.

“Another ship of the gods was seen this morning?”

“Yes, Chief!” answered Ariki. “I was about to launch my canoe to go fishing when me and my son saw it cross the sky at high speed, very high above. Rawiri also saw it. I then had my son line up four coconuts along the line of the ship’s flight path: it came from the Southwest.”

“The Southwest...again!” said thoughtfully Manaia before looking back at Ariki. “And what did you want to discuss with me?”

“Chief, those flying ships, which come from the direction of Tahiti or beyond according to Rawiri, must be coming and going from the land of the gods. There must be a large island beyond Tahiti, somewhere to the Southwest of us, which serves as home for the flying gods. I believe that we should try to find that island, so that we could pay our respects to the gods and thus help us gain their favors.”

Manaia nodded slowly his head as he weighed Ariki’s suggestion, which made a lot of sense to him.

“I believe so too, Ariki. Would you and Rawiri be ready to lead such a long and risky ocean expedition towards the Southwest? I would love to lead it myself, but our neighbors in Hakauai are again making a pest of themselves lately and I must stay here to defend our village against their marauding.”

Ariki and Rawiri could only nod at that: there were three other villages on Nuku Hiva, all of them highly jealous of their territorial claims and with frequent skirmishes happening when villagers met by accident or following an ambush by people from other villages. Those skirmishes could become quite bloody and violent, with the defeated ones often eaten afterwards in ritual cannibalistic feasts.

“We understand, Chief. Will you allow us, along with our families, to sail Southwest in one of our bigger Va’a Pahi<sup>11</sup> and go in search of the land of the gods?”

“I will do better than that, Ariki: I will let you take my own Va’a Pahi, our biggest and most seaworthy boat. But you will need more than just a handful of people to help you do such a long and hazardous trip. Let’s go assemble our people near the beach. I will then ask for volunteers ready to sail with you. I will then make sure that you are well provisioned for your trip.”

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<sup>11</sup> Va’a Pahi : Polynesian catamaran double canoe linked by a platform supporting a deck house and propelled by one or two sails. The biggest va’a pahis could accommodate up to fifty people and were quite seaworthy.

Ariki bowed to his chief, pleased by Manaia's decision. He and Rawiri then followed Manaia outside as the chief went to a part of the beach which served as a communal meeting and discussion place for the villagers. There, Manaia raised both of his hands high and spoke as loudly as he could.

"GOOD PEOPLE OF TAIOHAE, ASSEMBLE AROUND ME!"

Within a few minutes, Manaia had over 300 people, the majority of the village's population, forming a semi-circle in front of him. As more villagers kept streaming in, he spoke out loud again.

"MY FRIENDS, ANOTHER SHIP OF THE GODS OVERFLEW US THIS MORNING, COMING FROM THE SOUTHWEST. I BELIEVE THAT IT IS TIME FOR US TO TRY TO FIND THE LAND OF THE GODS, SO THAT WE COULD PAY OUR RESPECTS TO THEM AND ASK FOR THEIR FAVORS. ARIKI AND RAWIRI ARE READY TO LEAD AN EXPEDITION TO THE SOUTHWEST, USING MY OWN VA'A PAHI AND ACCOMPANIED BY THEIR FAMILIES. HOWEVER, THEY WILL NEED MORE PEOPLE TO ASSIST THEM DURING THIS LONG SEA TRIP. THIS TRIP WILL BE HARD AND RISKY, BUT I BELIEVE THAT OUR VILLAGE COULD BENEFIT GREATLY FROM IT. I AM THUS ASKING FOR VOLUNTEERS READY TO ACCOMPANY WITH THEIR FAMILIES ARIKI AND RAWIRI ON THIS TRIP. WHO AMONG YOU WOULD BE READY TO GO WITH THEM?"

Ariki and Rawiri anxiously looked on as the villagers looked at each other and at their spouses. To Rawiri's pride, his own grown son, Kauri, raised his hands high after speaking quickly with his wife Kaia.

"I AND MY FAMILY WILL GO!"

"I WILL GO TOO!" added one after the other Te Ariki, the younger brother of Ariki, and Naori, a nephew of Rawiri. Manaia nodded his head in satisfaction then: that meant that a total of ten adults and eight children would be going along on the expedition. A bigger crew would certainly have helped in order to row the va'a pahi, but the quantities of water, food and other supplies needed for such a long sea trip was also a factor. What would help the explorers was the fact that the predominant winds in the region came from the East, thus would push their boat at a good speed along the way.

"THANK YOU, MY FRIENDS! OUR BOAT WILL LEAVE IN TWO DAYS, AFTER IT IS INSPECTED AND REPAIRED AND AFTER ENOUGH PROVISIONS HAVE BEEN GATHERED FOR THIS GREAT ADVENTURE. WITH LUCK, OUR PEOPLE WILL



FIND THE LAND OF THE GODS IN A FEW WEEKS AND WILL THUS BRING GREAT FAVORS TO OUR VILLAGE.”

The assembled villagers then cheered loudly, making Ariki feel a wave of pride surge in him.

Two days later, the villagers assembled again in the morning on the beach, this time to wish goodbye and good luck to the crew of the chief's va'a pahi. The long catamaran double canoe, apart from carrying eighteen persons, was also loaded down with as much water and food as it could carry, along with a much smaller canoe meant for coastal trips, a few tools, a dozen chickens and four pigs. The latter were actually meant to be brought all the way to the land of the gods, where they would hopefully multiply and help the expedition members settle for the long run. Ten vigorous young men also boarded the boat, but on a temporary basis in order to help row the catamaran to the high seas, while two other boats would escort the chief's va'a pahi and would retrieve the supplementary rowers once the catamaran would be safely past the submerged rocks and reefs surrounding Nuku Hiva. Long, loud cheers rose from the crowd of villagers when the va'a pahi was pushed into the surf, along with its two escort canoes. With even the older children helping to row, the catamaran boat quickly cleared the beach, heading out to sea and the Southwest. Another half hour and they were able to deploy their two 'crab claw' sails, with a steady wind then helping to push the boat to a fair speed. That was when the ten supplementary rowers transferred to the two escort canoes while wishing good luck to the travelers. As the two escort canoes rowed back to their village, Ariki looked at Rawiri, who was their navigator for the expedition.

“Now what, Rawiri, apart from heading Southwest and hope for the best?”

“Since Tahiti is directly on our path, I believe that it would be advisable to make a brief stop once there, in order to replenish our provisions of food and water. We still don't know how long our trip will be, so it would only be prudent to use every opportunity to top up our reserves of water and food as we go.”

Ariki could only nod at that wise plan: people from Nuku Hiva, including Rawiri, had made trips to Tahiti a number of times in the past in order to exchange goods and cultivate the relations with the people of Tahiti, with one Tahiti crew having visited Taiohae some two years earlier. Thus, their catamaran had a good chance of getting help and supplies once in Tahiti. With luck, maybe a few people there would be ready to

accompany him and Rawiri along their hazardous trip. Looking up at their two sails, Rawiri was pleased to see them well filled with wind from the East.

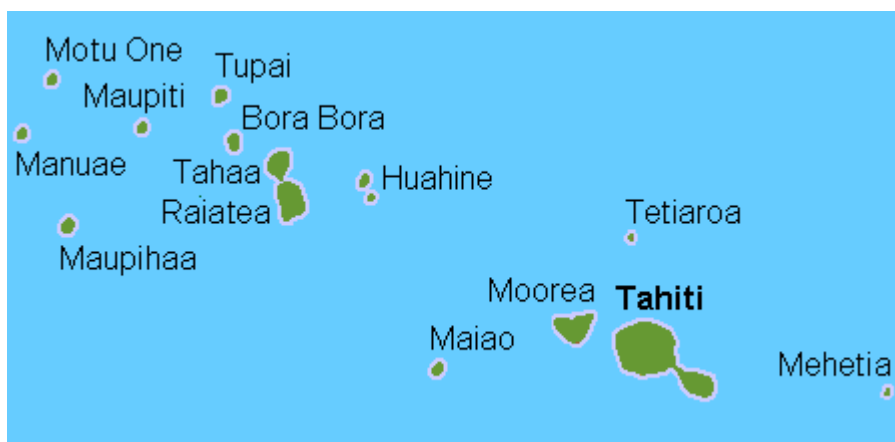
“We should be able to make good speed on our way if this wind stays on. Now, our people only need to settle in for the trip and be patient while I steer our boat towards our intended destination.”

**16:09 (South Pacific Time)**

**Wednesday, February 1, 862 C.E.**

**Rawiri’ catamaran, high seas**

**South Pacific**



**The Leeward Islands in the South Pacific.**

“ARIKI, LOOK AT THOSE BIRDS! WE ARE NEARING LAND!”

Alerted by Rawiri’s cry, Ariki looked up and saw five birds flying overhead in large circles, apparently searching for some fish to catch. For Polynesian navigators and sailors, the presence and type of birds were good indicators of the presence of a land nearby. Those navigators could then follow those birds’ path as they headed back to their nests to find the nearest lands. Going to Rawiri, who was sitting next to their boat’s rudder, Ariki eagerly asked him a question.

“How close do you think that we are from Tahiti?”

“No more than a day’s trip, at the rate we are going, but I can’t say for certain that Tahiti is actually the nearest land. We could be close to some of the islands around it. Which one is actually not very important, as long as we can find fresh water and food there. Maybe the people there will be able to tell us about sightings of the ships of the gods.”

"That would certainly help us navigate in the right direction. I must say that the wind was quite helpful during our trip."

Rawiri smiled at that last remark.

"Yes, it was indeed, being strong and steady from the East. However, returning to Nuku Hiva will be a real bitch, as we will then have to sail against a contrary wind."

"But, if we indeed find the land of the gods, will we want to then return to Nuku Hiva? Wouldn't we want to stay and live there?"

Rawiri's smile faded then, as Ariki's question was a most pertinent one.

"Our families would most probably want to stay and live on the island of the gods, but don't we owe something to our village for helping us launch this expedition? This is after all our chief's boat."

It was the turn of Ariki to feel indecision at those words.

"Uh, you are right."

An idea then came to his mind, making him smile.

"Hey, maybe the gods will help us travel back to our village after we meet them. They may even help us carry more of our people to their land."

"Hum, that is a possibility, but I hate to plan on assumptions and wishes. Let's see first what the next days and weeks will bring us. For the time being, I will be following these birds to the nearest land and see what happens next."

Ariki could only nod at that wise decision and returned to the side of his wife Amaia and of his three children, sheltered inside the deck house.

**06:23 (South Pacific Time)**

**February 2, 862 C.E.**

**Area of the Leeward Islands**

**South Pacific**



Long war canoe.

Rawiri was getting quite tired after a whole night spent at the rudder of their boat, navigating by the stars, and had to look twice in order to make sure that he was not mistaken: he could see the top of three islands ahead on the horizon. Focusing his tired eyes, he soon knew that he was indeed looking at a group of islands and started shouting joyfully.

“LAND! LAND! WE HAVE ISLANDS IN SIGHT AHEAD OF US!”

His shouts woke up at once his companion travelers, who then stared ahead at the horizon. Happy exclamations and shouts followed from the occupants of the boat: while the weather during their trip had been quite clement, a week spent at sea on a small boat was no picnic. Ariki came at once to the pilot’s position to speak with Rawiri.

“Do you recognize those islands, Rawiri?”

“I am not sure yet because of the distance but I could bet that we are approaching the group formed by Raiatea, Tahaa and Bora Bora. Tahiti would then be to the Southeast of here, but Raiatea will do just fine for us as a place to get fresh water and food. We should be there before noon.”

“Excellent! I will pass the word to the others.”

A bit over two hours later, they were able to clearly see the three islands from a few kilometers away, as Rawiri was steering their boat towards the larger island to their left: Raiatea. Ariki felt good as he contemplated the coastline of the larger island, lined with a thick jungle and with a number of sandy beaches visible. Going to the bow of one of the canoes forming their catamaran, he started looking down and slightly ahead, in order to warn Rawiri about any shallow coral reefs or submerged rocks. Already he could see that the seafloor was rising nearer to the surface, with the water changing color in the process. A shout from his son Nikau then made him look up and to the right.

“DAD! I SEE THREE LARGE CANOES COMING TOWARDS US FROM THE RIGHT.”

Looking in that direction, Ariki suddenly felt dread when he was able to detail those newcomers: they were war canoes! Furthermore, each of the three canoes carried at least thirty men and they were coming from the direction of Bora Bora and not from Raiatea itself. With fear visible on his face, he turned around to look at Rawiri.

“THESE ARE PROBABLY A WAR PARTY FROM BORA BORA, ON ITS WAY TO RAID RAIATEA! CAN YOU EVADE THEM?”

“IMPOSSIBLE! THEY ARE MUCH FASTER AND MORE MANEUVERABLE THAN OUR BOAT. MAYBE THEY WILL LEAVE US ALONE AFTER THEY WILL KNOW THAT WE ARE COMING FROM NUKU HIVA.”

Unfortunately, Rawiri’s hopeful wish turned out to be only that: a wish. The three long and thin war canoes, loaded with men wearing war tattoos and brandishing an assortment of clubs, spears and knives, deviated from their original course to intercept the va’a pahi and cut its path, forcing Rawiri to lower his sails and stop his catamaran boat. As the war canoes approached, he shouted out at their occupants, hoping that they would listen to him.

“WE ARE FROM NUKU HIVA AND WE CAME IN PEACE. WE ARE ON AN EXPLORATION VOYAGE.”

The answer he got from the man standing at the bow of the nearest canoe, while made in a Polynesian dialect a bit different from that used on Nuku Hiva, was nonetheless quite clear.

“WE DON’T CARE FROM WHERE YOU COME FROM! ORO<sup>12</sup> IS ASKING FOR PRISONERS TO BE SACRIFICED IN HIS NAME.”

That announcement made more than a few of the women and children traveling aboard the catamaran shriek in terror. Despite having a harpoon and an obsidian knife as his only weapons aboard, Ariki decided then that, if they were going to be killed and then eaten during a sacrificial ceremony, then he was going to make these newcomers pay as stiff a price as possible. Running to the deckhouse of the boat and grabbing his harpoon, he then gave his knife to his twelve-year-old son.

“Here, Nikau! Stay here and protect our family!”

Next, he looked at Kauri and Naori, the two other grown men present with him and Rawiri on the catamaran, and was satisfied to see that they had armed themselves with oars, which they now held like clubs.

“Naori, you defend our left side while I defend our right side. Kauri, you stay near the deckhouse and defend it against any attacker who will go through us.”

He was then surprised to see that the incoming warriors looked pleased at him showing to be ready to defend his boat. On second thoughts, he could understand their reaction then: they were on a war expedition in the name of Oro, the god of war and of sailors.

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<sup>12</sup> Oro : Polynesian god of war and of the sailors.

There was no glory in a simple massacre, while a battle would give them the opportunity to show off their courage and fighting skills. Taking position along the right side of the catamaran, next to the deckhouse containing his family, Ariki solidly held up his harpoon, its tip pointed at the nearest incoming canoe. However, he didn't have the chance to use it before a huge flying gray mass came down from the sky and stopped to a hover just above the three attacking war canoes. As Ariki and his companions stared up with awe at the giant gray ship, of ovoid shape with cruciform blisters, a thunderous voice speaking in a sort of Polynesian dialect that Ariki had some trouble understanding boomed out in the air.

"THERE WILL BE NO WAR TODAY, MEN OF BORA BORA! TURN AROUND AND RETURN HOME IF YOU WILL BE DESTROYED. THIS WILL BE YOUR ONLY WARNING."

The chieftain of the warriors, staring with a gaping mouth at this impossible sight, took seconds to react before shouting frantically at his warriors.

"TURN AROUND! TURN AROUND NOW! THE GODS ARE DISPLEASED AT US!"

His men obeyed at once, positively terrified by the enormous flying ship, which easily measured ten times the length of their longest war canoes. Rawiri, his knees getting weak from the emotion, knelt on the deck of his boat while watching the Bora Bora war canoes turn around and row away with the strength of near-panic. After about five minutes, as the war canoes were a good 300 meters away, the same voice that had given the warning spoke again, this time in a much-diminished volume.

"People of Nuku Hiva, we have been tracking your boat since you left your island to head towards the Southwest. We salute both your courage and your navigating skills. Tell us what was your intended destination and the goal of your voyage."

Having initiated this trip, Ariki felt that he was the one who needed to respond and shouted out at the flying ship.

"WE WANTED TO FIND THE LAND OF THE GODS, FROM WHERE FLYING SHIP SIMILAR TO YOU CAME TO AND FRO. WE WANTED TO PAY OUR RESPECTS TO YOU IN THE NAME OF OUR VILLAGE."

There was some delay before he got a reply.

"KNOW THAT WE ARE HUMANS LIKE YOU, NOT GODS. HOWEVER, IF YOU STILL WISH TO GET TO OUR ISLAND, THEN WE ARE READY TO HELP YOU TO GET THERE."

While stunned by those words, Ariki turned around to look at his companions in and around the deckhouse and saw them all nod in unison, with his wife Amaia then imploring him.

“Tell them that we want to visit them, Ariki.”

Not hearing any contrary opinion from the others and also getting a nod from Rawiri, he turned back to face the flying ship and shouted at it again.

“WE STILL WISH TO VISIT YOUR LAND AND, IF YOU WOULD LET US, TO SETTLE THERE.”

Again, there was a noticeable delay before Ariki got a reply.

“WE WILL GRANT YOUR WISH, ARIKI. WE WILL NOW TURN OUR SHIP AROUND AND OPEN OUR AFT HOLD FOR YOU. YOU WILL THEN BE ABLE TO SAIL YOUR BOAT INSIDE OUR SHIP.”

Before Ariki or Rawiri could ask how they could possibly fly their catamaran up to the level of the flying ship, the latter started to slowly go down at the same time as it turned around, performing a half-turn before its belly gently dove into the water. Next, some kind of huge ramp opened up at its rear, showing the inside of a sort of large cavern with flat walls. There were lights like brilliant stars illuminating the inside of that cavern!

“QUICK! GRAB YOUR OARS AND ROW OUR BOAT INSIDE THIS CAVE!”

Ariki didn't have to tell his companions twice and they all grabbed the available paddles to row with Ariki while Rawiri steered their catamaran towards the gaping opening in the flying ship. That opening proved to be more than large enough to let in their va'a pahi, complete with its two erect masts. As soon as it was completely inside the artificial cavern, the rear ramp closed shut and the water in the hold started being pumped out. In less than one minute, all the water had gone, allowing the occupants of the catamaran to jump down on the now dry deck of the hold. Crouching down and touching the deck plating, Ariki looked with bemusement at Rawiri, standing next to him.

“What is this ship made of? This is neither wood nor rock, yet is very hard and smooth to the touch.”

“It is called 'metal' and our ship is nearly entirely made of it.”

Taken by surprise, Ariki jumped to his feet and stared at the woman who had just entered the hold by a door that he had not seen before. The woman was both young and beautiful and wore a sort of outfit that clung closely to her body. She also happened to have facial traits which looked quite similar to those of a Polynesian woman, something that somehow helped reassure and calm Ariki. The newcomer looked around

at the passengers of the catamaran, smiling especially at the young children of the group, then looked back at Ariki and Rawiri.

"You two seem to be in charge of your group. Am I right?"

"Yes!" replied Ariki. "My name is Ariki and this is our pilot and navigator, Rawiri."

"And my name is Sheena, Sheena Ito. I am the pilot and commander of this interceptor."

"An...interceptor?" said Rawiri, pronouncing with difficulty the unfamiliar word. "What is that, exactly?"

"A warship able to fly and travel through the stars. But don't worry about trying to understand such new concepts right away: you will have ample time later on to learn about us and our machines and ships. First off, do any of you need some medical care?"

"No! We are all healthy, although we are a bit dehydrated and hungry." Rawiri's response attracted a gentle smile on the face of the woman.

"Then, we will provide you with a good meal and ample drinks right away. One thing, though: if you have to relieve yourself, don't do it anywhere but at the facilities we use for that. I would hate to find a puddle of urine or a pile of feces in some corner of my ship. I will show you where such facilities are and how to use them."

"Uh, what about our animals?" asked Kaia, Rawiri's wife. "We have chickens and pigs on our boat and we will need to tend to them during our trip to your island."

"Don't worry about your animals, miss: our trip will be very short indeed. If you will now follow me, please."

With Ariki and Rawiri encouraging the others to follow Ito, they exited the hold with the woman, finding themselves in a fairly wide corridor apparently running along the length of the ship. They followed that corridor along some fifteen meters before entering a door to one side of it and finding themselves inside another room, this one furnished with apparently very comfortable furniture and with a large table in its center.

"The ship's crew lounge and cafeteria." explained Sheena Ito. "My crew and the occasional passengers use it to relax and eat during long patrols. I will now show you one of our sanitary facilities, which we call 'toilet', so that you will know how to use it. Each of the toilets you can find on this ship has this sign on its door. Please remember what it looks like. I will now ask you to go inside it three at a time with me, so that I could



explain to you how to use it properly. We are very big on questions of public and personal hygiene, so please listen carefully to my explanations during my demonstration.”

Showing how to use a toilet to all the group of Polynesians took a good ten minutes, following which Ito made the newcomers sit around the table of the lounge. That was when a big young man with blond hair and blue eyes entered the lounge, to be presented to the Polynesians by Ito.

“This is Rolph Gunnarsson, one of my crewmembers. He will serve you some food and drinks while I go pilot my ship.”

Before leaving the lounge, Ito briefly stopped by a sort of large, flat object suspended to a wall and touched a few small things along its edges. To the surprise and astonishment of the Polynesians, a vivid color picture appeared on its surface, showing the water around the ship and the nearby island of Raiatea. As the Polynesians stared at the picture, Gunnarsson went to the large refrigerator of the lounge and started to take out of it a collection of drinks and prepared meals, choosing snack items which would be easy to eat without utensils. Distributing first the bottles of water and fruit juice around, he then started heating up the rations, using the three microwave ovens of the lounge. The interceptor rose out of the water and started accelerating and climbing towards the Southwest as he was starting to take the hot plates out of the ovens and to put them in front of the newcomers, serving the children first. As he was being served, Rawiri couldn't help ask him a question.

“How far from here is your island?”

“Roughly three times as distant as your island of Nuku Hiva is from Raiatea. But don't worry: we will be there before you can finish this meal.”

Rawiri exchanged a stunned look with Ariki on hearing that.

“By the ancestors! I can't even imagine how fast that is.”

In response, Gunnarsson looked at him soberly.

“This is only one of the first things you will see that may appear miraculous to you, sir. However, please remember that I and my companions are human, not some kind of gods. It is just that our knowledge and science are in advance of yours by millenniums.”

“And what will happen once we will arrive at your island?”

“Then, the leader of our people will meet with you to greet you and discuss with you. Her name is Lynn Tsu, Chief Administrator Lynn Tsu. However, before meeting with her, we will take the time to teach you our language, in order to facilitate your discussion with her.”

“But that could take months, maybe years!” protested Rawiri, making Gunnarsson smile.

“Actually, it will take no more time than what this trip will take. We will use that occasion to teach you as well a basic package of knowledge which will greatly facilitate your comprehension of us.”

Rawiri and Ariki gave Gunnarsson a skeptical look but didn’t say more, instead concentrating afterwards on eating their hamburgers and fries.

As they were finishing their meal some twenty minutes later, Rawiri excitedly pointed at the wall display screen, which had been showing up to now the open ocean being overflowed at incredible speed by the interceptor.

“I SEE A LAND ON THE HORIZON!”

Snapping his head towards the screen, Ariki also saw a long coastline far ahead. He then looked at Rolph Gunnarsson, who had stayed with the group in the lounge.

“Is that the land of your people?”

“It is the land on which my people have recently settled on, yes. It is called ‘New Zealand’. Before that, no Humans lived on it. Your people were originally due to arrive as the first humans to settle there in a century or so, but we beat them to it.”

“Uh, how could you predict that we would have arrived there in a century? How could you know or even say that?”

Rolph Gunnarsson then gave a sober look to Ariki and answered him in a soft tone.

“Because we came from the future, from three millenniums ahead of this time, Ariki. It wasn’t a voluntary move on our part but we are now here to stay.”

**09:14 (South Pacific Time)**

**Friday, February 3, 862 C.E.**

**Village of Taiohae, island of Nuku Hiva**

**Marquise Islands, South Central Pacific**



Chief Manaia was discussing with three of his villagers where they were going to go fish when a large shadow passed over him, making him crane his neck up. He nearly fell on his knees when he saw that a big gray flying ship was just above him and coming down, apparently to land on the beach Manaia was standing on with his fishermen. Paralyzed by stupor, he could only watch as the flying ship, some twenty paces in length and ten paces wide, landed softly on a pair of large skids. At first, nothing happened after that landing but a sort of ramp opened and lowered at the rear after a few seconds. Manaia, like a growing number of his villagers now running out of their huts, could only watch this at first. Then, two men walked out of the flying ship via the open ramp, making Manaia shout in utter surprise and disbelief.

“ARIKI! RAWIRI! HOW COME YOU RETURNED IN A SHIP OF THE GODS?”

“Because we found the land of the gods, Chief.” replied Ariki. “Or rather the gods found us.”

Ariki then spent a couple minutes, assisted by Rawiri, to tell Manaia how they had been saved by a flying ship near Raiatea and then transported to a land called ‘New Zealand’ by the ones they had taken at first to be gods. What he said after that concerning what had happened once they had arrived there left Manaia utterly stunned.

“They are offering to let us settle on their island?”

“That is correct, Chief.” replied Rawiri in a sober tone. “Their leader, a woman named Lynn Tsu, made that offer to us. She came here with us to discuss that offer with you.”

Manaia then reflexively looked at the landed shuttlecraft, in time to see a tall woman and two big, impressive warriors wearing some kind of armored suits, come out of the craft and walk towards him. The woman was richly dressed and her deportment was that of a person of importance and authority. Manaia then knelt to show his respect for her, imitated by the other villagers present. The woman stopped in front of Manaia and then gently grabbed his left arm to make him get up.

“Please get up, Chief Manaia: as humans, we are all equals.”

Getting back on his feet, Manaia contemplated the face of the woman, who stood a bit taller than him and had long, slanted eyelids.

“But...you fly around like birds. How could you be simple humans?”

“How? Via the use of highly advanced technology and science that are 3,000 years in advance of what you know. That doesn’t make us better or more worthy human beings compared to you, however. We may be very powerful by your standards but our

goals are not to conquer others or steal their lands. Rather, we care about the wellbeing and happiness of all around us. I came here to offer to your people the opportunity to move out and settle in a large, rich land that is part of New Zealand. There, your people will be able to continue to live as before, but with us nearby ready to help and support you as needed. Your children will also have the opportunity to learn from us...if they wished so. However, such a decision is understandably a very weighty one and you would probably want first to see what New Zealand looks like before taking a decision in accord with your people. I thus brought with me a device that will show you pictures of our land. Mister Zanders, if you please..."

One of the men standing next to her nodded his head and went back into the shuttlecraft, to come out a minute later, carrying a folding portable display screen. Setting it up near the shuttlecraft and unfolding the screen, he then switched it on, making a video image appear and start playing. A soundtrack in Polynesian also started playing as a distant aerial view of New Zealand came on screen. Manaia, like his villagers, watched and listened with fascination at the documentary video on New Zealand, admiring the richness and diversity of its terrain, fauna and climate. What amazed and awed him the most, however, was the sight of a huge city at night, its giant towers and building brightly illuminated.

"That city is New Auckland, our main city on New Zealand." Explained quickly Lynn Tsu to Manaia. "That is from where I administer my people. Your people will be most welcome to visit it and profit from its facilities, as your people will enjoy the same rights and privileges as my people."

Manaia couldn't help look at Tsu with utter respect.

"Your people are indeed great people, to show such generosity and kindness despite your immense power. How could I thank you for offering us all this?"

"By accepting our offer and coming to live with us in New Zealand, my friend." Said softly Lynn Tsu while smiling gently to the Maori man.

## **CHAPTER 8 – ARRIVING IN EDEN**



Early medieval Kog ship.

**15:40 (Provence Time)**

**Monday, February 6, 862 C.E.**

**Port of Marseille, Kingdom of Provence**

**Mediterranean coast**

“Marseille, at last! My stomach definitely doesn’t like sea trips.” Karl, leaning against the wooden bulwark of the cargo ship on which his troupe had travelled from Italy, smiled at his wife’s statement.

“Well, you certainly puked nearly all the way to here, Greta. Thankfully, the rest of our troupe proved more resistant to seasickness.”

Greta nodded her head at that as she eyed the port of Marseille, in which harbor their Kog<sup>13</sup> was now entering. The harbor was fairly narrow but deep and was proving to be

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<sup>13</sup> Kog : Type of early medieval cargo ship with a single mast and a square sail. It was mostly used for coastal navigation.

quite a busy port, with dozens of other ships, including fishing boats, either docked at the quays or moving around the harbor.

“Marseille seems to be quite a busy place, I must say.”

The captain of their ship, who was standing nearby in the middle of the deck, heard her and spoke up.

“It is indeed, madam! Marseille always has been an important port along the northern coast of the Mediterranean, but it has become even more so in the last couple of months.”

“How so?” asked Karl, curious. The captain responded while pointing towards the West-northwest.

“Since the arrival of the people from the future in Toulouse last fall, they have opened a new, major marketplace there, inviting merchants from all over the continent to come sell surplus foodstuff. In exchange, they offer at very cheap prices articles that are normally hard to get or cost a lot, like metallic tools, glassware and cut wood. The first merchants to come back from Toulouse then loudly praised that new Toulouse market to others in their home towns while selling things like steel nails of top quality at incredibly low prices. That in turn prompted more merchants to go to Toulouse. Now, the traffic on the roads to Toulouse is nearly constant. Myself, I hope to sell quickly my cargo of wine and olive oil to some Marseille merchant who will then bring it to Toulouse in order to make a big profit there.”

“But why are these people from the future interested exclusively in foodstuff?” asked Judith, the 22-year-old Hungarian Jewish woman who was part of Karl’s entertainment troupe. “They are said to be extremely powerful, on top of using flying ships. Why that obsession with getting foodstuff?”

“A good question, woman.” replied the captain, his expression becoming most sober. “One merchant who had returned from Toulouse told me that those people from the future, who call themselves the ‘Human Expansion’, are in reality refugees from the stars who lost their world to some kind of alien invaders, who also had flying ships. They supposedly have started to plant their own crops to feed their people, but some of those crops, especially fruit trees and olive trees, will take many years before they can start producing. Thus, they need to buy from all around what they can’t produce yet by themselves.”

“Uh, how many of these ‘Human Expansion’ people are there?” asked Markus, the eighteen-year-old teenager from Ancona who acted as one of Karl’s musicians.

"In Toulouse, they are supposedly over ten times the original population of the city, all living in a giant tower made of glass and steel. However, I was told that those only form an outpost, with the bulk of their people living on some far away land which had been unoccupied until their arrival from the stars. I know how to count but the number I was quoted about them is well beyond any number I heard before. One merchant told me that their total population at least equals the combined population of West and East Francia, plus that of Lotharingia."

That figure left the whole troupe in disbelief, with Karl finally objecting.

"But if they are so many and with their flying ships and weapons, why haven't they simply invaded Europe to take what they needed, like the Vikings were doing?"

In response, the captain stared at Karl with utmost seriousness.

"I asked that same question to that merchant back from Toulouse. His answer was that these 'Human Expansion' people are humane and kind people, like nothing seen before. At first, I thought that he was exaggerating, but many more merchants then told me the same things he told me, so I am now inclined to believe their claims. You told me that your troupe is a traveling band of minstrels. Where did you intend to go once off my ship?"

"Uh, Toulouse."

That answer made the captain nod his head.

"Good choice! With some luck, the Count of Toulouse could accept you as new citizens of his county, the way he has accepted a number of newcomers before."

"You mean that those people from the future didn't simply took power from him?" asked Greta in disbelief.

"They didn't! On their arrival, they made a pact with Count Raymond, then massacred the Viking army approaching Toulouse. As a thank you for that, Count Raymond then gave to these people a string of island on the Garonne River passing by Toulouse, where they built their giant tower and a number of other large buildings. While the people from the future have full control of those islands, Count Raymond is still in effective charge and control of Toulouse and of his counties surrounding it, but lets the Human Expansion people build roads and other facilities around that would benefit his counties and his own people. I was told that the subjects of Count Raymond are now by far the happiest and most prosperous people in Francia."

Karl and Greta exchanged looks then, greatly encouraged by the captain's words.

"My God! We really need to get to Toulouse, Greta."

"I believe so as well, Karl." said his wife before looking back at the ship's captain. "Do you know if the old Roman road between Marseille and Narbonne is still usable?" To her surprise, the captain grinned on hearing her question.

"Yes, but you won't need to use it: the people from the future recently finished building a new, much larger and better paved road connecting together Marseille, Montpellier, Narbonne, Carcassonne and Toulouse. They even built a number of relays and shelters along the way. You will thus be able to pull your cart along an excellent road."

It was then the turn of Karl and of his troupe members to grin.

"Damn! I can't wait to get off this ship."

"And I can't wait to be able to sell my wine and olive oil at a good profit to some of the merchants who will be waiting at quayside to see what I am carrying as a cargo." replied the captain. "The last couple of months sure have been good for my business. If you will now excuse me, I better go help my pilot to dock at one of the few quays still empty."

As the captain walked away, Ingrid, Karl's thirteen-year-old daughter, spoke softly to herself.

"By Mary, Mother of Christ! I can't wait to meet those people from the future!"

Half an hour later, their ship slowly docked at one of only three quays still unoccupied in the busy harbor. As the captain had predicted, a number of merchants with either carts or chariots were waiting at quayside, attracted to his boat by its Tuscan flag. a boarding ramp was not yet in place before shouted deals were being discussed between the captain and the merchants waiting on the quay. A group of four merchants and two teenage boys finally won the shouted auction for the barrels of olive oil carried by the ship, while another group of merchants put claims on the barrels of wine. The captain was indeed a satisfied man by the time that Karl and his troupe got off the ship, pulling their light cart along. Karl then went to see the senior merchant of the group who had bought the barrels of olive oil. That merchant, along with his associates and a number of hired local stevedores, was busy loading the heavy barrels on his four chariots when Karl approached him. Karl, who didn't speak Occitan, the local language, tried his luck with Lombard. Thankfully, the merchant proved to be fluent in that language, which was spoken in nearby Northern Italy.

"Excuse me, good sire! Are you going to Toulouse with those barrels?"



"Uh, yes! Why do you ask?"

"Well, my name is Karl. I lead a troupe of travelling minstrels and we just disembarked from this ship. We also want to go to Toulouse and I was wondering if we could travel together for mutual protection against thieves and road bandits. We have a small cart with us that carries the few supplies and equipment we have."

The merchant looked briefly at Karl's troupe, waiting nearby beside their cart, then jumped down from his chariot to come shake hands with Karl.

"I will be happy to have your troupe travel with my chariots. My name is Humbert and those with me are my son Charles, my associates Régis, Alain and Sylvestre, plus Gérard, son of Alain."

"And I am traveling with my wife Greta, my sons Erik and Cedrik, my daughter Ingrid, plus my musicians and dancers, Judith, Markus and Aïsha."

Humbert nodded his head while giving a second, more detailed look at the troupe members. He took good note of the beauty of the two teenage girls, Ingrid and Aïsha, and that of the younger woman named Judith: he was probably going to have to tell his son Charles to watch both his manners and his hands around those girls, with the same applying to Gérard, the young teenage son of Alain. Karl's wife, Greta, was also an attractive woman but, as she was a married woman, Humbert was not going to show disrespect to her.

"Well, I tell you what, Karl: you and your troupe help us load those barrels of olive oil on my chariots and you will then be able to travel on them, with your cart attached and pulled behind my own chariot. What kind of weapons, if any, do you have?"

"We have a total of three bows, four javelins and five knives, most of them presently in our cart."

"That will certainly help repel any bandits along the way, although I must say that the new road to Toulouse has proven to be quite safe, with the Human Expansion people conducting frequent patrols over it with their flying ships."

"Those Human Expansion people, do you know much about them? What we heard to date have made us anxious to learn more."

"I can indeed tell you more, but let's load up my chariots first. We will have plenty of time to discuss along the way during our nightly stops."

"Right!" replied Karl before motioning to the men and boys of his troupe. "Markus, Erik, Cedrik! Come help us load these chariots."

Joining their efforts to those of Humbert, his associates and the few stevedores he had been able to hire, they rolled the small but heavy barrels of olive oil on the chariots, using wood planks as ramps. As they were finishing with that job, Humbert threw a contemptuous look at the other merchants on the quay, who had concentrated their money on buying the barrels of wine brought in on the Tuscan ship.

"Pff! If they think that they will get top prices for their wine in Toulouse, they better think again. First, Toulouse is already well supplied in quality wine from Bordeaux, which is much nearer than Marseille is. Second, the people from the future need and want real foodstuff, not alcoholic drinks. For them, vegetable oil is much more precious than wine. Those guys will probably still be able to make a profit in the end, but we grabbed the truly profitable stuff."

"Those people from the future sound like truly pragmatic people, Humbert." said Greta, making the merchant nod his head.

"They are, on top of being decent, caring people. Well, time to roll! Hop in!" With the stevedores paid by Humbert and the barrels of oil secured on the chariots by ropes, the small convoy of four ox-drawn chariots, with Karl's cart attached behind the lead chariot, rolled off the quay and through the old city, heading for the gate connecting with the old Roman road leading westward.

Even though Humbert had foretold them about it, Karl and his troupe members were stunned when they rolled out of the northern city gate, which connected directly with the old, dilapidated Roman road, and saw the seemingly endless large ribbon of white concrete running along an East-West line past the city walls. There was even a tall sort of central pole made of concrete supporting indicator panels pointing in three different directions. The pole sat in the center of a wide roundabout connected to three different roads heading respectively West, East and North. Humbert pointed at the pole and its panels as he drove his chariot through the roundabout to take the westward road.

"This was built by the people from the future, or rather by their machines. Each of these panels show the names and distances to other towns along the way, with the distances indicated in terms of Roman miles, the most common local measure of distance. Being pragmatic and knowing that most of us are illiterate, they also added the armories of the various cities and rulers, visual markers which can be recognized by all. That blazon of a red and yellow cross over a red background is that of the Count of Toulouse and we are 276 miles from the city of Toulouse."

“Nice!” said Karl while eyeing the pole and its panels. “That’s a really useful touch to this wide, well-paved road. Uh, what’s that kind of black ball on top of the pole?”

“Don’t know!” simply replied Humbert while guiding his two oxen on the road to Montpellier, Narbonne, Carcassonne and Toulouse.

### **16:31 (Provence Time)**

#### **Security Center, Toulouse Tower**

##### **Toulouse**

Jenny Kim, one of the Public Security Officers on duty in the Security Center of the Toulouse Tower, smiled when the facial recognition program connected to the views provided by the cameras hidden atop the direction indicator pole of the Marseille roundabout started showing names next to some of the occupants of the four heavy chariots loaded with barrels.

“Good old Humbert and associates are on another delivery run to here, hey? And they have some passengers as well.”

Typing on the keyboard of her computer, she called up the data history concerning Humbert and his associates and read quickly the text that popped up. It told her that Humbert was now starting his fourth trip to Toulouse, with his previous trips used to bring lots of good quality vegetable oil and fruits to the Toulouse New Market, two kinds of products the Human Expansion had plenty of need for. She then swiveled her chair around and waved at her shift supervisor, Sergeant Gordon Walsh.

“HEY, SARGE! I HAVE A GROUP COMING OUT OF MARSEILLE WHICH COULD BE WORTHY OF A QUICK LIFT!”

Walsh immediately walked to her watch station, which kept eyes on the Marseille area, and looked at the viewing screens, taking the time to read the text on her computer display before nodding his head.

“He definitely sounds like someone who has proved quite useful in the past. Liaise with one of our shuttles to arrange a pickup some distance from Marseille along the road. I believe that Pham’s shuttle is presently waiting on Pad Number Two.”

“Got it, Sarge!” replied Jenny, satisfied, before placing a radio call to Pham’s light cargo shuttle.

**17:28 (Provence Time)****Marseille – Montpellier road****Four kilometers west of Marseille**

His chariot was negotiating a curve in the four-lane road around a patch of trees when Humbert saw a dark dot appear in the sky ahead. That dot quickly grew to a shape he had seen before three times already, making him grin as his passengers gasped at the sight of the light cargo shuttle now on landing approach.

“DON’T BE AFRAID, FRIENDS: THIS FLYING SHIP IS PROBABLY COMING TO OFFER US A QUICK LIFT TO TOULOUSE. I HAVE A GOOD REPUTATION THERE.”

“But how could they know that you are here, heading for Toulouse?” asked a flabbergasted Karl while staring at the approaching shuttle. Humbert smiled and shrugged.

“Beats me! Those people have some fantastic machines and tools that they use to learn quickly what’s happening around them. Don’t take me wrong, though: none of it involves magic or sorcery, contrary to the smears the Church is still spewing against them. I already traveled three times in that kind of flying ship, having paid in Toulouse for return trips by air back to Marseille.”

“You mean that we are going to fly, like birds?” asked young Aïsha, stunned.

“Not exactly like birds, but we will fly, girl. Now, don’t be afraid: those people are decent and kind...as long as you don’t try to attack them.”

With the four chariots rolling on the siding of the road and stopping, the light cargo shuttle landed nearly silently at the vertical a mere thirty meters ahead, on the wide concrete surface of the highway. Its rear ramp then lowered and a woman walked out of the craft, waving one arm and shouting.

“DO YOU NEED A LIFT TO TOULOUSE, MISTER HUMBERT?”

“HELL YES!” happily replied the merchant before urging his oxen forward, followed by the three other chariots. Karl, Greta and Aïsha, who were riding in Humbert’s chariot, stared at the young woman wearing a form-fitting royal blue and red outfit as they entered the large, deep cargo hold of the light cargo shuttle, eyeing in detail the first person from the future they had ever seen. Another person from the future, a man, then helped the woman to fix supporting harnesses suspended from the ceiling to the oxen attached to the chariots and placed retaining blocks and straps to

secure the chariots in place as the rear ramp closed. Aïsha, more excited than she had ever been before, like her companions, watched all this and also looked at the large viewing screens along the sides of the hold giving a view of the outside, thinking that they were ordinary windows. She held her breath when the cargo shuttle started lifting up, then picked up both forward speed and altitude quickly.

“I AM FLYING! WE ARE FLYING! THIS IS FANTASTIC!”

The female cargomaster smiled at her enthusiasm and looked up at Humbert, still sitting at the reins of his chariot.

“Who are your passengers, Humbert? Family relatives?”

“No! They are a troupe of traveling minstrels who just arrived by ship from Tuscany.”

“Traveling minstrels... Hum! And what are you bringing to us this time?”

“Olive oil from Italy. I have a total of 22 barrels of it.”

“Excellent! Let me advise my superiors of this.”

The woman then walked away to a communications station situated in one corner of the hold and spoke with someone for about a minute before returning to the side of Humbert’s chariot, smiling up to him.

“Our agents at Reception Station Number One will be waiting for you and your cargo of olive oil. There, you and your associates will get free tokens for one day of free hotel rooms, meals and barn stalls, as usual.”

“I won’t say no to that!” replied Humbert, quite happy. The cargomaster then looked at Karl, who was also still atop the chariot. She first spoke to him in Occitan, then tried Lombard after seeing that he had not understood her.

“Hello, mister! My name is Dax Kern. May I have your name and those of your companions?”

“Certainly, miss! I am Karl, from Regensburg. I am traveling with my wife Greta, my sons Erik and Cedrik and my daughter Ingrid. My troupe of minstrels also include young Aïsha here, along with Judith and Markus, who are dancers and musicians. Me and my troupe have been traveling for years now across Europe, performing and living on the road. Do you welcome traveling minstrels in Toulouse?”

“We welcome every person with good intentions, sir. Count Raymond of Toulouse has often received in the past visiting entertainers and we also welcome them to perform at our marketplace, which has a large dedicated show tent where you will be able to play and collect tips. Even when there are few visitors to our market, like in the

Winter season, many of the citizens of Toulouse, along with our own citizens from the Human Expansion, go to the marketplace to shop or watch shows. You should be able to do some good business there. Here are tokens for one day of free hotel stay and three meals for each of you.”

“Thanks, miss! You are very generous indeed.” said Karl, overjoyed, while taking the tokens offered by the cargomaster. He was about to start distributing them to the members of his troupe when Dax Kern asked him another question.

“Karl, you said that you have been traveling on the road for years with your family and musicians. Do you still have a home in Regensburg or somewhere else?” That made Karl look soberly back at the cargomaster.

“I left, or rather fled, my family home sixteen years ago in order to marry Greta. My children were born on the road, while I met along the way Judith, Markus and Aïsha. I saved Judith, a Hungarian Jew, when she was eight years-old and was in danger of being burned as a heretic, then saved four years ago Markus, who was fleeing his abusive family. As for young Aïsha, she is a fugitive slave whom we met along the road near Naples a month ago.”

Karl saw the expression on Dax Kern’s face change noticeably then, becoming quite sober as she eyed him and his troupe members.

“Could I ask you and your companions to come down from the chariots, please? I would like you to go speak with someone of authority in Toulouse. Don’t worry: you are not in trouble, on the contrary.”

Despite of her words, Karl was still a bit apprehensive as he came down from the chariot and helped Aïsha and Greta down. Kern then led him and his troupe to the same communications station she had used two minutes before. Karl watched her as she opened a link and spoke in a foreign language with a beautiful woman with long black hair and sparkling green eyes. The cargomaster then invited Karl to step in front of the station, at which time the woman in Toulouse spoke to him in good Lombard.

“Good day, mister! My name is Ann Shelton and I am the chief representative of the Human Expansion in Toulouse, with oversight responsibilities for Europe, Africa and Asia. I would like you and your troupe members to each tell me a short resumé of your past life and present situation, along with your various skills and level of education. Start with yourself, please.”

A bit intimidated by Ann Shelton’s title and position, Karl spoke for maybe a minute, resuming his life to date before letting his wife Greta do the same. Ann Shelton patiently

listened to him and the others, taking notes as they spoke, then called Karl back to the viewing screen.

“Karl of Regensburg, I am ready to offer asylum to you, your family and your troupe members, if you wish so. This would mean that you would be free to stay and live with us in Toulouse while benefiting from the same social advantages and privileges as our own citizens, meaning free food and lodging, medical care and free education. In return, I will expect all of you to be both productive and useful to our society, possibly by continuing to perform as entertainers, and to follow our laws and customs. Do you request asylum, Karl of Regensburg?”

For a long moment, Karl was paralyzed and speechless, unable to believe his luck while a wave of strong emotions submerged him. He finally was able to answer Ann Shelton in a nearly shivering voice.

“Yes, I do!”

“Thank you! May I now speak with your wife and children?”

Letting Greta and his three children speak in turn with Ann Shelton, Karl started quietly crying as they also requested and got asylum. For sixteen years, he had been traveling constantly, never knowing in advance where his next meal or lodging for the night would come from. He and his family had known hunger, cold, misery, fear and uncertainty along the way, while he had dreaded the day when he would eventually die, leaving his family at the mercy of a most uncertain future. Next in front of the communications station were Judith, Markus and Aïsha, who got asylum as well. At the end, Ann Shelton spoke to the whole group, her voice solemn.

“You all are now citizens of the Human Expansion. I will have your cargo shuttle land first on top of the Toulouse Tower, where I will be waiting for you, before it goes to let out Humbert’s chariots at our marketplace. I will see you again in a few minutes, my friends.”

The link then went blank. Karl and his troupe members looked at each other in silence for a moment before hugging together tightly, crying with joy while Humbert and his associates looked on.

## **CHAPTER 9 – ENFORCING NEW RULES**



Teenage girl being sold in a slave market.

**09:18 (Baghdad Time)**

**Wednesday, March 15, 862 C.E.**

**Bagdad slave market, al-Karkh District**

**Bagdad, Abbasid Califate**

Abu'l-Qasim Ubaydallah Ibn Abdallah Ibn Khordadbeh, more commonly known simply as 'Ibn Khordadbeh' had decided on a whim to go for a walk and had left the Bayt al-Hikma<sup>14</sup> after having breakfast there. Ibn Khordadbeh, who was already of advanced age and who was a famous scientist and geographer from the city of Basrah, had been

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<sup>14</sup> Bayt al-Hikma: 'House of Wisdom' in Arabic. Famous library and center of learning opened in Bagdad in 832 C.E.



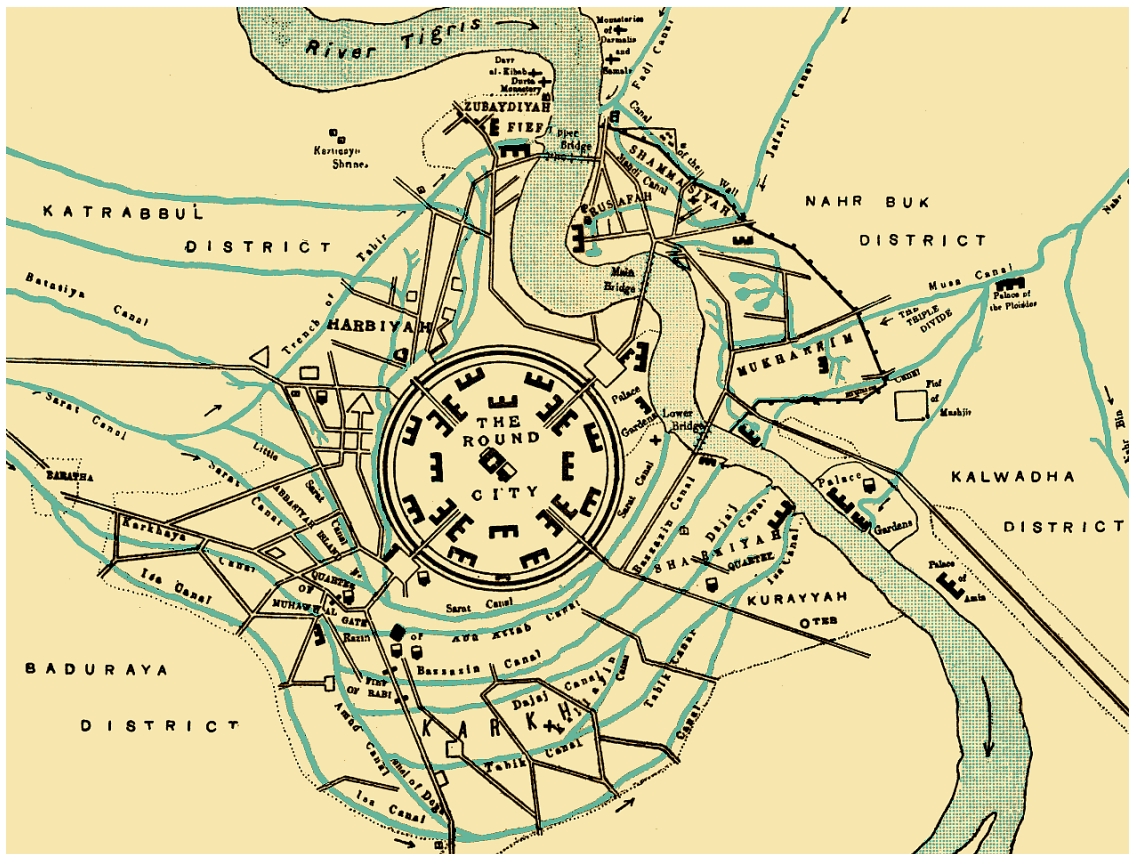
writing down during the last few weeks his recollections from his last voyage, when he had travelled by ship to the far-off Chinese city of Guangzhou<sup>15</sup> and spent a few months there before returning to Bagdad. He had seen many things there, some fascinating, many intriguing and new, but what had struck him the most there had actually been the sight of other visitors to the city. Those visitors, including a very beautiful young woman whose image he still had in his mind, had arrived in a fantastic flying ship and had then proceeded to buy up much of the reserves of rice and other foodstuff on sale in Guangzhou. What Ibn Khordadbeh had learned then from those people from the future had struck his mind hard and he was still trying to tell in writing all that he could remember about that encounter and those incredible people. His recollections were in fact becoming more and more relevant and important here, as Bagdad had been overflowed many times during the last few weeks and months by the flying ships of the people from the future. More importantly, one of those ships had stopped just over the city some four weeks ago, delivering a clear and direct message in a booming voice: to stop the trading of slaves and the practice of slavery or suffer the consequences. Ibn Khordadbeh, who prided himself of being a philosopher as well as a geographer and a scientist, had greeted that warning with hidden joy, as he abhorred the cruelty and abuse that came with slavery. However, few in Bagdad, or across the Abbasid Caliphate, had been happy about that warning, as the institution of slavery was an integral part of the Muslim society and, frankly, of nearly all of the rest of the World. Much of the manual labor in the Caliphate was done by slaves, who were also used for entertainment and sex, while some had become the personal guard force of Caliph Al-Muntasir, who presently resided in Samarra. There had been many discussions, some very passionate, inside the Bayt al-Hikma, about that warning to get rid of slavery, but in the end nothing concrete had followed, with the Governor of Bagdad, Mohammed Ibn Abdalla Ibn Tahir, the slave owners and slave merchants simply dismissing it in a rather cavalier fashion.

Having absentmindedly crossed the bridge over the Sarat Canal and walking into the Al-Khark District, Ibn Khordadbeh found himself entering one of the large open-air spaces occupied by the markets of Bagdad in the Al-Khark District, to the South of the central Round City in which the Bayt al-Hikmah was situated. That marketplace was in

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<sup>15</sup> Guangzhou : Chinese name for the city of Canton.

fact partly occupied by the displays, platforms and cages of the slave merchants of Bagdad, a very influential and rich social class in the city. There was quite a lot of activity in that corner of the market, with a new lot of slaves being auctioned at this time. Ibn Khordadbeh was in fact close enough from one of the wooden platforms used to parade the slaves on sale for auction to clearly see a pretty teenage girl being led atop of it by a big, brutish slave handler armed with a whip and a club. That poor girl, obviously of European stock, with white skin and black hair, understandably looked both terrified and dejected, on top of being completely naked. Her attempt at hiding her breasts and groin with her hands earned her a lash of the whip of the slave handler and a barked order, making her quickly remove her hands back to her sides. Ibn Khordadbeh felt pity for the poor girl, who could not be more than fourteen or fifteen. For a moment, he toyed with the idea of buying her, in order to at least ensure that she would not end up being sold to an abusive, uncaring owner. He however dropped that idea quickly enough: while he could help that girl by buying her, he could see a good dozen more girls and young women ready to follow her on the platform once she would be sold off. Could he reasonably save one girl at the expense of all the others?



Ibn Khordadbeh was still debating what to do when a large shadow covered him and the part of the marketplace he was in. Looking straight up, he froze on seeing a big flying steel mass now hovering over the market at very low altitude, completely covering it with its shadow.

"The people from the future!" he could only say to himself while staring at the flying ship.

### **09:25 (Bagdad Time)**

#### **Troop deck, assault barge 'IRON FIST'**

#### **Above the slave market of the Al-Khark District**

"GO GO GO!"

On the command of Major Lars Nierman, Corporal Diane Champagne followed him at a run and jumped out with the 260 other commandos from the Toulouse Security Battalion, using the opened access ramp of their assault barge and closely followed by 300 combat robots. Using the integrated directed gravity propulsion system of her combat armored suit, she then flew down towards a large wooden platform on which she could see a naked girl and two slavers. Seeing that both of the slavers were about to turn around and run off the platform, Diane used the video link between the multispectral aiming camera attached to her disintegrator rifle and her viewing goggles, which she wore directly over her eyes and inside her armored helmet, and quickly targeted both men, firing twice. Both slavers, half disintegrated by the energy bolts which produced loud cracking sounds, fell dead before they could jump off the platform. Diane then landed a mere meter from the terrified naked slave girl who had been about to be sold off and who was now on her knees, rolled into a tight ball. Walking quickly to the rear edge of the platform, where its short staircase was, Diane aimed her disintegrator rifle at one of the four slavers now trying to lead away the fourteen teenage girls and young women, all chained together, who had been waiting to be sold off. Fired at quarter power, the energy bolt incinerated off the head of the slaver, with his decapitated, fuming body then falling flat on the ground. Two more commandos, including the gigantic Baya Makwando, then landed next to the platform, cutting off the retreat of the remaining slavers and quickly killing the three men who were carrying whips and clubs. Next, Baya Makwando made forceful signs to the slave girls, telling them to turn around and climb on the auction platform, where they would be safer than among the panicked crowd

around the market. Seeing that her comrades had that well in hand, Diane scanned quickly the crowd around the platform, searching for more slaves who could be rescued. She quickly spotted two men, one bearded man in his forties and one younger man with bare torso, hurrying to lead away a young girl wearing iron manacles. Judging that firing from the platform would be too risky for the girl, Diane activated her suit's propulsion unit and flew off towards the trio, quickly catching up with it before landing right in front of the bearded man. With local people running wildly around her, Diane decided that her disintegrator rifle would be too dangerous to use, thus let it hang from its carrying strap and grabbed the handle of her short sword, pulling it out of its scabbard fixed along her upper right leg. That short sword had a wide, fifty-centimeter-long blade made of a tough chromium-steel alloy with a razor-sharp double edge, which could be used for various purposes. This time, it cleanly decapitated the bearded man in a single slash, following which Diane stabbed in the stomach the slave handler following him. As the man stared at her with wide eyes expressing both pain and shock, Diane spoke to him in Arabic, one of the languages she had learned via mnemotron after being assigned to Toulouse.

"Die, you piece of shit!"

She then pulled up her blade, ripping wide open the belly of the man. Kicking out of the way the dying man, Diane then surrounded with one protective arm the terrified girl he had been leading away.

"Don't worry, girl: you will be safe with me."

The teenager apparently could not speak Arabic, as she only stared with incomprehension at Diane. She nonetheless followed Diane without resistance as the commando returned towards the auction platform. As they were climbing the stairs to the platform, Diane was able to see that the situation in the market square, while still chaotic with panicked people running around, was more or less under control. More importantly, all the slaves who had been in the process of being sold off were now free and protected by other commandos, while the slave handlers and merchants in the market were now dead. Looking up, she could see the other three assault barges of the force assigned to Bagdad for this operation hovering over the city, with their embarked commandos and combat robots now occupying and sweeping the various palaces and rich houses of the city in order to find and free all the slaves they could find. She also could hear the loud orders shouted around in Arabic by their combat robots, telling all slaves to come out in the open and seek the protection of the commandos and their

robots. This whole operation in Bagdad was in fact only one part of a huge deployment of force covering the various main cities and slaving centers of the Abbasid Caliphate and of the Byzantine Empire, the two biggest contemporary powers around Europe and the Middle East. Once the slaves freed today would have been processed and either repatriated to their old countries or resettled, the forces of 'Operation Freedom' would then strike around North Africa, India and Asia, again with the goal of putting an end to slavery around the World. The sight of one Arabic man in particular then attracted her attention: instead of running away in panic, he was instead calmly walking towards the auctioning platform. Seeing another commando raise his disintegrator rifle, she hurriedly shouted an order to him.

"HOLD YOUR FIRE! THAT MAN IS NOT A THREAT!"

Leaving the girl she had freed under the protection of another commando, Diane flew to meet the old man halfway, landing two paces in front of him. She then recognized him, having met him in Guangzhou when she had escorted Vyyn Drelan around.

"Mister Ibn Khordadbeh? Don't tell me that you came here today to buy a slave."

"I wasn't planning to buy a slave but, in truth, I was briefly tempted to buy one girl being sold, so that she would not have fallen into the hands of a cruel, uncaring master. I can gather that you came to free all the slaves in Bagdad. While I don't own a slave, I do know where you can find many of them who are serving the rich people of Bagdad. I know in particular of a large prison where many slaves are held after arriving by caravan or ship in Bagdad. I can direct you to it if you want."

"That would be most appreciated. Please follow me."

Escorting the old geographer to the platform, Diane then took the information he had about the prison he knew about and passed it by radio to her commanding officer, Major Nierman. Some ten minutes later, Nierman contacted her back to say that the prison had been found and invested, with over 168 slaves freed from cells there. Opening the armored visor of her helmet, Diane smiled down to the old Arabic man.

"Your information has just been confirmed as accurate, with 168 slaves freed thanks to you. You thus deserve our most heartfelt thanks, Mister Ibn Khordadbeh." Looking around him at the devastated marketplace, the geographer then noticed that a number of local inhabitants living next to the market were now looking at him from their windows and balconies, with some pointing at him. The possible consequences of this became quickly too evident to him and he looked back with resignation at Diane.

"You actually may be able to thank me in a more tangible way, miss. Some of the local people have noticed that I freely spoke with you and they may well denounce me to the Bagdad authorities once you are gone, in which case I cannot expect anything good to follow. Will you accept to let me go with you to Toulouse, in order to ask asylum there? I am afraid that my time in Bagdad is now about over."

Diane nodded her head nearly at once, smiling down to the geographer.

"You would certainly be worthy of obtaining asylum, mister Ibn Khordadbeh. Let me contact my commander about this."

"If my request is accepted, could I go get my few personal things, like spare clothes, that I keep at the Bayt al-Hikmah? You could also go free a few more slaves there at the same time."

Diane nodded once at that, then started a short radio conversation with Major Nierman. At the end of it, she looked back soberly at the old geographer.

"Major Nierman agreed to your request, mister. A number of flying platforms will arrive soon to load up the slaves we just freed here in the market. We will use one of them to go to the Bayt al-Hikmah."

"Thank you, miss." Replied Ibn Khordadbeh while bowing to Diane. He then went to the teenage girl he had toyed with the idea of buying in order to save her and made her get up on her feet. Trying first Arabic, then four other languages in succession, he was still unable to communicate with her. The girl then spoke a few words back in a language that Diane Champagne was able to identify.

"That's Saxon! I can speak it, thankfully." said Diane to the geographer before switching to Saxon and speaking with the slave girl. "What is your name, girl, and where are you from?"

"My name is Ilse and I come from the village of Rutvern, in Saxony. How can you fly the way you do?"

"That is complicated. Let's just say that we came from 3,000 years in the future. We will soon fly you out of Bagdad and return you to your village, Ilse." Instead of showing joy, Ilse lowered her head in sadness.

"My village doesn't exist anymore. The Vikings raided it five months ago and burned it down, then killed the people living in it after taking me and other girls as slaves. They ended up selling me to a Frankish slave merchant, who in turn sold me to a Muslim slaver. I was then marched for months with other girls before arriving here in Bagdad."

"I am sorry to hear that, Ilse. Be assured that we will soon put a complete stop to this revolting slave trade...everywhere."

"What will happen to me now?" asked Ilse in a trembling voice, while tears ran down her cheeks. "I have no family left and my village is gone."

"We will take care of you and will find a new home for you soon, Ilse. I promise you that. All the slaves that we are freeing today will be repatriated or, if they have no homes left to return to, will be resettled in a good land, with ample material support from us. Be patient and we will soon be able to find you a new place to live."

Diane then fell silent, scanning the devastated market for any signs of a threat while waiting for the promised cargo platforms. The latter finally showed up some six minutes later, flying down from one of the assault barges. Two of them landed next to the auction platform, with the commandos then leading the liberated slaves to them and making them sit in one of the platforms. Leading Ilse and fourteen more girls and young women to the nearest platform, Diane then gently patted Ilse's shoulder after making her sit and buckle her seat belt.

"I now have to go free more slaves at another location in Bagdad, Ilse. I will see you again later on, on my ship."

She then went to the second platform with Ibn Khordadbeh, Baya Makwando and six combat robots, then gave a command to the pilot of the platform.

"Take off and fly towards the Round City: I will guide you to our next target." The young female pilot, a Navy technician wearing a protective light suit and helmet, nodded her head and made her cargo platform take off and pick up speed, heading towards the nearby walls of the so-called 'Round City', which had been built when Bagdad had become the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate. Diane then relayed to their pilot the indications given by Ibn Khordadbeh. Overflying the outer defensive walls of the Round City, the platform soon was silently flying down towards a large, squat building sporting a minaret at each of its corners.

"That's the Bayt al-Hikmah!" announced Ibn Khordadbeh in a happy tone. "It is the largest library to be found in the Caliphate and other erudite men like me spend their days there to study and translate old texts from all around the World."

"Hum! It would certainly be worthwhile to preserve such an institution. You said that there are a number of slaves working there?"

“Yes! There are slave boys who help us by maintaining the library, while more slave servants do the cleaning and cooking for the researchers working at the Bayt al-Hikmah. Contrary to many other places in Bagdad, those slaves at the Bayt al-Hikmah have always been well treated. There is in fact a young boy slave there that I consider nearly as my own son. I have now been educating him for a number of years and taught him how to read and write. His name is Hakim. If possible, I would like him to be able to follow me into asylum.”

“I see no problem with that. We...”

“ARCHERS! WATCH OUT!”

Diane barely had time to half turn around in reaction to the warning given by Baya Makwando before two arrows bounced on her armored suit, while more arrows flew by her. Thankfully, their pilot was protected by her light suit and was not wounded despite having one arrow bounce against her suit. Pointing her disintegrator rifle in the direction the arrows had come from, she quickly located their sources: a group of over thirty guards armed with bows and shooting from behind colonnades supporting the porch of a palace adjacent to the Bayt al-Hikmah. She then opened a dense fire at that group of archers, with Makwando and their robots joining in. The whole porch section of that palace quickly crumbled, its colonnades vaporized, crushing the guards not already killed by direct disintegrator hits. With that threat apparently taken care of, Diane looked at Ibn Khordadbeh to make sure that he was safe and sound. Her blood froze on seeing that the old geographer was now lying down on the platform, an arrow in his throat and a pool of blood around him.

“NOOO!”

Quickly kneeling next to the old man, Diane saw that his eyes were already losing their focus. Despite his mortal wound, Ibn Khordadbeh was able to say a few words in a weak voice.

“Hakim... Take care of...”

To Diane’s despair, the eyes of the geographer then rolled up and became fixed, while his breathing stopped. Despite her past combat experience at seeing deaths, Diane felt tears roll down from her eyes as she contemplated the now dead geographer.

“I will find Hakim and will care for him, my friend. Rest in peace.”

She then covered Ibn Khordadbeh’s face with part of his mantle before getting back on her feet and looking at Baya Makwando.



“We have to find a young teenage boy named Hakim who is a slave working at the Bayt al-Hikmah and who this old man was educating. Let’s keep our shooting inside the library to the strict minimum and use stun guns, unless we are attacked.”

“Got it!” replied the gigantic commando, who measured 192 centimeters without armor.

### **11:52 (Bagdad Time)**

#### **Vehicle deck, assault barge ‘IRON FIST’**

#### **Flying away from Bagdad**

Diane, accompanied by an eleven-year-old boy dressed in Arabic fashion, found Ilse among the over 4,000 liberated slaves filling the vehicle deck of her assault barge. Getting up from the metallic deck, Ilse then ran to Diane to hug her, wrapping her arms around the bulky armored combat suit of the commando.

“You did come back for me! Thank you for caring about me like this.”

Diane returned her hug, having set her armor’s exoskeleton to ‘normal strength’ mode, so that she would not crush accidentally the girl while hugging her.

“I was not about to forget about you, Ilse. By the way, this is Hakim, a boy who was being educated by Ibn Khordadbeh, the old man who you saw at the slave market and who had been wanting to save you by buying you, so that he could then care for you. Unfortunately, Ibn Khordadbeh was killed by an arrow shot by one of the guards of the Governor of Bagdad. Before dying, he asked me to find and take care of Hakim. Thankfully, I was able to find Hakim easily enough. Ilse, I just talked to my commanding officer, who approved a decision I just took. I would like to adopt you and Hakim, so that you could live with me in Toulouse, where my unit has its base. Hakim already accepted to be adopted by me. I am now asking you if you would also accept to be adopted by me.”

Ilse was silent for a moment, surprised by this unexpected offer. Tears then appeared in her eyes and she nodded her head as a big lump formed in her throat.

“I...I accept. What is your name?”

Diane mentally kicked herself then for forgetting such a basic formality.

“My name is Diane Champagne. I have the rank of ‘Corporal’ in the commandos of the Human Expansion.”

“Are you married, Diane?”

“Not yet, but that could happen soon enough. However, married or not, be assured that I will do my best to care and cherish you too. Soon, the other liberated slaves on this ship will leave for a distant island where they will be processed and then either repatriated to their original places of origin or resettled into new homes. As for you and Hakim, you will accompany me when we will fly back to Toulouse. There, I will be able to offer you a new, happy life with me as free persons. Hakim, come here and hug both of us.”

The boy didn't have to be told twice and came to emotionally hug both Diane and Ilse, watched by the other ex-slaves filling the vehicle deck.

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