



**THE ADVENTURES OF NANCY LAPLANTE
IN THE 19TH CENTURY**

BY
MICHEL POULIN

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**A HISTORICAL FICTION NOVEL
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WARNING TO READERS

THIS NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR AND VIOLENCE, AS WELL AS LANGUAGE UNSUITABLE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN. WHILE THIS NOVEL DESCRIBES AND INVOLVES MANY HISTORICAL PERSONS OR EVENTS, THIS NOVEL IS A WORK OF FICTION. THE ACTIONS AND WORDS ATTRIBUTED IN THIS NOVEL TO HISTORICAL CHARACTERS WHO EXISTED DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT HISTORICAL REALITY AS WE KNOW IT. HOWEVER, THE CHARACTER AND PERSONALITY OF THE HISTORICAL PERSONS DESCRIBED IN THIS NOVEL WERE REPRODUCED AS CLOSELY TO THE HISTORICAL REALITY AS POSSIBLE, AND THIS BASED ON EXTENSIVE HISTORICAL RESEARCH BY THE AUTHOR.

NOTE TO READERS

This novel is a compilation of chapters drawn from two of my other novels, *TIMELINE TWIN* and *FROM THE FIELDS OF CRIMEA TO THE SANDS OF MARS*, two works of science-fiction based on the theme of time travel. The present novel is meant to consolidate the adventures in the 19th Century of Nancy Laplante 'B', a young field agent of the Time Patrol, and thus satisfy the tastes of the readers who enjoy books on historical fiction and historical romance. For those readers who would wish to read other novels written by me, they will be able to find PDF format copies of them available for free on my author's page at Goodreads.com, or at Free-Ebooks.net. If any problem is encountered in getting a copy of one of my novels, then the readers are welcome to contact me directly at natai@videotron.ca and I will be most happy to send them a copy for free.

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Jeanne de Brissac, swimming in the Anse des Grandes Salines, Guadeloupe.

CHAPTER 1 – JEANNE DE BRISSAC

15:39 (Guadeloupe Time)

Monday, May 18, 1846

Anse des Grandes Salines

French colony of the Guadeloupe, Caribbean

Knight Pierre Alphonse d'Orléans, wearing a simple shirt and short trousers, was supervising his black employees who were busy extracting blocks of sea salt from the salt flats bordering the beach, on which he stood barefoot. Pierre took a moment to admire the sea and sky of the l'Anse des Grandes Salines, situated at the southeastern tip of the island of Grande-Terre, the second largest of the archipelago of the Guadeloupe. His parents, like many aristocrats, had fled France after the start of the French Revolution and its bloody period called 'The Terror' in 1789, when thousands of nobles had been summarily executed by resentful mobs of impoverished peasants and common workers. After much hard times, his family, a minor branch of the House of

Orléans, had managed to successfully establish itself in the Americas. Born and raised in New Orleans, Pierre had eventually decided to go live in the Guadeloupe, with its flourishing commerce of sugar and rum. Now, at the age of 36, he was the owner of a large sugar cane plantation, which included a sugar refinery and a small rum distillery, enough for him to live very comfortably. He had also created large salt flats on the coast near his plantation, with the salt produced there providing him with a substantial extra income. Despite the restoration of the monarchy in France at the start of this century, Pierre felt no urge to return to his country of origin, which he had never seen in his life. France's economy was still fragile and the social climate there poisonous, if he could believe the captains and passengers of the ships that regularly docked in the ports of Pointe-à-Pitre and Saint-François. He would be perfectly happy if not for the fact that he was without a wife. That didn't mean that he went without sex though, since more than one young black woman among his freed ex-slaves were quite willing and eager to sleep with him. However, young European women of noble or respectable birth were rare in the Guadeloupe and were all married already...or were as ugly as frogs.

As he was looking at the Island of La Désirade on the horizon, his eyes caught on a number of floating objects on the surface of the waves, about 600 meters off the beach he was on. Focusing on the objects, he was soon able to recognize them as debris from a wrecked ship. He was not surprised by that, as more than a few ships sank every year around the Guadeloupe because of tropical storms or collisions with reefs. Calling his foreman and telling him to continue to supervise the work of salt extraction alone, Pierre got closer to the edge of the water in order to better see. The currents and waves actually seemed to be pushing the debris towards the beach of fine white sand he was standing on. Pierre's heart accelerated when he saw some movement near one of the floating objects. After looking for a moment, he was ready to swear that someone was clinging to that piece of debris. He however hesitated to enter the water to swim towards the debris: the waves were strong and the currents dangerous along this coast. He finally took a decision when he was able to clearly distinguish a human head and heard a female voice.

"Help! Help me!"

"FERNAND, COME HERE WITH TWO MEN AND THE ROLL OF ROPE WE HAVE IN OUR CART, QUICKLY!" shouted Pierre to his foreman while starting to take

off his shirt. Keeping only his short trousers on, he tied around his waist one end of the rope Fernand brought to him at a run.

"Hold on tight to the other end of this rope with your two men, so that the currents won't wash me away. I'm going to get that girl."

"Understood, monsieur." replied the foreman, who then tied the other end of the rope around his own waist and walked into the water with his employer. While Fernand and the two black workers with him stopped once water came to their upper legs, Pierre started swimming resolutely towards the girl in distress. The latter, seeing him approach, let go the piece of floating debris she had been clinging to and started swimming to join up with him. Twice the surf threw her back away from the beach, cancelling her efforts. With an ultimate surge of energy, the girl finally managed to link up with Pierre, who firmly grabbed her in his arms at once and shouted towards the beach.

"I HAVE HER, MEN! PULL!"

Fernand and the two black workers immediately started pulling on the rope with all their strength, towing Pierre and the shipwrecked girl towards the beach. Pierre was finally able to walk on the bottom but had to drag the young woman, who was apparently exhausted, out of the water and onto the sand. Gently putting her down on her back once on dry sand, he examined her while untying the rope around his waist and catching his breath. He quickly had to revise his first impression of the girl, who only wore a wet night shirt that was now clinging to her body. While very tall, her face was that of a teenager, not that of an adult woman. She was also beautiful, with long dark hair and a sensual and athletic body. The foreman smiled while admiring the appetizing curves of the girl, whose nipples were visible through her wet shirt.

"Well, monsieur, it seems that you have caught quite a nice fish today."

"It seems so, my good Fernand. Pass me your water bottle, please."

Taking the tin flask offered by his foreman, Pierre knelt beside the teenager and gently raised her head while offering her the opened flask. The girl avidly gulped three long pulls of the water before looking up at Pierre, who could now see that her eyes were green.

"Thank you very much, monsieur. You are a most brave and kind man."

"You are welcome, mademoiselle. I am Sire Pierre Alphonse d'Orléans, owner of a nearby plantation. And what is your name?"

"I am Jeanne Marie Céleste de Brissac, but call me simply Jeanne. Where am I?"

"On the southeastern tip of the Island of Grande-Terre, in the Guadeloupe. Do you know if there were other survivors from your ship, Jeanne?"

"I...I don't know. I don't think so. I didn't see a single person during the day following the sinking. The ship sank at night, without a warning sign. All that I heard was a terrifying crack just before water filled the under decks. I barely had time to leave by a skylight."

"And your parents, Jeanne? You were traveling with your parents, weren't you?" The teenager closed her eyes for a moment, as if reliving a nightmare, before answering in a weak voice.

"They had been dead for four weeks already, killed by the pirates who boarded our ship. I was then put on the pirates' ship, while my original ship went south with a boarding crew."

Pierre nodded his head, not surprised by her story. Even in this century there were still a few pirates around the Caribbean Sea, most of them coming from the coasts of South America. The French Navy, which was only a shadow of its past Napoleonic glory, rarely patrolled the waters of the Caribbean, something pirates used to their advantage. The teenager was however awakening a particular interest inside Pierre's brain, even without her story about pirates.

"You have an aristocratic name, am I right, Jeanne?"

"I am of modest lineage, monsieur. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, just simple curiosity. Do you feel strong enough to get up now?"

"I think so."

Pierre helped her get up on her feet, finding out then that she was clearly taller than him. She was in fact taller than most men. Her wet shirt also revealed a muscular body...and a very appetizing chest.

"Come with me to my cart: I will bring you to my plantation, so that you could bathe and change. FERNAND, TELL THE MEN TO STOP WORKING: WE WILL CONTINUE THE EXTRACTION TOMORROW."

"YES, MONSIEUR!"

Jeanne looked at the two black men who started following the foreman, as well as at the dozen other black men visible further away.

"Are these black men slaves?"

"No! I freed all of my slaves a year ago. They now get a part of the profits from my plantation as their pay, plus a number of benefits."

Pierre thought that he saw an approving look in the teenager's eyes then before she followed him to the cart. Making her sit on the driver's bench, he waited for the blocks of salt already extracted from the flats to be loaded in the back before grabbing the reins and urging his two mules forward.

With his foreman sitting in the back of the cart and with the black workers walking behind, Pierre waited a moment before trying to start a conversation with the teenager, wanting to leave her time to recuperate some of her strength.

"So, Jeanne, how old are you, if I may ask?"

"Sixteen, monsieur." lied Nancy Laplante 'B', who had just attained the age of fourteen. Her body was however a lot more developed for her age than a typical 19th Century girl's body would be.

"Please, simply call me 'Pierre'. And why were your parents bringing you to the Guadeloupe, Jeanne?"

"My parents were practically broke following some disastrous financial speculations in France, and were hoping to build back their fortune here. Pirates then intercepted and seized our ship, killing my parents in the process, along with the whole crew."

"And what was the name of your ship? I will need to warn the authorities in Basse-Terre about this."

"It was called the GROS GAILLARD. We were the only passengers aboard. It was captured a month ago."

"So, it is the original pirate ship that sank near here, right, Jeanne?"

"That's exact, Pierre."

Something in her tone and attitude, which denoted unease, told Pierre that she was not telling him everything, but he didn't insist and stayed silent during the four kilometer trip to his plantation. Finally arriving at the limits of his property, Pierre proudly showed with a sweep of one arm the vast sugar cane fields, the sugar extraction plant, the rum distillery, the small workers' village and his own house.

"This is my plantation, 'Sweet Dreams'."

Jeanne smiled with amusement on hearing that and looked at him.

"I like that name. Was it your wife who gave it that name?"

"I am an old single guy, Jeanne. I am also a bit of a poet."

"Not married, a strong and handsome man like you?"

The compliment made Pierre smile in turn.

"Let's say that well-born girls are rare in the Guadeloupe, Jeanne. I am also in rather poor terms with most of my white neighbors, who think that I am way too soft on my black workers. I was even accused a few times of sheltering and protecting running slaves."

"From what I have heard during my trip about the living conditions of those slaves, I can't blame them at all for wanting to run away. Such cruel conditions could not possibly be condoned by God."

"Very well said, my dear Jeanne. However, too many people here worship gold rather than God."

"The same is true in France," replied the teenager, her expression hardening a bit.

"Well, enough about this! We will go to my house right away, so that you could wash and then rest."

Jumping down on the ground with Jeanne once in front of his residence, Pierre let the cart in the hands of Fernand and showed the wooden façade of his house, which seemed to have been damaged and then repaired summarily.

"You will excuse the appearance of my house, Jeanne, but a terrible earthquake struck this island three years ago. My house actually resisted much better to it than many other houses. Just in Pointe-à-Pitre, the main port in the island, there were over 3,000 dead from that earthquake."

Jeanne nodded her head while inspecting the façade.

"A wooden house normally resists to earthquakes better than stone houses. The repairs you did seem adequate to me."

She then followed Pierre inside. The latter shouted at once when inside a large lounge.

"MARTHE! MARTHE! I NEED YOU!"

A stoutly-built black woman with a sympathetic face came in at once from the kitchen, to open wide eyes on seeing Jeanne, who was still only wearing her half-dried shirt.

"Dear Lord, monsieur, what happened to this poor girl?"

"She was shipwrecked off the coast and I saved her on the Grandes Salines beach, Marthe. Can you prepare a good hot bath for Jeanne and also wash her hair.

Use some of my clothes to dress her up afterwards: I am afraid that she is way too tall to fit any dress in this plantation.”

“Right away, monsieur.” said Marthe before walking to Jeanne and bow to her with a warm smile. “If mademoiselle will follow me.”

With Jeanne following the servant, Pierre then ended alone in his living room. Going briefly to the kitchen, he advised his cook that there would be a guest for supper and then returned to the living room, where he poured himself a glass of rum before sitting down in his favorite sofa. Barely twenty minutes later, Marthe entered the lounge at a near run, looking and sounding troubled.

“Monsieur, the girl is now in the bathtub.”

“Yes, and?” said Pierre, not understanding her excitement.

“She was flogged and also branded repeatedly with red hot irons, monsieur! Her torso and buttocks are covered with scars.”

Pierre got up at once from his sofa, shocked by this.

“WHAT? Did she tell you how she ended up with these scars?”

“I didn’t dare ask her, monsieur. What do I do now?”

Pierre thought for a moment before looking again at Marthe.

“The branding marks, are they shaped like fleurs-de-lis?”

Marthe shook her head at that, understanding what he was alluding to. Prostitutes often were branded by the royal justice, which used irons shaped like a fleur-de-lis.

“No, monsieur. I believe that she was tortured, severely. Her scars seem to date from a few weeks at the least.

“Those pirate bastards!” swore Pierre, suddenly understanding what could have happened to Jeanne. “Very well, Marthe. Continue to help her wash up and don’t mention her scars with her. I will talk with Jeanne afterwards.”

“Understood, monsieur.” replied Marthe before walking away, leaving Pierre alone with his thoughts.

Marthe returned with Jeanne a bit less than one hour later, as another servant was preparing the covers on the dining table, situated at one end of the lounge. Pierre smiled to Jeanne, who was now wearing a male set of clothes that ill fitted her.

“I believe that my first priority tomorrow will be to go in town with you to find some proper clothes for you, my friend.”

Jeanne, who seemed to be still disoriented, returned his smile.

"You already did a lot for me, monsieur. I don't know how to properly thank you for saving me and now caring for me."

"You can start by sharing this supper with me, Jeanne." replied Pierre while pointing at the dining table. Getting up from his sofa, Pierre led Jeanne to the table and gallantly helped her sit down before taking the chair facing her. Filling Jeanne's cup with wine, then filling his own cup, Pierre raised it and smiled to the beautiful teenager.

"To your health, Jeanne."

"And to yours, Pierre." replied Jeanne while raising her own cup and making it touch that of Pierre. They each drank a short pull of wine before putting back down their cups, looking at each other in silence while a servant brought in two plates of soup. Jeanne waited for the servant to be back in the kitchen before speaking, her eyes lowered and with embarrassment on her face.

"I noticed the reaction of Marthe, your maid, when she saw my scars. I suppose that she told you about them?"

"Yes, but if you don't want to talk about them now..."

"You have the right to know about them, Pierre. That is the least I can do. When pirates attacked my ship over a month ago, killing my parents and the whole crew, I defended myself and managed to kill two pirates and to wound another one before being overpowered. The pirates, enraged, punished me by flogging me. When I resisted again as the pirate captain was trying to rape me, he had me tortured with red hot irons to break my resistance, then took me by force. The next few weeks were like Hell for me, with the captain beating me when I was not cooperating. On top of killing my parents and taking all that we owed, those bastards also took away my dignity and sullied me in an unspeakable way. I am afraid that I am not worthy of your hospitality, Pierre."

"Nonsense, Jeanne!" said softly Pierre while putting his left hand over her right hand. "You have nothing to be ashamed of in all this. You were helpless and a prisoner. As for those pirates, they have now paid for their crimes and will not abuse anyone anymore."

"But what will people think of me now? I am not even sure yet if those pirates didn't make me pregnant or not. I also can't prove who I am: all my family documents are now at the bottom of the sea and the pirates took away my family ring."

"Don't worry about that, Jeanne. Just rest for the next few days and get over your misadventure. You are my guest here and you will always be respected at 'Sweet Dreams'."

Jeanne lowered her head, tears in her eyes.

"You are too good, Pierre. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart."

Moved, Pierre quickly got up and went around the table to go gently grab her shoulders and to speak softly in her ears.

"Forget about all this, my dear. You are a noble and will be treated as such here. Tomorrow, we will go together to Saint-François, the main town in this area, to buy some clothes worthy of you. Now, just eat and relax."

Going back to his place, Pierre sat back and ate in silence, respecting her obvious embarrassment. He was however thinking furiously as he kept looking discreetly from time to time at Jeanne, who was eating slowly. The news that she had been tortured and raped by the pirates was saddening him for more than one reason. The idea of eventually marrying this beautiful girl he had saved from the sea was already in his head, but he would have to wait a few months to make sure that she was not pregnant before proposing marriage to her. If not, the busybodies around Saint-François would not hesitate to call a baby born too quickly from Jeanne a bastard. He would thus have to temper his temptations towards her for a few months before courting her favors. Somehow, Pierre knew that this was not going to be easy.

On her part, Nancy Laplante 'B' eyed discreetly Pierre, a handsome and solidly built man who wore black hair cut at the neck and who shaved his face. He was muscular and stood at about 175 centimeters, with gray eyes and a square jaw that reinforced his apparent strength of character. She had not needed to simulate her embarrassment when she had told him about her scars. Even though she had successfully resisted the tortures inflicted to her in the Bastille in 1651, that experience had deeply traumatized her and had marked her mentally as well as physically. She could have had her scars treated via the highly advanced medical science of the 34th Century and have made them disappear completely, but she had decided to receive only basic medical care. That decision had greatly pained her parents, but she had insisted on that in order to keep her cover identity in 1651 plausible. A recovery that would prove too 'miraculous' would have attracted many questions and nasty rumors at the King's court. As a consequence, she had been forced to modify slightly her original cover story

for her role as Jeanne de Brissac in 1846. Thankfully for her, Pierre Alphonse d'Orléans seemed to be the kind of man that she could truly love. The knowledge that Pierre had less than one year to live according to history then came back to her mind, attracting tears on her cheeks. Pierre, misunderstanding the cause for her tears, hurried up again to go comfort her.

"Do not cry, Jeanne: your misfortunes are over, I promise you that."

"Excuse me, Pierre." said Nancy between two sobs. "So many things happened to me lately. I don't know what to expect anymore from life."

"Maybe some rest will do you good, Jeanne. Would you like to go to bed after supper?"

She nodded her head at that. Returning to his place, Pierre let her finish her supper, then escorted her to the guest room of his house, showing her the bed covered by a mosquito net.

"Marthe will bring you a night gown and some underwear. If you need anything, just ask."

"Thank you again, Pierre. You are too good."

"Not at all: I am only doing what a good Christian is supposed to do. Sleep now and forget about those pirates, Jeanne."

He then left the bedroom and returned to the lounge, where he poured himself some more wine, drinking it while dreaming about the girl he had saved from the sea.

Next morning, Pierre had his cart readied and left with Jeanne for the small town of Saint-François, situated a few kilometers to the southwest of his plantation. Keeping to small talk on the way, Pierre did his best to relax Jeanne by chatting about the town and the local life. The dresses and other clothes he found for her in Saint-François, while of decent quality, were not however what a noble would expect to wear. Despite the fact that Jeanne seemed more than satisfied by his acquisitions, Pierre promised himself to one day bring her to Pointe-à-Pitre, the main port of the Guadeloupe and a place where he knew that he would find some gowns worthy of an aristocrat girl. On the other hand, Jeanne, with her uncommon height and athletic body, was well noticed in Saint-François, where the coming of new French settlers was fairly rare these days. Some of Pierre's French neighbors were also in town with their wives that day and didn't miss the tall and beautiful teenager going around with Pierre. Most of them being in rather poor terms with Pierre d'Orléans, the ideas that came to their mind then and the

comments they made about the couple were not exactly charitable. Jeanne's origin in particular attracted many questions in the heads of those neighbors. One plantation owner, intrigued by Jeanne, visited a tailor shop after Pierre and Jeanne and spoke with the tailor, who told him in turn about the scars on Jeanne's torso. That made the plantation owner and his wife think about all kinds of hypothesis, which they of course diligently shared with other people around them.

Returning to the plantation by the end of the afternoon with a Jeanne apparently happy about their acquisitions, Pierre took one hour to go inspect the various works in progress in his fields and in his sugar extraction plant. As he was about to reenter his house just before supper, Pierre suddenly slowed down his pace and stopped in front of his door, perplex: somebody was playing the piano he had in his lounge. He was supposed to be the only one able to play the piano in 'Sweet Dreams'. The answer that came to his mind then made him smile and he resolutely entered his house, walking quietly to his lounge. He found Jeanne there, wearing one of her new dresses and playing with brio a piece of music unknown to Pierre. Seeing him approach, Jeanne gave him a big smile while continuing to play.

"You didn't tell me that you had a square piano, Pierre. Do you have other musical instruments, by chance?"

"Uh, I have a guitar, plus a banjo that I bought in New-Orleans. You didn't tell me that you knew how to play the piano. I must say that you seem to be quite good at it."

"Thank you! In truth, the guitar is my favorite musical instrument, but I am also well practiced with the piano and the harpsichord. I also like to sing."

"Really?" said Pierre, ecstatic. "Could I then ask you to sing something for me?"

"But, with pleasure, my handsome knight." replied Jeanne in a playful tone before changing her tune on the piano. Concentrating for a moment, she then started singing a song in French that Pierre had never heard before but that he found beautiful. He also found that she had a very pretty voice and that she seemed to have a clear talent for singing. His heart warmed up as he watched Jeanne sing and play, radiant with beauty and talent. He applauded her at the end of the song, truly impressed.

"Bravo, Jeanne! That was beautiful! Do you know many other songs?"

"I do, but many of them are in English, with a few more in Spanish and in German."

Pierre looked at her with big surprised eyes.

“You can speak four languages?”

“Seven, actually.” replied Jeanne, who didn’t seemed to be bragging. “I also know Gaelic, Greek and Latin. I do have a special talent for languages.”

What Nancy didn’t tell him was that her I.Q. of 153 made her a certified genius and that she already held a diploma in robotics engineering, a discipline marrying mechanical science, electronics and computer programming. On his part, Pierre then felt immense relief wash over him. The multiple talents just shown by Jeanne basically ruled out a possibility that had worried him since yesterday: that Jeanne had lied to him and was in reality a pirate herself, a thought brought by her tall and strong body and her torture marks. However, the chances that a girl raised among pirates could speak seven languages, play the piano like a virtuoso and sing the way she just did were about nil, her talents denoting instead the education of a true aristocrat.

Pierre listened to two more songs by Jeanne, who played the guitar for her last song. She then proved to be really good with a guitar, playing as well as anyone he had seen before, including in New Orleans. Now truly hooked on, Pierre shared an agreeable supper with Jeanne, whose morale seemed to have improved a lot since yesterday. After the meal, the two of them sat in a comfortable sofa of the lounge with glasses of rum, spending a good two hours conversing together. That time with Jeanne finished convincing Pierre that she had received a quality education that only a true aristocrat could get. The only point that detracted from that was when she told him that she liked to practice combat sports, including fencing. Her explanation that she had been fascinated since her tender youth about the girls of the ancient Greek city of Sparta however reassured him somewhat. In truth, Pierre wanted to believe her, conquered by her personality and her beauty. When the time came to go to bed, it took him all of his strength of will not to follow her into her bedroom. Sleep came with difficulty for him that night, with images of Jeanne filling his mind.

During the following days, Jeanne revealed herself to be a girl with a heart of gold and with liberal, progressive ideas, treating with respect and kindness the ex-slaves of the plantation and their families and showing interest in their welfare. Pierre, who was in bad terms with his white neighbors because of his so-called ‘softness’ towards his black workers, much appreciated that side of Jeanne, while she gained quickly the

affection of the plantation's workers. Jeanne also proved to be singularly useful to Pierre around the plantation. On the third day at 'Sweet Dreams', she told Pierre that she was going to go fishing at a nearby beach, leaving with a young black boy carrying a harpoon, a fishing net and a large haversack containing only a water bottle and a loaf of bread, plus a knife. She returned in the evening with her haversack full of shellfish and with nine big fish carried inside her fishing net, enough to provide a well-received extra for the supper of the workers of the plantation and their families. From then on, she went to swim and fish nearly every day, telling Pierre that the swimming helped her keep in shape and invariably returning with an impressive amount of fish and shellfish. She often returned as well with quantities of mussels harvested from the sea bottom, sometimes from impressive depths, proving herself to be a first class swimmer with impressive lung capacity. Pierre quickly realized how useful her fishing was to him when he saw the substantial savings he made in terms of food supplies for his workers and to the cost of his own table. Leaving early each morning with her young black assistant, Jeanne would return by noon hour with her catches, then would wash and change into simple work clothes to help Pierre run and maintain his plantation. She further surprised Pierre in that respect, proving to be incredibly knowledgeable about mechanical sciences and also being highly skilled at mechanical repairs, diagnosing and then repairing a problem with the gear mechanism of the crushing rollers used to crush the sugar canes cut down by Pierre's workers. When Jeanne casually told him how she had done those repairs, Pierre could only look at her with his jaw wide opened in disbelief. After washing a second time before supper, Jeanne would put on a gown and become again an aristocratic girl, entertaining Pierre's evenings by singing, playing music and conversing with him. She also often went out to the small village housing the plantation's workers and would play her guitar and sing, to the enjoyment of the black workers and their families. Even though she was still officially only a guest at the plantation and had not had sexual relations yet with Pierre, the latter nearly felt like he was married and was now happier than he had ever been since his youth in New Orleans.

Two weeks after her arrival at the plantation, Jeanne went to see Pierre, a big smile on her face.

"I have a very good news, Pierre: my menstruations showed up last night. I don't have to worry anymore about becoming pregnant from those damn pirates."

"But, that's great news indeed!" said Pierre, also smiling, before taking her in his arms and kissing her passionately. She returned his kiss with equal passion, letting his hands roam over her body. Now fully fired up, Pierre looked at her with utmost love.

"Jeanne, you are the most fascinating and precious girl I ever met. Would you accept to marry me once there could be no more possible doubts about the origin of a pregnancy in the eyes of the authorities?"

Jeanne's eyes became moist at those words as she eyed him in silence for a moment before replying in a very soft tone.

"Pierre, I would be most happy to be the wife of a man such as you." She then exchanged a long kiss with Pierre before looking at him again.

"I realize that it will take another couple of months at the least before it is evident to all that I was not made pregnant by those pirates. We should normally abstain from full sexual relations in the meantime, but I do not wish to make you suffer by frustrating your passion for me this long. I hope that you are not the type that believes that there should be no sex before marriage?"

That made Pierre smile in amusement.

"You are kidding, right? We are both French, thus from a country where sex is celebrated through our whole history and where half of the men are cuckold. You also must have noticed by now that I am not a very religious man."

"And neither am I, Pierre. I may be quite young still but I did play around boys before leaving France. I know ways to please you without risking a pregnancy. Come!" She then led him by one hand towards her bedroom while smiling warmly to him. Even if he would have wanted to resist her offer, Pierre knew that he would have lacked the willpower for that.

14:28 (Guadeloupe Time)

Wednesday, June 3, 1846

'Sweet Dreams' plantation

Island of Grande-Terre, Guadeloupe

Barely a day later, a cart carrying a functionary and escorted by an officer and six mounted soldiers showed up at the plantation. Pierre saw them coming at the last minute, being busy at the time inspecting the big vats used to distill rum. A bad feeling

growing in him at the sight of the soldiers, he returned in hurried steps to his house, in front of which the cart and its escort had stopped. The officer commanding the escort, still perched on his horse, asked him a question on a neutral tone.

“Are you Sire Pierre d’Orléans, monsieur?”

“That’s me!”

The officer then saluted him with his hat.

“I am Lieutenant Dupré, sent by Governor Layrle with Monsieur De Mézières, the crown assistant-prosecutor in Basse-Terre. We were sent to inquire about a Jeanne de Brissac. Is she still in this plantation?”

“Uh, yes! I however do not understand why the Governor wanted Monsieur de Mézières to be escorted by soldiers for this.”

“We could discuss this inside, monsieur. Could you tell the lady in question that we would like to speak with her?”

Despite the polite tone used by the officer, Pierre didn’t like at all the way things were looking. He however hid his anxiety as best he could and walked quickly around his house, going to its vegetable garden, which Jeanne was helping to maintain. He did not miss the fact that the officer followed him with two of his soldiers, still on their horses. Jeanne, busy plucking out wild grass, only saw Pierre and the soldiers once they were only a few meters from her. Getting up slowly from her knees and hands, she gave a suspicious look at the soldiers before looking at Pierre.

“To what do we owe the visit of these gentlemen, Pierre?”

“They came from Basse-Terre with an assistant-prosecutor to see you, Jeanne.”

Jeanne then detailed the officer, who was in exchange noting her height and athletic built.

“Very well! Just let me some time to make myself presentable, gentlemen.”

“Of course, mademoiselle.” replied the officer, who however followed her to the rear door of the house and entered behind her, followed by Pierre. The latter then led the young lieutenant and the assistant-prosecutor to his lounge, offering them to sit in a sofa.

“Please sit down, gentlemen.”

“Thank you, Sir Pierre.” said De Mézières, sighing with relief after sitting for hours on the hard wooden bench of his cart. Pierre sat facing him in his favorite easy chair and examined the expression of the graying royal functionary.

"So, Monsieur De Mézières, you came to find out about my unfortunate guest? My letter thus got promptly enough to the Governor?"

"Yes, along with other pieces of information about Mademoiselle de Brissac that we found a bit alarming."

"Her correct title would be Lady Jeanne, Monsieur de Mézières." replied Pierre in a rather irritated tone. The assistant-prosecutor looked at him with some skepticism.

"If she is indeed who she pretends to be, Sir Pierre. Understand that the disappearance of the GROS GAILLARD, supposedly at the hand of pirates, has worried the authorities in Basse-Terre. Why don't you tell us now how you first met this girl?"

"As you wish, monsieur." said Pierre before telling him in a few minutes how he had saved Jeanne from the sea and had then brought her to his plantation. At the end of it, Lieutenant Dupré whispered into the ear of the assistant-prosecutor, who nodded his head before speaking again to Pierre.

"Sir Pierre, have you seen the scars on this Jeanne de Brissac?"

"Yes, I did. She told me herself that she was flogged and branded by the pirates who captured her, for having resisted them."

"And you didn't think about the possibility that those scars could have been caused in different circumstances, monsieur?"

Pierre stiffened at once in his easy chair, indignant.

"Are you insinuating that Jeanne is not a true aristocrat, monsieur?"

"That possibility came to the mind of the Governor, monsieur. That is why he sent me with an escort to come question your guest. Lieutenant Dupré just told me that your Jeanne happens to be very tall and quite muscular...for a sixteen year-old aristocrat."

"She effectively is, but that does not make a liar out of her, monsieur."

"Sire Pierre, please put yourself in our place for a moment. Here is a tall, strong girl who arrived here by the sea following a shipwreck. She wears torture scars and has no paper or jewel that could prove who she is. One could be excused to think that she could be a pirate herself, a pirate girl that could have been tortured in the past by a rival band."

"A pirate girl that speaks seven languages, plays the piano and the guitar with brio and can talk about the history of France for hours?" shot back Pierre. "She may look to you physically like an Amazon, but I can assure you that she has the education of a true noble girl."

"Seven languages?" asked De Mézières, suddenly less sure of himself.

"Yes monsieur! On top of French, she can speak and sing in English, Spanish, German, Gaelic, Greek and Latin. I can also certify to you that Jeanne has advanced notions in mathematics, geometry, astronomy and many other things."

De Mézières exchanged a surprised look with Lieutenant Dupré.

"Uh, Sir Pierre, your Jeanne de Brissac seems nearly too good to be true."

"It is true that men keep thinking that women are inferior to them, gentlemen, in which they are sorely mistaken." said a female voice, making the three men snap their heads towards the entrance of the lounge. Jeanne was now wearing a gown, while her hair was carefully combed and gathered in a horse's tail at the back of her head. She then walked up to them and bow politely in front of the assistant-prosecutor.

"Jeanne Marie Céleste de Brissac, at your service, Monsieur De Mézières. I am ready to do my best to prove to you who I am."

"Uh, well, I was actually planning to bring you to Basse-Terre, where the official registers that could help verify your declarations are, mademoiselle. It is also quite possible that I could have to send an official request to France to have the passenger registry of the GROS GAILLARD checked to see if you and your parents were indeed recorded as having left on that ship."

"But, such a procedure would take months!" objected Pierre, frustrated. "Know that me and Jeanne were planning to marry in a month or so."

De Mézières gave him a cold look at those words.

"More the reason to be careful, Sir Pierre. Would you be ready to risk associating the name of your illustrious family, which is connected to the Crown, with a possible impostor? I believe anyway that the Governor will oppose such a marriage as long as he will not be certain about the identity of your guest."

Seeing that Pierre was suddenly struck by discouragement, Jeanne went to sit by his side to console him, one arm around his shoulders.

"Don't worry, Pierre. The doubts about me will vanish soon enough. The important thing is that I am here with you and will stay by your side."

"If you say so, Jeanne." replied Pierre with little conviction. Jeanne then looked up resolutely at De Mézières and Dupré.

"Gentlemen, if you still want to bring me to Basse-Terre in order to complete your inquiry about me, I am ready to follow you willingly...as long as I am treated with

respect. I know that your inquiry, if conducted competently, will eventually prove that I am who I say I am. Thus, think twice before making me travel while wearing shackles.” De Mézières made a forced smile, realizing fully the consequences if he made a mistake and dishonored an authentic aristocrat.

“Do not worry, mademoiselle: you will be treated with respect, unless the inquiry exposes you as an impostor, in which case your punishment will be harsh indeed.”

“Fair deal!” said Jeanne before looking at Pierre, who was staring at his two ‘guests’ with little sympathy. “I am sure that we could accommodate our visitors for the night, right, Pierre?”

“Effectively, Jeanne. The escort of Monsieur De Mézières can go establish itself in the barn. I will leave my own bedroom to Monsieur De Mézières and Lieutenant Dupré.”

“But, where will you sleep then, monsieur?” Asked Dupré.

“With Jeanne, of course!” Replied Pierre with a malicious smirk, making Jeanne giggle. “You are of course welcome to have supper with me and Jeanne, you and your soldiers.”

16:49 (Guadeloupe Time)

Saturday, June 6, 1846

Fort Saint-Charles, town of Basse-Terre

Guadeloupe

Jeanne looked around her with curiosity as the cart transporting her entered a stone fortress through a guarded gate. The fortress had been built according to the principles dear to Vauban, the famous French military engineer that had served King Louis XIV. The walls were low but thick and the octagonal star pattern included a series of sunken bastions situated behind wide and deep trenches. Cannons also were visible at the crenellations, especially on the side facing the nearby sea. Nancy ‘B’ knew that this fortress had seen many battles during the last two centuries, especially against the British, who had occupied the Guadeloupe a number of times in the past, the last time being from 1810 to 1816. The cart soon stopped in front of a long, single storey house made of wood and stone and situated in the center of the fortress. Pierre, who had made the trip atop of his horse, set foot on the ground with Jeanne, De Mézières and Lieutenant Dupré, letting the soldiers of the escort bring the cart and the horses to the

stables. Jeanne, carrying in her hands a canvas bag and a guitar that she had used to provide some entertainment during the trip, was invited to follow De Mézières inside the house, which turned out to be the residence of the governor of the Guadeloupe, Monsieur de Layrle. The latter, alerted to their arrival by a servant, greeted them in a large but modestly furnished lounge. De Layrle was a thin, rather small man with long sideburns joining with his moustache and who wore a pair of round spectacles. He wore a frock coat and a pair of gray striped pants despite the heavy heat of the Summer. He examined Jeanne a moment, surprised by her height, before bowing politely to her and Pierre.

“Welcome to Basse-Terre, lady and gentleman. I am Governor Henry de Layrle.”

“Sir Pierre Alphonse d’Orléans, at your service, Governor.” said Pierre while bowing himself, while Jeanne made a curtsy. “This is Lady Jeanne Marie Céleste de Brissac, whom I saved from the sea three weeks ago.”

“And how old are you, mademoiselle?” Asked the governor.

“Sixteen, Your Excellency. As I already said to Monsieur De Mézières, I am ready to do my best to prove to you who I am.”

“Let’s not talk about this yet, Lady Jeanne.” replied de Layrle with a polite smile. “Please take the time to install yourself after your hot and dusty trip. My wife Louise will show you to your room.”

A small woman in her forties with a distinguished appearance then stepped from behind the governor and smiled to Jeanne.

“If you will follow me, my dear.”

“With pleasure, madame.”

With the Governor taking care of Pierre, Jeanne followed Louise de Layrle to a small but clean and comfortable guest room. Louise however closed the door of the room behind Jeanne and spoke to her in a sober tone.

“Mademoiselle, my husband asked me to examine you in private, so that your modesty would not be hurt. I will thus ask you to undress completely.”

Having expected that, Jeanne obeyed without fuss and soon stood fully naked in front of the wife of the governor, who asked her to slowly turn around on the spot. Louise seemed genuinely shocked by the sight of the scars left by whip strokes and red hot irons on her torso and buttocks.

“Decidedly, those who did this to you were quite cruel, my poor girl.”

"I dared resist the pirates who boarded my ship, killing two of them and injuring a third one. They also punished me a second time after I resisted their captain, who wanted to rape me."

Louise de Layrle then stepped close to her to examine in detail her scars, touching them before feeling the muscles in her legs and arms and also noting her wide shoulders.

"And...did they rape you?"

"Many times, madame."

Louise next made her lie on her back on the bed with her legs opened. A few seconds were enough for her to see that Jeanne was not a virgin anymore.

"You may now wash yourself before dressing back if you wish so, mademoiselle. There is a wash basin full of water and a sponge near the window, plus a towel. Once dressed, please return to the lounge, where my husband will speak with you."

"I will only need ten minutes, madame."

"Perfect!" said Louise before leaving the room and closing the door behind her. She then went to the lounge, where her husband was discussing with Pierre d'Orléans, whispering in the ear of her husband.

"She was effectively cruelly tortured, but not by the royal justice, on top of being raped. She is also the most athletic and strong girl I ever saw."

"Thank you, my dear Louise. We will speak further after supper."

As promised, Jeanne showed up in the lounge ten minutes later, cleaned up and with her dress dusted off. The governor greeted her with a smile and pointed the sofa in which Pierre was already sitting.

"Ah, here you are, my dear! Please, take place besides Sir Pierre. Would you like a cup of wine to refresh yourself?"

"With pleasure, Your Excellency."

Once Jeanne was sitting, a servant brought her a cup of wine on top of a silver tray, with Jeanne taking the cup with good grace. De Layrle watched her closely, knowing that De Mézières was listening through the wall from an adjacent room, various reference books in front of him.

"Well, my dear Jeanne, why don't you tell us about your family and the reasons for them to travel to the Guadeloupe?"

Jeanne obliged him at once and served him the cover story built for her by the Time Patrol. That story actually followed closely reality, as a Jeanne de Brissac had

effectively taken a cabin with her parents on the GROS GAILLARD in the port of Bordeaux, with the goal of rebuilding their fortune in the Guadeloupe. The real Jeanne de Brissac was sixteen at the time of her fatal trip, was fairly tall for a girl and had dark brown hair and green eyes. Nancy 'B' knew nearly every detail about her short life and that of her parents, thanks to the research in depth done on the Brissac family by the Time Patrol. Nancy finally had to lie only about the way the GROS GAILLARD had vanished. At the insistence of the governor, she described to him the taking of her ship by the pirates, as well as the tortures and ill treatments she had endured at their hands. She only had to think about her own, too real experience in the basements of the Bastille to paint a convincing look of horror on her face. De Layrle, visibly moved, listened closely to her story before asking less disturbing questions about what she knew about the French government and French customs. Nancy also passed with brio that part of what was really a polite but detailed interrogation.

By the time that supper was announced, the governor had become convinced that Jeanne was telling the truth, reasoning that a girl raised among pirates could not possibly fool him this much. What cemented his favorable impression of her was when, at his invitation in order to test her, Jeanne played the piano and the guitar after supper while singing, on top of conversing in Spanish and in English, two languages that the governor was fluent into. De Layrle exchanged a knowing look with his wife, who nodded her head and whispered in his ear.

"Her education is just too good for her to be anything but an aristocrat, Henry. I believe her."

"I believe her too. Just let me go speak discreetly with De Mézières, to see what he thinks of Jeanne's answers to my questions."

Excusing himself for a moment with Pierre and Jeanne, the governor left the lounge and went to see his assistant-prosecutor, who was hiding in the governor's office adjacent to the lounge.

"So, what do you think, Monsieur De Mézières?"

The graying functionary had a last look at his notes before answering in a slow, deliberate voice.

"Well, Your Excellency, everything she said made sense and fitted with what we know. Her answers about the House of Brissac matched perfectly with my treatise on French genealogy. She even described very precisely the coat of arms of the Brissac,

which is only a modest noble house that is not known by many. I still can't be absolutely certain that this girl is who she says she is without sending a letter to Bordeaux to verify that the Brissac family indeed boarded the GROS GAILLARD. However, I am certain that this is no pirate girl, Your Excellency."

"Excellent! I agree with you that she can only be a true aristocrat. I don't believe that sending a letter to Bordeaux will be necessary. Close your inquiry on her and have a certificate in her name prepared for tomorrow morning, indicating her date of arrival in the Guadeloupe. Put her as well in the registries of the colony."

"It will be done, Your Excellency."

The governor then returned to the lounge, both relieved and satisfied, going to Jeanne and gallantly kissing her hand.

"Lady Jeanne, I am truly sorry to have forced you to do the long trip to here. Know that I now believe your story and that the registries of the colony will officially list your arrival in the Guadeloupe as Jeanne Marie Céleste de Brissac."

"Thank you! Thank you from the bottom of my heart, Your Excellency!" replied Nancy, not needing to simulate her emotion, before kissing de Layrle on both cheeks. The latter then shook hands with Pierre, who was now feeling immense relief wash over him.

"Congratulations, Sir Pierre. You now have my blessing to marry your beautiful Lady Jeanne when you wish so. You are of course both invited to stay in my residence until your departure to return to your plantation. In fact, I was planning a ball for tomorrow, to which I have invited all the high society of Basse-Terre. You would make me happy if you could stay and participate in that ball."

"It will be an honor to do so, Your Excellency." said happily Pierre. On her part, Nancy also smiled, satisfied. The first part of her mission in the Guadeloupe was now nearly complete. There was only one small formality left to conclude it.

14:23 (Guadeloupe Time)

Sunday, July 5, 1846

Church of Saint-François, Guadeloupe

"And I thus declare both of you united by the sacred links of marriage. You may now kiss each other."

The small crowd that was present at the ceremony, made up in majority of the black workers of Pierre and their families, shouted with joy as Pierre and Jeanne exchanged a long kiss inside Saint-François' church. Nancy looked into Pierre's eyes, real tears on her cheeks.

"Pierre, I could not possibly have found a better man than you here in the Guadeloupe. I promise to love you with all my passion and for as long as I will be alive." Many of the women present sighed deeply on hearing that declaration of love, while Pierre caressed her cheek with one hand.

"Know that you are everything for me, Jeanne. I now count myself as the luckiest man in the World."

The couple then exchanged a second kiss even more passionate than the first one, making more than one female spectator cry.

The marriage ceremony in the church was followed by a party held in the biggest inn of the town, a party that went on until after supper. The newlywed and their employees then returned to the plantation, either by cart or on foot, to continue the festivities there. Pierre and Jeanne stayed together in bed until late next morning, caressing each other and repeatedly making love. They finally decided regretfully to get up and wash, then dress. With Pierre having declared that day as a holiday for his workers, Jeanne made a point of walking around the workers houses with Pierre's guitar, playing and singing to brighten their day. When she returned to the main residence a few hours later, she found Pierre busy writing a series of letters in his lounge. Approaching him and hugging his back, she rested her head on his shoulders.

"To whom are you writing to, Pierre?"

"To my relatives in Louisiana and in France, to announce my marriage to them."

"Do you still have a lot of relatives in France, Pierre?"

Pierre gave her an amused look before kissing her on the cheek.

"You are now a d'Orléans, Jeanne. You should know that I am actually a distant nephew of King Louis-Philippe. One of these letters is for the King."

"Oh! Should I be intimidated or flattered by that?"

Pierre answered her by gently patting her bum.

"Nothing of the sort, my sweet Jeanne. Affairs of state and the aristocracy are of no interest to me at all. I was content with living in reasonable comfort here, in the Guadeloupe. Now, I have the most beautiful jewel that I could possibly find."

"You flatterer!" purred Jeanne while caressing his hair.

Later, as night had fallen, Jeanne left the residence, telling Pierre that she was going to walk through the workers' houses. Once out of sight, she changed direction and stealthily went to the back of the barn. First making sure that nobody was watching her, she concentrated and mentally activated the space-time distorter implanted in her body, disappearing in a brief flash of white light. Nancy Laplante 'B' had another mission to continue in the 17th Century.



Carriage entrance, Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles-V, Paris.

CHAPTER 2 – LADY JEANNE D'ORLÉANS

22:45 (Guadeloupe Time)

Sunday, December 20, 1846

The 'Sweet Dreams' plantation

Southeast tip of the island of Grande-Terre

The Guadeloupe

Feeling the preoccupation in Pierre as they were about to go to sleep after making love together, Nancy tenderly caressed his cheek in the darkness of their bedroom.

"Something is wrong, Pierre?"

Pierre hesitated for a long moment before answering.

"I don't know, Jeanne. You still have no sign that you could be pregnant?"

It was Nancy's turn to be silent for a moment. Her anticipated joy at being allowed by the Time Patrol to give him a child had gradually turned to confusion, then to uncertainty when more than five months of marriage laced with near daily bouts of sex gave no apparent results. Riddled with worry and remorse, Nancy had used her last training period at the main base of the Time Patrol to pass a complete medical examination. That examination had shown that she was still fertile and fully able to have children. She then had discreetly collected sperm samples from Pierre to have them analyzed. She had cried when the results of those analysis had shown that Pierre d'Orléans was sterile at the age of 36. His spermatozoid count was too low, possibly the result of a past disease he had suffered from while in New Orleans.

"No, nothing! Pierre, did you ever make love to one of your black ex-slaves? Don't be afraid to answer me truthfully: it won't bother me."

"Why would you want to know that, Jeanne?" asked Pierre, surprised.

"Well, if you ever made a baby with a slave girl, this could help point where our problem lay in getting a child, Pierre."

Pierre looked at her tenderly, moved by her comprehension. That question in fact had just awakened a painful doubt in his mind.

"Yes, I did bed a few of my slave girls in the last few years. None of them became pregnant from me, as far as I know, and they knew that I would have recognized any child I would have conceived with them."

"And the girls of the Brissac family always proved to be fertile." added Nancy, a lump in her throat. "Pierre, I am afraid that we won't be able to have a child together." That brought tears to Pierre's eyes, who then hugged Nancy tight in his arms.

"If that's the case, then it is probably not because of you, Jeanne. God knows that you honored my bed with assiduity and enthusiasm."

"What will we do then, Pierre?"

"The only thing we can do now, apart from continuing to try: pray God."

Pierre concluded that declaration with a tender kiss on Nancy's lips, who kissed him back with profound love.

15:11 (Guadeloupe Time)

Wednesday, February 10, 1847

The 'Sweet Dreams' plantation, the Guadeloupe

Doctor Lebaron had a downcast expression on his face when he came out of the bedroom where he had just examined Pierre d'Orléans. He found the young and beautiful wife of Pierre in the living room, where Father Marchand was doing his best to reassure her. The couple was well known in Saint-François for their deep, mutual love, on top of their generosity and their kindness towards their black employees. Jeanne d'Orléans got up from her chair the moment Lebaron appeared in the living room, speaking to him in an anxious tone.

"What is your diagnostic, Doctor? Pierre will recover, right?"

"Lady Jeanne, I am afraid that the news are bad. Your husband has contracted a type of tropical fever that cannot be treated and is too often fatal. I unfortunately can't do anything to cure him. I am sorry."

Jeanne's eyes filled at once with tears and she had to sit back down, her shoulders raked by sobs.

"My god, no!"

"Be strong, my child." said softly Father Marchand while holding her hands. "God will watch over his soul."

Lebaron stayed silent for a while, leaving some time for Jeanne to go over her grief before speaking again.

"Lady Jeanne, your husband realizes that he doesn't have long to live and asked for a notary, in order to update his will."

"I...I can send our foreman to Saint-François, to go get Mister Tellier there. Could I see Pierre in the meantime?"

"Yes, but don't make him talk too much: he is burning with fever and is weak."

"I understand. I will advise our foreman right away, so that he can leave for town, then I will go watch over Pierre. You are of course welcome to stay here as long as needed, Doctor."

Jeanne then got up slowly and left the house for a few minutes, returning to the lounge afterwards.

"Fernand is on his way with our cart to go get Monsieur Tellier. I will now go see Pierre. If you need anything in the meantime, just ask our maid, Marthe."

Lebaron watched the tall and athletic teenager go into Pierre's bedroom before looking at the priest sitting with him in the lounge.

"What a tragedy! This couple was the image of love and happiness."

“Indeed! I married Jeanne to Pierre d’Orléans and I must say that it was the best thing that happened to Sir Pierre. If all my flock could have a conjugal life like that of this couple, my parish would be a happy one indeed. I am afraid that the poor Jeanne could end up being broken by her oncoming loss.”

The notary, George Tellier, arrived at the plantation two hours later and immediately went to see Pierre in his room, his paper, pen and seals with him and with Father Marchand acting as a witness. The notary and the priest stayed in Pierre’s bedroom for what felt like an eternity to Jeanne, who tried to forget her distress by going to prepare supper for her three visitors. Supper was a somber affair indeed, with Jeanne leaving the table early in order to go help her husband eat a soup in bed. Lebaron used that opportunity to ask a question in a low voice to Tellier as they kept eating.

“I suppose that Pierre d’Orléans is leaving everything to his wife?”

“Normally, this would be covered by professional confidentiality, but I must say that the last will of Sir Pierre is most simple, especially since he has no children, or business associates for his plantation. He also had no known debts and was in fact quite wealthy, despite living rather modestly in comparison to his revenues. The money that he kept in a locked chest in the strong room of the bank in Saint-François will go to his wife, along with the plantation. Does he really have no possibility of recovering, Doctor?”

“I strongly doubt so, Mister Tellier. I too often had to deal with this type of fever and it nearly always has proven to be fatal. Fortunately, it is not contagious and is transmitted only through the sting of a certain type of insect.”

“So, Lady Jeanne will soon find herself alone in charge of this plantation. I wonder if she will want to stay or to sell the property. The plantation, with its sugar refinery and its rum distillery, is worth quite a sum, on top of being very profitable. Prospective buyers won’t be lacking if Lady Jeanne ever decides to sell it.”

Father Marchand then joined the conversation, speaking in a low, conspiratorial tone.

“There are rumors that Sir Pierre found a few months ago an old pirate treasure with the help of his young wife.”

That made Lebaron raise an eyebrow.

“Oh? Where did you hear that rumor, Father?”

“Let’s say that I have my sources in town.” replied the priest, smiling. “Pierre d’Orléans and his wife were once seen at the bank in Saint-François, depositing a

collection of old, rusty chests. They then went the same day to sell to an antiquary an old rusted sword that Lady Jeanne had found in a submerged cave during one of her frequent swims. You must say that this is enough to make people speculate.”

“There are also stories that say that Lady Jeanne swims nearly naked when she goes to fish on the coast.” insinuated Tellier with a knowing smile, making Father Marchand sign himself.

“Monsieur Tellier, to eye the wife of another man is a sin. You should go confess yourself.”

“I am only repeating what many are already saying, Father. You must admit that this young girl has made people talk a lot since her arrival nearly a year ago, starting with the torture scars on her torso.”

“She is certainly an uncommon girl.” recognized the priest. “She however has a heart of gold and is most generous, something that I can only approve of.”

The trio continued to exchange stories and news during the rest of the meal, until Jeanne returned to the lounge. After further comforting Jeanne, Father Marchand left for Saint-François with Tellier in the cart driven by the plantation’s foreman. Doctor Lebaron, on his part, made another examination of Pierre d’Orléans before going to bed in the guests’ bedroom, leaving Jeanne alone with her husband.

As Lebaron had expected, Pierre d’Orléans’ condition deteriorated gradually, to the point of making Father Marchand return two days later to be ready to give him the last rites. Just before noon on Friday, February 12 of 1847, Pierre d’Orléans passed away in the arms of a Jeanne nearly mad with grief.

09:38 (Guadeloupe Time)

Tuesday, May 11, 1847

The ‘Sweet Dreams’ plantation

The Guadeloupe

Alerted by one of her black workers, Nancy was standing on the porch of the residence when a small carriage stopped in front of her and let out a thin man dressed in a distinguished suit. The man, who held a leather briefcase in his left hand, saluted her with his top hat.

"Lady Jeanne d'Orléans? My name is Victor Schoelcher, deputy for the Guadeloupe at the National Assembly. I was told that your plantation is for sale."

"You were told right, Mister Schoelcher." said Nancy while climbing down the steps of the porch to go greet her visitor. "I heard good things about your work at the National Assembly. You have already done a lot for the cause of the abolition of slavery in the colonies."

"And I am hoping soon to convince the National Assembly in Paris to pass an act abolishing for good this abomination, Lady Jeanne."

Nancy smiled to him, favorably impressed by the man, and showed him the main entrance of the residence.

"You would then make me quite happy, Mister Schoelcher. I was starting to despair of finding a good, honest man worthy of buying my plantation. But let's go inside, so you can refresh yourself."

"Thank you, Lady Jeanne."

Schoelcher followed Nancy inside, taking place in the sofa offered by her in the lounge. Nancy then served him a cup of fruity white wine before sitting beside him.

"So, you are interested in buying this plantation, Mister Schoelcher?"

"Along with its sugar refinery and its rum distillery, if they are also for sale."

"They effectively are, monsieur."

"Could I ask you first the reasons why you want to sell, Lady Jeanne? Your property seems to have resisted very well to last month's earthquake, contrary to many other plantations."

"Please, call me simply Jeanne, Mister Schoelcher. My reasons for selling are simple. With the death of my husband last February, I do not wish to live in the Guadeloupe anymore and want to go rebuild my life in Paris. I however want to find a buyer that will treat well my workers before leaving the Guadeloupe. As for the good state of my plantation, I owe it to the fact that I spent money to maintain it adequately, while too many of my neighbors look only for short term profits, exploiting their workers and using their installations to full capacity while skimping on maintenance."

"I was able to see that by myself while visiting other plantations, Jeanne. Would it be possible to visit in detail your plantation before speaking business further?"

"But of course, Mister Schoelcher! Once you are finished with your cup, I will give you the grand tour. We will then start by the rum distillery."

12:09 (Guadeloupe Time)

The 'Sweet Dreams' plantation

Victor Schoelcher used his handkerchief to wipe out the sweat from his forehead as he sat back with a sigh of relief in the lounge's sofa. The Sun was blazing hard on the Guadeloupe today and he had just walked for over two hours. In contrast, Jeanne seemed to be still fresh and full of energy, while her suntanned skin only added to the impression of health radiating from her.

"I must say that you seem to be administering a model plantation, Jeanne. Your workers also seemed to be both happy and motivated. You certainly would be in your right to ask the maximum possible from your property."

The teenager, who had deeply impressed Schoelcher with her maturity and with her technical knowledge during the tour of the plantation, smiled to him while sitting at the other end of the sofa.

"Mister Schoelcher, while I could be as hard about business as any man, I only want to get a honest price for my plantation. My husband left me a small fortune and luxury doesn't attract me. In truth, once installed in Paris, I intend to create a charitable society, using the money I got from my husband to help the downtrodden, the poor and the abused children."

"A most commendable goal, Jeanne. As a National Assembly deputy, I would certainly be happy to help you in that project. So, how much would you be asking for your property, including its stocks of rum and refined sugar?"

Nancy, who had studied with care the estate and commodities markets of the time, answered him at once.

"One hundred thousand francs¹ for the installations, the land and the stocks of rum and sugar. My workers are free men, so are not for sale. You will have to hire them on wages."

Schoelcher calculated furiously in his head the value of what he had seen. Jeanne's offer seemed more than fair to him. As for the funds needed to buy and operate the plantation, he had plenty of liquidities available to him right now.

¹ The French franc of the time was worth about twenty American cents (1800s), while an English pound sterling was worth 25 francs. One French Napoleon gold coin was worth twenty francs.

"Your price is a very honest one, Jeanne. You have a deal. I will come back tomorrow with a notary, in order to conclude the deal and to organize the payment."

"Excellent! You will be staying for lunch, I hope?"

"With pleasure, Jeanne!"

Victor Schoelcher then spent an agreeable hour eating and conversing with Jeanne, discussing mostly about the operations of the plantation and the current market for rum and sugar. That conversation convinced the deputy that he was dealing with an extremely intelligent girl who was well educated and had an uncommon strength of character. Frankly impressed by Jeanne, Schoelcher left the plantation at the end of the afternoon, going back to Saint-François in his carriage with a promise to come back the next day.

Schoelcher effectively came back next morning, accompanied by notary Tellier and carrying a bank draft for 100,000 francs. Once the selling act was signed, Jeanne presented him to her foreman and to her black workers and their families, watching discreetly his reactions at the contact of the ex-slaves. Schoelcher however proved to be as tolerant and kind as his reputation said, to her relief. On their part, the black workers, being understandably nervous at losing such a good employer as Jeanne, relaxed noticeably once they met their new boss. The sad truth was that too many French settlers in the Guadeloupe were abusive, even brutal, towards their black workers. The workers genuinely loved Jeanne, while she was sad to have to leave them. The plantation-wide party that she organized that night to raise the morale of her workers quickly turned into a tearful reunion. Later, before going to sleep that night, Nancy went to visit Pierre d'Orléans' grave in the small cemetery of the plantation. Her tears then were genuine and plentiful.

The day Nancy left the plantation, on Friday, May 28, was another occasion for tearful hugs and kisses between Nancy and her workers. She finally had to climb on the cart driven by her foreman, with Victor Schoelcher bidding her goodbye with Gérard Bussière, the man chosen by him to manage the plantation. Nancy's throat was tight as she waved at the crowd of ex-slaves one last time.

Once in the port of Saint-François, Nancy went to the local bank to retrieve there the two solid, locked chests that contained the savings accumulated by Pierre d'Orléans as well as the pirate treasure that had sparked so many rumors in the last months. The fortune in gold and gems of that treasure, which had a monetary value at the time of over four million francs, really came from a pirate wreck dating from the 16th Century. However, that treasure had been retrieved from the bottom of the Caribbean Sea by the Time Patrol, to be relocated discreetly in a coastal grotto, where Jeanne had 'found' it and signaled it to Pierre. Such treasures recuperated from hundreds of old ship wrecks around the World were often used by the Time Patrol to fund the operations of its field agents in the past. In fact, more gold and jewels retrieved from the sea were already set aside to further fatten the startup funds to be used by Jeanne d'Orléans once in Paris to create her future d'Orléans Social Foundation, the ultimate goal of Nancy's mission.

The night of May 28, Jeanne d'Orléans officially climbed aboard the three-mast ship CAMARGUE with her luggage and her heavy chests. Early next morning, the CAMARGUE left its quay with the high tide and slowly went out of the small port of Saint-François, heading for the port of Le Havre and France.

13:52 (Paris Time)

Thursday, July 1, 1847

Port of Le Havre, France

Nancy, like the 46 other passengers of the CAMARGUE, was up on the weather deck of the ship, leaning against the siding and observing the port of Le Havre during the docking maneuvers. Dozens of other cargo ships, many with mixed sail and steam propulsion, were anchored in the port's basin or were docked, loading or unloading cargo and passengers. The quays were backed by a long façade of warehouses and five-storey brick or stone residential buildings, while a small railway station that had been recently built was situated at the limit of the port area. The port of Le Havre was itself situated in the estuary of the Seine River, which flowed down from Paris and further on.

A ramp was finally put in place between the quay and the top deck of the CAMARGUE but, before any of the passengers could go down to firm ground, a group of French customs officers and policemen climbed aboard to inspect the passengers and the ship's cargo. Nancy waited patiently her turn to be inspected with her luggage, smiling politely to the custom officer who finally came to her to ask for her papers. The official stiffened and looked at her with new deference when he read her name in her passport.

"Lady Jeanne d'Orléans? You are from the royal family, miss?"

"My husband was a cousin of King Louis Philippe, monsieur. Unfortunately, he died recently from a fever in the Guadeloupe."

The custom officer then bowed low to her while giving her back her passport.

"My sincere condolences, Lady Jeanne. I am sorry to have importuned you like this. You may disembark with your luggage."

"Thank you, my good man."

Enlisting the help of four solid sailors to carry her luggage and chests down to the quay, Nancy waved at one of the carts and carriages waiting nearby for customers. Once her things were loaded up on the cart that came forward, Nancy gave a generous tip to the four sailors before climbing in the cart and sitting besides the driver, smiling to him.

"To the train station, please."

"Right away, miss." Replied politely the graying man before urging his horse forward. The trip to the railway station took less than ten minutes but it gave a chance to Nancy to get a good estimate of the traffic passing through Le Havre. It also gave her a chance to take some films through the micro-camera hidden in her hat as she watched the activity around her. She could not help smile on seeing the train that was waiting at the station. Both the engine and its wagons were of primitive manufacture, the French railroad industry being still in its infancy. The engine could not have rated more than a few dozen horsepower and the passenger wagons were open to the winds and to the ample black smoke from the coal-fired engine. The cart stopped temporarily in front of the railway station's office to allow Nancy to go buy a ticket for Paris and to requisition the help of two of the station's baggage handlers. A bit more than a hour later, Nancy's train left the station in a thick cloud of black smoke and steam, its steel wheels screeching under the effort.

For a modern traveler, the 228 kilometer trip would have been slow and uncomfortable, with the passengers often having to breathe the black smoke from the engine while sitting on hard wooden benches. For Nancy, that was a precious opportunity to document a trip on the dawn of rail transport. She had however lived through much worse and endured with patience the trip, conversing with a distinguished English couple who had arrived from London and was going like her to Paris. Too happy to be able to pass time with someone who could speak English, the couple even invited Nancy to share the content of their picnic basket with them.

The train finally arrived in Paris as the night was falling. On a common accord, Nancy and the English couple rented the services of a carriage to go to a good hotel that had been recommended to the couple by a relative in England. Nancy sighed with relief when she was finally able to soak in a hot bath in her room of the Westminster Hotel, her precious chests secure in the strong room of the hotel.

09:27 (Paris Time)

Monday, July 5, 1847

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles-V

Le Marais district, Paris

France

The man waiting in front of the carriage entrance of the large town house bowed politely to Nancy when she showed up, saluting her with his top hat. While the man wore a good quality suit, Nancy wore a fine gown and an expensive set of jewels.

“Lady Jeanne d’Orléans, I presume?”

“Correct, mister! I came here Saturday and told your keeper that I was interested in buying this town house. Would it be possible to visit the property, Mister...?”

“Jean Barrot, real estate agent with the Bank of France, which is the present owner of this residence.”

Nancy gave Barrot a surprised look then.

“This town house was repossessed by your bank, Mister Barrot?”

“Yes, Lady Jeanne. Unfortunately, the economy is not going well these days and the last occupant of this residence went bankrupt a few months ago. The Bank of

France then repossessed the building as partial payment of that occupant's debts, but prospective buyers have been quite rare since then."

Nancy nodded her head in comprehension. In fact, she knew in detail the history of this residence, called in French a 'hôtel particulier', and had already chosen it as her future residence in Paris. The last three days spent roaming Paris and visiting other residences on sale had only been to support her cover story.

"I see! Please show the way."

Barrot knocked on the pedestrian door inserted in the right-hand door of the large carriage gate, making the keeper of the property open it after a few seconds. The keeper was a big, solid man with a knife in his belt and his main task was probably to prevent squatters from occupying the residence. After a few words with Barrot, the keeper stepped aside and let him and Nancy enter, closing back and locking the door behind them.

Walking twelve paces down the tunnel formed through the town house's façade by the carriage entrance, Nancy emerged into a large, paved inner courtyard bordered on both sides by wings of the residence. The right side wing had three large garage doors for carriages and horses at ground level, while the left side wing was lined by many windows and three entrance doors. The town house proper thus formed a 'U' surrounding the courtyard of three sides, with the back of the courtyard occupied by a garden and closed off by a high stone wall marking the limit of the property, which was sandwiched between other residences and buildings. The stone building had two floors, plus an attic level with dormer windows. The upper floor clearly had a higher than normal ceiling, judging from the height of the windows, and probably lodged the master bedrooms and the various reception rooms. It was also immediately apparent to Nancy that the building and its courtyard had been neglected for decades and would need some serious renovation work. Jean Barrot noticed her expression as she was detailing the state of the town house and gave her a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry, Lady Jeanne: this residence is still very solid."

"Maybe, but it will need at the least a serious cleanup, plus new coats of paint to the door and window frames. I hope that the roof doesn't leak."

"You will be able to judge by yourself, Lady Jeanne. This way, please."

Entering the building with Barrot via a door of the façade section opening on the courtyard, Nancy found herself in a large vestibule occupied by a grand, curved marble staircase with forged iron railings leading to the upper floor. She also saw near the foot of the staircase a door that had to lead to the basement, judging by the angle of the passage visible past the open door. The main staircase would have been magnificent if not for the fact that it was covered with dust and dirt and with rust on the railing, while plaster was falling off the walls and ceiling. Nancy looked at all that with true sadness.

“What a waste! To neglect like this a building with so much history in it.”

“You know the history of the Hôtel de Brinvilliers, miss?”

“Of course, my dear Mister Barrot! Who doesn't know the story of the infamous, sinister Marquess of Brinvilliers, to whom this residence belonged. She was executed in 1676 for having poisoned members of her family as well as many other nobles and big bourgeois. The building does date from the early 17th Century, right?”

“Correct! It was completed in 1630, when many big nobles started residing in the district of Le Marais. Let's start the visit with the ground floor.”

Passing through a door located near the door to the basement, Barrot led Nancy into a large kitchen that was nearly empty, save for a large fireplace, an iron stove and a baking oven. Like the vestibule, the room was full of dust and spider webs and looked utterly abandoned. Barrot took a few steps while pointing features around him as he spoke.

“This is the kitchen. The fireplace, oven and stove, while old, are still functional. The rest of the west wing on this level contains a pantry, a laundry room, six guest rooms or suites and a bathroom.”

Nancy, guided by Barrot, took a good ten minutes to visit and inspect carefully the ground floor of the west wing. While dirty and dusty, the wing seem to be structurally sound, except for the decaying wall plaster. The rooms were however utterly empty of furniture, it having probably been sold to help pay back part of the debt owed by the previous owner. Then going back out in the courtyard, they crossed the fifteen meter-wide paved expanse, which widened to twenty meters in its back half, and entered the eastern wing. Nancy found in the stables a collection of hay balls, some old buckets and a pile of horse blankets. The two adjacent garage stalls, meant for carriages, were however completely empty. Using the communicating doors of the stalls, Barrot led her next to the south-east section of the façade facing the Charles-V street. She saw there

three rooms of various sizes, one of them measuring a good eight by six meters and containing a large fireplace and an iron stove. Like the other rooms she had already visited, the place was utterly devoid of furniture. Barrot made a gesture with both hands while describing the larger room.

"This is where the maids and servants took their breaks and ate their meals. The adjacent room giving on the street was the watchman's room, while there is a bathroom for the domestic staff at the back. If you don't have questions about the ground floor, we could now go visit the upper floor."

"Go ahead, Mister Barrot." replied Nancy after a quick look around the three rooms in this section. They then went out by a door of the watchman's room that gave access to the tunnel formed by the carriage entrance, crossing to the west wing side entrance and ending back in the main vestibule of the grand staircase. While climbing the marble steps of the staircase, Nancy inspected visually the walls of the staircase well, which was lit by a large window giving a view of the courtyard and by a single window giving on the street. Like in the rest of the building, the plaster was falling off the walls and would have to be completely redone.

Setting foot on the upper level of the staircase, which twisted yet twice more to go to the attic level, Nancy followed Barrot through a set of double doors giving access to the west wing upper floor. The ceiling on this level was over four meter high, adding a lot to the volume of the upper floor. Barrot then showed her a fairly large room that contained a fireplace.

"This was the reception lounge proper. To your left, you will see two doors. The nearest door leads to the private boudoir and the library, which themselves communicate with the two master bedrooms. The other door gives on a staircase that goes down directly to the kitchen."

"Let me look first at the boudoir, library and master bedrooms of the façade section before visiting the west wing, Mister Barrot." said Nancy after looking around the lounge."

"As you wish, Lady Jeanne."

Going through the nearest door, she ended up in a relatively small room with a window that gave a view down on the Charles-V street. An old iron stove sat in one corner but there were again no furniture present. Despite its small size, Nancy liked at once the boudoir: It was strategically situated at the corner angle of the west and south wings,

while it was isolated enough to give someone a place to work in peace. The adjacent library, which walls were still lined with old, dusty bookshelves, albeit empty, was a wide, six by five meters room, with double doors giving on the grand staircase well and a single door linking it to a large bedroom with fireplace. They then crossed into the bedroom.

"The master bedroom." announced Barrot while sweeping one hand around. "Behind that corner, you will find two large closets, while this door near the corner leads into the master bathroom."

"Not bad at all!" said Nancy with appreciation as she scanned the big, L-shaped bedroom, which had to cover about 35 square meters and was lit by two windows. After going around the corner to examine the two storage closets, she went into the master bathroom, where she found a large tile-covered bathtub and a marble counter with a sink. There was also a toilet chair, with a bucket sitting under it, but no actual plumbing except for lead water drainage pipes for the bathtub and the sink. Barrot shrugged his shoulders on seeing the face she made at the primitive sanitary facilities.

"Please understand that this residence was built in the 17th Century, when toilets were limited to simple chamber pots. However, the more recent owners installed a few toilet pits that go down to the sewers. You still have to bring up water with buckets, though."

"I see!" said simply Nancy, who was making a mental note about the need to completely renovate the sanitary and heating installations, in order to bring some modern comforts to the residence. Fortunately, she knew about an English sanitary engineer that had started to market sanitary appliances, including flush toilets, in this time period. She followed Barrot through the second door of the master bathroom, ending in the guest bedroom. While smaller in surface than the master bedroom, that room was still big, with its own fireplace and wide storage closets. From there, they went into the long hallway connecting the west and east wings and running along the aft façade of the south wing.

"If you wish, Lady Jeanne, we could have a quick look at the two guest lounges in the east wing before visiting in detail the west wing."

"Please go ahead, Mister Barrot."

Barrot, taking a few steps to a double door leading into the east wing, then showed her a side door.

"This is the access door to the servants' staircase, which connects the servant's lounge on the ground floor with the servants' rooms in the attic. It thus allows them to go around and do their chores without infringing on the guests' and masters' privacy."

Nancy nodded while hiding her resentment at this sign of how lowly the domestic staff had been treated by its masters through the centuries. Social and sexual equality as known in the later 20th Century still were mostly empty words in this time period, despite the rapid technological advances being done in the mid 19th Century, which knew steam power and was on the verge of developing the widespread use of electricity. Still following Barrot, she quickly visited two mid-sized lounges, each with a fireplace, before returning in the communications hallway and going back to the reception lounge in the west wing. From there, they stepped into a ten meter-wide room well lit by tall windows and sporting a large fireplace. The floor was made of polished wood, which was however in bad need of maintenance.

"The main dining room," announced Barrot. "It is big enough to comfortably seat at least eighteen persons for dinner. The hidden staircase to our left leads down to the ground floor and to the kitchen level, while stairs also lead up to the servants' quarters. Next door, we have the ballroom, the largest room of the residence."

The ballroom indeed proved to be huge, measuring about eleven by ten meters and being well illuminated by a total of five tall windows, while a big fireplace was meant to heat the wide volume during Winter. Nancy nodded her head slowly, suitably impressed by the ballroom.

"I do like playing music and singing. This will be perfect to entertain my future guests."

"I am happy to see that you like this, Lady Jeanne. At the back of the ballroom, we have another guest suite, a large one with a private bathroom. We could then visit the attic level, even though it contains only the servants' quarters."

"I would still want to visit that level, Mister Barrot. The welfare of my future domestic staff is important to me."

"As you wish, Lady Jeanne."

Using a hidden staircase at the back of the ballroom, they climbed wooden stairs to the attic level, which proved a lot more cramped than the upper floor and which finishing touches had visibly been neglected, with many roof structures left uncovered. The 22 servants' bedrooms she saw on that level, while each illuminated by a dormer

window, were cramped, nearly claustrophobic. Nancy firmly resolved then to do something about this, and soon. As Barrot announced to her that the visit was completed, she smiled to him while shaking her index.

“You forgot the basement, Mister Barrot.”

“Uh, you will find only dust and humidity there, Lady Jeanne.”

“Maybe, but it will also allow me to inspect the state of the residence’s foundations.”

The young real estate agent made a face at that.

“True! I will however have first to go borrow an oil lamp from the watchman before we go down there.”

Going down to the ground floor with Nancy, he went to see briefly the watchman, returning with a lit oil lamp and smiling to her.

“We will use the stairs of the vestibule, near the kitchen.”

That stone staircase proved to be both dark and sinister, smelling of molds. The light from the oil lamp soon revealed to Nancy a long cave extending in two directions in the shape of an ‘L’. Stone pillars were lined up at about every four meters as far as she could see, which wasn’t much really. Piled around the stone pillars was an eclectic assortment of old rotting furniture, crates and wooden chests, the lot covered by a thick coat of dust, rat droppings and spiders’ webs. The air was also fetid, making Barrot grimace.

“As you can see, Lady Jeanne, this is not the most attractive part of this residence.”

“Oh, I was not expecting a reception lounge, Mister Barrot.” said Nancy in an amused tone before going to the nearest stone wall to inspect it. Closely followed by Barrot and his oil lamp, she methodically inspected the stone walls and pillars of the foundations, which ran for about 25 meters under the south façade and for 35 meters under the west wing. The west wing foundations however proved much wider than the ones of the south wing, with double rows of stone pillars compared to a single row under the south wing. The total volume of space was actually very significant and, while the place lacked proper ventilation at this time, Nancy could see some useful future use for this basement level.

“Well, the foundations seems to be in a very good state, considering their age, Mister Barrot. Let’s go back to the ground level.”

Jean Barrot let out a sigh of relief once they were back in the ground level vestibule and quickly slapped away the dust and spiders' webs that had fallen on his suit. He then gave Nancy a typical salesman's smile.

"So, Lady Jeanne, are you interested by this property?"

"Definitely! It will be perfect for my needs...if the price is right."

"Excellent! The published sales price is 180,000 francs for both the building and the lot, a truly good deal."

Nancy at once threw him a skeptical look.

"A good deal, 180,000 francs? That is three times what this residence cost when brand new, if I can go by the price of 58,000 livres paid by Robert de Frémont in 1672. Even when taking into account the inflation since the 17th Century, which basically doubled the price, your offer is about 50% too high, and this without even taking into account the age of the building and the need for extensive renovations."

Jean Barrot looked at her with surprise, taken off balance by her knowledge about this property. He however still attempted to defend his position.

"But, the prices of property lots in Paris has risen a lot since, Lady Jeanne. I however concede that the property is in need of some renovations. I thus am ready to lower my price to 160,000 francs."

"I offer 120,000 francs, and I am being generous."

"Uh, 140,000 francs. I really can't get lower than that."

Nancy made of show of thinking about his offer for a moment before smiling to him and presenting her right hand for a shake. In reality, she would have paid about any price to get this specific property, which would become crucial to her future projects.

"Deal!"

"You won't regret your decision, Lady Jeanne. We now only have to discuss the financing of this sale."

"What financing, Mister Barrot? I am ready to pay cash for this property. Prepare the sales act for tomorrow and I will go to your bank then, to both pay for this property and to make an important deposit in gold and gems."

"We will be ready for you, Lady Jeanne. Our watchman will stay at his post until you are able to take effective possession of the property, and this to prevent squatters from occupying your new house. The times are hard these days and there is unfortunately a lot of vagrants in Paris right now."

Barrot took a minute to speak with the watchman, giving him additional instructions before leaving the town house and letting Nancy alone in front of the carriage entrance. She looked with pride at the façade of her new residence, happy with her acquisition. Her mind was already on the various renovation and improvement works that she wanted to make in order to restore the town house to its past splendor. Her heart particularly warmed up at the thought of all the good that her future charitable foundation was going to do from this building in the near future.

“Great things will be done here indeed.” she whispered to herself.

The next morning, a bit after the opening of the main branch and head office of the Bank of France, the two gendarmes on guard at the entrance of the bank stiffened instinctively when four big men, near giants, climbed down from a chariot that had just stopped in front of the bank. A tall and pretty teenage girl wearing a high quality city gown and who had just arrived in a small carriage then joined the four men as they took out two apparently heavy chests from the back of their chariots. The driver of the chariot, a young man of medium size, stayed with his vehicle as the teenager and the four mountains of muscles carrying the two chests climbed the stairs to the entrance of the bank. One of the gendarmes then interposed himself in front of the teenage girl, who was holding a fair-sized wooden box in her hands. He however kept his tone polite.

“Excuse me, mademoiselle, but I must ensure that you and your four helpers are not armed. Could I see the content of your box and of your chests?”

“But of course, my good man! I was in fact coming here to deposit my fortune in this bank. To see it so well guarded reassures me.”

The girl then opened the cover of her box to let the gendarme look inside it. The latter felt a rush of blood go to his head on seeing the dozens of big polished emeralds contained in the box. He however managed not to exclaim himself and nodded his head before going to inspect the two chests. He suddenly started sweating at the sight of the gold bars filling the chests.

“Uh, everything is okay. You may enter the bank, miss.”

“Thank you!”

The gendarme watched the small group enter the bank with its chests before exchanging a bemused glance with his comrade.

"Good god! I have never seen such a fortune at once. This girl is easily a multi-millionaire. She did well to hire those big men."

"Yeah! Did you notice the one with the long scar on one cheek?"

"You bet! He could scare away the worst criminals."

Followed closely by Jack Crawford, Otto Skorzeni, Fernand Brunet and Ken Dows with their two chests full of gold bars, Nancy went to a service wicket that was presently free of customers and politely saluted the cashier with a nod of her head.

"Good morning, monsieur. I am here to make an important deposit and to pay for a property I bought from your bank yesterday. I believe that your director will want to see me."

"Uh, just a moment, miss."

After excusing himself, the cashier left his wicket and went to a private office located behind the service counter. He soon came back out with an obese man wearing a large graying moustache. The latter crossed on the customers' side of the counter to come to Nancy, bowing in front of her.

"Miss, I am Charles de Pointcarré, director of this bank. What could I do for you this morning?"

"Let me present myself first, monsieur: Lady Jeanne d'Orléans. I came to open an account and make in it a large deposit, on top of paying for the buying of the Hôtel de Brinvilliers, which I visited with Mister Barrot yesterday. These men are escorting my gold."

The director gave a cautious look at the four powerful men before looking back at Nancy.

"In that case, please follow me with your men and your chests, Lady Jeanne."

The group then crossed behind the service counter and went to the director's office, where Pointcarré offered a chair to Nancy.

"Please sit down, Lady Jeanne. I will go get Mister Barrot."

"Thank you, monsieur."

The director then left for a minute, to return and sit behind his desk.

"Could I see some identity papers, miss?"

"Certainly, Monsieur de Pointcarré! Here is my passport as well as my marriage certificate. Unfortunately, my husband died last February from a tropical fever in the Guadeloupe and I then decided to return to France. Here is his death certificate as well."

The director examined carefully the three documents presented by Nancy, to then return them to her, apparently satisfied.

“So, you came here to deposit your fortune in our bank, Lady Jeanne. You chose well.”

“I believe so as well, monsieur. I would like first to have the value of my two chests and of my jewel box evaluated with precision. Then, I will deposit the majority of that sum in a savings account, with the rest put in a regular account. I have with me gold bars and polished emeralds.”

“And could I ask you the origin of that gold and those emeralds, Lady Jeanne?”

“You can, monsieur! Part of my gold comes from the sale of the plantation in the Guadeloupe that I inherited from my husband, while the rest comes from a pirates’ treasure found in a coastal cave on the boundaries of our plantation.”

The director’s eyebrows rose in interest at the words ‘pirates’ treasure’.

“Hum, quite an interesting story indeed, Lady Jeanne. Let me go get someone for the evaluation.”

Leaving again his office, the director came back with a small, thin man wearing round spectacles.

“If your men could follow Monsieur Lafleur with their chests, he will weigh and calculate the value of your gold, so that it could be credited to your account. As well, our associate jeweler should be here soon.”

Nancy nodded her head and made a sign to Otto Skorzeni, who grabbed with Fernand Brunet the handles of one of the chests and picked it up to follow the accountant out of the office, accompanied by Ken Dows and Jack Crawford, who carried the second chest. The director then started filling the paperwork needed for Nancy to open a savings account and a regular account, the lot in the name of Jeanne d’Orléans. Those procedures were nearly completed when Jean Barrot showed up with the sales contract for the Hôtel de Brinvilliers. Nancy had just signed the contract when the accountant in charge of evaluating her gold bars knocked on the door of the office, passing his head inside once invited in.

“Monsieur de Pointcarré, the weighing of the gold of Lady Jeanne is now completed. It is worth 3,206,800 francs.”

De Pointcarré opened his mouth, stunned by that number, then noted the sum quoted by Lafleur before smiling to Nancy.

"Well, I believe that your credit will be solid indeed, Lady Jeanne. How much of this sum do you want to put in your new savings account?"

"Three million francs. What will be left after paying for my new residence will go in my regular account. The value of my emeralds will also go in my regular account, once evaluated of course."

"Our expert jeweler should be here soon, Lady Jeanne. In the meantime, let's seal this sales act, so that I could give you the keys to your new property."

The said jeweler showed up a few minutes after Nancy was handed the keys to the Hôtel de Brinvilliers by the director. The expert opened wide eyes at the sight of the big polished emeralds contained in Nancy's box.

"Colombian emeralds, and of top quality. At first sight, I would say that you have here about two million francs worth of emeralds in this box."

Setting up a precision weight scale, a magnifying lens and measuring calipers, the jeweler took about one hour to examine with care the emeralds while Nancy patiently sipped a coffee and conversed with the director. He finally raised his nose from the last emerald he had examined and smiled to Nancy.

"Lady Jeanne, you have here 266 top grade Colombian emeralds. I am offering you 2,677,000 francs for the lot. Your biggest emerald was worth by itself 43,000 francs and would be worthy of a queen. Do you want to sell them all and credit them to your accounts, or would you like to keep a few in order to have some jewels made for you?"

"I will credit them to my regular account, monsieur. I still have more gems and gold in my possession anyway. I will however take 50,000 francs out of that sum in cash: I will be needing to pay for extensive renovations to my new residence, plus will have to buy furniture for it."

The director swallowed hard on hearing the value of the emeralds: Jeanne d'Orléans had just become one of his richest customers. Making a few quick calculations, he adjusted the value of the two accounts in Jeanne's name, then went to get 50,000 francs in gold and silver coins for her, as French paper money was still a few years in the future. When everything was done, he got up from his chair and shook hands with Nancy.

"It was a true pleasure to welcome you as a customer, Lady Jeanne. Welcome to Paris!"

"Thank you, Monsieur de Pointcarré."

Nancy, accompanied by the director to the main entrance, then left the bank with her four escorts and her heavy bag of gold and silver. Pointcarré shook slowly his head while watching her leave.

“So young, yet so rich. She would make a hell of a marriage prospect. All the gigolos in Paris will be after her.”

After her visit to the bank, Nancy then returned to the Marais District, where she roamed the streets while passing the word that she was looking for workers and maids in order to renovate and clean her new residence. With the widespread unemployment that was devastating the French economy of the time, she quickly found herself with more hands than she really needed. However, in line with the charitable vocation of her mission, she hired nearly everyone that showed up at the Hôtel de Brinvilliers in the afternoon, offering them wages that were quite inflated for this period.

The 63 men and women whom she ended hiring and who showed up on Wednesday morning were promptly split into small work groups and then dispersed around the large town house by Nancy, who also distributed tools and equipment bought the previous day. Nancy then directed and supervised them, but always showed them politeness and consideration during the three days that the renovation work went on. She used those days as well to talk individually with her workers, evaluating their competences and their character and learning to know them, while physically helping them in their work from time to time. On Saturday afternoon, after thanking and paying her workers before sending them home, Nancy kept with her six women and four men, assembling them as a group in the courtyard. She scanned in turn their faces before speaking in a friendly tone.

“My friends, it is obvious that I will need a domestic staff to keep such a large residence running. During the last three days, I was able to see the quality of your work and your degree of initiative, which made you stand out from the other workers. I am ready to offer you permanent positions as my employees, at the same daily salary that I gave during the renovation work, meaning three francs per day, plus food, lodging, work clothes and medical care. What do you say to that?”

“Lady Jeanne,” said Leila Benchetrit, a young Algerian woman, “working for you would make me very happy. What position are you offering me?”

"That of assistant cook, under Charlotte Truffaut. Charlotte, would you in turn accept to work for me as my head cook?"

"With great pleasure, Lady Jeanne." answered the portly woman.

"Well, this brings me to a particular point. If you are to become my employees, then I will expect you all to simply call me Jeanne. I may be rich, but you are my equals in the eyes of God, like all other human beings. Understood?"

"Yes, Jeanne!" replied in concert her seven employees, making her nod her head in approbation.

"Excellent! Go home now and rest well, as we will be quite busy on Monday: we will have a lot to do to furnish and decorate this residence."

20:39 (Paris Time)

Friday, July 16, 1847

Quai des Célestins, Right Shore of the Seine River

Paris

Nancy, returning to her residence after a visit to the Left Shore, suddenly saw in the growing darkness a small group of men surrounding a lone silhouette crouched against a stone wall near the shore of the Seine. Turning her left ear towards the group, she listened up via the directional microphone implanted in her ear, hearing men's voices that seemed to mock the one crouched down. Not sure of what was happening, Nancy nonetheless decided to go see what was going on: this part of the Right Shore had a rather bad reputation. As she was approaching at a quick walk, she started to hear the voice of a girl or young woman. She thus accelerated further her pace as the girl's voice took a begging tone. Nancy arrived at the top of the stone stairs leading down to the shoreline's sidewalk as one of the men brutally forced the girl to get up.

"Are you going to finally obey me, or will I have to teach you a lesson?"

"LEAVE HER ALONE, NOW!"

Nancy's shout surprised the three men, who turned around to face her. The man who had grabbed the girl, a stocky man wearing a beard and dressed in rough clothes, laughed on seeing Nancy, who was now quickly climbing down the stairs towards him.

"Look at that, guys: a second girl to entertain us tonight."

"And a well to do girl on top of that." Added one of the two other men, who wore a sailor's outfit. "Her purse must be quite fat."

Nancy did not reply to that, having just decided what she would do. As the man in the sailor's outfit stepped forward to grab her by one arm, she quickly pivoted on one heel, delivering a swept high kick. Hit on the left temple, the sailor was projected sideways and fell on the pavement, knocked out cold. His nearest companion, frozen by surprise, then got a fist in the plexus that made him crumble to his knees, his breath taken out. Seeing that, the man that had brutalized the girl took a knife out of his belt and gave a murderous look to Nancy.

"You are going to regret not having minded your own business, bitch!"

Nancy waited for him to step forward to strike her, then grabbed his right wrist with her left hand, twisting and crushing it and making the man scream with pain as her grip broke his wrist bones.

"This is the last time that you will abuse a girl, you bastard!" spat Nancy. Grabbing the man by the throat with her right hand, she crushed his air pipe with a mighty grip, then pushed him with all of her supernatural strength. The man was sent flying in the air, to then splash in the dirty waters of the Seine, disappearing head first under the surface. His inert body came back to the surface after a minute, to float down the current. In the meantime, Nancy turned around to face the girl, who had watched the fight with incredulity.

"Follow me, quickly!"

The girl, an oriental teenager wearing a dirty, tattered dress, followed her without discussion, probably too happy to be out of trouble. She spoke only after she and Nancy had climbed back the stairs and had walked past one city block. Her French was good but had a distinct Chinese accent.

"Thank you! Thank you so much, whoever you are."

Nancy then surprised the girl for a second time by answering her in perfect Cantonese.

"Think nothing of it. My name is Jeanne d'Orléans. What is your name?"

"My name is Mai, Li Mai. You speak Cantonese?"

"As well as Mandarin Chinese and many other languages. You are not wounded, I hope?"

"No! He didn't have time to become truly violent."

"And what were you doing at such a place and time, Mai?"

The young Chinese lowered her head, apparently feeling shameful.

"I live along the Seine, miss: I am homeless and penniless since the death of my husband and survive on charity."

Nancy eyed quickly the thin body of the girl, who effectively looked malnourished.

"You will be able to tell me your story once in my home, in front of a good meal, Mai. My house is not too far now."

The two teenagers arrived a few minutes later at the Hôtel de Brinvilliers, whose windows were lit from the inside by oil lamps. Nancy used her key to open the pedestrian's door that was part of the carriage gates, relocking it behind her and Mai before leading Mai inside, to the kitchen. The cook, Charlotte Truffaut, looked at Mai with a mix of surprise and pity.

"My god, Jeanne, where did you find that poor girl?"

"On the shores of the Seine and about to be abused by three men. She is homeless and needs to eat something."

"I will get some bread and cheese at once."

"Boil as well some water to make tea and fill a hot bath, Charlotte."

As the cook got busy, Nancy gently made Mai sit down at the large kitchen table, bought in the last few days, like the rest of the furniture in the residence.

"You are now safe, Mai: you are with friends here. So, tell me your story...from the start."

The Chinese teenager lowered her head as painful souvenirs came back to her.

"There is not much to say, miss. I was born in Canton, in China, and I am fifteen years old. I became an orphan at the age of seven and was then picked up by French missionaries, who cared for me and educated me. A French officer serving with the French delegation in Canton then noticed me a year ago and married me just before returning to France, bringing me with him. Unfortunately, Bertrand died from cholera just after arriving in France and his family then refused to accept me, taking away my marriage certificate and burning it. They even stole the pension I had the right to as the widow of a French officer. I then had no choice since but to live in the streets."

Nancy, moved by her story, put her right hand on top of Mai's left hand.

"You now have a home, Mai: my residence. Know that I am as well a young widow and that I recently arrived from the Caribbean, where my husband died from a tropical fever."

"You...you are too good, miss." said Mai, bordering on tears. Nancy shook her head slowly at that.

"No, I am simply humane, Mai. Now, if you want to live and work in my home, you will have to obey the main rule here: call me simply Jeanne."

"Okay, Jeanne. What kind of work do you have in mind for me?"

"We will see about that later, Mai. For the moment, eat. Afterwards, you will take a good hot bath, so that your beauty could come out from under all that dirt."

Nancy then left Mai alone at the table as Charlotte put a plate with bread, butter and cheese in front of the Chinese teenager. Mai thanked Charlotte and started eating at once while thinking how lucky she had been to meet Jeanne.

Jeanne returned in the kitchen twenty minutes later, as Mai was sipping with delight a cup of green tea.

"So, feeling better now, Mai?"

"A lot better, Jeanne. Thank you again for everything."

"Bah, that's nothing! Once you will have finished your cup of tea, I will bring you to the master bathroom."

Nancy then went to check the temperature of the water heating up in a big iron pot resting on top of the kitchen's stove. Satisfied, she filled two buckets with hot water and, grabbing them effortlessly, climbed the steep stairs leading from the kitchen to the upper floor. Mai, like Charlotte, watched her go with her heavy load, mystified.

"My god! Jeanne is really incredibly strong. First, she gets rid of the three men bent on abusing me, then this."

"I must say that she is making many people talk about her." said the cook as she picked up the now empty plate and cup in front of Mai. "Apart from being very strong, she is highly educated and speaks many languages. What is most important, however, is that she is kind and generous."

"Too true."

Nancy's voice came from the top of the stairs a moment later.

"MAI, GET YOUR CUTE ASS UP HERE!"

"Did I say as well that she can be very informal at times?" said with a smile Charlotte as Mai got up from the table. The latter giggled at that and hurried up the stairs, finding Nancy waiting for her on the upper floor.

"Follow me, Mai. We are going to my private master bathroom."

Passing through the grand staircase well, Nancy led Mai down the corridor leading to the east wing, to enter her large master bedroom, which she had recently furnished with Louis XIV style furniture. There, she pushed open a door giving on a bathroom with a marble floor and a tile-covered tub. Nancy pointed to Mai the bathtub, now half full with hot water.

“Take off your clothes and soak in, Mai. I will wash your hair while you soap up.” Mai’s modesty made her hesitate for a moment before she obeyed and shed her dirty dress, then her underwear. Nancy eyed with sorrow her thin body, with the ribs visible.

“Nobody should live through such misery. I promise you that you will not be lacking anything here, Mai. Now, step in and sit down.”

Mai stepped in the bathtub and let herself sink down to her chin with delight in the hot water. As she rubbed a bar of soap on her body, Nancy poured water on her head and started washing thoroughly her hair, checking at the same time for the presence of vermin.

“You don’t have any fleas or lice, thank God! Were you forced to bed men before tonight? Answer me frankly: I only want to evaluate your overall health.”

“No!” answered Mai truthfully. “I did everything to avoid surviving by such means, but the thug that you killed had in mind to force me to prostitute myself for his profit. I owe you my honor, on top of my life, Jeanne.”

“Think nothing of it, Mai. I would have done the same for anyone. Let’s talk about your employment here. I would like to use you as my personal assistant and receptionist. You would greet my guests, would serve them and also do some shopping for me. I am offering you the same pay and benefits as for my other servants: three francs a day, plus lodging, food, working clothes and medical care.”

Mai looked with surprise at Nancy on hearing that.

“But...that’s a lot more than the normal wages. A servant can usually count herself lucky in Paris if she earns one franc a day.”

“Well, I don’t believe in exploiting my employees, contrary to too many nobles and big bourgeois. I also have the financial means to pay good salaries. Tomorrow, we will go shopping together to buy you a decent wardrobe, along with furniture to furnish your room, which is still empty. You will sleep in my bed tonight, unless you object to that.”

“Uh, not at all. You are too good, Jeanne.”

"Bof! My goal is to create a charitable foundation here in Paris. I might as well start by being generous now."

The next morning, Nancy gave a detailed tour of her residence to Mai, showing her in particular the room in the attic level that was going to be hers, which faced the Charles-V Street and had two dormer windows. Mai didn't miss the fact that her room had been up to quite recently two separate rooms, the adjoining wall having been ripped away to create a single room measuring eight by three meters. She found out at the same occasion that the other domestics that lived in the residence occupied similar rooms, much more spacious than what was considered the norm for servants. There was even a large, comfortably furnished lounge reserved for the employees. What however surprised the most Mai was the small steam-powered pump that now occupied the old gardener's hut, situated in a back corner of the courtyard. Workers were busy welding in place copper pipes that linked the hut and the residence to a water tower that was still under construction. Other workers were installing on the roofs a number of shallow basins made of tin, which were connected to the water tower by pipes.

"What is all this, Jeanne?"

"Progress!" replied Nancy, smiling proudly. "Once all this is completed, this water tower and those water collecting basins will provide by gravity clean water to the residence. My maids won't have to carry anymore buckets full of water up and down stairs, or to pump water from a well. This steam engine will in turn pump water up into the water tower in periods of droughts, on top of heating a hot water tank. That hot water will then circulate through the residence via copper pipes equipped with faucets. I am planning soon to go to England, in order to open a bank account there. That will give me the opportunity to go hire a British sanitary engineer, so that he could come install flush toilets in my residence. My house may not be the biggest or most luxurious in Paris, but I will make it the most comfortable."

"And who thought about all this, Jeanne? You hired an engineer for this work?"

"No! I took care of the plans and calculations myself."

Mai didn't ask her where she got such knowledge, instead adding this to the growing list of the surprising abilities of Jeanne.

Once the visit was completed, Nancy went out with Mai to go shopping in the small carriage pulled by Pegasus, her personal horse. To the surprise and profound

emotion of Mai, Nancy stopped her carriage in front of a boutique that specialized in oriental imports. Tears came down on her cheeks when she saw the various pieces of furniture, decorations and silk clothes that had come from her native country. Nancy then spent without a second thought a small fortune to buy for Mai a complete set of lacquered wood furniture for her room, plus a few Chinese art objects and multiple rolls of embroidered silk. Mai couldn't stop herself from openly crying as she looked at herself in a mirror while wearing a splendid Chinese silk dress bought for her by Nancy.

“Thank you, thank you for everything, Jeanne.”

In response, Nancy gently put one hand on her shoulder as she still cried.

“Mai, consider me as a friend, and not as your employer.”



Barricades in the streets of Paris, June Revolution of 1848.

CHAPTER 3 – MONARCHY, REPUBLIC AND EMPIRE

11:08 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, February 23, 1848

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Charles-V Street

District of Le Marais, Paris

France

“MADAM! MADAM! THE NATIONAL GUARD HAS JOINED THE BARRICADES IN MONTMARTRE!”

Jeanne, who was reading the morning newspaper, raised her nose as Leila Benchetrit, her assistant-cook, appeared in the doorway of her private office on the upper floor of her residence. Leila, who had gone to buy fresh bread, entered the office on a sign from Jeanne.

“Where did you hear this, Leila?”

“At the market, madam. Spirits are becoming hot in town and some are talking of going to the Prime Minister’s residence to demonstrate.”

Jeanne/Nancy ‘B’, who already knew in detail what was to come, put down her newspaper and got up from her sofa, her expression somber.

“Tell the other employees that I want to see all of them in the ballroom: I will speak to them.”

“Right away, madam.”

As the Algerian woman walked away quickly, Jeanne pondered the present situation. France was about to live through a revolution that would not only mark the end of the reign of King Louis-Philippe The First and of his so-called ‘July Monarchy’, but would also inflame revolutionary passions across the whole of Europe in the weeks and months to come. While he had tried to reign with moderation, King Louis-Philippe was afflicted with a most unpopular prime minister, Guizot, who was totally opposed to any reform to the unjust current electoral system, on top of showing himself incapable of dealing with the grave economic crisis France was living through, with the poorer citizens suffering the most from the said crisis. The months to come were going to be politically and socially unstable and she was going to have to act cautiously in order not to put at risk her mission, which was to create and make prosper her future charity foundation, on which the welfare of so many people would eventually depend. To intervene herself politically in the various crisis to come, unless to bet on a winning horse, would only put her fortune and maybe even her own freedom at risk.

When she entered the huge, eleven by ten meter ballroom of the upper floor, she found assembled the six women and four men that made up her domestic staff. She first looked around at the anxious expressions of her employees, which she had personally selected with care for their honesty, intelligence and human decency.

“My friends, the next few days could become quite agitated and the streets of Paris will be dangerous, especially now that the army is occupying the streets and that the National Guard seems ready to face it in favor of those asking for reforms. I will thus ask you to stay inside the residence and not to go out until further notice, and this for your own safety. I am ready to offer safe lodging and food to your immediate families, for those of you who are married and have children. However, please hurry and come

back before darkness if you want to go get your families. Act quickly but cautiously. Go!"

Her employees dispersed at once, with the exception of Li Mai, her personal assistant, who stood there, unsure what to do. Jeanne walked to her and gave her a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry, Mai: everything will be fine."

"But, what will we do if rioters, or even soldiers, come and attack the residence, Jeanne?"

"We will not give them any pretexts to attack us, Mai."

"But, you are a d'Orléans, Jeanne. Some may be hostile to you just because of your apparent family link with the King."

Jeanne nodded her head slowly at those words. Mai, on top of being a sensitive and likeable teenager, had also proved many times that she was an intelligent girl.

"I will deal with that whenever the problem will show up, Mai. In the meantime, let's go prepare our spare rooms for the families of our people."

The four employees who were married and had children came back to her townhouse just before noon with their loved ones and a few suitcases as the popular agitation increased along the city's streets. Jeanne received them with a warm smile, showing particular affection to the sixteen children, whose age varied from nine months to fourteen years.

"Come, my children! I have prepared a large common room for the boys and another one for the girls. Aisha, Nadine, you are the two oldest of the lot. You will thus sleep in the guest bedroom, which is empty at the moment."

The thirteen year-old Algerian and the fourteen year-old Haitian thanked her before being guided to their room by Mai, each carrying a bag containing a few spare clothes. Jeanne took care herself of installing the other children, as well as the four spouses of her employees. Once everyone had been accommodated, Jeanne locked herself up in her private office and, taking out a key she always wore on herself, opened a large, solid oak cabinet, revealing her personal arsenal. Taking out of the cabinet two Colt-Paterson Model 1839 caliber .52 revolving carbines and two Colt DRAGOON caliber .44 revolvers, plus gunpowder, bullets and loading accessories, she took fifteen minutes to carefully load the four weapons. Those would give her a total of 26 ready-to-fire shots, a nearly unthinkable amount of firepower for the time period, all with perfectly contemporary

weapons. Then hiding in various places her loaded weapons, Jeanne next went to the dining room, where she ate lunch with her assembled employees and their families.

The afternoon and early evening were tense, with seditious shouts being heard at intervals from the street and with mixed groups of workers, students and small merchants starting to patrol the streets, armed with improvised weapons and a few rare firearms. Thankfully for Jeanne, nobody seemed to pay particular attention to her residence then. She probably owed that to the fact that she was well known in this district for her generosity and for her respect for the lower social classes, a respect that was most atypical of other French aristocrats. However, at around ten at night, a short but intense firefight could be heard from the direction of the district of Des Capucines. Less than half a hour later, rioters started running up and down the streets, shouting out indignant cries.

“THE SOLDIERS OF THE KING FIRED ON THE PEOPLE AND KILLED 52 MARTYRS! DOWN WITH GUIZOT!”

Those outraged cries rekindled at once the revolutionary fervor, which had quieted down somewhat during the evening. Jeanne, imitated by the other adults in her residence, watched from the upper floor windows of her townhouse as a small crowd of rioters started building a barricade at the corner of their street, while the bells of churches rang all across Paris.

“My god! This is going to end in a bloodbath.” said Rosette Sans-Soucis, Jeanne’s Haitian maid. Jeanne gave her a sober look.

“I truly hope that it won’t happen, Rosette. While Prime Minister Guizot has no consideration for the lower classes, King Louis-Philippe is not the kind of man ready to stay in power through massacres.”

Jeanne, who had discreetly sent robotic spy probes to various strategic points of Paris to film those historical events for the benefit of the Time Patrol, also filmed the scenes down her street with the help of a pair of micro-cameras hidden in her earrings. She was thus able to film the passage of a funeral procession that passed under her windows around one o’clock in the morning. A huge crowd carrying lit lanterns escorted a cart full of dead people covered with blood. From the clothes worn by the dead, who were mostly men, it was evident that the bodies were those of people of modest condition, something that made Pierre Brunelle, Jeanne’s gardener and handyman, grind his teeth.

"The bastards! To shoot at the people like this. I hope that this Guizot bastard will pay for that."

"I believe that his position of power will not survive long after this, Pierre. The King will have no choice now but to disassociate himself from him. Let's go to bed: tomorrow may be a long day."

The day of February 24 in fact proved to be full of news that brought joy to Jeanne's employees and to the insurgents of Paris. With his palace besieged by a huge crowd of rioters, and not wanting to be responsible for another massacre, King Louis-Philippe officially fired his hated prime minister and abdicated before fleeing his palace under a disguise, on his way to exile in England. The King's daughter, the Duchess of Orléans, whom he had named as regent for the benefit of his nine year-old grandson, then went to the Palais-Bourbon, the seat of the National Assembly, to proclaim her regency and thus save the monarchy. However, the republican representatives were not ready to play her game and colluded with the rioters to let the crowd invade the Palais-Bourbon. It was not supper time yet when the news of the proclamation of a provisional republican government circulated around Paris.

Jeanne greeted that news with an obvious satisfaction that surprised her employees. As she was opening a bottle of Champagne to celebrate the republican victory with them and their families, the young Michel d'Angelo, her stable boy, hesitantly asked her what all the others were secretly wondering about.

"You are really happy to see the monarchy fall, madam? But, you are a d'Orléans."

Jeanne answered him with a big smile as she made the bottle cork pop out.

"I was born a Brissac, not a d'Orléans, Michel. Furthermore, I believe in democratic values. The people IS France, whatever the aristocrats and big bourgeois may think. Come on, let's drink together for the people and for France!"

"FOR THE PEOPLE AND FRANCE!" Shouted in unison the men and women while raising their glasses of Champagne.

The weeks to follow were turbulent ones, as much in the rest of Europe as in France. Popular insurrections and riots shook in succession Vienna, Venice, Berlin, Milan, Munich and Prague, while the provisional French government publicly proclaimed

the abolition of the death penalty and of slavery, the creation of national workshops in order to combat the widespread unemployment and the adoption of universal male suffrage. Jeanne didn't waste her time during those weeks. Operating anonymously through a Paris stockbroker and using the troubled political situation across France and Europe, she speculated actively on the stock markets while using her historical knowledge from the future, buying stocks from companies which were going through temporary lows and were being dumped by panicked owners. On top of the Paris stock market, she also speculated on the London stock market, not wanting to put all of her precious eggs in the same basket. By May 4, the day of the official proclamation of the Second Republic in France, created after the national elections held on April 23, her initial fortune had ballooned to nearly thirty million francs², split nearly evenly between her accounts at the Bank of France and at the Midlands Bank of London. The proclamation of the Second Republic did not stop her financial speculations, but Jeanne did slow down her stock market activities in prediction of other important events due in June. Those events were preceded on May 15 by a big popular demonstration meant to support the Polish insurgents fighting to throw off the hold of Imperial Russia's on their country. The French National Assembly, composed in majority of right-wing conservatives and hidden monarchists, then imposed its views on the more socialist Executive Committee, which supposedly governed France but was in reality too weak to oppose the National Assembly. Many moderate republican officials were then replaced or even accused and imprisoned following the failed demonstration of May 15. The repercussions of this turn to the right by the government did not take long to make themselves felt around Jeanne.

10:18 (Paris Time)

Thursday, June 22, 1848

Hôtel de Brinvilliers

12 Charles-V Street, district of Le Marais

Paris

² In 1848, thirty million French francs was worth roughly 1.2 million British sterling pounds of the time, or six million American dollars of 1848.

Jeanne, who was starting to be worried about Mai and her two missing maids, was partly relieved on seeing through the window of her private study her young Chinese personal assistant come back at a quick pace and enter through the carriage gate. Leila Benchetrit and Rosette Sans-Soucis were however still missing. Going quickly down the grand staircase of her residence, Jeanne met Mai as she was about to go up the stairs.

“Do you have news about Leila and Rosette, Mai?”

“Yes, Jeanne! Unfortunately, they are not good. Their husbands, who were officially working at the national workshops closed yesterday by the government, will now have to leave for the provinces, like all the other unemployed men over the age of 25. Leila and Rosette are desperate and don’t know what to do anymore. They are asking for your help concerning their husbands.”

“And they will have it!” Replied firmly Jeanne. “Let’s take my personal cart to go see them.”

Going out in the inner courtyard of the townhouse and walking to the stables, Jeanne gave an urgent order to Michel d’Angelo, who was cleaning the stalls of Jeanne’s three horses.

“MICHEL, HOOK QUICKLY PEGASUS TO MY PERSONAL CART: I HAVE TO GO OUT AT ONCE.”

“RIGHT AWAY, MADAM!”

Not staying inactive herself, Jeanne helped Michel by pushing out of its garage the small four-wheeled cart that she used for her informal trips in and around Paris. Six minutes later she was rolling out with Mai, turning on Saint-Paul Street and driving towards Saint-Antoine Street as fast as she could without risking to hit the numerous pedestrians following the narrow streets. Jeanne soon arrived at an old and decrepit apartment building where Rosette Sans-Soucis and her family were living. Telling Mai to stay in the cart, Jeanne ran up the narrow, dirty stairs of the building, finally knocking on a door of the second floor.

“ROSETTE, IT’S ME, JEANNE. OPEN UP!”

The worried face of her Haitian maid appeared a few seconds later as she opened her door.

“Thank you from the bottom of my heart for coming, madam. To be frank, I don’t know what to do right now.”

Jeanne gave a quick look at Thomas, Rosette's husband, who was sitting in a corner on a rickety chair and who was holding his head in despair.

"What is happening exactly, Rosette?"

"It's that damn governmental decree, madam." exclaimed Rosette on an indignant tone. "Not content with closing the national workshops and thus throwing my husband and tens of thousands of other workers back into unemployment, the government has ordered that all the unemployed men over the age of 25 are to move to worksites in various provinces. If my husband Thomas obey that edict, I will be separated from him, maybe for good."

"Has he received an official notice about that?"

"Not directly, madam, but the decree published in the newspapers orders the unemployed to show up tomorrow morning at their old workshops, from which chariots will carry them to provincial worksites. The youngest ones will be brought to army barracks to be enrolled there. Can you help us, madam?"

Rosette's pleading tone moved Jeanne, who already knew how much misery and even blood that closure of the national workshops would bring. She however had an idea in mind that could save Thomas. She thus looked at the dejected black man and spoke gently to him.

"Thomas, when did you show up for the last time at your workshop?"

"The day before yesterday, madam." answered Thomas in his Creole-accented French.

"Thus on the twentieth, one day before the publication of the decree announcing the closure of the national workshops. Excellent! Thomas, you will say to anyone asking you that you were hired by me on a permanent basis on the evening of the twentieth, and that you are thus not touched by the decree. As a precaution, I will ask you to come lodge with your whole family in my residence, until I can make all this official. By the way, you will really work for me, at my standard daily salary of three francs per day."

"You...you would do this for me, madam?" asked Thomas, not believing his luck.

"I would do it for any decent person in need, Thomas. Rosette, pack quickly a suitcase for your husband: he will leave with me. Then, start packing more bags for the rest of your family, so that I can pick you up in a couple of hours and bring you to my residence for a few days: I anticipate that some difficult days are coming."

"Thank you, Jeanne! Thank you for everything! You are too good." said Rosette, tears in her eyes, prompting Jeanne in going to her to hug her.

"Nobody can be too good, Rosette: you can only be too mean."

Ten minutes later, and with Thomas in the back of her cart with an old suitcase, Jeanne took the reins and drove off, this time in the direction of the home of the Benchetrit. There, she found the same situation as that with the Sans-Soucis and applied the same solution, retroactively hiring permanently Omar Benchetrit and telling Leila to start packing her family things. With both Thomas and Omar in the back of her cart, Jeanne then went to see a notary that she knew well and who had socialist views, asking him to produce hiring contracts with retroactive dates for Omar and Thomas. A discreet bonus of 500 francs helped erase the few professional scruples of the notary, who signed the contracts as a witness. On her return trip, Jeanne briefly stopped at the homes of the two men, to start hauling their families' bags to her residence. Two more return trips were needed to pick up their wives and children and the rest of their limited belongings, with Luc Rémillard accompanying Jeanne's cart in her heavy haul chariot. By the time that the families of all her employees were safely installed in her residence, the popular agitation had grown to alarming levels.

Supper that night was a somber affair, with all realizing how difficult the next few days could become. Jeanne did her best to calm the nerves of her employees and of their families by singing and playing the piano and the guitar for them. She hid her own anxiety, knowing thanks to historical hindsight how bloody the next few days were going to be in Paris. Helping in late evening the mothers to put their children to bed for the night, Jeanne thought on looking at the sixteen boys and girls that simply doing this made all her efforts expended in this mission worthy. The smiles of gratitude from her employees, which had nothing to do with simple servility, also warmed her heart. Satisfied with herself, Jeanne/Nancy went to take a good hot bath and then slipped in her bed, falling asleep quickly.

The first shots, coming from the poor districts on the Left Shore, echoed around ten o'clock the next morning. Those isolated shots quickly became heavy exchanges of gunfire as the workers of Paris built barricades all across the city and as the army went on to brutally dismantle them and disperse the rioters. Contrary to the February

Revolution, the government did not bow to the rioters and the National Guard stayed on the government's side. By the evening of June 23, Paris had turned into a battlefield. The next day, June 24, proved even worse, prompting Jeanne in keeping her guests far from the façade's windows during the day, fearing lost bullets. On the morning of June 25, the fighting closed in on her district. Jeanne was able to film in that afternoon the brief firefight that opposed a full company of infantry to a group of rioters holding a barricade erected at the corner of Charles-V and Saint-Paul Streets. The rioters, poorly armed, still caused a few casualties to the soldiers before dispersing in disorder. Jeanne ground her teeth together but kept filming discreetly as soldiers rounded up with much use of rifle butt strokes a dozen disarmed rioters and made them stand against a wall before summarily executing them. She suddenly became alarmed when about fifty soldiers started coming slowly down her street, bayonets fixed, while knocking on doors and then entering houses to search them. A poor man who made the mistake of protesting too vigorously the searching of his house was simply shot on his doorstep.

Taking a quick decision, Jeanne left the window and walked out of her private study to make a quick tour of her residence, ordering her staff and their families to assemble in the ballroom and to stay there. She then took with her Luc Rémillard and, after making sure he had no weapons on him, went down with him in the tunnel formed by the carriage gate of her residence. Once in front of the solidly locked double doors of the gate, she looked gravely at the ex-legionnaire, a tough, solid man of 32 who had left the Foreign Legion because of a wound to his left arm.

"Listen to me carefully, Luc, and don't protest. At my signal, you will unlock the pedestrian door and will let me go out, then will immediately close and lock back the door. You will open it again when I will give three widely spaced knocks. If soldiers then follow me inside, do not oppose any resistance and do not object to their presence. The lives of all of our people here are at risk."

Rémillard in turn looked at her with worry. Jeanne was presently wearing a splendid aristocrat's dress, plus a set of jewels that was worth a fortune.

"But, you risk being killed by going out like this, madam."

"I am the least at risk here, Luc. Trust me: I know what I am doing."

Then getting close to the pedestrian door embedded into the left carriage door of the gate, she listened for a moment before signaling Rémillard.

"Now, Luc!"

While mortally worried for her, the man obeyed her and quickly pulled the three heavy bolts locking the thick wooden pedestrian door, then pulled the door opened to let Jeanne pass. She quickly stepped outside in the street, letting her coach driver and security guard close and lock the door behind her. A group of soldier walking down the street towards her residence and being less than fifteen paces from Jeanne raised their muskets at once on seeing her.

“DON’T MOVE! HANDS IN THE AIR!”

Her heart beating furiously and hoping to hell that the soldiers would not simply shoot her without questions, Jeanne slowly raised her hands up in the air while speaking in a firm voice.

“I am Lady Jeanne d’Orléans. I want to speak with your commanding officer.”

The soldiers looked at each other in indecision, with one of them finally talking to his NCO.

“Shit, she’s an aristocrat! What do we do, Sergeant?”

“Uh, I think that we better let the lieutenant decide. LIEUTENANT!”

A young officer whose saber was stained with blood approached at a quick step on hearing the call.

“What is it, Sergeant? Who is this woman?”

“She says that she is an aristocrat, Lieutenant. She came out of that carriage door.”

“This is my residence, Lieutenant.” offered Jeanne, then taking a chance. “I am Lady Jeanne d’Orléans and I came out to ask your soldiers to show restraint if they have to search my residence. I can assure you that I am alone with my servants and their families and that you will find no rioters inside.”

The lieutenant approached Jeanne and examined her visually from head to toe, noting her rich dress and jewels. Impressed by her appearance and beauty, he finally bowed politely to her.

“Searching your residence will not be necessary, Lady Jeanne. You may now return inside. Have a good evening, madam.”

“Thank you and good evening to you too, Lieutenant.”

Going back to the carriage gate, Jeanne knocked three times on the pedestrian door, slipping inside as soon as Rémillard opened it. She sighed with relief as the man pushed back in place the heavy bolts of the door.

“Ooof! That was tense! Thankfully, that young lieutenant proved to be polite...and reasonable.”

Rémillard looked at her with something approaching adoration.

“Madam, your bravery would be worthy of a legionnaire.”

“Bof! Some would call this simply a typical display of aristocratic arrogance.”

Replied Jeanne, smiling.

The end of the insurrection that would be known in the future as ‘The days of June’ was marked the next day, June 26, by the fall of the last barricades in the suburbs of Saint-Antoine, which bordered the district of Le Marais, where Jeanne lived. Despite the end of the fighting, Jeanne insisted that her employees and their families stay inside her residence for another few days, alluding to the forcible searches and police sweeps that would probably follow. The next days proved her right and brought many bitter news to the poorer people of Paris. A number of newspapers considered to be left-leaning were closed by the government and the rights of assembly were severely curtailed. To the 4,000 civilians killed during the insurrection had to be added 1,500 other persons summarily shot without trial, while 25,000 more people were arrested in the days and weeks to follow. Of those 25,000 persons arrested, 11,000 were eventually condemned to long prison terms or were deported to Algeria. On the side of the government forces, the losses amounted to 1,600 killed. All this brought a harsh turn to the right by the government, which was already too right-leaning to the taste of the Parisian workers. Feeling like a vulture for profiting financially from such a tragedy, Jeanne kept to her mission profile and bought at bargain prices millions of francs worth of shares at the Paris stock market, knowing that the societies whose shares she was buying and that had brutally dropped in value due to the insurrection would eventually regain their true value. As a consequence, her personal fortune ballooned again, to reach a total of over 49 million francs by August of 1848. That in turn provided her with a steady annual revenue from interests and dividends of over two million francs. Jeanne was now in a good financial position to create her charitable foundation.

16:55 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, September 20, 1848

Charles-V Street, district of Le Marais

Paris

As their carriage turned into the Charles-V Street, Alexandre Dumas The Younger looked quickly outside through the window of his door to examine the façades along the short, narrow street. He then looked at his father, sitting to his right, asking him a question with a slight smile on his lips.

“Do you know well that Lady Jeanne d’Orléans, Father?”

Alexandre Dumas The Elder, successful writer, author of such famous novels as ‘THE THREE MUSKETEERS’ and ‘THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO’ and an incorrigible skirt chaser, smiled at the insinuation in the question from his son.

“Not as well as I would like, which is unfortunate for me: she is a decidedly appetizing young woman. She invited me once already in the last months, in the company of other writers and artists. While very young, she is remarkably well educated and possess a sharp intelligence. She is rich, but lives rather modestly for her means and supports a number of charitable works.”

“She is thus a person I should like.” Said the third passenger of the carriage, a frail but pretty woman in her forties. Alexandre Dumas The Elder nodded his head and smiled to his ex-mistress, with which he was still in very good terms and which he was escorting to this evening reception.

“I believe so, my sweet Mélanie, even though Jeanne d’Orléans definitely has an adventurous side to her.”

“Oh? What do you mean, Father?” Asked his son, attracting a malicious smile on the face of the writer.

“You will soon see, Son.”

The carriage then slowed down, to stop in front of Number 12, Charles-V Street. Alexandre Dumas The Elder stepped out first and helped Mélanie Waldor come out before going to pay the driver of the rented carriage. As his son was also coming down, another carriage turned into the street and stopped behind their own carriage. Intrigued, Alexandre The Elder watched as a tall, well dressed young man came out of the newly arrived carriage, followed by a young woman wearing an elegant evening dress. As the two carriages were rolling away, the two groups found themselves together in front of the carriage gate of Number 12. Alexandre The Elder saluted the young couple with his top hat.

"Let me present myself: Alexandre Dumas The Elder. This is my son, Alexandre The Younger, and this is Miss Mélanie Waldor, a good friend of mine. I presume that you were also invited to this reception given by Lady Jeanne d'Orléans?"

"Effectively, Monsieur Dumas." replied the young man in a French with a strong American accent. "I am Doctor Thomas Evans, dentist, and this is my wife Agnes. Uh, you wouldn't happen by chance to be the famous writer Alexandre Dumas, author of 'THE THREE MUSKETEERS'?"

"In person!" replied proudly the writer. A pedestrian door then opened in one of the carriage doors, pulled from the inside by a man dressed in a valet uniform.

"If you may come in, ladies and gentlemen. Lady Jeanne is expecting you." The five guests entered at once by the pedestrian door, then were guided to an entrance door on the left side of the tunnel leading to the inner courtyard. To the surprise of the guests, a young and beautiful oriental teenager wearing a magnificent Chinese embroidered silk dress greeted them with a deep bow inside a wide vestibule.

"If you may follow me to the lounge, Lady Jeanne is waiting for you there with the guests that have already arrived."

As Alexandre The Younger climbed the stairs of the grand staircase behind the Chinese girl, he bent sideways to whisper to his father.

"She is really cute, that young Chinese."

"She certainly can make a man get an appetite, Son. She is the personal servant of Lady Jeanne, who can speak Chinese, by the way."

Alexandre The Younger opened his eyes wide, not a little impressed.

"Really? The people who can do so in Paris are rare indeed."

"And it's not her sole talent, I assure you."

Having climbed to the upper level, the group passed a double door and entered a very comfortably furnished lounge that featured a large fireplace and two tall windows giving a view of the inner courtyard of the townhouse. The lounge was furnished in First Empire style and measured about seven meters by five meters. Thomas and Agnes Evans fixed at once with curiosity the tall young woman, nearly a teenager, who then got up from one of the sofas. She was as tall as Thomas and looked very athletic, with tanned skin and long silky black hair framing a pretty face with gleaming green eyes. Her floating, 1810 style dress, let her muscular shoulders uncovered and, while out of fashion, appeared very comfortable, contrary to the dress with crinoline cage that the

American woman was wearing and which was both heavy and cumbersome. Agnes Evans opened wide her eyes on seeing the fabulous set of jewels worn by the young woman, whispering to her husband in English.

“She is rich, no doubt about that.”

Jeanne went to them, while a man and a woman in their forties got up from their sofa.

“Welcome to my house, my friends. For those who don’t know me yet, I am Lady Jeanne d’Orléans. However, call me simply Jeanne. Already present are Monsieur Victor Hugo and the Baroness of Dudevant, better known under her pen name of George Sand.”

The newcomers presented themselves in turn, then sat in the sofas forming a rectangle in a corner of the lounge. A butler then showed up with a tray supporting cups of Champagne, while a black servant went around with a plate of appetizers. With all her guests now served, Jeanne smiled to Thomas and Agnes Evans, speaking in perfect English to them.

“Do you feel comfortable enough to converse in French, Mister and Misses Evans?”

“Be reassured, Lady Jeanne.” replied in good French Thomas. “Learning French as a second language is common in the good society of Philadelphia. We will manage.”

“Excellent! However, do not hesitate to ask if you need something translated in English. With all the cultural luminaries present here tonight, the conversation will be flying quite high, especially with a member of the French Academy present among us.” Victor Hugo smiled at that barb thrown at him.

“Do not worry, my dear Jeanne: I will not act like a literary critique tonight.”

“No?” replied with a malicious smile Alexandre Dumas The Elder. “Your Esmeralda³ would have loved to meet my dashing d’Artagnan.”

“As far as my Esmeralda is concerned, I believe that our hostess would have been perfect to play her role, Monsieur Dumas.”

Alexandre The Younger, who had been discreetly admiring a large painting hanging from a wall facing him, pointed the artwork with one index.

“Talking of our hostess, is this you in this nude portrait, Lady Jeanne?”

³ Esmeralda : Name of the main character in the famous novel ‘THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE-DAME’, written by Victor Hugo.

"It is me indeed." Recognized Jeanne, smiling, making Thomas Evans and Alexandre The Younger pay a detailed attention to the painting. "I asked the painter who did it, a disciple of the method of the famous master Mathieu Le Nain, to show me as I am in real life, and not according to the old beauty canons of the Renaissance masters. I never understood why men of earlier centuries preferred overweight women who were as white as cadavers."

"Because they were the signs that marked you as a rich aristocrat, Jeanne." replied Victor Hugo, attracting an unconvinced expression on the face of his hostess.

"Hum. Nobility and beauty, be they corporal or moral, are not the same in my mind. I always loved to live in the wide open spaces and to exercise physically. I don't think that I have anything to envy in all those livid fat women we see in museum portraits."

Agnes Evans had to give a discreet elbow in the ribs to her husband, who was admiring a bit too much to her taste the nude portrait of Jeanne d'Orléans. She then spoke to their hostess.

"Lady Jeanne, from the decoration of your residence, you seem to like old things..."

"Except in love." interrupted Jeanne with a smile, making her guests burst out in laughter. "I am sorry to have interrupted you like this, Agnes, but I couldn't resist. Yes, I do have a taste for history, which I study diligently. Take this residence, for example. I was lucky enough to be able to buy it a year ago. It was built in the early 17th Century and was the residence of the Marquess of Brinvilliers, who was executed in 1676 for poisoning a number of people. Unfortunately, her residence was then neglected along the years and I found it in a rather pitiful state, even though its structure was perfectly sound. Instead of having it renovated on the lines of a single style, I decided to furnish each main room to a different style and period. I also possess a varied historical wardrobe, as you can see tonight. I frankly find today's female fashion both horrible and uncomfortable, especially these crinoline cages and corsets. You should try once an antique Greek dress: it is very comfortable and also quite elegant. But enough about history: let's talk a bit about the present. Mister Evans, how is your dental practice doing in Paris?"

"Fairly well I must say, Jeanne." replied Thomas. "We arrived in Paris last November and, while my appointments agenda is still not full, I have enough customers already to be able to live comfortably."

"So, you would still have some place left in your agenda for new customers?"

"Are you in need of dental care, Jeanne?"

Jeanne smiled widely, showing perfect teeth.

"Me, no! I was looking for a dentist using the latest techniques and who would be ready to examine and treat the young occupants of a Paris orphanage that I am helping financially. Doctor Brewster, whom I contacted at first, was already too busy but he gave me your name and address. I am of course ready to pay for your services in full if you accept to care for these orphans."

Thomas nodded his head at that: he now understood why he had received an invitation from a perfect stranger.

"To help your orphans this way would please me most, Jeanne. You can count on my services."

"Thank you very much, Thomas. We could further discuss this in detail later tonight, if you wish so."

Jeanne then looked at Alexandre Dumas The Elder.

"My dear Alexandre, when could we hope to see the last parts of your last novel, 'THE VISCOUNT OF BRAGELONNE'?"

The writer smiled with pride as the other guests listened on intently, apparently all interested by his answer.

"Well, the second part, titled 'LOUISE DE LA VALLIÈRE', should be published next month. As for the third part, 'THE MAN WITH THE IRON MASK', I should be able to finish it in about a year."

"Decidedly, you make us endure a cruel wait, my friend."

Agnes Evans then had a question for the writer.

"Monsieur Dumas, I loved your novel 'THE THREE MUSKETEERS', but I have a question about one of the characters in your novel, Milady de Winter. Is her character based on a person who really existed in the 17th Century?"

"Aaah, the beautiful and sinister Milady de Winter." said Dumas in a thoughtful tone. "In truth, I sketched that character along fictitious lines when I wrote my novel. However, one of my historical research assistants has since found a few obscure references in the archives on King Louis XIV concerning a mysterious Marquise de Saint-Laurent, who seemed to have been some sort of secret agent for Cardinal Mazarin. According to some, the Cardinal called her 'Milady' and there are also allusions that she had been marked with a red hot iron, like my Milady. Curiously, other

vague notations pretended that this Marquise de Saint-Laurent was a lover of d'Artagnan and even of King Louis XIV. The historical information on that woman are very limited and fragmentary, but I now think that the character of 'Milady' in my novel had after all some historical roots. That Marquise de Saint-Laurent must have been a fascinating woman."

Jeanne, who had tensed up on hearing the name 'Marquise de Saint-Laurent', forced herself to keep a neutral expression.

"Your assistant didn't find more information about that mysterious marquise, Alexandre?"

"Unfortunately no, my dear. This Milady seemed to have purposely stayed as discreet as possible during her stay in the court of King Louis XIV, something that would be normal for a spy employed by Cardinal Mazarin. Actually, I would picture her like you, Jeanne: you are a young woman out of the ordinary, if I could go with the little you told me of your life."

"Oh, I would love to hear your story, Jeanne!" said at once Agnes with enthusiasm, bringing a forced smile to Jeanne's lips.

"Oh, I am not so extraordinary, really, except for my athletic physique. I was born a Brissac and am the nineteen year-old daughter of a couple of ruined aristocrats who took a ship to the Guadeloupe over two years ago with the hope of rebuilding their fortune there. Unfortunately, pirates intercepted and took our ship in the Caribbean Sea, killing my parents and taking me prisoner. The pirate ship then sank in a storm off the Guadeloupe but I was able to swim to the coast. That is when I met my late husband, Sire Pierre d'Orléans, who possessed a large sugar cane plantation."

While speaking, Jeanne showed a small portrait hooked to a wall of the lounge. It showed a solidly-built, handsome man in his early thirties.

"Pierre d'Orléans was a man the kind of which we unfortunately see too rarely: generous, intelligent, strong but also kind and gentle. We quickly fell mutually in love and I married him in 1846. Unfortunately, he died a few months later of a tropical fever, leaving me his plantation and fortune. I then decided to return to France and sold the plantation. Since then, I have been using my newfound fortune to help others by supporting charity works. Well, that's me in a few words."

"Words that are too brief to properly tell a story as fascinating as yours, Jeanne." replied Alexandre Dumas The Younger. "How long were you prisoner of those pirates?"

“Three long weeks. To be frank, I would rather not talk about that episode of my life.”

Alexandre The Elder gave a warning look to his son, who then held his next question. The other guests easily guessed what kind of treatment Jeanne, a beautiful teenager, could have endured from these pirates and they had the good taste not to ask about that subject. The Baroness of Dudevant was the one to ask the next question after taking a sip of her Champagne.

“And how do you use your time, apart from supporting charity works, Jeanne?”

“I manage my fortune, mostly. I keep a close eye on the economic and political situation, in order to better invest my money and to make it fructify. I also train physically every day, in order to stay in top shape. I must say that I am a born athlete.”

“You certainly seems to be in perfect health, Jeanne.” Said Thomas Evans, making her nod her head.

“I am! Unfortunately, today’s women’s fashion is very restrictive for any woman trying to practice sports in public. I thus transformed a room on the ground floor into a small private gymnasium, so that I could exercise in private.”

“You said that you follow closely the political situation, Jeanne.” said Victor Hugo, who was a member of the National Assembly. “What do you think of the events of this year?”

“That way too much blood has been spilled to date, Victor. The small people, who live in scandalous poverty and work for a pittance, have legitimate demands, demands that too many rich or well-off people dismiss while getting fat on their backs. Do not however think that I am engaged in politics: I simply am a humanist who detests seeing people being exploited and treated unjustly.”

“Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, who has political opinions quite similar to you on that subject, was elected to the National Assembly a few days ago. I wonder if, this time, he will leave his refuge in England and return to take his seat.”

“I think so, Victor. He is said to be very popular with the majority of the people and he has the support of the Republicans. Especially, he is not threatened anymore with arrest if he returns to France.”

“His return will certainly please the countless mistresses and lovers he left behind in France.” said Mélanie Waldor, a slight smile on her face. “It is said that he even made two kids with the daughter of the commander of the Fort of Ham, where he was jailed until his escape in 1846.”

Many guests laughed with Jeanne at Mélanie's remark, while Thomas Evans shook his head with incredulity.

"I must say that the way Frenchmen collect mistresses, even when they are married, is making many talk in the United States. Do the French women really accept so easily such rivals around their husbands?"

"Aaah, but where would be poetry and theatre plays without all these spicy stories, Doctor Evans?" replied humorously Alexandre Dumas The Younger. "France has a long and proud tradition of making its people cuckold."

The whole group then burst into loud laughter at this declaration. Alexandre The Younger eyed Jeanne, young and desirable in her dress with large cleavage.

"And you, my beautiful Jeanne? You are young, rich and beautiful. You are thus a prime candidate to become the mistress of many men of substance in Paris. Are you planning to remarry soon?"

"To get married, no! To continue dating men, most probably!" declared Jeanne while grinning, attracting more laughs. She however became serious before continuing.

"Please understand something, Alexandre: I came back to France so that I could use my fortune to help the people in need. To marry would legally give control of my fortune to a husband who would then be free to spend it according to his own whims, which would probably not be the same as mine. Remember that in France, as well as in England, a married woman belongs to her husband and that she has no legal rights to possess her own things without the permission of her husband. On the other hand, an adventure or two with dashing young men won't hurt my fortune."

More laughs came out when Agnes Evans, red with embarrassment, fanned herself with one hand on hearing Jeanne.

"Dear god! Should I keep my husband under key during our stay in France?" Jeanne made a face while making a show of eying Thomas Evans from head to toe.

"Hum, that may be a good idea, my dear Agnes."

The stunned expression of the American dentist, along with the scandalized look of his wife, made the French present burst out in laughter again. Jeanne then used the fact that the atmosphere was now fully relaxed to invite her guests to proceed to the dining room.

After a meal featuring exotic Chinese, Algerian and Creole dishes, Jeanne led her guests on a guided tour of her residence, tour which finally ended in the huge

ballroom, where a piano sat near a display case containing an assortment of musical instruments. Sitting at the piano, Jeanne then played a couple of melodies while singing along, impressing and pleasing her guests with her musical talents. The quality of her piano playing particularly surprised the Baroness of Dudevant, who had been until recently the mistress of Frederic Chopin.

“My god, Jeanne, have you taken piano lessons from Monsieur Chopin?”

Jeanne shook her head as she got up from the piano stool to go grab a guitar.

“Not at all, my dear. I learned to play the piano at a young age, before going to the Guadeloupe. I also have a gift for guitar playing, an instrument that is said to be very popular in the United States.”

She proved her gift with more singing while playing her guitar, dancing along with her tunes. Unknown to her guests, the repertoire she played included a number of musical pieces and songs from future times, but adapted to earlier centuries. The guests, who had already been surprised by the extent of Jeanne’s technological knowledge, demonstrated when she had shown them her steam engine and the sanitary plumbing facilities installed in her residence, could only marvel at the range of her talents.

The reception came to an end at around ten o’clock at night, with Jeanne’s guests leaving by rental carriage or, in the case of the Baroness of Dudevant, who lived outside of Paris, aboard Jeanne’s saloon carriage, driven by the loyal Luc Rémillard. Victor Hugo, who was the last to leave, kissed Jeanne’s hand as he was about to step out.

“Thank you again for having invited me, Jeanne. The evening was most pleasant. I would love to be able to return the favor in the coming days.”

“Thank you for the thought, my dear Victor. I however have to leave for England tomorrow, to go take care of my investments there and also to inspect a few orphanages that I am planning to support. I will however advise you once back in Paris.”

The playwright gave her an admiring, fond look then.

“Jeanne, if all the rich people could be as generous and kind as you, the little people would be really happy. Good night my dear.”

“And good night to you, Victor.”

Going out in the street with the playwright and author, Jeanne watched as Victor Hugo climbed into the carriage that had waited for him and waved her hand as it started rolling away. Going back inside, she thought about her trip to England tomorrow. On top of the

goals she had described to Victor Hugo, she had something else to do, something that could assure her of some very high level support in the future for her charitable organization.

12:16 (London Time)

Saturday, September 23, 1848

Dining room of the Empire Hotel

Port of Dover, England

Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, accompanied by his current mistress, Harriet Howard, and by their three young boys, was about to select a table in the dining room of their hotel when Harriet discreetly pulled his left arm sleeve to attract his attention.

“Louis, I already met before the young woman sitting alone at the table near the windows to our left. Let me just speak with her quickly.”

Louis looked in the direction she indicated and raised an eyebrow in immediate interest at the beautiful young woman sitting at a corner table. From what he could see of her clothes, the girl seemed richly dressed and also wore expensive jewels.

“And who is she exactly, Harriet?”

“Her name is Jeanne d’Orléans. She is a rich philanthropist whom I met at the Bank of Midlands yesterday. We then had a cup of tea together and talked a bit.”

Louis tensed up at the mention of the girl’s name: he owed his years of jail time and exile to the government of King Louis-Philippe, himself in exile in England since last February. He was thus understandably reticent when Harriet came back to him to say that the said Jeanne d’Orléans was inviting them to her table.

“Uh, she does not have family links to King Louis-Philippe, I hope?”

“Not at all!” replied his English mistress, a young actress of great beauty who had inherited a fortune left to her by her previous lover and who was financially supporting Louis. “She was born a Brissac and her late husband, whom she married in the Guadeloupe, never set foot in France. Come, Louis! You too, my little ones!”

Taking by their hands the two youngest boys, Harriet led them to Jeanne’s table, followed by Louis and the third boy. Jeanne got up from her chair to greet them, revealing the fact that she wore a skirt that only went down to her calves, rather than down to the floor, as current fashion dictated. She however wore a pair of knee-length boots made of shiny black leather that completed her expensive but unorthodox outfit.

Louis, a man of small stature standing a mere 166 centimeters, looked up with surprise at Jeanne's 183 centimeters, with shoulders wider than his own shoulders. She had an eminently feminine body, if one overlooked her muscles and tanned skin. Louis however quickly regained his composure and saluted her with his top hat.

"Let me present myself, miss: Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, at your service."

"And I am Jeanne d'Orléans. Pleased to meet you, Monsieur Bonaparte. And what are the names of those three cute boys, if I may ask?"

While keeping to himself the fact that all three boys were illegitimate and that the oldest one was from Harriet's previous lover, Louis proudly presented the children to Jeanne, who had bent over to smile to them.

"With pleasure, Lady Jeanne. The oldest, Martin, is six. You then have Alexandre Louis Eugène, five, and Louis Ernest Alexandre, who is three."

"Hello, little ones!" said Jeanne, attracting timid responses from the boys, with Martin's one made in English. Straightening up, Jeanne pointed her table to Louis and Harriet.

"Please, have a seat! It would please me to be able to eat with you."

"You are too kind, Lady Jeanne."

"Please, simply call me Jeanne."

"In that case, just call me Louis."

"Deal!"

Once they were all sitting, and with their orders taken by a waiter, Jeanne smiled to Louis.

"I suppose that you are taking the ferry for Calais that is departing this afternoon, Louis?"

"Exact, Jeanne. Me and Harriet are moving to Paris, now that I have been elected to the National Assembly and that it is finally possible for me to take my seat."

"And you have a residence waiting for you in Paris, I presume?"

"Uh, not really. We were planning to take a suite at the Westminster Hotel until we could find an adequate house to buy."

Jeanne immediately shook her index at those words.

"Forget the hotel for you, my friends. I am offering the hospitality of my own residence on Charles-V Street, in Le Marais, and this for as long as it takes you to find a permanent place."

"That is most generous on your part, Jeanne, and I sincerely thank you for your offer, but do you have enough place for all of us without having to tighten up?"

"I have ample room in the Hôtel de Brinvilliers, Louis."

"The Hôtel de Brinvilliers? Isn't that the old residence of the infamous Marquise de Brinvilliers, the poisoner?"

"Effectively!" replied Jeanne, smiling. "But don't worry: you will be able to eat in my home without choking, unless you try to swallow too big a piece."

Jeanne's joke made Harriet giggle, while Louis fixed with hungry eyes Jeanne's chest, which she had pushed up with her arms while speaking.

22:57 (Paris Time) / 21:57 (London Time)

Port of Calais, France

The group formed by Jeanne, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, Harriet Howard and the three boys walked down the walkway to the quay with sighs of relief at leaving the small steam ship that had brought them and twenty other passengers across the stormy waters of The Channel. Louis-Napoléon, who had suffered badly from seasickness during the trip, nearly kissed the quay after stepping on it.

"Thank you, God! I am decidedly not destined to be a sailor."

He then looked around him to orient himself in the dark, the quay being poorly lit by a few rare oil lamps.

"You said that your carriage would be waiting for you at the port, Jeanne?"

"Correct, Louis. In fact, I can now see my carriage coming up at the entrance to the quay."

Louis-Napoléon nodded his head with approval when the big two-horse carriage stopped in front of their group. It had four doors, was painted a lustrous royal blue and gold and its four wheels had steel coil spring independent suspensions and rubber rims.

"A German-style saloon carriage? You certainly offer yourself the best there is, Jeanne."

"I actually had it built to my own specifications, my dear Louis. Let's install the boys first, so that they could sleep: the poor kids are about to drop. LUC, I WILL TAKE CARE OF MY GUESTS. LOAD THE LUGGAGE IN THE MEANTIME."

"RIGHT AWAY, MADAM!"

Jeanne climbed in the passenger cabin as Luc Rémillard climbed down from his sheltered driver's bench to start loading in the rear trunk of the big carriage the dozen or so suitcases and chests of the group. Watched by the curious eyes of Louis and Harriet, she removed two safety pegs before sliding out from the rear section a sort of internal platform that covered the baggage trunk, extending it over the rear seats and anchoring it to the top of the middle side jump seats. She then took out from a storage box situated under the rear seats a rolled, thin mattress, a few wool blankets and three pillows, laying them out on the extended rear platform.

"Here you are! By temporarily sacrificing the rear seats, this system of retracting bed allows two adults to sleep comfortably during long trips. Come on, boys! Come up and get into bed!"

The three boys eagerly obeyed her, climbing aboard with the help of Louis, to then undress before slipping with delight under the blankets. Harriet kissed the three boys on the forehead once they were installed.

"Sleep well, my little ones."

Louis was further surprised by the conception of the carriage when he sat in one of the two cushioned forward seats, which faced aft, finding them to be uncommonly comfortable. The seat cushions were made of royal blue velvet and seemed to contain springs inside their padding. The seats were also equipped with padded armrests and head-high padded back cushions.

"My god, I love this carriage design. I should order a similar one."

"Wait, you haven't seen everything yet, Louis." replied Jeanne. "The front and rear seats can be reclined, on top of being fixed to spring suspensions of their own. You and Harriet will be able to sleep on the way, like your children."

"They can recline? How?"

"Press your back against your seat and push, while raising this little lever under your right side armrest. To put it back straight, you will then only need to squeeze the lever again while taking your back off the seat."

Jeanne smiled to herself as Louis and Harriet tried their reclining seats, a concept from the future that however needed only a primitive technology well within the capabilities of this time. She then climbed down from the cabin to help Luc finish loading their pieces of luggage. Once that was finished, she climbed back in the cabin and sat on one of the central, forward-facing seats. Harriet, who had reclined her seat, sighed with

contentment when the carriage started rolling, the noise of the wheels of the pavement muffled by the rubber rims.

“Louis was right: we should get a carriage like this one. What a contrast with that horrible ferry boat.”

“I must say that the passenger facilities on our ferry were rather minimal.” said Jeanne, attracting an indignant reply from Louis.

“Minimal? How about nonexistent? In truth, that crossing exhausted me, on top of making me sick.”

“Then, feel free to catch some sleep, Louis. You too, Harriet. I will wake you up once we will be at my place.”

“You are decidedly too good, Jeanne.” said Harriet, making Jeanne shrug.

“It is in my nature to help others, Harriet.”

Giving up to her fatigue, Harriet then let herself go to sleep in her padded, reclined seat, soon imitated by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte. Now the lone one awake in the cabin, Jeanne fixed for a long moment the small man, thinking about all the events that were going to happen around the future French emperor in the coming months and years. A few discreet but well-informed counsels given at key moments by her to Louis would probably be sufficient to avoid many tragedies and much human suffering during the 23 years to come. However, Jeanne/Nancy understood too well the consequences of giving such counsels to Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, or to anyone else from this time period. Trying to avoid future tragedies by changing history would only create new ones, on top of completely screwing up known history and preventing her own future origin from happening. That would also prevent the formation of the Time Patrol and would leave her a person that would never be born. Human history was drenched with blood and tears but she could not change in any significant way the history of this period. All that she could do was to do acts of charity to help a few hundred poor people who would stay anonymous in history. In that, the friendship and support of the future emperor could only help her in her projects. Later, in about a hundred years, her charitable foundation would then be able to help in its full capacity those multitudes of unfortunate people in the 20th Century who deserved help.



Jeanne d'Orléans

CHAPTER 4 – AMNESIA

21 :12 (London Time)

Saturday, March 11, 1854 'A'

Hyde Park, London

England

The loud crack of lightning falling nearby made Lady Carmelia Smythe jump with fright as her carriage was rolling down Park Lane. Her son Gordon then put a protective arm around her, smiling reassuringly.

“Don’t worry, Mother: that one fell at least one mile away. Besides, lightning will strike one of the park’s statues first, not our carriage.”

The distinguished, 54 year-old woman looked up at her son and caressed his chin tenderly. A tall and very handsome young man, Gordon was wearing a striped dark blue suit and overcoat tonight instead of his uniform of captain of the 8th Hussars, which was

truly a shame: he was so dashing when in uniform. Gordon was Carmelia's only child but he had made her rightly proud of him. Her only disappointment was that he was still resisting the advances of the young, respectable ladies Carmelia kept presenting him, like tonight at the reception given by Lord Carver. Gordon had still not completely come over the deaths of his young wife Megan and of his newborn son less than three years ago. His most persistent objection to hopeful ladies was that, while well bred and proper, they lacked character and were often vain and boring. Carmelia had to recognize that Gordon's wife had been a real firebrand, owing probably to her Irish bloodline. Finding another woman like her that was not from hopelessly low class was proving to be quite a challenge.

The voice of Thomas, their foot servant and carriage driver, came up above the drumming of the rain on the roof of the carriage as they were approaching the Duke of Wellington's triumphal arch.

"Lady Carmelia, there is a lady walking in the rain near Wellington's arch. Should I offer her a lift?"

Carmelia frowned at that: what kind of lady would be walking alone at night in such weather?

"Does she look like a proper sort, Thomas?"

"Hard to say from this distance, madam. I..."

A blinding flash accompanied by a terrifying detonation cut off the driver, who then had to fight hard to regain control of his terrified horses. On her part, Carmelia literally jumped in her son's lap from the surprise and fright. A strange, tickling sensation ran through her body for a second, while her hair and that of Gordon puffed out.

"MY GOD!" Shouted the driver. "THAT WAS A CLOSE ONE: IT STRUCK THE TOP OF THE DUKE'S STATUE!"

The driver's remark made Gordon open the door on his side of the carriage to look out. After a quick look he closed his door and knocked sharply on the wall of the carriage to attract the driver's attention.

"THOMAS, THAT WOMAN IS LYING ON THE ROAD NEAR THE ARCH. GET TO HER, QUICKLY!"

Both Gordon and Carmelia were pushed back in their bench seat as the driver yelled at his horses and the carriage took up speed. Gordon jumped out in the rain as soon as they came to a stop. Looking out by the window of the door, Carmelia saw Gordon and

Thomas pick up a woman lying still on the pavement. Opening the door, she held it open as both men carried the woman to the carriage and labored to get her inside. The stranger was very tall for a woman and, while not apparently overweight, appeared to be quite heavy, making Gordon swear as he pulled her inside and sat her on one of the two benches.

“Bloody hell! She must be made of stone!”

“Gordon, watch your language!” protested Carmelia as she examined the young woman. The stranger’s dress and coat, of rich and fine make, was burned in many places, proof of how close to the lightning strike she had been. Part of her black hair, twisted into a bun behind her head, had been burned, filling the carriage with an acrid smell. Carmelia couldn’t help notice the necklace, broche, earrings and rings worn by the stranger: they appeared to be very expensive jewels.

“Well, whoever she is, she must be from a high class.”

“That’s not important right now, Mother.” replied Gordon, a bit annoyed. “Let’s get her to our home so that she could be treated. THOMAS, GET HOME AT THE DOUBLE!”

The young man held the unconscious woman in a sitting position as the carriage started moving again. Going through the arch and down Grosvenor Place, they turned onto Grosvenor Crescent, arriving within minutes at Gordon’s townhouse on Belgrave Square. Alerted by Gordon’s shouts, two servants came at a run out of the four story building and helped him take the young woman out of the carriage. Taking the stranger in his arms, Gordon shouted at the driver as Carmelia got out of the carriage and ran inside to escape the driving rain.

“THOMAS, GET DOCTOR PORTAL AND BRING HIM HERE AS QUICKLY AS YOU CAN!”

“RIGHT AWAY, SIR!”

Walking quickly inside with his load as the carriage sped away, Gordon went through the front hall and the large reception lounge, then climbed the main staircase to the first floor. Carmelia and two maids were already ahead of him, waiting in one of the guest bedrooms. As soon as he lay the still unconscious woman on the wide bed, his mother shooed him out of the bedroom.

“The poor girl’s clothes are all wet. We have to undress and dry her before the arrival of Doctor Portal. Just send him upstairs as soon as he arrives.”

"I understand, Mother. Could you check if she has any papers or things that could identify her, though? Her relatives will undoubtedly get worried about her."

"A sensible thought, Gordon." replied Carmelia, smiling. "I will keep you informed."

She then closed the door in her son's face and returned to the side of the bed, where the two maids had already started to take off the wet clothes of the stranger. Grabbing the woman's overcoat first, Carmelia searched it, quickly finding a purse in a large pocket. Opening it, she was disappointed to find no papers inside that could have helped identify her. Her eyes bulged though at the sight of a large assortment of banknotes and silver and gold coins, plus a set of keys.

"My god! There is over four hundred pounds in here!"

That made the two servants stop and look at her in shock.

"Four hundred pounds!" exclaimed the younger maid, Judith. "She must be a very rich woman."

"She must be!" added Clara, the other maid, while raising the woman's inert right hand to let her mistress look at it. "Look at that emerald and diamond ring, madam."

"A rich woman indeed." agreed Carmelia. "She must belong to a prominent family. Let's dry her quickly, girls."

The two maids had to be helped by Carmelia when they removed the dress with its flounced skirt.

"God, she is really heavy for her size." said Clara. "She must be all muscles."

They soon saw that for themselves when they removed her wet undergarment and Judith passed a towel over the stranger's nude body to dry it.

"Not an ounce of fat on her but look at those muscles." wondered the young maid. "She reminds me of an acrobat girl I saw once in a circus."

"A circus girl with expensive jewels and four hundred pounds in cash?" replied Carmelia, dubious. Judith didn't answer back, waiting for Clara to laboriously turn the woman on her belly before continuing to towel her dry. A multitude of old, faint scars covering the woman's back, buttocks and legs made her hesitate and stop. While obviously dating back many years, they were still fairly easy to see.

"Sweet Mary! What happened to her?"

Bending over to have a better look, Carmelia nearly immediately recoiled from surprise and shock: those were whip marks! Looking again more closely, she was then able to

see a number of burn marks on her back and buttocks. Turning laboriously the woman on her back, Carmelia saw similar whip and burn marks on her chest and belly.

“My god! This poor woman was tortured once, horribly.”

“Tortured, madam?” said Clara, shocked. “Why, and by whom?”

“I don’t know! Forget about that and cover her with the bed sheets. Judith, bring her clothes downstairs for drying.”

Carmelia had a last look at the young woman as the maids covered her. While beautiful and shapely, her shoulders were broad and she was easily close to six feet in height. She may be rich but she certainly didn’t look like a typical aristocrat.

Gordon noticed the puzzled look on his mother’s face when she came down the staircase and joined him in the lounge. Walking quickly to her, he gallantly took her hand and guided Carmelia to a sofa, sitting beside her and looking into her eyes.

“Is something wrong? Has her situation deteriorated, Mother?”

“No, Gordon. She is still unconscious but her breathing is strong and regular. I didn’t find anything on her that could help identify her, except that she had four hundred pounds in cash and expensive jewels on her.”

“Then, she must be an aristocrat.” proposed Gordon. Carmelia hesitated before replying slowly to that.

“Maybe, maybe not. Gordon, why would anyone torture a young woman?”

“Torture?” said Gordon in a disbelieving tone. “Was that woman tortured?”

“She was flogged and branded extensively all over her torso and buttocks a few years ago. The scars are faint but still visible. Again, why would someone torture a woman?”

“Uh, to get answers, probably to make her say where her gold is.” proposed Gordon, at a loss for any other answer. His mother looked gravely at him then.

“Gordon, you may have a point there. That woman is obviously rich, so someone could indeed have tormented her to get at her money. Poor girl!”

A notion then went through Gordon’s mind, raising doubts in it.

“On the other hand, maybe the bastards who tortured that girl were not after money.”

“What do you mean? What else could it be?”

“Information... secrets, I don’t know really!”

“She could be a spy?” said Carmelia, horrified. Gordon then shrugged, truly at a loss.

“I don’t know! I was just speculating. Look, why don’t we let to that poor girl the benefit of the doubt and wait until she wakes up to ask her a few questions?”

“Alright, that sounds fair enough to me.” replied Carmelia while rising from the sofa, helped by Gordon. “I will go put her money and jewels in a safe place now: we don’t want one of our maids to rob that unfortunate woman.”

“Mother, you should have more confidence in my maids. Clara and Judith are honest women. However, in view of the sum that girl had on her, your idea is still a good one. Here is the key to the secure drawer of my work desk.”

“Thanks, Gordon!”

Gordon watched his mother go upstairs again, then resumed his pacing around, his mind boiling over Carmelia’s remarks. Doctor Portal, followed by a drenched and shivering Thomas, showed up ten minutes later, his medical bag in one hand.

“Where is this woman, Mister Smythe?”

“Upstairs!” Answered Gordon, taking the doctor’s coat. “My mother will show you to her.”

He then looked up and around in time to see Carmelia appear in the staircase.

“Mother, could you show the good doctor to our guest?”

“Of course! This way, Doctor.”

As the doctor climbed the stairs, Gordon faced Thomas, who was still wearing his wet overcoat.

“Well done, Thomas! Go to the kitchen and warm yourself up with a hot cup of tea in front of the stove. Take this as well for your diligence.”

The servant looked down at the gold coin Gordon had taken out of a pocket and grinned before accepting it.

“It is always a pleasure to serve a true gentleman like you, sir.”

“The pleasure is mine, Thomas. Now, go warm yourself.”

Letting the happy driver go to the kitchen, Gordon ran up the stairs to the first floor and went to the door of the guest bedroom, knocking lightly on it. His mother cracked the door open a bit and looked at him.

“I’m sorry, Gordon, but you can’t enter now. The woman is not decent at this moment.”

“Could you let me in when she will be?”

“I will. Be patient, though.”

Carmelia then closed the door, prompting Gordon to pace impatiently in the hallway. The door opened again after fifteen minutes and his mother motioned him to come inside. Gordon did so and found Doctor Portal sitting on the bed, holding the right wrist of the still unconscious young woman. Grabbing a chair near a dresser, Gordon put it besides the bed and sat on it, contemplating for a moment the face of the young woman. She was certainly beautiful by any standards.

“How is she, Doctor?”

Portal put down the woman’s wrist before looking at Gordon, uncertainty on his face.

“She will live, Mister Smythe, but she suffered a severe shock and is in a coma. The next few hours will be crucial: if she wakes up soon it will be a good sign. If not...”

Gordon took a few seconds to digest the doctor’s statement.

“Uh, what about the scars on her body, Doctor?”

Portal shook his head as he looked at the comatose woman.

“They were quite a shock to me, Mister Smythe. They are effectively marks from horrible tortures suffered by this poor woman years ago. From their severity and density of pattern, I would say that they were not sustained simply as some form of punishment ordered by a court. Whoever tortured her went at it for hours, maybe days, and probably wanted some kind of answers. She probably passed out a number of times during that ordeal. There was also a scar from a long gash made by a blade weapon on her belly. She however looks extremely fit and strong and is otherwise in good health. In fact, she is by far the most fit woman I ever saw.”

“What could she be then, Doctor? She doesn’t exactly fill the mold of an aristocrat.”

“Quite! The only thing we can do for the moment is to let her rest and wait for her to wake up by herself. Make sure to note the hour she will wake up, though: the length of her coma will be critical for my diagnostic.”

“Then we will keep a vigil at her bedside.” decided Gordon, getting a nod from his mother. “Could I interest you in staying overnight, Doctor? I have a second guest room available.”

“I am afraid that I will have to pass on your generous offer, sir: I am hosting guests at my own house tonight.”

“Oh! In that case I will let you know when that poor woman wakes up. How much do I owe you, Doctor?”

Portal stopped Gordon as he was searching his pockets for money.

“I will wait until I finished treating her before presenting my bill, sir. Have a good night, sir and madam.”

“Let me at least get my carriage driver to give you a ride home, Doctor.”

“A kind thought, sir, which I will accept gladly.”

Escorting Portal out of the bedroom, Gordon was back in after a few minutes, closing the door before looking at his mother.

“I will take the night vigil, Mother. You can replace me in the morning, after you have rested.”

Carmelia hesitated for an instant while glancing down at the young woman in the bed: the stranger was naked under the bed sheets.

“Alright, but let me get a night gown for her first: we don’t want her to wake up and think that she was abused in any way.”

Gordon gave her a pained look at those words.

“Mother, I am not that sort of bastard.”

“Of course not, Son! I just want that girl to feel secure.”

“I understand. While you get the gown, I will get myself an extra oil lamp and a good book.”

Going to his study, Gordon took the lit oil lamp on his work desk and used it to scan the rows of books filling the wall shelves. A well educated man, he always enjoyed reading and could do so in Latin and Greek as well. He finally grabbed a thick book on the life and death of Joan of Arc, his favorite heroine, and returned to the guest bedroom only to find its door blocked by his mother, who signaled him to halt.

“You will have to wait a bit: Judith and Clara are busy putting a night gown on her.”

She then looked at the book in his hands and smiled.

“Still stuck on Joan of Arc, I see?”

“Hey, is it my fault if she was such a brave girl, even if she was bashing on English soldiers? Besides, you know that I am attracted to women of character rather than to those spoiled aristocratic girls I keep bumping into.”

“I noticed!” replied his mother rather frostily.

Gordon had to cool his heels another few minutes before the two maids left the bedroom and he was allowed in by his mother. Putting a chair besides the bed, he moved the bedside table so that he would be between it and the bed, then put the oil lamp on the table and sat in the chair. Before starting his reading, he admired the face of the sleeping woman: a physical attraction towards her was now growing quickly in him. His secret hope was that she would prove as attractive of character as she was physically. Since he still had over three weeks of leave left, he should have ample time to find out about her. With a sigh, he opened his book and started reading.

Hours later, having gone through one third of his book, Gordon rubbed his tired eyes and, putting down the book on the bedside table, rose from his chair to stretch his legs a bit. Taking out his pocket watch, he saw that it was merely one thirty in the morning. This was going to be a long night indeed. Turning around to face the bed, Gordon nearly did a double take from surprise: the young woman was now looking at him with dazed eyes. She then spoke in a weak voice as he was hurrying to her side of the bed.

“Où suis-je⁴?”

Silently swearing at himself for knowing only half a dozen words of French, Gordon knelt beside the bed and gently took one of her hands. His hope now was that she could speak English.

“You are in my home, miss. You were nearly struck by lightning and have been unconscious for hours. Can you understand me?”

“Yes.” She replied weakly in English, bringing a feeling of relief to Gordon, who smiled down at her.

“Good! A doctor already examined you a few hours ago. You suffered a severe shock. Can you tell me your name, so that we could advise your relatives?”

The woman was about to speak when she froze, a growing look of despair and horror appearing on her face.

“I...I don't know my name! I can't remember who I am!”

Patting the hand of the now distraught young woman, Gordon spoke to her softly, trying to reassure her.

⁴ Où suis-je? 'Where am I?' in French.

“That is quite normal after the kind of shock you suffered, miss. You will probably remember everything back after a good night’s sleep. The best you can do now is to rest. I will post myself outside in the hallway to leave you some privacy.”

The quickness and fierceness of her reaction to his words came as a shock to him: a look of sheer despair appearing on her face, she grabbed his right arm with a strength that truly surprised Gordon.

“No! Don’t go! Don’t leave me alone!”

Gordon looked down into her beautiful green eyes and saw genuine distress in them.

“Alright, miss, I will stay. Now, calm down and rest.”

Followed by her eyes, Gordon sat back in his chair and picked up his book to resume his reading. He soon saw from the corner of one eye the woman go back to sleep. Then staring at her, he pondered how he would handle an amnesiac French woman but decided to leave that problem to Doctor Portal later. The French embassy would probably have to be contacted as well at one point. She wasn’t wearing a wedding ring when she had been picked up, even though she wore three rings on other fingers. Now feeling really tired, Gordon decided to replace his straight chair by the easy chair near the dresser. Switching them around as silently as he could, he then got himself a thick wool blanket and installed himself as comfortably as he could. He was asleep in less than a minute, dreaming about charging on his war horse and saving a tall, beautiful French woman.

06:37 (London Time)

Sunday, March 12, 1854

14 Belgrave Square, London

Gordon was awakened by progressively more vigorous shakes and opened his eyes, to find the French woman standing in front of him, dressed in a night gown that stopped at her knees. She then asked him something in French that he didn’t understand, making him shake his head apologetically while replying in English.

“I’m sorry, miss, but I don’t speak French.”

The young woman, who looked to be in her early twenties, hesitated a bit, then switched to a fluent English.

“Could you tell me where I am and what I am doing here, mister?”

“But, I already told you when you first woke up, miss.” said Gordon, both surprised and alarmed: if she couldn’t remember such a recent event, then her mind must have been affected quite severely. “My name is Gordon Smythe and you are in my London home on Belgrave Square. Me and my mother picked you up in Hyde Park after you were nearly struck by lightning. Can you remember your name now?”

The woman’s green eyes wandered around as she seemingly concentrated. She finally sat back heavily on the edge of the bed and answered him in a soft, discouraged voice.

“I...I can’t! What am I going to do now?”

Gordon threw away his blanket and got to his feet, then took her hands to reassure her.

“Do not worry, miss. You are safe in my home and can count on the full support of both me and my family. You must be hungry by now. Would you like to have breakfast?”

She answered by nodding her head sheepishly. Gordon then showed her the door.

“Then let’s put one of my robes on your first: a lady such as you should be dressed properly in public.”

“How do you know that I am a lady and not some tramp?”

Her question made Gordon smile.

“Tramps don’t go around wearing expensive jewels and with over four hundred pounds in cash in their purses.”

She instinctively raised a hand to her throat, searching for a necklace. Gordon quickly reassured her then.

“Don’t worry, miss. Your valuables are in a safe place. Just tell me when you will need them and I will get them for you. This way, please.”

As he was leading her towards his bedroom, she looked at her left hand and slowed down, forcing him to stop and turn around.

“Tell me, sir, was I wearing a wedding ring?”

“No, miss. You did have three rings on other fingers, though.”

“Then I must be single.” she said after a pause. Gordon nodded and, getting to his bedroom, opened the door and invited her in. Going directly to the main closet and opening it, he pulled out a warm burgundy robe made of thick wool, along with a pair of sheepskin slippers. He still had his back to her when she spoke, excitement in her voice.

“You’re in the Army, mister?”

Gordon then realized that she must have spotted his Hussar's uniform, visible inside the closet. Smiling proudly, he took his uniform out to display it to her.

"I'm a captain in the 8th Royal Hussars, presently garrisoned in Winchester. I am right now on a long overdue leave."

"It is a nice uniform." said the woman while detailing the golden cordons and embroidering on the vest. She then stared for a moment at the two medal ribbons sewn on the left breast of the vest. "You served in India and Afghanistan?"

Gordon raised an eyebrow at that, not a little surprised and impressed: few people knew well enough military ribbons to identify those two service ribbons. As for women, Gordon had never met one who knew much about military ribbons.

"I have effectively served in those two countries, miss. How come you know those ribbons?"

She hesitated while concentrating and trying to remember. She finally shook her head sadly.

"I don't know. The only thing that I know is that I seem to be familiar with things that are military and about war."

She then looked around the closet, apparently searching for something.

"I don't see your combat uniform, though."

Giving her a dubious look, Gordon put back his uniform in the closet and handed her the robe and slippers.

"Miss, that uniform is meant for parades as well as for the field. You should know that if you are really familiar with the Army."

She somehow seemed to have troubles with that notion, looking perplexed as she put on the robe and slippers.

"You use such a flashy uniform in the field? Wait! What year are we in?"

"I believe that we are still in 1854, miss." Replied Gordon sarcastically. The shock from the near lightning strike had decidedly been more severe than he feared on her. "To be exact, we are on Sunday, March twelfth."

"1854... The Crimean War, of course." She muttered to herself, making Gordon tense up.

"Which war, miss?"

"But, the Crimean War, you know! The one between England, France and the Ottoman Empire on one side and the Russian Empire on the other side."

Gordon was speechless for a moment, staring at her. The situation in the Balkans was tense and the Russians had been fighting with the Turks for a few months now but England and France, while diplomatically supporting the Turks, were not yet at war with Russia.

“Miss,” he said coldly, “where did you get this fancy notion of a war between us and Russia?”

“I don’t know!” she replied vehemently. “It just popped in my head when you mentioned the year 1854.”

“The year 1854...you are speaking as if it was already history, miss.”

“It feels like it to me.” she said, her tone heating up and obviously getting irritated by his skepticism. “The Crimean War was so primitive in terms of tactics and weaponry! I...”

She then stopped speaking, realizing how odd her words had been. On his part, Gordon was starting to seriously wonder if her mental state could make her dangerous. He finally resolved to watch her closely for the time being, in case she did something regrettable.

“I see. Well, let’s forget this, uh, Crimean War, and let’s go downstairs to have breakfast.”

“As you wish, sir.” she replied, obviously unrepentant. Whoever she was, Gordon could see that she had to be a woman of strong character.

“Please, call me Gordon, not sir. You are my guest, remember?”

She understood at once from his tone that he meant as much to remind her that this was his house as much as meaning that he was ready to care for her. Taking a deep breath to calm down, she then managed a smile to him.

“You are right, Gordon. Please excuse me if I have irked you.”

“No offence taken, miss. Please follow me.”

They walked downstairs together but in silence. Gordon was still going over what she had said, while she seemed to go be going through her own mind to make sense of what was in it. Carmelia, having breakfast already in the dining room, immediately noticed the frost between the two as they entered the room. She got up as Gordon presented her to the young woman.

“Miss, this is my mother, Lady Carmelia Smythe. Mother, I would like to present our guest properly but, unfortunately, she seems to be amnesiac because of her accident.”

“Oh dear! I am sorry to hear that, miss.” said Carmelia before going to the young woman and kissing her on both cheeks. “Doctor Portal will come to examine you further today. In the meantime, feel at home here.”

“Thank you, madam.” replied the woman before sitting at the table with Gordon. Carmelia called Judith and ordered her to serve breakfast to Gordon and the stranger, then gave a tentative smile to the young woman.

“Can’t you remember anything about yourself, miss?”

“The only thing that seems to be a fact about me is that I am French, Lady Carmelia, as I spoke first in French on waking up. I am not sure about anything else for the moment.”

She looked down for a moment at her hands, devoid of rings.

“My rings and jewels, was there anything about them that could help identify me? Maybe my name was engraved on them.”

Carmelia and Gordon looked at each other: they had not thought about that possibility. Gordon rose from his chair at once.

“I will go get her jewels and purse to show them to her. Hopefully they will be able to jog her memory a bit.”

“A good idea, Gordon. Ask in passing as well to Thomas to go get Doctor Portal.”

“I will, Mother.” replied Gordon before leaving the dining room. Carmelia, now alone with the stranger, discreetly detailed her while sipping on her tea. Judith soon brought a tray with a cup of tea, English muffins and jam, serving the young woman and Gordon’s empty place, then returning into the kitchen. The stranger first ate in silence, obviously preoccupied. Carmelia could understand well her state of mind, as being amnesiac had to be a most unsettling experience. If found by unscrupulous men, that beautiful stranger could then have ended in some dire predicament indeed. She was young and beautiful, with a firm and generous chest, large hips and long athletic legs. Many men would have had little scruple to abuse such a woman. Carmelia felt pity for her. Clara then showed up and bowed respectfully to Carmelia before presenting a rolled newspaper to her.

“The morning paper, madam.”

“Thank you, Clara.”

Carmelia barely had time to look at the titles on the front page before Gordon came back and sat, putting on the table besides the stranger her jewels and purse.

“Here you are, miss. You may count your money if you wish so.”

The stranger gave him a funny look then but didn't speak yet, taking instead her purse and opening it. Emptying it on the table, she looked briefly at the large collection of banknotes, gold and silver coins, then grabbed the set of keys to examine it closely.

“One key here seems to be for a bank safety deposit box, with the number 138 on it. There is unfortunately no indication about what bank it is from. There is also another numbered key, possibly for a hotel room, again without a name or address on it. The other five keys could be for a house somewhere.”

She next examined her jewels, which included a pair of emerald and diamond earrings matching with a rich necklace, bracelet and broche, plus three rings. One of the rings bore a coat of arms with a fleur-de-lis in it. That ring got the young woman excited at once.

“I recognize that coat of arms: it is that of the French House of Orléans.”

“You are sure, miss?” Said Gordon, suddenly hopeful that they were finally getting somewhere. She nodded her head somberly.

“I am. My head seems to be full of all kind of historical details and knowledge and this ring woke up the name of Orléans at once. I must be related to that family line.”

“Well, that is one good lead we could follow, miss. What about that gold ring? I see some strange inscriptions on it.”

Taking the plain gold ring, which seemed of rather primitive manufacture, the woman appeared surprised as she looked at the inscriptions engraved around the ring.

“Cuneiforms?”

“Cunei what?” Said Gordon, mystified.

“Cuneiforms. They were the writing system used by ancient Sumerians, in Mesopotamia.”

“How ancient were those Sumerians?” Asked Carmelia, having a poor knowledge of ancient history. The young stranger answered her while still looking at the ring.

“The Sumerians date as far as 5,000 years or more ago and were the first to develop a writing system. This is weird: I can actually read those cuneiforms.”

“You can?” nearly exclaimed Gordon. “What do they say?”

She read apparently without difficulty, surprised by her own linguistic skills.

“May the great Ninshoursag, Goddess of the earth, protect Sarai, daughter of Shoudou-Usur, great servant of the mighty Rim-Sin, King of Ur and Chaldea.”

She had a puzzled expression on her face as she put down the ring on the table while both Carmelia and Gordon looked at her with disbelief.

“This is an ancient family ring from 5,000 years in the past?” asked Carmelia, quite dazzled. “How did you get it?”

“Uh, I don’t know.” Said sheepishly the young woman, who then slowly put the ring around her left middle finger. “It however fits my finger perfectly.”

Carmelia saw that she was right and looked at her son.

“Would many people know how to read those cuneiforms, Gordon?”

“Very few, I suppose. I could go to the British Museum some day and ask an expert there. Our friend is however obviously well versed in history, which would be another good reason to visit the museum.”

“And dressed in what? Her dress was extensively damaged by the lightning strike.”

“Talking of my clothes, could I see them later?” Asked the young French woman.

“Of course, my dear! But take the time to eat your breakfast first.”

While Carmelia started reading the morning newspaper, Gordon took a sip of his tea and bit in a muffin. The French woman however took the time to put her other rings and jewels on, then quickly counted her money and returned it with the key ring into her purse, which she pocketed. Carmelia suddenly saw a title that attracted her attention.

“Gordon, it says here that England and France just signed a military alliance pact with the Ottoman Empire against Russia. We may be going to war again, against Russia.”

Gordon strangled on his tea at those words, nearly making him spit it out and attracting a reprobate look from Carmelia.

“Gordon, watch your manners!”

Gordon, still choked up, took a few seconds before he could speak, pointing to the French woman.

“Mother, she predicted that war this morning.”

The young woman nodded somberly as Carmelia stared at her.

“Your son is right, madam. I somehow knew about this already. I also know that a terrible war will follow in the Crimea and around the Black Sea. War will be declared at the end of March.”

“But, we are now only in mid-March.” said a stunned Carmelia. “How could you know this?”

“I don’t know, madam. Things are still quite confused in my head.”

Thinking for a second, Carmelia gave the newspaper to Gordon, who started reading it avidly, then rose from her chair.

“If you may excuse me for a moment, I will be back shortly.”

She was back at the table after about ten minutes. In her hands were a pen, an ink bottle, some sheets of paper and a thick book. Sitting down first, she showed up the book to the young woman.

“A French-English dictionary and lexicon.” She explained. “I do speak a passable French but I will need it for what I’m going to do now.”

“What are you up to, Mother?” asked an intrigued Gordon.

“You will see shortly, Son.”

Alternatively searching in the book and scribbling on a sheet of paper, Carmelia finally presented one page of writing to the French woman.

“I wrote down common French female first names, in no particular order. Could you scan them and tell us if one of them feels familiar to you?”

Her expression somber, the French took the sheet of paper and studied it for a minute before pointing out one name.

“Jeanne! That one is the only one to awake a feeling inside my head.”

“Then, do you mind if we call you Jeanne for the time being?” asked a satisfied Carmelia.

“It is the best alternative for the moment, madam.”

“Then Lady Jeanne it is. After breakfast we will see if your dress can be repaired.”

They were rising from the dining table when Doctor Portal showed up with Thomas. Looking first at Jeanne, he then bowed his head politely to Carmelia.

“Good morning ladies, sir. I am pleased to see that the young lady is up and apparently well.”

“Apparently is the word, sir.” said Jeanne. “I can’t remember who I am or where I come from.”

“Oh! I was afraid of that.” replied Portal, who then looked at Gordon. “At what time did she first wake up?”

“At one thirty this morning, Doctor.”

“Then she was out for only a little more than four hours. That is good news indeed.”

“What do you mean, Doctor?” asked Gordon anxiously. Portal stared at Jeanne as he answered calmly.

“It is my experience with victims of trauma who suffer from amnesia that the persons who wake up and stop feeling disoriented within a day normally recover all or nearly all of their past memories. The memories of their general knowledge will come back quickest, normally within days or at most a few weeks. The memories of their personal experiences and of their identities will however take more time, typically many months. Some never recover their identity but those are the exceptions.”

“Months?” said Jeanne hesitantly. Portal nodded sadly.

“I am afraid so, miss. Your memories will come back gradually as time goes by. Seeing a familiar person, object or place also often helps in reviving souvenirs. If you may, I would like to examine you in private.”

“As you wish, Doctor.” she replied, discouragement in her voice, before following Portal out of the dining room. Carmelia and Gordon then exchanged worried looks.

“The poor girl will need prolonged support to go through this. Are you ready to help her out, Gordon?”

“A true gentleman wouldn’t do otherwise, Mother. I am not due back at my regiment before April fourth anyway. That gives me a full three weeks to actively take care of Jeanne. I suppose that you could take care of her after that.”

“Of course, Son! By the way, your father is giving a reception next Saturday evening. You could bring Jeanne with you then.”

Gordon smiled at the idea of dancing with the beautiful and statuesque Jeanne in his parents’ manor. She may be a bit strange but she was attractive as hell.

“That would please me a lot, Mother. We will be there.”

“Good!” said Carmelia while getting up. “I will now go see if I can salvage Jeanne’s dress. Otherwise we will have to find her new clothes in a hurry.”

"If need be I know a Jewish tailor who would be willing to work on a Sunday." volunteered Gordon, getting a scandalized look from Carmelia.

"That man would work on God's day of rest?"

Gordon shrugged as he replied to her.

"Hey, we do work during the Sabbath."

"Hmm, true! We'll see!"

Leaving Gordon to finish his breakfast, Carmelia went to the laundry room adjacent to the kitchen, where Jeanne's clothes were suspended. A quick inspection showed her that Jeanne's overcoat and hat, bearing extensive burn marks and even holes, were beyond repair. While burned in a few spots, the French woman's dress could still be worn if absolutely necessary but was finished as a proper attire for a true lady. Gordon's Jewish tailor may yet come handy after all. Going back to the dining room, Carmelia found Gordon in the process of reading the morning paper. He looked at her as soon as she came back in.

"So, what's the verdict?"

"Jeanne could use her dress to go to the tailor shop but that's about all it is good for now. Her overcoat and hat are write-offs."

"Well, that does it! I will bring her to that tailor shop as soon as Doctor Portal is finished with her."

As if he had called the Devil, Portal showed up just then, Jeanne in tow. Both sat at the table, with Jeanne keeping a sullen silence as Portal spoke to Gordon and Carmelia.

"Her burns, which were light anyway, are healing very well indeed. As for her mind, I made her pass a few simple tests. She is not yet fully out of the post-trauma period and has some difficulty still on remembering details. That should however return to normal by tomorrow morning. Her past memories should return...in time."

"Should..." said Jeanne softly while looking despondently down at her hands. Gordon's hands then covered hers gently.

"Do not despair, Jeanne. We will help you through this."

"Thank you! I owe you and your mother so much."

Doctor Portal patted her shoulder as well while getting to his feet.

"Please have faith, miss. You will remember your past. It is only a question of time."

Gordon rose as well, ready to escort him to the door.

“Thank you for your help, Doctor. How much do I owe you?”

“Please let me pay him!” suddenly cut in Jeanne. “It is not as if I am poor, after all.”

“But, it is nothing to me, my dear Jeanne.” replied Gordon, taking his wallet out. She in turn got to her feet and stopped his hand, looking straight into his eyes.

“Please, Gordon. I may not know who I am but I know that I am a proud woman. I don’t want to be a burden on you.”

Gordon returned her stare for a moment. His heart racing, he realized then that he couldn’t refuse anything to this woman, that he would not let her go ever if he could help it. He nodded his head slowly, speaking softly to her.

“Alright, Jeanne. Do as you wish.”

Jeanne smiled to him, then faced Portal while fishing her purse out to pay him. While she paid Portal, Carmelia examined her discreetly with a new eye: she had seen Gordon’s look and realized that he was rapidly falling in love with her. She was certainly extremely attractive and her manners and behavior up to now had been those of a well educated woman, but her past was still a total mystery. For all they knew about her she could be a thief or, God forbid, one of those celebrated French high flight courtesans. Carmelia promised herself to keep a close watch on that woman, in case her only son fell for the wrong woman. Gordon then escorted Portal to the door, coming back after a minute and taking out his pocket watch, glancing quickly at it.

“Half past seven. How about a quick tour of my house, Jeanne?”

“Why not?” she replied good-naturedly, presenting her arm to Gordon, who gallantly took it. He led her first into the kitchen, where they encountered Clara and Judith, who were busy washing dishes in a wooden tub full of water.

“Jeanne, may I present you my two maids, Clara and Judith.”

Both servants did a curtsy and shook hands with Jeanne, who noticed the Mediterranean looks of the plump Clara.

“Are you of Italian descent by chance, Clara?”

“Yes miss!” answered the maid timidly. “I was twelve when my parents emigrated from Milan.”

That brought a warm smile to Jeanne’s face.

“Aah, Milano! Come va la tua familia?”

It was then Clara’s turn to smile widely.

“Molto vene, signora. Gracie!”

Gordon and Judith exchanged surprised looks as Jeanne and Clara launched into an animated exchange in Italian, speaking for a good minute. Jeanne finally hugged Clara before facing Gordon.

“Sorry about delaying the tour with my chatter.”

“Don’t be! You’re putting me to shame with your abilities. How many languages do you speak?”

She concentrated for a moment, her face reflecting growing puzzlement as seconds went by.

“Er, I can’t explain how, but I seem to have the knowledge of dozens of languages in my head.”

Gordon and both maids stared at her with disbelief.

“Dozens? But that’s unheard of!” protested Gordon.

“Try me!” replied Jeanne, smiling.

“Alright, you asked for it!” said Gordon, getting into the game. He first tried out his Greek and Latin on her, to which Jeanne replied perfectly. That didn’t surprise him too much, since she seemed to have received a good classical education. Having served nearly six years in India, Gordon next spoke haltingly a few sentences in Hindi and was stunned to be corrected by Jeanne, who obviously spoke the language much better than him. Now backed up to his last linguistic notions, he said the few words he had heard and registered while fighting Afghan rebels. Jeanne winced on hearing him.

“My God, Gordon, where did you learn your Pashto? That was about the crudest collections of insults I ever heard.”

“Oh?! What did I just say?”

Jeanne then translated for him, making both maids gasp while Gordon reddened with embarrassment.

“Blast! No wonder that Afghan chieftain got mad at me. And I thought that I was greeting him.”

That made Jeanne break out in laughter.

“You did greet him alright, Gordon. Now, how about continuing that tour?”

“Good idea!” he agreed, anxious to have his Pashto words forgotten. He next led Jeanne into the laundry room, where he pointed at her suspended dress and overcoat.

“I’m afraid that your clothes are beyond repair.”

Jeanne examined them, then shook her head sadly.

“I’m afraid that you are right. I will need to visit a tailor shop urgently.”

“That is precisely our next stop after touring the house.” replied Gordon jovially. “I know a Jewish tailor who is open on Sundays.”

“Excellent! Let’s hope that he will have something that fits me.”

Gordon didn’t say a word then, eyeing her up and down instead. Few women he knew were as tall and broad-shouldered, yet feminine, as Jeanne was. Fitting her was definitely going to be a problem. Skipping the pantry, Gordon led Jeanne back through the kitchen and the dining room, ending up in the main lounge. There, she looked at the rows of shelves full of books covering two of the walls, nodding her head in approval.

“You seem to be a well educated gentleman, Gordon.”

“Not as educated as you, I would say.” he retorted, getting a malicious look from her.

“I haven’t found out yet what I am, remember?”

“I am a patient man, Jeanne.”

That got him a devilish grin from her.

“You would like to explore my inner self with me? You cheeky devil!”

“Ahem! Let’s visit the first floor now, shall we?”

Followed by Jeanne, Gordon went up the main staircase and guided her around the first floor. Apart from Gordon’s bedroom and office, two guest bedrooms occupied that level, along with a washroom. In the latter, Gordon proudly showed the sink, bathtub and toilet.

“We have tap water around the house and everything is connected directly to the sewer system. Very few areas of London have such services yet.”

“What about hot water?” asked a seemingly unimpressed Jeanne. A disappointed Gordon kept his tone neutral as he answered her.

“The maids of course still have to bring hot water from the kitchen. Let’s go to the second floor now.”

Jeanne became a lot more excited when Gordon led her inside his exercise room, previously a large study that he had converted himself. She looked happily around at the suspended punching bag, weights and padded benches and at the floor, covered by a thick wool carpet.

“This is great! Could I use this room in the days to come?”

“You are welcome to it, Jeanne. Do you practice sports normally?”

"I must be! The sight of this room awakened an urge to exercise in me. Yes! You have sabers and rapiers too."

"Of course! I am an army officer, remember?"

He watched Jeanne with interest as she picked up a saber from a wall and, taking it out of its scabbard, did a few practice passes with it. He had to recognize that she looked quite proficient with it.

"Could I try you in a friendly saber duel some time in the future?" she asked with a big smile, amusing Gordon.

"If you wish. I have to warn you though that I am considered one of the best swordsmen of my regiment."

"Then we have a deal." she replied before putting the saber back in place. Gordon then led her out of the exercise room, showing her next a guest bedroom and two servants' bedrooms before going up to the third floor. Three more servants' bedrooms, a washroom, a storage room and a knitting room occupied that floor. The knitting room was well lit by two large windows, a detail that pleased Jeanne.

"That room is just what I may need to fit my new wardrobe."

She then faced Gordon, pointing an index at him.

"And don't even think about paying for my new clothes! You do that and I get the hell out of here."

"Alright, alright, I get the message." Protested Gordon, throwing his hands up.

"Then, how about visiting that tailor of yours?" proposed Jeanne, her feigned severity changing to joviality.

09:33 (London Time)

Piccadilly, St-James' District

While walking side by side with Jeanne, Gordon was seriously starting to suspect that his regretted late wife, Megan, had been tame compared to this Jeanne. Wearing her expensive jewels with her damaged dress and a borrowed shawl, she made for a curious sight that had attracted many side looks and snide remarks from well-to-do passersby. Jeanne had ignored it all, acting as if she had not noticed the attention she attracted. Gordon knew better by now, for Jeanne had demonstrated quickly a powerful sense of observation during their walk from Belgrave Square. During that relatively short walk, she had already saved Gordon in extremis from a runaway cart, then had foiled a

young pickpocket who had tried to get away with Gordon's wallet. Only Jeanne's pleas had saved the young teenager from being handed to the police by Gordon. She then had stared into the boy's eyes before letting him go, taming him first into presenting his sorriest excuses to Gordon. To top the cake, she had then given a shilling silver coin to the stunned boy, making Gordon nearly choke with reprobation.

Gordon, with Jeanne still holding his left arm, finally turned on Sackville Street and stopped in front of a small shop. Trying the entrance door first and finding it locked, he then stepped back from it and looked at the upper floor windows, shouting loudly over the din of the street traffic.

"NATHAN! NATHAN! IT'S GORDON SMYTHE. I NEED YOUR SERVICES URGENTLY."

A middle-aged, bespectacled and bearded man soon showed his head at one of the windows and looked down at Gordon and Jeanne.

"It's Sunday, sir. My shop is closed."

Gordon was about to insist when Jeanne put one hand on his shoulder.

"Let me handle this, Gordon."

She then shouted in a foreign language at the tailor, who answered her after going over his surprise, then disappeared from the window. Gordon stared at Jeanne, who was smiling with satisfaction.

"What language did you use?"

"Yiddish!" she said, pointing at an inscription in the store's façade. "There is writing in both Yiddish and Hebrew there."

"Don't tell me that you know Hebrew as well." said Gordon in disbelief. Jeanne nodded soberly and pointed at the façade of a store across the street, where an advertising board in Arabic was visible.

"I do, Gordon, no kidding. I can also read that Arabic sign over there."

"Damn!" muttered Gordon, overwhelmed by her linguistic talents. "I'm starting to feel like a moron compared to you."

That made her look tenderly at him in a way that made him melt. She caressed his cheek while speaking softly to him.

"Gordon, you are anything but a moron. You are in fact a very tolerant and kind man for your time."

"For my time? Why did you say that, Jeanne?"

She froze for a moment, thinking over the choice of words she had used but coming up blank and confused.

“I...I don't know. It came up unconsciously.”

The noise of bolts being pulled and of the shop's door opening prevented Gordon from asking her more questions then. Urged on by Nathan, both of them got quickly inside the shop, with the tailor then locking the door behind them.

“Some people take exception at a Jew working on a Sunday.” explained Nathan apologetically, getting a nod from Gordon.

“I know. Anti-Semitism is unfortunately all too common. The lady here had an accident yesterday and she has no wardrobe left save for this burned dress. Could you help her out?”

The tailor eyed critically Jeanne, noting her uncommon height and wide shoulders.

“The lady is of unusual built but I will do my best. This way, please.”

Nathan led them to the back of his shop, where a few dresses were on display on top of dummies. Taking a measuring tape, he noted down Jeanne's principal measurements, then compared them to those of the displayed dresses. He shook his head in frustration after a few minutes while pointing at two of the dresses, flounced affairs designed to be worn with crinoline cages.

“Those two dresses were made for, uh, large ladies and are the only ones big enough to accommodate the shoulder and chest sizes of the young lady. They are however too short for her. Modifying them will take time.”

Jeanne, examining the two dresses closely, smiled at the tailor after a moment.

“I think that I have a solution for this problem: let me try them without those stupid crinoline cages. Whoever invented those damn things should have been hanged anyway.”

“Of course!” replied Nathan, looking at the wide bottom extremities of the dresses. “Without the cages, they will go much further down. They will be somewhat loose and will float around, though.”

“I don't mind.” Said Jeanne resolutely. “I need a quick fix until you can fit me with custom dresses anyway. Where can I try them?”

“My daughter will help you out. MIRIAM! MIRIAM! COME HERE AND HELP OUT THE LADY.”

As a young woman in her early twenties appeared from a backroom, Gordon noticed a change of expression on Jeanne's face.

"Is something wrong, Jeanne?" he whispered to her.

"No, not really." she said hesitantly. "The name of that girl sounded very familiar to me but I can't say why. This amnesia is so frustrating."

"Like the doctor said, your memories will come back in good time."

"Yeah! In the meantime I feel like an empty shell."

Miriam then led Jeanne in the backroom so that she could try the two dresses, leaving Gordon to ponder her last words. He was not sure how he would have reacted to finding himself an amnesiac but Jeanne was showing a remarkable coolness in the face of her present, dire situation.

Gordon waited patiently for a good twenty minutes before Jeanne reappeared, wearing a burgundy red and gold dress. It was a bit large at the waist but was of the correct length and her wide hips quite made up for the crinoline's absence. Being a ball dress, it had a deep cleavage that gave a tantalizing view of her generous chest. Gordon immediately felt a physical reaction as he looked at her.

"Mister Meir is going to adjust it at the waist later on. What do you think, Gordon?"

"Why, you are just delightful like this, my dear Jeanne."

She smiled with contentment at those words, making her even more appetizing to Gordon.

"I am sure that you say that to all the amnesiac girls you meet. Let me try the other dress now."

She returned in the backroom, emerging again after ten minutes. She was now wearing a white and pink city dress with a buttoned collar more appropriate than the other dress for everyday wear. After being complimented by Gordon, she put on top of it a beige overcoat that fit with the dress she wore. A small pink hat was then picked up by Jeanne, who tried it in front of a mirror.

"Not bad overall." she pronounced then. "It should do until I could get a full wardrobe done. Let me just try some spare underwear."

That part didn't go exactly as well as the rest. When she got out of the backroom, wearing a white bodice that was too short for her, her breasts popped out as soon as she raised her arms, making in turn Gordon's eyes pop out of their sockets. Covering quickly her breasts, the embarrassed Jeanne then ran back in the dressing room. She finally resolved her problems by having Nathan Meir cut the bodice in two at the waist,

turning it into a two-piece undergarment. Adjusting and putting the last touches to Jeanne's new clothes took another hour. Promising Meir to come back on Monday to order custom-fit clothes, Jeanne paid the tailor and left the shop, Gordon following her with his arms full of boxes. She had already thrown away her original, ruined dress and was wearing her new city dress and overcoat. As Gordon was flagging down a Hansom cab, Jeanne got close to him and spoke in a low voice.

"I'm sorry about the earlier incident in the shop. I hope that I didn't embarrass you."

"Me, embarrassed?"

His smirk got him a playful elbow in the ribs from Jeanne, who rolled her eyes in mock exasperation.

"Men! They will never change."

Gordon felt her to be a lot more relaxed and self-assured as they rode home in the horse cab: the promenade seemed to have had a good effect on her mind. Deciding to test her, he had her recall the name of the preceding street as their cab reached each street corner. To their combined delight she remembered them all, something she would have been incapable of only a few hours earlier. In her happiness, Jeanne planted a kiss on Gordon's cheek. Seeing that it had troubled him, she smiled apologetically to him.

"I'm sorry if I did something inappropriate, Gordon. Please excuse me."

"No need to excuse yourself, Jeanne. It's just that parts of you reminds me of Megan, my late wife."

"I...I'm sorry. I didn't know that you were a widower. Did she die a long time ago?"

"Less than three years ago, while in labor. I lost my newborn son at the same time."

"Again, I'm sorry."

They then kept silent for the rest of the way. Carmelia was in the lounge when they entered Gordon's home. Seeing the boxes in Gordon's hands and the new dress worn by Jeanne, she let go her bible and came to them. She frowned when she noticed the absence of a crinoline under Jeanne's dress.

"Didn't they have crinolines at that tailor's shop?"

“They did, madam, but everything was too short for me so I had to improvise. Besides, there is nothing wrong with my hips, right, Gordon?”

“I wouldn’t change a thing in you, my dear Jeanne.” he answered enthusiastically, getting a suspicious look from his mother.

“Uh, I was going to attend the early afternoon service at Saint Paul’s Church after lunch. You are both coming as well, I suppose.”

Gordon hesitated, glancing at Jeanne.

“Mother, Jeanne is French, thus probably Roman Catholic as well. Bringing her to a Protestant church may be inappropriate.”

“Well, we are all good Christians, aren’t we?” replied Carmelia while looking at Jeanne, who searched her mind for a moment before speaking slowly.

“I do seem to know the bible’s history very well. I can also recall various prayers in a multitude of languages on top of Latin.”

“Multitudes?” said Carmelia, intrigued. Gordon then jumped in on the conversation, patting proudly Jeanne’s shoulder.

“Didn’t I tell you that Jeanne is a linguistic genius, Mother? She already demonstrated her knowledge of ten languages.”

“Ten?!”

“That is besides the point.” said Jeanne, a bit embarrassed by Gordon’s admiration towards her. “As you said, madam, I am a good Christian and will be glad to accompany you to the church.”

“Perfect! Then let’s have lunch!” pronounced Carmelia, both satisfied and relieved: a high flight prostitute could be a practicing Christian but was very unlikely to be an intellectual and a linguist as well. While quite unorthodox, Jeanne was proving to be a respectable lady after all.

14:26 (London Time)

Saint Paul’s Church, Wilton Place

Knightsbridge-Belgravia District

London, England

Carmelia left the church slightly disappointed: while Jeanne had followed without difficulty the service and had recited all the prayers without hesitation, her heart clearly had not been in it despite honest efforts on her part to fully participate. She was a

competent churchgoer but obviously not a devout one. When they reached the foot of the church's steps, Gordon took hold of one of Carmelia's hands.

"Mother, ride the carriage home. I am going to bring Jeanne to the British Museum."

"The British Museum? Why?"

"Jeanne seems to have an interest in history and foreign places. I am hoping that a visit there will help awake some souvenirs in her mind."

"Hmm, not a bad idea actually." agreed Carmelia, who then smiled to Jeanne. "Well, I hope that your visit will be entertaining as well as educative. Have a good afternoon, Lady Jeanne."

"And you as well, madam." replied Jeanne politely, curtsying. Gordon then helped Carmelia get in Thomas' carriage and waved at her as it pulled away. He next flagged one of the number of Hansom horse cabs waiting outside the church for potential customers. Thankfully the weather was bearable, the air being cold but rain being mercifully absent despite the overcast sky. He helped Jeanne into the carriage that stopped in front of them and sat beside her. He smiled with satisfaction at seeing her eagerness as they rode towards the British Museum: she definitely seemed to be enjoying the idea of visiting that most cultured institution.

There was a dense crowd of visitors inside the museum when they arrived, the institution being one of the few places apart from churches to be opened in London on Sundays. Going up the steps of the Greek style South Façade, Gordon and Jeanne turned left once inside and climbed a flight of stairs, entering the Assyrian Transept Room. The joyful expression on Jeanne's face as she admired the colossal winged lion stone gates from Nimrud warmed Gordon's heart. Getting close to her, he gently took hold of her right hand. She in turn pressed his hand and smiled to him, sparkles in her green eyes.

"Thank you so much for bringing me here, Gordon. This place is awakening a mass of souvenirs in me."

"So you visited this museum before, right?"

She shook her head at once, then pointed at the stone artifacts.

"It is more than that, Gordon. I actually remember those antiquities as if I lived with them."

Moving along with the other visitors nearly filling the gallery, they stopped in front of a group of stone obelisks and clay bricks bearing inscriptions. Gordon saw Jeanne suddenly freeze with surprise as she looked at a clay brick covered with strange signs.

“Gordon,” she said excitedly, “I can read this!”

“What?” replied Gordon, completely stunned.

“I tell you, I can read these inscriptions.”

As the other visitors around them and a museum guide nearby listened on with growing disbelief, Jeanne started reading aloud in a strange language, then translated the text in English for Gordon’s benefit.

“This commemorates the restoration of the ziggurat of Nimrud by King Shalmaneser the Third.”

Moving to face an obelisk, she spoke again in Assyrian, then in English.

“This obelisk celebrates the victorious campaign in Syria of the Assyrian King Ashur-Nasir-Pal the Second.”

An overwhelmed Gordon looked at the terse label at the foot of the obelisk: it only said ‘Assyrian obelisk, Ninth Century B.C.’. There had been no label in front of the brick.

“Bloody hell, Jeanne, how could you be able to read this?”

“I don’t know!” replied Jeanne, looking sincere. She then seemed to think about something and looked at the gold ring on her left middle finger. “My ring...it bears cuneiforms, like this obelisk. Maybe I learned Assyrian at the same place as I got my ring.”

She didn’t see the museum guide nearby walk away hurriedly as a richly dressed old man with an arrogant face sneered at her, while the old woman holding his arm looked contemptuously at her.

“That woman is obviously making this up to attract attention, Bertha. Let’s leave that lunatic alone.”

Anger rising at once in him, Gordon stepped between the man and Jeanne and stared down at the pompous couple.

“Sir, you just insulted my friend. I will ask you to excuse yourself with the lady forthwith!”

“And why would I do that?” replied the old man, trying to hide his fear as he faced off the much bigger and younger man. “No woman could know this writing system, so she is obviously lying. As for you, know that I am Lord Spencer, Earl of Islington.”

Gordon was about to retort to that when Jeanne stepped forward, drilling the aristocrat with her green eyes.

“I don’t care what you think of me, sir, as you are of no consequence in my opinion. Being a man or an earl doesn’t make you superior to me, on the contrary. If you want, we can get one of the museum’s historians and see if I really made up that Assyrian text. Then I will expect either an apology or a duel with the weapons of your choice...against me!”

Gordon was about to protest when Jeanne’s hand gripped his left arm with surprising strength, signaling him to keep quiet. As for the earl, he was too surprised to answer at first and, seeing the fierceness in Jeanne’s eyes, decided that retreat was the better part of valor this time. Whispers and amused comments went around the crowd of visitors as Lord Spencer, red-faced, walked away with his wife, not daring to look back. Facing Jeanne and taking hold of her shoulders, Gordon chided her in a low voice.

“Jeanne, why did you risk a duel with that man? I was there to protect you if need be.”

Her eyes didn’t waver as she stared back at him.

“Gordon, I know that I would have won easily against that pompous ass. Now, please forget him and let’s continue our visit.”

“Alright, but on one condition: that you be more discreet when translating ancient texts. I...”

The obvious truth then struck Gordon like a ton of brick.

“An archaeologist! You must be an archaeologist of some sort.”

“Me? Why?”

“Think about it, Jeanne! You know at least a dozen languages, including a few ancient ones; you have a keen interest in history and old artifacts; have obviously traveled a lot and seems to be a strong, rugged type. What else could you be?”

She didn’t speak at first, thinking over Gordon’s words. She finally smiled and kissed him on the lips.

“You must be right! You’re a genius, Gordon. How could I ever thank you?”

“By guiding me around the museum.” he replied maliciously. Jeanne’s eyes sparkled with amusement at those words.

“You have a deal, my dear Gordon.”

15:48 (London Time)

Egyptian Sculpture Gallery

British Museum, London

Sir Arthur Waddel, Curator of the British Museum, had been discreetly following the lady whom an excited museum guide had pointed to him twenty minutes ago, listening to the discreet lectures she was giving to her companion about the various artifacts of the museum. To his total bemusement, she had proven to have a vast and detailed knowledge of history, easily qualifying her in Waddel's mind as an expert historian. She also had demonstrated fluent mastery of such ancient languages as Assyrian, Etruscan, Old Greek, Latin and now Egyptian hieroglyphs, both ancient and Demotic types. Right now she was treating her companion to a translation of the Rosetta Stone, which bore texts in old hieroglyph, Demotic hieroglyph and Coptic, while a fascinated crowd of visitors listened on. The truly incredible part was that she had not made a single mistake yet, being in fact better at reading hieroglyphs than Waddel himself. Having seen and heard enough by now, Waddel accosted the couple as they were about to go up the Southeast staircase to the upper floor of the museum. Bowing his head, he shook hands first with the man.

"Good afternoon, sir. I am Sir Arthur Waddel, curator of this museum. May I compliment your friend on her extensive historical expertise?"

"You may, sir." replied the man, obviously pleased. "This is Lady Jeanne, a recent acquaintance of mine."

Waddel then kissed the woman's hand and smiled to her. She was certainly a more agreeable sight than the average historian.

"Just Lady Jeanne, miss?"

"For the moment, yes, I'm afraid." she sighed. "I was nearly struck by lightning in Hyde Park yesterday and since then can't remember who I am. My friend Gordon, who found me unconscious in Hyde Park, brought me to this museum after he saw my interest for history, in the hope of awakening souvenirs in me. It did work, as I believe that I must have been an archaeologist."

"You certainly have the expertise to claim such a title, Lady Jeanne. I am truly sorry for your unfortunate accident. Can you remember anything about yourself now?" His question made her shake her head sadly.

"Nothing! A doctor told me that it could be months before I start remembering my identity, if ever."

“A true shame! Lady Jeanne, I would be truly honored if I could tour the rest of the museum with you and your friend. We could also examine together a few pieces recently received from the Middle East that are not on display yet.”

“That would be fantastic, sir!” she replied, overjoyed. “I accept with pleasure.” Gordon felt as proud as a peacock as they resumed the tour, Jeanne’s hand hooked to his arm. He couldn’t wait to tell Carmelia what kind of gem they had found yesterday. Jeanne certainly outshone by a few orders of magnitude the collection of high-born twits his mother had been pushing on him up to now.

20:09 (London Time)

Sackville Street, St-James’ District

“God, I’m stuffed!” pronounced Gordon as he stepped out of a Lebanese restaurant with Jeanne. Their visit of the British Museum had gone well past closing hour, with Jeanne actually having translated an old Sumerian tablet still in the museum’s workshop. That had stunned Sir Waddel, who had claimed that nobody else had been able to decipher Old Chaldean before. Yet, Jeanne had made it look like child’s play. With both of them being famished by the time they left the museum, Gordon had gone along with Jeanne’s proposal to stop at this restaurant, something he certainly didn’t regret now. Jeanne patted her own belly as they turned into Piccadilly.

“I’m certainly full myself. How about walking the rest of the way to your home to help digest our loads?”

“A good idea.”

She waited a few seconds before speaking again while walking besides him.

“Gordon, I know as little about you as you and I know about myself. Would you mind telling me a bit about yourself?”

“There isn’t much to say, really. I was born on May third of 1826 on my family’s estate of Twickenham, was educated by a private preceptor and enrolled in the army as a cornet in 1844. I first served here in the Eight Hussars for two years, then was transferred to the Seventh Hussars in India, where I fought Indian and Afghan rebels and bandits. I was brevetted lieutenant there and married Megan four years ago. Then, she died during labor, along with our baby. I thought that I would go insane with grief but somehow got over it, mostly. I was transferred back to England in May of last year. Well, there I am! Not much to it, as you can see.”

Jeanne stopped and faced him while holding him by one arm, speaking very softly while staring in his eyes.

“Gordon, you are a lot more than not much. I have known you for less than a day but you already proved to be honest, kind and a perfect gentleman. May I also say that you are very handsome.”

His heart now beating faster, Gordon put his hands on her cheeks, admiring her smooth but resolute face.

“Jeanne, I am still nothing compared to you.”

“And I would probably be nothing now if you wouldn't have saved me yesterday.”

“But you did save me this morning from a runaway cart.”

Gordon saw her smile in the darkness. She then took one of his hands and pulled him along.

“Let's not do more comparisons about ourselves. Now, continue about your life. Which regiment are you in now?”

“In the Eight Hussars, of course. Didn't I tell you that already this morning?”

“Me and my damn memory!” she muttered while shaking her head in frustration.

Gordon then saw a look of horror suddenly appear on her face as she braked to a halt.

“Jeanne, what's wrong?”

“Balaklava...The charge of the Light Brigade!” she said in a near whisper, then hugging him while looking at him with tears in her eyes. Gordon could only hold the shaking woman clinging to him.

“Jeanne, don't be afraid! I'm here. What is happening?”

“Gordon,” she said in a choked voice, “I can't explain this but I just had a memory flash about that Crimean War I told you about this morning. At a place called Balaklava, the British Light Cavalry Brigade will charge down a valley ringed on three sides by Russian guns. It will be a massacre and the Eight Hussars will be part of the charge.”

“But, that's in the future!” protested Gordon, both shocked and incredulous. “How could you predict this?”

“I don't know!” she answered in a desperate tone. “Call it a premonition, a vision, anything. I just know that it will happen.”

Gordon then realized that, whatever she had just seen inside her mind, she was afraid for him to the point of despair. Tightening his hold, he kissed her neck tenderly, getting a kiss on the lips in return. They stayed glued together for a long moment, getting

sympathetic smiles from a passing couple in the process. Jeanne finally stepped back while still holding his shoulders.

“Let’s forget the future for the moment, Gordon. We have the present for ourselves.”

“Then let’s go home.” he replied softly, presenting his left arm, which she took. They then walked more slowly and deliberately, as lovers would do.

Walking alongside Green Park, they eventually came up to Hyde Park Corner. Looking around him, Gordon then had an idea and veered right towards the park, still leading Jeanne.

“I’m going to show you the spot where we found you. Maybe it will help you remember from where you were coming.”

“A sensible idea. Good thinking, Gordon.”

They soon stopped just past the Wellington Arch, with Gordon pointing at a spot on the pavement in the darkness.

“This is where you lay unconscious after lightning struck the arch.”

“My God! I was lucky not to be fried on the spot. I...”

She suddenly stopped speaking and looked around her nervously.

“Gordon, there are men around us.”

Gordon tensed up immediately, not wasting time in wondering how Jeanne could have seen hidden men or if she was even right. Hyde Park at night was notorious for harboring thieves and pickpockets and both of them could be in real danger right now. Adrenaline rushed through his veins when he saw four men leave their hiding places and converge quickly on them. Moonlight reflected on at least two blades as the men positioned themselves two paces to the front and back of the couple. Gordon could now see that one of the bandits held a single shot pistol, while another had a short truncheon in his right hand. The man with the pistol pointed his weapon at Gordon and spoke in a raspy voice.

“Hand over your money and your valuables and you won’t get hurt.”

Gordon, not wanting to put Jeanne at risk, was about to comply when the French woman surprised everybody by jumping forward and kicked away the man’s pistol, making the weapon discharge harmlessly skyward. Jeanne followed up by kneeing the surprised bandit in the groin, making him collapse on his knees. The nearest other bandit reacted too slowly and had his knife lunge parried by her before being savagely punched in the

plexus by Jeanne while she pushed an ear-splitting yell at the same time. As the second bandit collapsed, gasping for air, she turned on the third bandit, also armed with a knife. Feeling shame at standing by like this and doing nothing while Jeanne performed her heroics, Gordon took on the man armed with a truncheon, dodging a furious swing before delivering a powerful right hook to the jaw that made the bandit stagger on his feet. A second hook sent the man down on his posterior. A right uppercut under the chin then took Gordon's assailant out. Gordon turned around in time to see Jeanne violently twist her opponent's right arm, making the man drop his knife, before slamming down her elbow on the man's twisted elbow. Gordon heard the noise of the articulation breaking just before the thief screamed horribly. Jeanne then picked up the man's knife in time to face the man who had a pistol, enraged and now holding a knife. Totally fascinated by her now, Gordon watched Jeanne hold her knife with the cutting edge facing outward and down, using it to parry the first lunge from the bandit. Now realizing that he was facing a dangerous opponent, the bandit stopped pushing forward, instead thrusting his blade at her. She easily beat off his attacks, fencing with her knife in a way Gordon had never seen before. One lightning-quick swing of her blade and the bandit emitted a gurgling sound while holding his sliced throat and collapsing to his knees. Gordon's shout of triumph suddenly turned into one of alarm when he saw the second bandit Jeanne had taken on get on his knees and reverse his hold on his knife, preparing to throw it.

"JEANNE, WATCH OUT TO YOUR LEFT!"

He then started to run, trying to interpose himself between Jeanne and the knife-wielding bandit, but was too late. A blade swished through the night air and the bandit collapsed backward, a knife in his throat. Repeated whistle blows could now be heard in the distance as Gordon looked with disbelief at the dead thieves, then at Jeanne. She was barely breathing faster than usual and didn't appear bothered by the corpses and the blood around her one bit.

"My God, Jeanne, how did you do all this?"

There was no reprobation in his voice then, just awe. With the adrenaline flow cutting out now, she got out of combat trance and looked quickly around her.

"Hell, I don't know! It was all pure reflexes, Gordon."

"Some reflexes! Someone trained you damn well."

"I wish I knew who."

Both of them then saw two men in overcoats and top hats running towards them.

“Peelers⁵, at last!” announced Gordon. Jeanne hurriedly dropped the knife in her hand to the ground at those words and walked to Gordon, speaking in a low voice.

“Don’t tell them my role in this, please. They would never believe me anyway and your mother could get some weird ideas about me if this splashes over the newspapers’ front pages.”

He couldn’t help smile in amusement at that and took hold of her.

“Jeanne, I am the one having weird ideas about you now. Alright, I will tell the police that I did all this carnage.”

“Thank you, Gordon. You are sweet.” said Jeanne, following those words with a gentle kiss. The first policeman then arrived at the scene, a truncheon in his right hand, and contemplated the four bandits sprawled on the pavement, one of which was screaming with pain and holding his right elbow.

“Bloody hell! What happened here?”

Gordon then stepped forward and spoke calmly.

“Those four men tried to rob me and my lady friend. I defended myself. Please let me present myself: Captain Gordon Smythe, of the Eight Hussars Regiment.”

He saw the policeman grin in the dark as the second policeman arrived.

“Well done, sir! It seems that those ruffians attacked the wrong person tonight.”

“They sure did!” replied Gordon, glancing discreetly at Jeanne while repressing a smile.

21:35 (London Time)

London Metropolitan Police headquarters

Great Scotland Yards

London

Inspector John Wren shook hands with both the man and the woman and invited them to take the chairs in front of his desk. Sitting himself behind the desk that half filled his small office, he detailed the couple for a moment, noting the expensive jewels on the woman and the high quality clothes of the man. The latter was a bit over six feet tall, had black hair and eyes, a mustache and looked strong and fit, as befitted a cavalry officer. The woman, also around six feet in height, was unusually broad-shouldered and

⁵ Peelers: Nickname given to the old London policemen.

strong looking but was beautiful and very shapely. Wren's trained eyes saw bloodstains on the woman's right sleeve but none on the man's clothes. While surprised, he didn't raise that subject, only grabbing a sheet of paper and a pen before looking first at the man.

"I'm sorry if we had to bring you and the lady here, sir, but two men are dead and I must take care of a few formalities."

"We perfectly understand and don't mind it, sir."

"Then, may I have your name first, sir?"

"Certainly! I am Gordon Smythe, captain in the 8th Royal Hussars. My house is at number fourteen, Belgrave Square."

Wren wrote that down, then looked at the woman.

"And your name, miss?"

"That may be a problem, Inspector: I am an amnesiac and can't remember yet who I am. Gordon calls me Jeanne because the name sounded familiar to me."

She then told how she had become an amnesiac and how Gordon had been sheltering her. That left Wren thoughtful for a moment, measuring the implications of this.

"So, Lady Jeanne, you may have friends or relatives looking for you at this moment."

"If I have any here in London, yes. I was planning to come here on Monday anyway to report myself. I guess that this incident saved me the trip."

"It did, miss. I will post a notice about you afterwards."

"Thank you, Inspector." she said, sounding relieved.

"You are welcome, Lady Jeanne."

Wren then looked back at Gordon.

"Could you now describe the incident with those thugs, starting at where you were coming from?"

"Certainly, Inspector."

Gordon then spoke slowly for a few minutes, letting time to Wren to scribble down the information, with an occasional question here and there to clarify a point. At the end of it, Wren looked at him inquisitively.

"So, you took on four armed men single-handedly and defeated them, sir?"

"Actually, I tripped one man who was going to attack Gordon in the back." Volunteered Jeanne. "I then sat on him and held him down until Gordon could deal with him."

“I see!”

Reading back his notes, Wren noticed a small discrepancy and looked up at the man.

“Captain Smythe, you said that you and Lady Jeanne left the British Museum at about seven O’clock, yet the museum closes at six. Could you explain this?”

Gordon smiled then and took hold of Jeanne’s right hand.

“I can, Inspector. The curator of the museum, Sir Waddel, had invited us to stay late so that he could use Jeanne’s linguistic and historical expertise to help translate some ancient texts. You see, sir, I believe now that Jeanne must be an archaeologist of some sort.”

Wren rose an eyebrow in interest at that: this case was becoming more intriguing by the minute. He then rose from his chair and smiled at his visitors.

“If you may excuse me for a moment, I will just go check on something and will be back soon. Would you like some tea in the meantime?”

“That would be kind of you, Inspector.” replied softly the woman. Nodding his head, Wren called in an assistant and put him in charge of serving tea to the couple, then left the office and went downstairs to the interrogation rooms. There, he found Junior Inspector Charles Medhurst as the latter was leaving an interrogation room, while two policemen led away one of the two surviving bandits.

“So, what do you have, Charles?”

The young man looked at a notepad in his hand before answering Wren.

“Well, you will be happy to learn that that bastard of Jack Hill was one of the two dead men.”

“Good!” exclaimed Wren with glee: Hill had been on the run for four months now after escaping from prison. His sinister record included the murder of a policeman, numerous aggravated assaults, rapes and countless robberies. There was in fact a reward of 500 Pounds Sterling for his capture. Medhurst then went on.

“The other dead was Michael Kelly, a long-time associate of Jack Hill. Of the two others, one is named Peter Robinson and has a history of petty theft. The other one is a Bob Cole, a new one for us. Cole was the one you saw being returned to the cells. Robinson had his right elbow dislocated, by the way.”

“Ouch! That must hurt!” said Wren, wincing. Medhurst smiled and delivered his punch line.

“Indeed! Robinson said that a woman did that to him, apart from cutting Hill’s throat and pinning Kelly in the throat from five paces away.”

“WHAT?”

“My own reaction exactly, sir.” said Medhurst, deadpan. “He must be lying, of course.”

Wren then gave a jaundiced look at his subaltern.

“Think, Charles! What would other criminals think of Robinson and of his accomplices when learning that a single man defeated the four of them?”

“Uh, they would probably be considered with contempt, sir.”

“What if a woman defeated them?”

Medhurst paused, seeing Wren’s point.

“They would most probably become the butt of London’s jokes, sir.”

“Then, why would Robinson tell such a story, unless it was true?” asked Wren forcefully.

“But,” protested Medhurst, “no woman could be this dangerous, sir!”

“Charles,” said Wren patiently, “did you see the woman involved in this incident?”

“Uh, no sir!”

“Well, I have now in my office a six foot tall lass with wider shoulders than you and with bloodstains on her right sleeve. What do you say to that?”

“But, this is unheard of!” protested the junior inspector. “Who is that woman anyway?”

“A French archaeologist, if she and her companion are to be believed. Where is Robinson now, by the way?”

“In the infirmary, sir, getting his arm treated. Sir, you don’t really believe that bit about a woman defeating three men, do you?”

Wren sighed in exasperation then: nobody would effectively believe that, even if it was the obvious truth. As much as he hated hiding the truth, he was going to have to paint over that part of this case.

“Alright, book both Robinson and Cole on charges of attempted armed robbery.”

“What about assault, sir?”

“Who assaulted who, Charles?” replied Wren cynically before walking away.

Wren found the couple still waiting patiently in his office, sipping tea and chatting casually. Taking back his place behind his desk, he smiled at both the man and the woman.

“Good news! One of the dead robbers was a Jack Hill, a dangerous felon on the run. The 500 Pounds Sterling reward on him is now yours.”

“Five hundred pounds?” exclaimed the Hussars’ captain. “That’s quite a sum for a felon.”

“What did this Hill do to warrant such a reward, Inspector?” asked Lady Jeanne, curious.

“His criminal record is quite thick, Lady Jeanne, but the highest charge was the murder of a policeman.”

“Did that policeman leave a family behind, Inspector?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. He had a wife and five young children, which I met at the funeral of our poor agent. Why do you ask, Lady Jeanne?”

She didn’t answer directly, instead asking another question after a short pause.

“Could I have the name and address of that policeman’s widow, Inspector?”

Wren nodded his head gravely as Gordon Smythe gave a tender look at Lady Jeanne: he could see already what she had in mind.

“I certainly can get that information for you, Lady Jeanne. If you may both sign this declaration about the night’s events, I will then get you both the reward and the information on that widow.”

Once both had signed the paper Wren presented to them, with Jeanne hesitating before simply putting down ‘Lady Jeanne’ as a signature, the inspector then led them out of his office and through a series of corridors. He finally stopped in the accounting and administrative offices of the Metropolitan Police. It took twenty minutes to Wren to get the two duty clerks to deliver the cash reward and sign it out, plus finding the name and address of the policeman’s widow requested by Jeanne. Presenting the large purse containing the 500 Pounds Sterling to the couple, Wren repressed a knowing smile when Lady Jeanne took it without hesitation. He then gave her a piece of paper, which she read aloud.

“Elizabeth Hatfield, apartment 23, 286 Mansell Street, Tower Hamlets.”

She then looked with dismay at Wren.

“That whole area is a living dump! Is this woman getting a pension from the Metropolitan Police?”

“A very small one I’m afraid, Lady Jeanne.” Replied sadly Wren. “Her husband was quite junior in the service and didn’t draw much of a pay for starters. Misses

Hatfield had to move to her present address when she couldn't afford her old place anymore."

Gordon and Jeanne looked at each other at those words.

"Could we visit her tomorrow, Gordon?"

"I will escort you there with pleasure, my dear Jeanne." replied softly Gordon before looking at Wren. "Please don't forget to put up a notice about Jeanne, Inspector, so that relatives searching for her could trace her."

"I will, Captain. You are now free to go. Thank you again for your help and assistance in capturing those bandits. Let me guide you to the exit and get you a carriage."

"You are most kind, Inspector." said Gordon, then offering his arm to Jeanne before following Wren. John Wren went back to the administrative offices after bidding goodbye to the couple, filling a report on Lady Jeanne and giving it to the duty clerk before returning to his office to formalize the case against Robinson and Cole. Unknown to him was the fact that his notice about Lady Jeanne was going to be inadvertently misfiled and lost by the clerk.

23:12 (London Time)

14 Belgrave Square, London

Carmelia ran to Gordon as soon as he entered his house with Jeanne, kissing her son on one cheek.

"My God, where have you been? I was getting scared to death about you two."

Gordon took the time to hug his mother before smiling down to her.

"We had a few adventures today, me and Jeanne. We are just back from the Metropolitan Police headquarters, where we testified against a group of robbers who attacked us in Hyde Park. Don't worry about us: we were unhurt and those bandits are now out of the circulation. First, let me reintroduce you to our guest."

He then took Jeanne's hand and looked proudly at the French woman as he spoke.

"I am happy to have in my house Lady Jeanne, expert archaeologist and linguistic genius."

08:46 (London Time)

Monday, March 13, 1854

14 Belgrave Square

London

Carmelia, still half asleep, entered the kitchen and found Clara in the process of boiling water for making tea on top of the pot-bellied stove.

“Ah, good! Tea is just what I need now, Clara. Are Gordon and Lady Jeanne up yet?”

With the maid’s back to her, Carmelia didn’t see Clara’s knowing smile then.

“Yes, madam. They are washing up now.”

Not catching on to this, Carmelia sat sleepily at the small dining table of the kitchen, with Clara soon serving her tea and English muffins with jam. As she ate, Carmelia thought about Lady Jeanne. A woman of such rare aptitudes and a rich one to boot should have been quite well known around, yet she had never heard of a woman, French or otherwise, who remotely resembled Jeanne. The question of whether or not Jeanne was really single also nagged her mind. She wouldn’t have minded seeing Gordon court her except for the fact that so little was known about Jeanne, if that was her real first name.

The object of her concerns showed up half a hour later, led by a happy-looking Gordon.

“Good morning, Lady Carmelia.” said Jeanne amiably.

“Good morning, Lady Jeanne. I hope that you slept well.”

“I did, madam. That walking around yesterday really relaxed me.”

“You find meeting four robbers at night relaxing?”

Jeanne took Gordon’s hand and smiled tenderly to him while answering.

“Why worry with such a man at my side?”

“My son was right, Lady Jeanne.” said Carmelia proudly. “You do have a way with words. Please sit down and have breakfast.”

Carmelia chatted with Jeanne and Gordon for another twenty minutes before getting up from her chair.

“If you will excuse me now, I have to dress and pack: Thomas is driving me back to our family manor in Twickenham this morning. Don’t forget that you are invited to a reception next Saturday, Lady Jeanne.”

"I will be there, Lady Carmelia."

"Excellent! Sir Charles will be most delighted to meet you."

Carmelia then left the kitchen. Jeanne glanced at Gordon, who had a smile on his face.

"You, mister, look like the cat who was just left alone in the house with the canary."

"A good comparison indeed! So, what's next today?"

"I first go to Mister Meir's shop and get fitted for a new wardrobe. We then visit that poor Misses Hatfield. If there is still time left after that, I will do more shopping."

"Shop, shop, shop! Women only have that in mind." said Gordon jokingly, earning a friendly slap on the shoulder.

13:41 (London Time)

Mansell Street, Tower Hamlets District

London

Gordon looked around him with dismay as he helped Jeanne get out of the Hansom cab: the street was crowded, filthy and stank like a sewer, while the multistory brick townhouses lining the narrow street reeked of poverty and neglect. The people circulating in the street were a pitiful, ragged lot with little but despair and resignation on their faces. Escorting closely Jeanne to the door of number 286, Gordon had to run a gauntlet of emaciated children begging for money and had to screen Jeanne from seeing a drunken man busy urinating against the wall of the building. The noise level inside the building proved nearly as high as in the street, with children playing and running everywhere and with adults shouting at each other. Gordon now understood why Jeanne had chosen not to wear her expensive jewels today, keeping only her gold ring with cuneiform engravings on. Going up the wooden staircase to the first floor, they came up to a door with a number 23 painted on it. The wails of a baby could be heard inside as Gordon knocked on the door. A small boy, maybe three or four years old, opened the door after a moment, looking up at Gordon and Jeanne with curiosity. Gordon smiled down to him, getting a timid smile in return.

"Hello, boy. Is your mother in?"

"Yes!" said the boy, not moving.

"Uh, can we see her?"

"Thomas," shouted a woman from inside the apartment, "let the man in!"

The boy opened the door wide and let Gordon and Jeanne in, then pushed the door closed, slamming it violently and attracting a concert of invectives from across the hallway. The couple was now inside a tiny two-room apartment crowded beyond belief. The room they were in obviously served as a kitchen, dining room, lounge and washroom and was no bigger than nine feet by twelve feet. Gordon could look inside a similarly sized bedroom filled with three beds, a crib and an old dresser. A woman in her late twenties was sitting in a rocking chair, holding a baby and looking at Gordon and Jeanne with suspicion. The red-haired woman had once been beautiful but misery and hardship had marked her face and her body had thinned to a ghost of its former self. A toddler girl with hollow eyes was playing at the woman's feet, soon joined by little Thomas. The pot-bellied stove sitting in a corner of the room was empty and the whole apartment was cold and damp. Gordon swallowed the lump in his throat as he surveyed the miserable place: he had heard of the poor living conditions in the eastside districts of London but had never visited them because of their reputation as high-crime areas. He could see Jeanne's eyes becoming moist as the woman in the rocking chair addressed him.

"Can I do something for you, sir?"

"Uh, yes. Are you Misses Elizabeth Hatfield?"

"I am!" she replied cautiously. Gordon then walked to her and, taking gently her right hand, gallantly kissed it.

"Madam, I am pleased to bring you good news."

The woman sighed at those words and smiled weakly.

"That will be a nice change, sir. What is it?"

"First of, your husband's killer is dead. He tried to rob us last night and met his match."

Elizabeth Hatfield was silent for a moment, looking past Gordon at nothing in particular. She then spoke with bitterness in her voice.

"I don't want to sound ungrateful, sir, but that will not give me back my Francis."

"No, but we can help you escape this miserable life, madam. There was a 500 pounds reward for the capture of Jack Hill: that reward is now yours."

Elizabeth looked up with disbelief at Gordon.

"You said 500 pounds, sir?"

"Yes, madam." said Gordon, who had decided by now what he was going to do next. "Do you know how to cook?"

"Of course, sir!" replied the woman, puzzled. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I am offering you to move with your children to my house in Belgrave Square, to work for me as an assistant cook. Do you accept?"

Tears appeared nearly at once in Elizabeth's eyes as she tried to answer Gordon. She only could nod her head in agreement as she started crying silently. Jeanne immediately knelt beside her, caressing the woman's dirty hair.

"Please don't cry, madam. This is your chance to offer a decent life to your children. By the way, we were told that you had five children. I see only three of them here."

Choking off her tears, Elizabeth stared into Jeanne's eyes.

"Mary and Peter are working at the garment factory up the street, madam."

That shocked both Jeanne and Gordon: those children could not be more than ten years old, judging from the age of their mother.

"How old are your two children, madam?" said Jeanne, nearly afraid to ask. Elizabeth answered in a near whisper.

"Mary is seven, while Peter is six. Without their earnings we would be starving."

Cold rage filled Gordon as he digested that information.

"Madam, lead me to that factory: we are getting your kids out of there. Jeanne can take care of your three youngest children in the meantime."

"Let...let me get my shawl first, sir." said the overwhelmed woman, then handing her baby to Jeanne before rising from her rocking chair and talking down to the two children at her feet.

"Thomas, Helen, be nice with the lady while I am gone. I am going to get Mary and Peter."

Both children nodded silently their heads and went back to their playing. Their mother took a ragged shawl from a wall hook and left the apartment, Gordon on her heels. Going down to the street level and leaving the building, she turned right on Mansell Street and walked up two blocks before stopping in front of a dilapidated brick building similar to the others they had passed. She then looked hesitantly at Gordon, examining him from head to toe.

"Why are you doing this for us, sir? We never met before."

"No, we didn't, but I believe in simple Christian charity, madam. Unfortunately, many people seem to have forgotten that concept. Let's go in and get your children now."

Elizabeth stared into his eyes for a moment, then turned around and entered the building. They found themselves in what looked like an apartment building crudely converted into a garment sweatshop. A small, fat and rude-looking man blocked their path as they walked towards the staircase, looking cautiously at Gordon before staring at Elizabeth.

“What do you want, Misses Hatfield? You know that visits are not permitted during work hours.”

“I am here to take back Mary and Peter, Mister Grant.” replied Elizabeth, trying to sound resolute. “They will not be working here anymore.”

“May I remind you that you still owe me last month’s rent, madam?” said the man, unsympathetic. “Your kids will work here until you can pay your rent.”

“Bloody hell, man!” swore Gordon, stepping between Elizabeth and Grant and staring down angrily at the man. “Do you have to be such a bastard about this? How much does she owe you?”

“One pound and four shillings.”

“What? You charge her this much for such a dump?”

“If she’s not happy about it, then she can always move out...once she pays her rent.” replied the unmoved man. Gordon gave him a black look while taking out his wallet, extracting three one pound gold coins and throwing them in the man’s face.

“Here is your money, mister! Consider this month’s rent covered as well. Pray that I find those two children in a good state.”

Pushing aside the red-faced man, Gordon followed Elizabeth up the staircase all the way up to the third floor. Once there, the woman started calling out for her children.

“MARY! PETER! WHERE ARE YOU?”

A young girl ran out of a room nearly immediately, smiling.

“Mother! How come you’re here?”

Elizabeth took the girl in her arms and hugged her tearfully.

“I’m taking you and Peter out of here for good. Where is your brother, Mary?”

“They moved him to the boiler room in the basement, Mom.”

The little girl then looked up at Gordon.

“Who is that man, Mom?”

“A gentleman who has come to help us, Mary.”

Before Gordon could present himself to the girl, a burly man emerged from a room, holding a wooden stick.

“Mary, you little tramp, get back to work before I...”

“Before you what?” shot back Gordon, advancing quickly on the man and taking away his stick before breaking it in two. The man had one look at Gordon’s muscular bulk, then retreated inside a room without a word, attracting a caustic remark from the Hussars officer.

“Bloody coward! Only brave enough to beat kids up.”

Turning towards Elizabeth and Mary, Gordon smiled down at the girl.

“Hello Mary! I’m Gordon Smythe. How about leading us to your brother now?”

“Yes sir!” answered timidly the girl before running down the staircase. The trio found little Peter in a gloomy basement room, shoveling coal with another boy into the furnace of a steam boiler. Gordon gave a warning look at the man watching the boys as Elizabeth hugged Peter.

“We’re taking the boy out of here. Don’t interfere!”

As they left the basement and exited the factory, Gordon surveyed the children’s clothes: they were not much more than rags and were woefully inadequate for the cold, damp March weather. A stop later at a clothing store was definitely in order.

Going back to the Hatfield’s apartment, they found there that Jeanne had already bundled up the family’s meager wardrobe inside a blanket.

“No sense delaying your move out of this hole.” Explained the French woman, sweeping one arm around her. “As for your other belongings, they are not worth salvaging. Don’t worry: I will provide you with all that you will need. Are we all ready?”

“Wait, please!” said Elizabeth, who then went to her bed and searched for a moment under the mattress before pulling out a large silver badge.

“My husband’s police badge.” she explained in a soft voice, close to tears.

16:41 (London Time)

14 Belgrave Square, London

Elizabeth Hatfield was in a near state of shock when the Hansom cab transporting her family and their two benefactors stopped in front of a luxurious townhouse. The cab was filled with boxes from the wildest shopping spree she had witnessed in her life, courtesy of Lady Jeanne. The 500 pounds of the reward was still intact, kept inside Elizabeth’s coat pocket, itself part of the brand new clothes she was

wearing. All of her children were similarly attired in new garbs and each held a new toy as well. Helped down by Gordon, she then took baby Harry as Jeanne handed him to her. Shouted orders from Gordon brought out of the house a foot servant and a maid, who helped bring inside the Hatfields' new acquisitions while Lady Jeanne led the family inside. A plump maid who was waiting for them inside smiled with delight at the sight of the children.

“Bambinos! Que vene!”

Lady Jeanne then engaged in a short conversation in a foreign language with the maid, who ran to a room at the end of the hallway, apparently all excited and happy.

“What language did you just speak, Lady Jeanne?” asked Elizabeth, intrigued. Jeanne gave her a big grin.

“Italian. Clara seems to love children, like most Italians do, in fact. I just asked her to heat up water for your baths.”

“Our baths?”

“Of course! If you are going to start a new life here, you might as well start it clean. Besides, a nice-smelling baby is so much more fun to cuddle, right, Harry?”

The baby boy giggled as Jeanne tickled his feet, making Elizabeth feel warm inside: she still couldn't believe her luck in meeting such kind strangers.

20:53 (London Time)

Third floor bedroom

14 Belgrave Square

Gordon watched on, fascinated, as Jeanne was singing a soft ballad in some ancient language in order to put the Hatfield children to sleep. She was also playing soft music from the box lyre she had found this morning in an antique shop. Seeing her sitting besides the big bed with four children in them, looking tenderly at the kids while singing, made Gordon dream about the day when he would have children of his own. To have them with such a wonderful woman as Jeanne would be bliss indeed. Elizabeth Hatfield, standing besides Gordon in the doorway of the bedroom, looked up at him and whispered in order not to disturb Jeanne's performance.

“You are lucky to have such a wife, Mister Smythe. She has so many talents.”

Gordon couldn't help smile in amusement then: somehow, they had not yet have time to explain to Elizabeth who Jeanne was.

“Jeanne is a guest here and not my wife, Misses Hatfield. I will tell you later about her. But you are right about her: she is indeed full of unusual talents.”

“Not your wife? But...you look like such a perfect couple. You should marry her while you have a chance, sir.”

“That’s in the books, madam.” Replied softly Gordon while eyeing Jeanne.

23:58 (London Time)

Master bedroom

14 Belgrave Square

Gordon sighed as he stopped turning around in his bed and opened his eyes in the darkness of his bedroom. He just couldn’t sleep, not with the face and body of Jeanne constantly in his mind. Finally making up his mind, Gordon jumped out of bed and groped for his robe in the dark, putting it on as he walked to the bedroom’s door. Opening it, he stepped in the hallway and had to come to an abrupt stop: Jeanne had been about to knock on his door and was now nose to nose with him, her fist raised and ready to knock. Both smiled at each other.

“Uh, hi Gordon!” she whispered in the dark, her sparkling white teeth showing. “I...I was kind of restless and couldn’t sleep.”

“How curious! Me too!”

Both were silent for a moment. Gordon’s hands moved first, taking hold of her waist before caressing her back. Jeanne then slowly glued herself to him, her hands roaming as well while she exchanged a long kiss with Gordon. They finally parted, both of their hearts racing.

“Gordon, the truth is that I’m lonely in my bedroom. Could I stay with you for the night?”

“Jeanne, I was about to ask the same thing.”

Without thinking further, Gordon grabbed Jeanne and lifted her in his arms, then walked back inside his bedroom while she giggled.

“Aren’t we supposed to do this only once married?”

Stopping besides his bed, Gordon stared into the French woman’s green eyes.

“Jeanne, you just need to answer one question: will you marry me once you will have regained your memories of yourself?”

“Yes!”

Her answer had been a whisper, but it had come out instantly and passionately. Kissing her while she was still in his arms, he then laid her on the bed. Both shed their robes and underwear quickly before Gordon lay on top of her.

“Jeanne, I don’t care what your real name could be or what you were before. I just know that I will love you all my life.”

She caressed his face and kissed him before replying very softly.

“Gordon, I can only be eternally grateful that a man such as you found me first in that park. Without you I would probably have gone insane.”

“Then, let’s celebrate our reunion the proper way.” Said Gordon before starting a round of love session with her.

07:14 (London Time)

Tuesday, March 14, 1854

Master bedroom, 14 Belgrave Square

London

Gordon kissed Jeanne awake, bringing a radiant smile to her face.

“Good morning, my dear. Did you sleep well?”

“Like a baby.” she replied softly, kissing him back. Both then stayed besides each other in the large bed, exchanging caresses. Gordon noticed a puzzled look appear on her face after a minute or so, making him curious.

“Something is bothering you, Jeanne?”

“Yes: my mind! It seems to be playing tricks on me.”

“No wonder: you’re amnesiac.”

“That’s not what I meant, Gordon. Things are coming back to my mind constantly since yesterday, but not what I would expect from remembering my identity.”

“What kind of things?” Said Gordon, now intensely curious. Jeanne thought her words over carefully before answering.

“The kind of general knowledge that Doctor Portal said I would remember first, like about languages and objects I learned to use, historical events and general knowledge about the world and sciences.”

“That seems normal stuff to me, Jeanne.”

“Not if they include things such as flying machines and weapons that could destroy whole cities in one mighty blast, Gordon.”

Shocked and surprised, Gordon rose on one elbow while staring at her.

“Flying machines? But, that’s impossible! Your imagination must be playing tricks on you.”

“Gordon,” said cautiously Jeanne, not wanting to scare him away from her, “the pictures that now appear in my mind are quite graphic and detailed, as if I was living among those machines. When I tried to understand the machines or tools I pictured in my mind, answers and some scientific and technological knowledge came to my mind as well.”

“Such as?”

“Well, while thinking about a flying machine called an aircraft, I wondered what made it able to fly. A series of scientific principles and technical concepts then popped up in my mind, answering my questions in such detail that I think that I could build at least a rudimentary flying machine.”

“But, no such machine exists, Jeanne. Where would you have learned such knowledge?”

“I wish I knew, Gordon, since that would probably help me remember who I am.”

“Did you learn anything else unusual from those souvenirs?”

“A lot, actually, much of it that would be considered impossible today, like submersible ships and guns that fire repeatedly before needing to be reloaded.”

Gordon did his best to hide his dismay then, looking down gravely at Jeanne.

“And what do you think all this means, Jeanne?”

“I believe two things right now, Gordon. First, I believe that those things really exist, or existed where I came from, wherever that is.”

“And second?” asked Gordon, swallowing hard. Her eyes then became moist as she got close to him.

“That, whoever I am or wherever I come from, I still love you, Gordon.”

08:22 (London Time)

Dining room

14 Belgrave Square

Clara couldn’t help notice the preoccupied look on her master’s face as she picked up his now empty tea cup and plate. He had hardly spoken six words in the half

hour since he had come down from his bedroom. Lady Jeanne was also noticeable by her absence.

“Excuse me, sir. Is Lady Jeanne coming down for breakfast this morning?”

“Uh, I don’t think so, Clara.” he answered absent-mindedly. “She is going to do some shopping all by herself this morning. How are Misses Hatfield and her children doing, by the way?”

“Just fine, sir.” said the maid, grinning. “Her kids are so cute! They are finishing breakfast now in the kitchen.”

“Good! When they are finished, show Misses Hatfield around the house. Tell her also that she will start helping you in the kitchen tomorrow morning. I will take her to the bank after lunch, so be ready to baby-sit her kids for an hour or two.”

“To the bank, sir?”

“Yes, Clara. Misses Hatfield has a rather large sum given to her by Lady Jeanne that she has to put to safety. No sense either in missing on potential return interests from a savings account.”

“You are right, sir. One should always get the utmost from one’s money.”

Jeanne then chose that time to walk in the dining room, fully dressed and with her new overcoat on. Going to Gordon, she bent down and kissed him quickly before starting to walk out.

“I’m going to tour Saint James’ District, Gordon. I’ll be back for lunch.”

“Have fun!” replied Gordon, watching her leave before getting up and looking at Clara. “I’ll be in my study if anybody needs me, Clara.”

The maid in turn watched him leave the dining room. With a beautiful woman as a guest and with a family of six now in, the household’s atmosphere had changed drastically from the quiet, routine rule of a mostly absent single man like Gordon Smythe.

09:30 (London Time)

67A St James’ Place, London

Neville Black had a last look at his pocket watch, then decided that it was opening time and pocketed back his watch before leaving the back room of his gunsmith store and walking to the entrance door to unlock it. To his surprise a young woman was waiting on the sidewalk in front of his store, looking through the façade window. Female customers were a rarity indeed in any gunsmith store. She came in as soon as Neville

unlocked the door, exchanging a polite greeting with him before avidly looking around his display cases. The woman, wearing fine jewels and being very tall for her gender, was quickly attracted to the counter displaying pistols. Moving to that counter, Neville cleared his throat to attract her attention.

“Ahem! Are you looking for something in particular, miss?”

“I am!” she replied in a clear, agreeable voice. “Do you have any American-made Colt revolvers, sir?”

That made Neville raise an eyebrow in surprise: very few of his customers knew about Colt weapons, them being so new. She must have heard stories about them from someone returning from the United States. Moving to the end of the counter, he bent down and fetched some guns from the lower tablets.

“You are in luck, miss: I acquired a few Colt models from Mister Colt himself when he was exposing his guns at the 1851 Great Exhibition. I can’t say that they are big sales items, though. I sold only one of them in three years.”

“That’s because your other customers didn’t know a good pistol when they saw one.” replied resolutely the woman, nearly getting Neville to make a remark of his own on women and guns. He did manage to keep it to himself, though, and was about to present each of the Colts to her when she surprised him again. Pushing a whoop of delight, she took hold of a particular gun and smiled with satisfaction.

“A Dragoon! Excellent! Do you have a second one like this, by chance?”

“Uh, I have a few others in my back store.”

“Then, bring three more Colt Dragoons, if you have that many, sir.”

“Three more, miss?” said Neville, having a hard time believing his ears.

“Yes! I need two for a friend of mine and two for me. If you have the reloading accessories and any tools that go with them, then I will take them too, along with at least 500 percussion caps, six cans of fine grain powder and a reserve of already molded .44 caliber bullets, Minié type if possible.”

“Good God, miss! Are you planning on attending a war?” exclaimed Neville. He then found himself the target of the woman’s unflinching green eyes.

“As a matter of fact, maybe, sir.”

Deciding that he didn’t want to antagonize further that customer, Neville went inside the back store and got her extra revolvers, percussion caps, accessories and bullets. Putting the lot on the counter in front of the young woman, he smiled to her.

"I guess that I will have to get more of these from the United States now. Each gun case for the Colt Dragoons include a spare six-shot cylinder, by the way. Anything else, miss?"

"Yes! I will need holsters, both belt and saddle types, for these guns, along with belts and ammunition pouches."

"Then, this way please." answered the gunsmith while pointing at a corner of his shop where leather products were displayed. The woman followed him there and examined the items as he described them.

"These holsters here will fit your Colt Dragoons. You also have here various types of belts and pouches that will go with these holsters. What waist size is your friend, miss?"

She eyed Neville critically before answering.

"He's taller than you but has about the same waist size as you, I would say."

"Then this one should fit him." He said while grabbing a belt and adding it to the holsters she had selected. The woman grabbed a few matching pouches as well, then shocked Neville by taking another belt and trying it around her own waist after slipping two Colt Dragoon holsters and two pouches on it.

"This will do just fine for me." she pronounced resolutely, ignoring the gunsmith's stunned look. "Do you have fighting knives as well, sir?"

"Knives? Uh, yes miss, right here."

The woman looked for a moment at his knives display and quickly decided on a huge American Bowie hunting knife. Taking it and its scabbard, she then smiled at him.

"Well, I think that I'm nearly done here. Since you got Colt revolvers, would you also happen to have models of Colt-Paterson revolving carbines or rifles?"

"In fact, I do, miss, but to be frank they sell even less than Colt revolvers. They have a bad reputation for unreliability and accidents."

"Oh?" said the young woman. She then concentrated for a moment and frowned with apparent frustration. "I can't remember anything about that, but you certainly must know better than me about it. Could I see them anyway?"

"Certainly, miss." said the gunsmith, who walked behind his counter and took two rifles from a well filled wall rack, putting them on the counter in front of Jeanne and pointing at each weapon in turn while speaking.

"First, I have this Colt-Paterson Model 1836 revolving cylinder rifle. It has a caliber of .69 inch and has a seven-shot cylinder. The weapon above it is a Colt-

Paterson Model 1842 carbine. Its cylinder can hold eight shots of .55 caliber. The main complaints about those Colt-Paterson weapons are their unreliability, their tendency to spit lead and hot gases from the gap between the barrel chamber and the front of the cylinder and the possibilities of having chain firing, when all chambers ignite at once when you fire a shot.”

“Those are serious problems indeed, sir. Are those complaints founded in your opinion, though?”

“Well, the lead and gas spitting is definitely a problem in these weapons, especially in the bigger, more powerful .69 caliber. The reliability could be better but, in the hands of a caring professional, these guns can be devastating, even if they are a bit fragile. As for the problem of chain firing, I believe that it is due to the fact that many shooters are not careful enough to cover with grease the front of the loading chambers once the powder and balls are in place. These weapons are by the way the only production repeating long guns you will find on the market now, anywhere. If you are looking for heavy firepower, then those are the things you want.”

The woman nodded while eyeing the two guns, then grabbed the smaller, .55 caliber carbine and examined it from up close.

“Do you have a set of spacer gauges, sir? I would also need a tool set for dismantling this gun.”

“Uh, sure, miss!” replied the surprised gunsmith before going into his back store. He was back after two minutes with the gauges set and the tools, putting them on the counter. The woman first checked with the gauges the spacing between the face of the loading cylinder and the back of the barrel. She was apparently unimpressed by what she saw.

“The spacing is effectively quite large. It will lose quite a lot of energy from the powder through that gap.”

“I could always fit a thin plate to diminish that gap, miss. It would be maybe half a day’s work.”

“You could, sir?” asked the woman, smiling. “Could you as well fit a flash guard plate around the lower half of the cylinder, so that my left arm is protected during firing?”

“Certainly, miss. In fact, that modification is one that is often requested with those weapons.”

“Perfect! Let me just finish my inspection of this carbine and I will then pay for my acquisitions.”

Watched closely by the gunsmith, the young woman quickly dismantled the carbine, then checked the internal mechanisms before reassembling the weapon, all the while showing the assurance and flair of a person expert in gun handling. She finally looked and smiled at the gunsmith.

"I will take this carbine, sir. If you have spare cylinders, I will take them as well, along with a full accessories kit, two cans of powder, one can of percussion caps and what you have in .55 caliber Minié bullets. I will come back on Friday to pick up the carbine once you have a filler plate fitted to it. You may add up my bill now."

"Yes miss!" said the happy shop owner, who then went to his cash register and added up her bill. The young woman didn't flinch when he told her that it all came to a total of a bit over 37 Pounds Sterling, a sum many Londoners would find quite impressive, it representing months of salary for an average worker. The woman actually added even more to that bill, selecting a pair of leather saddlebags in which she stuffed her new acquisitions, minus the carbine. She then left the store, the heavy bags slung over her right shoulder. The shop owner watched her walk away from a window, then shook his head in amusement: that woman had to be his most unusual customer ever.

11:28 (London Time)

Private study, 14 Belgrave Square

Gordon sighed with relief as he closed the accounting book and put down his pen. He always hated doing his household accounting, finding it boring and making him feel like a cheapskate. However, as his mother kept telling him, Sir Charles Smythe would not be part of the top shareholders of the prestigious East India Company if he had neglected his accounting chores. Gordon was putting back on the lid of his ink bottle when someone knocked on the door of his study.

"Come in!"

His heart accelerated when Jeanne stuck her head inside, a charming smile on her face.

"Hi, Gordon! I have a few things for you with me. Could you close your eyes for a minute?"

"Sure, my love!" replied Gordon, closing his eyes and straightening in his chair, a smile of anticipation on his face. If the few days with her had taught him something, it was that Jeanne loved making other people happy, a trait that only endeared her more to him.

"You can look now." said Jeanne from behind him after a moment. Doing so, Gordon saw two closed wooden cases now sitting in front of him on his desk.

"What are these, Jeanne?"

"Open them and look!" she answered in an encouraging tone. Gordon did so, revealing two big revolvers and their accessories. Taking one of the revolvers, he examined it with growing happiness.

"A pair of six-shot pistols. They are real beauties."

"These are American-made Colt Dragoon .44 caliber revolvers. I also have a few more things to go with them."

She then lined on the desk the belt, holsters, pouches, powder and ammunition. Gordon got up from his chair and kissed Jeanne for a long moment before looking into her eyes.

"These revolvers are magnificent! Somehow I think that my pair of Adams single shot .577 caliber pistols will take an early retirement. Thank you, Jeanne."

"Actually, you could say that those guns are as much for my benefit as for yours, Gordon. They will help you stay alive while in combat and thus also help me keep you." His happiness suddenly tempered by those last words, Gordon eyed cautiously Jeanne.

"I suppose that you are referring to that war in Crimea you predicted?"

"You suppose right, Gordon." she said somberly. "I keep remembering more details about it all the time."

"Jeanne, to remember something you have to either live it or see something about it, yet this war still hasn't happened. What you see must be visions from the future."

"Maybe that's what they are, Gordon. It however doesn't change the fact that they make me worry about you. You are too good a man to lose."

Softened up by her declaration, Gordon stepped to her, hugging her for a long kiss. When they parted, Gordon sighed while looking into her eyes.

"And you are too good a woman to pull away from, Jeanne. Come downstairs and let's have lunch: we have to escort Misses Hatfield to the bank this afternoon."

13:39 (London Time)

Midland Bank

Prince's Street, The City

London

Gordon, Jeanne at his left side and Elizabeth Hatfield behind him, swept his right arm around as they entered the large main hall of the Midland Bank.

“The Midland Bank, repository of my family’s wealth and the best bank in London, notwithstanding what the Bank of England across the street may say about it.” The trio then took place in one of the short waiting lines of customers. Chatting about the sights they had seen while riding in Thomas’ carriage, now parked outside the bank, they only had to wait five minutes before their turn at the service counter came. A clerk in his mid forties, thin and balding, smiled at Gordon and his two female companions as they stepped forward.

“Good day, Mister Smythe! I see that you had the pleasure of meeting Lady Jeanne D’Orléans.”

While Gordon froze up, thunderstruck by the clerk’s words, joy filled Jeanne’s face.

“You...you know me, sir? What name did you say again?”

“But...your name: Lady Jeanne D’Orléans. You are our biggest account holder.” replied the clerk, surprised by their surprise. “Is something wrong, miss?”

“Not anymore!” said Jeanne before hugging and kissing happily Gordon. “I can’t believe it! I’m finally going to know who I am.”

While hugging Jeanne, Gordon looked at the puzzled clerk.

“We need to see the bank’s director, sir. Tell him that this is most urgent and important.”

“Uh, yes sir!”

As the clerk hurried to one of the offices behind the service counter, Gordon gently took hold of Jeanne’s face and kissed her.

“Jeanne D’Orléans: a beautiful name for a beautiful woman.”

Taking her hand, he led her and Misses Hatfield through a wicket and past a few bank employees desks. They were approaching a wood and tainted glass door when the clerk who had greeted them at the service counter emerged from that door. Stopping cold at their sight, the clerk then stepped aside, holding the door open for them.

“The director will see you now, ladies and gentleman.”

Jeanne took the time to slip a gold coin in the clerk’s vest pocket before going inside.

“I owe you a big one, mister. Thank you for remembering me.”

“What did I do to deserve this, miss?” said weakly the puzzled employee, getting a grin from Gordon.

“Like Lady Jeanne said, you remembered her.”

He then followed Jeanne and Elizabeth Hatfield inside the office, where the bank director greeted them and shook their hands. Sir Kenneth Maple was a jovial, rotund man with long whiskers and moustache. Offering chairs to his visitors, he then took place behind a huge desk of polished wood, sitting in a leather padded armchair. He immediately noticed the expectation on the faces of his visitors and looked questioningly at Gordon.

“How may I help you today, Mister Smythe?”

“It is Lady Jeanne that you can most help, Sir Maple.” answered Gordon while putting a hand on Jeanne’s shoulder. He then spent a couple of minutes explaining to him how Jeanne had become amnesiac and had been sheltered by him. The director nodded gravely his head at that story, shifting his gaze to Jeanne.

“You were indeed very lucky, Lady Jeanne. You could have been robbed while unconscious and then end up a lonely, destitute woman without memories. Your fate could have been quite grim, miss.”

“I know, sir.” replied softly Jeanne, bowing her head. “That’s why I am grateful to have met such a gentleman as Gordon. This may sound silly, sir, but could you tell me about myself?”

“By all means, Lady Jeanne. Let me just get your account file first, please.”

Gordon felt Jeanne’s hand search for his hand and then press it anxiously as Sir Maple left momentarily the office. The director returned within minutes with an inch thick file full of papers, receipts, account updates and cashed checks, putting the lot on his desk and sitting down. Taking a particular sheet from the file, he cleared his throat before reading from it.

“This is the account opening form you filled five years ago when you first came here. Your...”

“Wait!” interrupted Jeanne. “Could I have something to write all this down first?”

“Of course, miss!” replied the director, then searching in a desk drawer and taking out a few blank sheets of papers, putting them on the of the desk nearest to Jeanne, along with an ink bottle and a pen. Jeanne then shifted her chair close to the desk and dipped the pen’s tip in the ink bottle as Sir Maple resumed his reading in a slow, deliberate voice.

“As I was about to say, your full name is Jeanne Marie Céleste D’Orléans. You were born as Jeanne Marie Céleste de Brissac in Brissac, France, on June thirteen of 1831. You married the Chevalier Pierre Alphonse D’Orléans in the French overseas Territory of the Guadeloupe in 1846 but your husband died of a tropical fever in 1847

and you had no children. Both of your parents are dead according to the information you gave on this form.”

Gordon felt relief on hearing this: Jeanne’s true marital status had been increasingly bothering him, what with his project to marry her. Feeling much better now, he listened on as the bank director continued.

“Your official residence in France is listed here as the Hôtel de Brinvilliers, at number 12 Rue Charles-V in Paris. Your official occupation is as founder and head administrator of a philanthropic organization, the d’Orléans Social Foundation, based in Paris. From what I know of that organization, it is dedicated to charity work directed at the poor and the socially disenfranchised. You opened a local office in London last year, while your foundation has other offices in Italy, Germany and Holland.”

“Good God!” uttered Elizabeth Hatfield, impressed. “No wonder Lady Jeanne helped me: she could nearly qualify as a saint with this pedigree.”

Sir Maple gave Elizabeth an amused look.

“Actually, many members of London’s high society call her less flattering names, such as socialist revolutionary, mad visionary and stock market shark.”

“Stock market shark?” said Gordon, not having expected such an epithet for Jeanne. Sir Maple grinned at that and referred to one of the financial information sheets in Jeanne’s file.

“That’s right, Mister Smythe. Lady Jeanne seemingly started investing heavily in the stock markets on her return from the Guadeloupe, both in France and in England, using the fortune left by her dead husband. She hired an experienced stock trader here, who regularly comes to this bank to make deposits and withdrawals to and from a corporate account belonging to her foundation. The rumor at the London stock market, where I personally trade from time to time, is that Lady Jeanne is the one truly calling the shots and that her instincts on the trading floor are impeccable. Right now, Lady Jeanne’s London portfolio of shares and bonds is valued at approximately one and a half million pounds, while her personal account at this bank actually stands at a meager 873, 912 pounds. Lady Jeanne also has of course another bank account and stocks portfolio in Paris rumored to value over four million pounds in total. I have here the bank address and account number in Paris.”

While Jeanne recovered quickly from her surprise and then scribbled down all that information on paper, Gordon’s mind boiled up: Jeanne’s fortune eclipsed by far that of his own family and actually made her one of the richest women in Europe, if not the

richest. Sir Maple gave Jeanne the address of her bank in Paris and the number of her bank account, then spoke cautiously.

“Since you became amnesiac, Lady Jeanne, I should remind you of a point of British law pertinent to you. According to it, women are not recognized as full legal persons. Married women in particular have no rights to private ownership, with their husbands automatically becoming owners of all their possessions on marriage.”

“But, that’s preposterous!” exploded Jeanne with indignation. “You said yourself that I support a number of charitable works. How am I supposed to continue doing that if all my wealth is forcibly stripped away from me when I marry?”

Sir Maple gave a cautious look to Gordon before answering.

“For the moment, the British laws regulating the rights of women do not apply to you, Lady Jeanne, as you are both single and French. If you however marry in England, those laws will apply, unless you arrange some special legal measures.”

“Such as?”

“You could always transfer the money you have in England to a corporate account, with you as sole signatory authority for its use. You could also, in the case you marry in England, have your husband sign a legal waiver leaving you in charge of your fortune. That last measure would however be open to legal challenges in British courts and is not foolproof. As for your money in French accounts, it is out of reach of British law. I’m sorry if I had to raise such a subject and I certainly didn’t want to infer anything bad about Mister Smythe, who is both a good customer and a personal friend of mine, but, in view of your immense fortune, I thought it my professional duty to warn you about these laws.”

“You did well to warn her, Sir Maple.” cut in Gordon, his face sober. “To be frank, I already proposed marriage to Lady Jeanne after being conquered by her personality, even though I didn’t know who she was. The last thing I would want to do is to abuse her confidence and strip her of her fortune. I am ready any time to sign a waiver to my rights to her fortune if we marry. Your professional honesty is a credit to you, sir.”

Sir Maple nodded his head at that compliment, then looked back at Jeanne.

“Your last account entry dates from last Friday and was incidentally the first one since January 26 of this year. You took out 600 pounds then and changed some French Francs as well. I thus presume that you just arrived from France on Friday.”

“That could be a useful information for later on, sir.” agreed Jeanne politely. “Do you by chance have an address for me in London? I have no clue where I resided here before I became amnesiac.”

“Unfortunately, none, Lady Jeanne. You are known to live rather modestly for a woman of your wealth and use middle scale hotels while in London. I do have however here the address of the local office of your foundation, along with the names of its local representative and of your stockbroker.”

“Those I will certainly note down, sir.”

“Finally, I can tell you that you have a vault safety box in your name here, miss. Would you have with you your box key by chance?”

“Wait a minute!” replied Jeanne, frantically taking out her purse and searching inside it. She shouted in triumph as she took out a small key attached to a key ring and showed it to the bank director. “Could this be it, sir?”

Kenneth Maple grinned after examining the key.

“This is definitely one of our safety box keys. This is decidedly your lucky day, Lady Jeanne. If you will now excuse me for a moment, I will go get your deposit box.” The director then left the office for a second time. Jeanne hesitated a bit, then counted out 200 pounds out of the remaining cash left in her purse and handed it to a stunned Elizabeth Hatfield.

“You would make me very happy if you would add this to the account you are about to open, Elizabeth. There is plenty more where it came from.”

After some hesitation, the widow took the money, tears filling her eyes.

“Lady Jeanne, you are simply too good to be true. How could I ever repay your kindness?”

“By raising healthy and happy children, Elizabeth.” said Jeanne softly. Gordon, a lump in his throat, rose from his chair and gently took Elizabeth’s right arm.

“Please come with me, Misses Hatfield. I will escort you to the service counter so that you can open a savings account.”

He then bent down and kissed Jeanne as he walked by her.

“You are the best woman any man could hope for, Jeanne. I love you!”

“I love you too, Gordon.” she replied before returning his kiss.

Jeanne used the time taken by Gordon and Elizabeth at the service counter to continue copying down select information contained in her bank file. The two came back

just before Sir Maple, who was carrying a large, flat steel box and a booklet in his hands. He gave first the booklet to Jeanne and put the safety box in front of her on the desk.

“This is your new bank account book, Lady Jeanne. A clerk is now preparing your new checking book, which should be ready soon. Do you want a private room to examine the content of your safety box?”

“No sir. I am with people I can trust.”

Maple bowed at the compliment. Jeanne then inserted her key in the lock of the box and, after a slight hesitation, turned it and held her breath as she raised the lid. Gordon involuntarily bent forward to look inside the safety box, as did the director and Elizabeth. Jeanne first extracted a large, decorated wooden box. Next were a booklet and a leather holder. Her hands trembled as she opened the holder and unfolded the large velum sheet inside, which bore an official seal.

“A French passport... My passport! I am now officially a person.”

Nobody spoke as Jeanne took the time to control her emotions. Her voice was more firm when she looked at the booklet.

“A bank account book in my name, from the Banque de Paris. Let’s see the wooden box now.”

Grabbing the box and fully opening its lid, she got a concert of admiring gasps, including from herself: inside was a full set of jewels worthy of a royal person. Taking out a large diamond and emerald necklace, Jeanne held it around her neck, smiling at a mesmerized Gordon.

“So, how do I look?”

“Just irresistible, my dear Jeanne.” said Gordon, meaning it. This was turning into a true fairy tale for him. Putting back the necklace in the jewel box and closing the box, Jeanne put it back in the safety box but kept her passport and Paris bank account. Folding the sheets of paper she had scribbled on, Jeanne put them in an overcoat pocket and shook hands with the bank director.

“Sir, I owe you a big one today. I will not forget this.”

“It was my pleasure to be of help, Lady Jeanne.” replied jovially the fat man. “Let’s go see if your checking book is ready before you leave, though.”

Leaving his office with his three visitors, Maple led them to an employee’s desk while carrying Jeanne’s safety box under one arm. Getting the now ready checking book from the clerk, the director handed it to Jeanne before heading to the bank vault, where he put back in place the safety box while Jeanne watched him. After a last round of

handshakes with the director, his visitors started heading out of the bank. As they were passing the wicket separating the employees area from the public area, Jeanne suddenly turned around and went to the clerk who had recognized her, kissing the stunned little man on the cheek.

“I owe you my name and my fortune, mister. Thank you again.”

Jeanne then walked out with her amused companions, holding Gordon’s arm. Once out on the sidewalk, she flashed a happy smile to Gordon and Elizabeth.

“Well, how about finding a suitable place to celebrate this, my friends?”

“Uh, I don’t want to be a killjoy, Lady Jeanne,” said apologetically Elizabeth, “but I’m due soon to breast-feed my little Harry.”

Jeanne grinned and shrugged at that.

“Then, we will buy something quickly and celebrate at home. Harry must not be made to wait for his milk. By the way, Elizabeth, please call me simply Jeanne. I believe that I am a very informal woman.”

“Thank you, Lad... uh, Jeanne.”

“That’s better!” said Jeanne cheerfully, patting Elizabeth’s shoulder.

15:06 (London Time)

14 Belgrave Square, London

Both Judith and Clara sighed with relief when Elizabeth Hatfield arrived home with Lady Jeanne and their master. Taking four year old Thomas, who had been playing horsy, off her back, Judith got back on her feet and hurried to Gordon, taking the box and bags filling his hands. On her part, Clara gratefully gave a crying Harry to Elizabeth.

“I changed him and tried everything to calm him down, madam, but I’m afraid that he is hungry.”

“No need to apologize, Clara. I will take care of that right away.”

The young widow, little Harry in her arms, then disappeared in the kitchen. Clara, helping Judith with the bags, saw the content of one of them.

“French champagne? May I ask what we are celebrating, sir?”

“You may, Clara.” said Gordon happily while passing an arm around Jeanne’s waist. “We are celebrating the rebirth of Jeanne Marie Céleste D’Orléans, born Jeanne de Brissac, the richest woman in Europe and now my fiancée.”

He then told the two maids what had happened at the Midland Bank. Both servants then hugged and kissed Jeanne in turn, sharing her joy. Taking the large box they had brought with them, Jeanne offered it to Mary, smiling tenderly at the small girl.

“This is for you and your brothers and sister. I will let you take care of the distribution.”

“What is it, Lady Jeanne?”

“Chocolate!” answered the French woman, starting a rush on the box by Elizabeth’s children. By the time Jeanne had put the children under control and lined them up for their ration of chocolate, Gordon had fetched four champagne flutes. He let a radiant Jeanne pop open the first bottle and fill the glasses, two of which went to the delighted maids. Raising his glass high, Gordon looked at the three women around him in the lounge.

“To my fiancée, Jeanne Marie Céleste D’Orléans, and to happiness!”

“Cheers!” replied the women before sipping from their glasses. Clara then timidly looked at Gordon.

“When are you going to announce your engagement to your parents, sir?”

“Saturday, at the reception thrown at the family estate. Before, though, me and Jeanne are going to make a short trip to Paris: Jeanne has business to take care of there.”

“Paris!” said Judith dreamily. “How I would love to see and visit it.”

“You will have your chance soon, Judith.” replied Jeanne, smiling with malice at the maid.

19:58 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, March 15, 1854

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles-V

Paris, France

“What a trip!” sighed Judith as she stepped out of the coach with Gordon’s help. “Thomas’ carriage to Dover, a boat trip across the Channel, then this coach ride from Calais. My bum feels like stone.”

“I’m sure that you could find yourself a nice Frenchman to massage feelings back into your bum, Judith.” Said jokingly Jeanne. The young maid, wearing her best dress for this trip, smiled but did not reply to that: while pretty and still only 21 years old, she

had been raised by strict, conservative parents and had not slept with a man yet. Looking up at the beige stone façade of the building in front of which their coach had stopped, she examined the two storey residence quickly. It occupied half of a block and had a wide arched entrance gate meant to accommodate horses and carriages that gave access to a private courtyard. As soon as their luggage was unloaded from the coach, Jeanne led Gordon and Judith to the large carriage gate giving on the street. Taking out her set of keys, she had to try three keys before getting the good one and unlocking the pedestrian door in the carriage gate. Bringing their luggage with them inside the tunnel leading to the inner courtyard, Jeanne unlocked a side door that gave on the tunnel. The trio stepped inside a wide entrance lobby with cream-colored walls and a large staircase with forged hand railing. Two lit oil lamps illuminated the lobby, telling Jeanne that someone was in the building.

“Y a t’il quelqu’un⁶?” She called in French. After a few seconds, they heard light footsteps upstairs and a tiny young oriental woman then appeared at the railing at the top of the staircase. She smiled at the sight of Jeanne and spoke a few words in a language Gordon had never heard before. Jeanne hesitated for a moment, then replied in the same language. As both women engaged in an animated conversation, Gordon examined with curiosity the newcomer. She looked very young indeed, probably no more than twenty years old, and stood at most five feet tall. Her slim, graceful body was enhanced by a long, beautifully embroidered red and gold silk dress that earned an admiring look from Judith. She had long, silky black hair that went down to her waist and a tiny nose that enhanced her youthfulness. Overall, Gordon found her beautiful. Jeanne then turned sideways to look at him and Judith.

“Gordon, Judith, this is Li Mai, my personal assistant. Unfortunately she speaks only French and Chinese, so I will have to play translator between you. Please follow her to the bedrooms, so that we can drop our luggage.”

Gordon locked back the main entrance door before grabbing his two suitcases and climbing the curved staircase behind Judith, Jeanne and Li Mai. Once on the upper floor, they followed a hallway lined with doors that made a ninety degree turn after fifty feet. Li Mai finally stopped and opened a door, speaking briefly to Jeanne in Chinese, who in turn spoke to Judith in English.

⁶ Y a t’il quelqu’un? Is there anybody?

“This will be your room during your stay, Judith. Just drop your bags and take off your overcoat, then we will tour the rest of the residence with Li Mai.”

Judith did as told, entering a fair-sized bedroom that was very comfortably furnished. Li Mai lit an oil lamp for her while she took off her wool overcoat and hung it inside a closet. Then following the Chinese girl and Jeanne, who kept translating Li Mai's words in English, she and Gordon toured the upper floor, which had a high ceiling that further enhanced the impression of spaciousness of the residence. The place, while not extravagant in terms of luxury like some of the British manors Judith had seen, looked and felt very comfortable, with thick carpets, tapestries and well-padded furniture everywhere. It also had a strong historical flavor, being decorated with innumerable pieces of antique weapons, armor, furniture and artwork. Jeanne's bedroom, apart from being quite large, made Gordon and Judith feel like they had been thrown back to the Middle Ages, with its canopy bed, large fireplace and medieval style furniture. In contrast, the private study was furnished with magnificently sculpted lacquered wood Chinese furniture and decorated with ancient pieces of oriental artwork and weapons. As for the main lounge, where Jeanne finally invited Gordon and Judith to sit with her and Li Mai, it had the looks of an ancient Persian palace lounge. Going to an antique sword hanging above a fireplace, Gordon passed a hand on it, admiring its leaf-shaped bronze blade.

“How old would be this sword, Jeanne?”

She approached him and gave a quick look at the weapon.

“Greek, Achaean Period. Probably dates from the Fourteenth or Fifteenth Century before Christ. The age and good condition of this blade would make it nearly priceless.”

Gordon gave her an awed look.

“Then you really must be an archaeologist to own such a piece.”

“It seems so.” she replied in a subdued voice while looking around her. “I see here antiques that most museums would kill to get their hands on them. Take that Egyptian bronze hand mirror over there: it must be over 3,000 years old. That little clay cylinder on that shelf is a Sumerian seal and is probably even older than the Egyptian mirror. The funny thing is that I feel completely at home around those pieces of antiques, as if I lived with them all my life.”

“Talking of home, do you have only a single servant for such a large residence?”

“Uh, let me ask Li Mai about that.”

After a lengthy exchange with the Chinese girl, Jeanne faced back Gordon and Judith.

“It seems that I gave a few days off to my other employees. According to Li Mai, I help a lot with house chores...when I’m not traveling, which seems to be often. I also help serve my guests when I throw private receptions and discussions for intellectuals, artists and scientists.”

Gordon nodded in appreciation at that: Jeanne had more than proven by now that she was a very intelligent and extremely well educated woman. She was also very liberal-thinking by any standards. She was definitely a far cry from the often empty-headed snobs that seemed to populate much of the British aristocracy. Gordon then eyed the young Chinese woman, who was sitting on large Persian cushions.

“And your Li Mai, how did you find her?”

Jeanne had to ask the maid again, translating her story as Li Mai spoke.

“Li Mai is an orphan who was picked up at a young age by French missionaries in Beijing, in Northern China, and educated by them. A French Army captain fell in love with her when she was fourteen and married her. He brought her with him back to France but died shortly thereafter of cholera, leaving Mai alone and desperate. I found her begging in the streets five years ago, the target of pimps and abusers, and helped her by offering her a job as my personal assistant. It seems that I trained her to be a hostess for my guests, who apparently love the exotic touch she brings to my receptions. Talking of reception, how about a little snack and drink after this long trip?”

“That sounds like a good idea, Jeanne.”

“Good! Let’s find the kitchen, then.”

The four of them then walked out of the main lounge, stepping into an adjacent dining room through a connecting French double door. Despite being used to work in the quite luxurious surroundings of the Smythes’ home, Judith opened her mouth in admiration at the sight of the fine China and crystal ware displayed in glass shelving units around a large dining table made of polished and sculpted mahogany wood. Going down to the kitchen, which was connected to the dining room by a wooden staircase, they found it quite large, with both a large fireplace, a bakery oven and a wood stove. The kitchen was impeccably clean, sporting stainless steel kitchen ware and marble top counters. It also contained a small table for informal meals, around which Gordon and Judith sat while Jeanne and Li Mai prepared a frugal assortment of bread, cheese,

pickled fish and dry sausages. Judith was stunned to see Li Mai sit with them afterwards. Her facial expression prompted a smile and an explanation from Jeanne.

“This may look most unusual to have my servant eat with me but I am a very democratic woman. To me, everyone is equal, without regards to race, sex, social status or religion.”

“I remember that Sir Maple told us that many in the high society of London supposedly call you a socialist revolutionary and a mad visionary.” said Gordon while pouring himself a cup of red wine. “You truly seem to honor those terms, Jeanne, not that it bothers me, though.”

“Thank you, Gordon. You are indeed a tolerant and comprehending man, the way I like them.”

Gordon smiled at that, having seen her wink to him. Li Mai then said something to Jeanne, prompting a quiet exchange between the two of them. Jeanne finally looked back at Gordon and Judith to explain what had been said.

“Li Mai told me that, apart from my domestic day staff, employees of my charitable work foundation work out of an office suite on the ground floor of this residence. I also have a personal mount in the stables opening on the inner courtyard, along with two more horses for my carriage.”

“Could I go see those horses after this?” asked Gordon, who had a keen interest in horses, as was fitting for a cavalry officer. Jeanne smiled and nodded.

“I also would want to see them, as my amnesia left me with no souvenirs of them and as I also love horses. That will also give us an excuse to finish touring my residence.”

After chatting and eating together for twenty minutes, Jeanne helped Li Mai put away the leftovers and clean the dishes, prompting Judith into helping them. They then left the kitchen, guided by Li Mai, who first showed them the offices used by the D'Orléans Social Foundation. Jeanne took some time there to review the papers in the 'in' and 'out' baskets on the desk of the executive secretary, in order to acquaint herself with the latest business handled by her foundation.

“I will decidedly have to have a serious chat with this Mister Jacques Leblanc. I hate to be ignorant of what my foundation does when so much people are touched by its good works. Just from those papers here, it appears that my foundation is supporting in

Paris a school for poor girls, two orphanages and a shelter for abused women. I also see a transfer of funds to cover the buying last month of shares of the Minié Company.”

“The Minié Company?” said Gordon, surprised. “But that’s the company that provides the new ammunition for the rifles of the British Army.”

“It also provides the bullets for the French Army as well.” added Jeanne, thoughtful. “If what I believe about the Crimean War is correct, that company is going to make a fortune by providing ammunition for the French and British armies during that war.”

“And so will you, by buying in advance shares of that company.” said Gordon, somber. “And your foundation bought these shares before England and France became implicated politically in that war. Your visions of the future apparently helped you become rich.”

“I do not use my fortune for my own benefit, Gordon, and you know it.” protested Jeanne, raising her voice. “You know what kind of living standard I could be enjoying with the money I have? Hell, I could have a palace the size of Versailles if I wanted to. Yes, I do not live like a pauper either but part of the success of my foundation depends on maintaining social and political contacts at various levels and I thus have to maintain a minimum level of social decorum. If some good can be done out of that war, which I can’t stop or prevent, then I will do it.”

“Jeanne,” said softly Gordon, “don’t take me wrong. I am not blaming you for how you make your money or how you spend it. In fact, I approve of it. Let’s forget this financial business for the moment and let’s visit the stables.”

“You’re right.” said Jeanne, sighing. “Not remembering anything about myself and what I did in the past is really annoying and irritating me.”

“No wonder!”

Locking back herself the door to the office suite, Jeanne then collected a lit oil lamp and followed Li Mai outside to the three large carriage entrance doors opening on the inner courtyard, Gordon and Judith behind them. Entering the first one through a small door set in the large double doors, they found that garage occupied by a carriage parked in it, with various spare harnesses and carriage parts stored in it as well. Gordon noticed at once the unusual design of the carriage. While the passenger cabin of the carriage was luxurious and comfortable, as expected from the carriage of a rich lady, the structure and suspension system were nothing like Gordon had seen before. Instead of

the leaf spring suspension common on carriages everywhere, this carriage had coil spring suspensions on all of its four wheels. Furthermore, each wheel was attached to one of four independent half axles. The main structure was also based on a metallic tubular chassis supporting a lightweight shell. Gordon scratched his head on seeing that.

“This is the strangest carriage I have seen yet, Jeanne. I suppose that you had something to do with its design, since you have visions of strange mechanical things.”

“You are probably right, Gordon.” said Jeanne while examining a small plaque screwed to the chassis of the carriage. “I see here that this carriage was built here in Paris by a local carriage shop. I will have to visit it soon to find out the story about it.” They then used an inside door connecting the garage with the next one, finding two horses occupying stalls well provisioned with hay, grain and water. Li Mai spoke briefly in French with Jeanne, who then translated for Gordon and Judith.

“Li Mai says that these are the horses for my carriage. Their names are Clémentine and Hercule.”

“Hello, Hercule.” said Gordon, caressing the head of the stallion near him. It was a healthy and strong Arabian horse, like the mare in the other stall. Both horses seemed quiet and docile animals and obviously enjoyed the attention. Jeanne and the others next went into the third and last garage, again using an internal connecting door. That garage housed one brown horse and a small, two-seater buggy. The buggy was as unusual as the larger carriage in the first garage and also used coil spring independent suspensions and tubular chassis construction. The big brown mare occupying the stall next to the buggy watched them quietly as Jeanne, Li Mai, Gordon and Judith examined the buggy. Gordon found the buggy surprisingly light, being able to lift one side with little effort.

“I decidedly like this design. Being this light, it must be quite fast and maneuverable.”

Gordon next went to the mare, who eyed him quietly as he caressed her head.

“And what is the name of that beauty, Jeanne?”

Li Mai again answered through Jeanne.

“Pegasus. It is my personal horse. Li Mai says that she is a very intelligent animal.”

“She appears so.” agreed Gordon while passing a hand on the right side of the horse. Jeanne, standing close to the head of the mare, saw that the animal was staring at her insistently and caressed its forehead.

“Hello, Pegasus. We will have to reacquaint with each other soon. You will have to excuse me if I don’t remember you.”

The horse raised its head at those words, as if it had understood her. Intrigued, Jeanne looked into the animal’s eyes.

“You seem to be a bright beast indeed, Pegasus. It shall be a pleasure to ride you again.”

Gordon then came to her, a smile on his face.

“Well, this was certainly interesting, especially your carriage and buggy. Shall we continue the tour of the ground level of your residence?”

“By all means! Let me ask Li Mai about what is left to see.”

She conversed in French with the Chinese woman for a short while before looking back at Gordon.

“There is still my personal exercise room and a small workshop used by my handyman to see. My exercise room is supposedly well equipped and quite spacious.”

“Let’s see it then!” said Gordon enthusiastically. With Li Mai again leading the way, the four persons left the garage, watched by Pegasus. A few seconds after the door of the garaged had closed, the horse silently floated up a foot from the ground, then disappeared in a flash of white light.

15:08 (New Zealand Time)

July 9, 2980 B.C.E.

Main residential tower, main Time Patrol base

Future site of Auckland, New Zealand

Rina Tonen ‘B’, on duty as the officer in charge of the space-time transit hall, was not a little alarmed to see a brown robotic horse appear alone on arrival pad number six: robotic horses were programmed to jump space-time with the agents they were assigned to and did otherwise only in case of emergencies. Running from her control desk to the horse, the giant ex-Imperium woman gave it a short, concise order.

“Identify and report!”

“Robotic mount Pegasus, assigned to field agent Nancy Laplante ‘B’. I just arrived from March 15, 1854 Paris. Nancy ‘B’ returned from a solo trip to London in an apparent state of amnesia and accompanied by two unknown British persons.”

“Amnesia?” said softly Rina, not liking this one bit. “How severe did that amnesia appear to you, Pegasus?”

“She didn’t remember me, her name or even the layout of her Paris residence. Her maid Li Mai had to guide her around. I attempted discreet radio contact with Nancy ‘B’, including on the emergency frequency, but got no answer. Her mental brainwaves showed some disturbances and anomalies. Physically she seemed in good state.”

“Damn! Alright, Pegasus, come to the control station and I will download your recorded data on your last encounter with Nancy ‘B’.”

The robotic horse trotted at once to the control station, where Rina Tonen connected Pegasus to her computer via an optical fiber cable she plugged in a hidden port inside its left ear. While the video, sound and mental wave data was copied into her computer, Rina called at once Mike Crawford, the chief of operations of the Time Patrol, to pass him the bad news: this definitely classified as a major emergency.

22:19 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, March 15, 1854

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles-V

Paris, France

Jeanne, about to go to bed for the night with Gordon, opened the closet of her bedroom to hang her dress but then froze: the closet was nearly full of female clothes that seemed made to fit her. She burst out laughing, surprising Gordon, who was also undressing for the night.

“What? What do you find funny, Jeanne?”

“My clothes! I am having Mister Meir make five dresses in a hurry for me in London and I have here a closet full of dresses and other clothes. Let’s see what I have in here.”

Sifting through the closet, she selected and took out a few dresses and items of clothing so that Gordon could see them, putting them on the bed. Jeanne suddenly shouted triumphantly and pulled out of the closet a magnificent sky blue ball dress studded with pearls, holding it against her and smiling at Gordon.

“Do you think that this would do for your parents’ reception on Saturday?”

“Do? My dear Jeanne, you will be sensational in this.” said Gordon, sincere. Grinning at his response, she laid the ball dress on the bed, then kept foraging through the closet. At one point she frowned and took out a red dress with pleated skirt, examining the bottom part.

“What is this? It looks like a normal dress but the skirt is split in two at crotch level to form a sort of trousers with wide legs.”

“I don’t know, but it should be perfect for you to ride.” said Gordon without thinking. His words made a sudden look of revelation dawn on her face.

“A riding dress! Of course! I would still look like a proper lady but wouldn’t need to use that stupid Amazon riding position. I wonder if I was the one who came out with this design.”

“You probably did, Jeanne. It is an ingenious idea indeed.”

“Thank you, my love! I see in there five more riding dresses, so I must ride quite regularly.”

She then gave a malicious look at Gordon, who was now down to his shorts.

“Talking of riding, I have some projects involving you tonight, Gordon.”

23:52 (Paris Time)

Master bathroom

Hôtel de Brinvilliers

After a last bought of cuddling and lovemaking with Gordon, Jeanne left the masterbedroom to go into its adjacent bathroom, while Gordon went to sleep, utterly burned out but happy. The moment that Jeanne, wearing a bathrobe, closed the door of the bathroom behind her, a small cylindrical object appeared in the air close to Nancy and glued itself to her belly. Before Nancy could react, a brief white flash of light enveloped her and she suddenly found herself inside what appeared to be some kind of metallic compartment. The moment that she appeared, a man wearing a sort of gray uniform approached her slowly, both of his hands up.

“Don’t panic! We are friends of yours. Your true name is Nancy Laplante and you are one of us.”

Jeanne looked quickly around her at first, her eyes stopping briefly on the two bald, giant women standing a few paces away with a young redhead woman and a tall, powerful man. She then looked with suspicion at the man who approached her.

“How the hell did you get me here? What is this place anyway?”

“This,” said one of the two bald giant women while stepping forward, “is the Time Patrol scout ship TEEN TEAM 2, commanded by your friend Ingrid Weiss here. Nancy, you are one of our field agents, sent to this century under a false identity to study in detail this time period. My name is Farah Tolkonen, Chief Administrator of the Time Patrol. To my right are Mike Crawford and Miri Goshenk and the man facing you is Fernand Brunet, your direct superior and assault squad leader in the Time Patrol.”

“The...the Time Patrol?” Said hesitantly Nancy, making Farah nod once.

“Yes! Nancy, what I will tell you now may hurt you in view of the love you showed towards the man you call Gordon: you have already two children, both boys. One is your natural son from the famous musketeer d’Artagnan, with whom you are still in love, while your second son was adopted by you in Ville-Marie in 1655.”

Nancy was frozen by those words for a moment, then slowly sat on the deck, sobbing.

“No! It can’t be! I love Gordon and want to marry him.”

That was when Miri Goshenk hurried to her, kneeling in front of her and gently taking hold of her hands while speaking softly.

“Nancy, you still can love Gordon if you want to. You just need to know that others love you deeply too. I will help you remember them all again.”

A flash of white light then enveloped the whole cargo bay for a fraction of a second without causing any apparent effect on its occupants, except for making Nancy tense up and look around her.

“What was that?”

“That was our scout ship jumping space-time back to our main base, Nancy. Once...”

“YOU ARE TAKING ME AWAY FROM GORDON?” shouted at once Nancy in an angry voice while jumping on her feet. She then grabbed Miri’s uniform collar. Before she could do more, a yellow stun beam from Fernand Brunet’s pistol struck her, making her stagger on her feet. Nancy surprised Fernand by showing enough remaining stamina to start charging him, forcing him in shooting her a second time. Nancy then collapsed at his feet, knocked out. Fernand looked down at her, shaken by her fierce reaction.

“Hell, she must really love madly that guy. You saw how she reacted at once when she understood that we were taking her away from Paris?”

Miri, also shaken by Nancy’s reaction, nodded sadly.

“Yes, and it won’t make her recovery easier, I can tell you right now. Do we really have the right to deny her this love?”

“And what about the love of her sons Charles and James for her, and that of d’Artagnan?” replied Farah. “Poor girl! She will find herself in an impossible situation.”

“So, what do we do now with her?” asked meekly Ingrid Weiss, hurt by the plight of her friend. “All this was probably through no fault of hers.”

“I know.” said Farah, sounding discouraged. “Miri will have to do her best with her. We can only hope that Nancy will recover completely from her amnesia.”

“But, what will happen of that Gordon, Farah?” Insisted Ingrid. “He will be undoubtedly hurt and upset if Nancy tells him afterward that they can’t continue their romance because she already has two sons. You know how strict the social conventions are in the England of the 19th Century.”

“We will find a way to reconcile all of this.” said Farah, sounding more wishful than certain. “We have to.”

08:02 (Paris Time)

Thursday, March 16, 1854

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, Paris

The Sun was well up when Gordon woke up in Jeanne’s big bed. His first move then was to extend an arm, intent on caressing Jeanne, but his hand found the place besides him empty. Fully opening his eyes and looking around the bedroom, he then saw that Jeanne, wearing a bathrobe, was sitting at her private desk, a letter in her hands. The weak smile she did on seeing that he was awake alarmed Gordon, who jumped out of bed at once and went to her, kneeling in front of her.

“Is something wrong, Jeanne?”

Nancy, having returned a few hours earlier from seven months of medical treatment and rehabilitation and now in full possession of her past memories, felt her heart falter for a moment. She still loved very much that handsome and kind man who had saved her but she was going to be forced to deceive him and lie to him. The only permissible way out of her dilemma for her if she wanted to still love him was for her to live a secret triple life:

one here in the 19th Century with Gordon; another in the 17th Century with d'Artagnan, with her playing the role of the Marquess of Saint-Laurent; and a third as Nancy Laplante 'B', field agent of the Time Patrol and single mother for two young boys. Gordon was however a man well worth the extra effort. Farah Tolkonen had also seen the practical side of this and had bombarded Nancy as the specialist field agent of the Time Patrol for the 19th Century, apart from being already the designated specialist agent for the 17th Century. That had made Nancy wonder only half-jokingly when she would also have to find another man to love in the 18th Century and become specialist agent for that century as well. Looking down into Gordon's eyes and gently grabbing his hands, she spoke softly to him after shaking her head.

"Nothing is wrong, Gordon. My memories returned during the night, probably because the familiar setting of my residence stimulated souvenirs in me. Only a few small details are still fuzzy now."

"But that's great!" said Gordon, sincerely happy for her. "So, what do you remember now?"

"My life as Jeanne D'Orléans." lied Nancy. "I now know for certain that I am not married and that I am free to marry you if you still want me."

"Want you? Jeanne, I wish for no other woman than you to be in my life." Those passionate words brought tears to Jeanne's eyes, who kissed Gordon tenderly on the lips and then smiled.

"And I want to continue living with you, Gordon, on one condition."

"And which one would that be?" asked Gordon, a bit apprehensive.

"That, when we marry, you sign a clause in our marriage contract stating that you renounce any legal control on my fortune and possessions. I want to be able to continue administering my charity foundation as I wish and to keep my main residence in Paris. In exchange, I am ready to provide you with a sizeable dowry on marrying you."

"Jeanne, I wish to marry you because I love you, not because I want your money. I also believe that the work of your foundation is worth continuing and even expanding." His answer got him another kiss.

"Thank you, Gordon. You are all that a woman could hope for. Let's wash up and dress, then we will go have breakfast."

"And what do you have planned for the rest of the day?"

"I will review the business of my foundation with my employees, then we will go together tour a bit Paris. I suppose that we will have to take the boat back to England tomorrow, so that we are able to be in time for your parents' reception on Saturday."

"Right! I'm going to shave now. I won't be long."

Gordon was effectively cleaned up, shaved and dressed in less than half a hour. With himself wearing a flannel suit and Jeanne wearing a nice blue city dress made of fine wool, the couple went to the dining room to have breakfast. To Gordon's surprise, apart from meeting there Judith, who was already munching on muffins and bacon, he found nine young children already sitting around the big mahogany table and eating with gusto their eggs, bacon and croissants.

"Good morning, Jeanne!" chanted in unison in French the children, making Jeanne grin.

"Good morning, children! This is Gordon, a good friend from England. He doesn't speak French, so you will have to talk to him through me. Everything is alright here?"

"Yes, Jeanne!" answered cheerfully the oldest child, a black girl of maybe ten years of age. Jeanne then looked at Gordon and spoke in English as she took a seat beside him.

"These are the children of a few of my female employees. They eat and study here while their mothers work. That way they are not left alone at home and their mothers can work without worrying about them. I employ two female teachers just for them and for a few other children selected for their special needs."

"Jeanne, you must have the heart of an angel." said Gordon, making her smile weakly.

"No, I simply do what others should have done if they had placed the good of others ahead of their greed and selfishness."

A young Arabic woman then came out of the kitchen and brought a tray with pots of coffee and tea, along with cups, cream and sugar. Jeanne spoke briefly to her in French before looking back at Gordon.

"This is Leila Benchetrit, my assistant cook. She is from Algeria. We have eggs, bacon, sausage, ham, sautéed potatoes, croissants, muffins, cheese, jam and butter available for breakfast. What would you like?"

“Uh, that’s quite a selection. I will have two eggs over easy with bacon, potatoes, croissants and jam.”

Leila took as well Jeanne’s order, then returned into the kitchen after chiding in Arabic a little girl who was playing with her toasts. Gordon watched the whole scene with amusement while sipping on his cup of tea: Jeanne’s daily routine seemed quite lively to him already.

His food and that of Jeanne was served in less than ten minutes by Leila, by which time two women came to collect the nine children to bring them to their respective classrooms. The couple ate while chatting quietly about Paris in general and Jeanne’s social foundation in particular. What Jeanne told him impressed Gordon to no little degree: if she was to be believed, she held stock shares in many of the most profitable and promising commercial and industrial ventures in both Europe and the United States. In turn, much of the profits from her portfolio of stocks were used either to buy more promising shares and bonds, or financed a multitude of charitable and social help organizations, mostly on an anonymous basis. Gordon, remembering the awful conditions he had seen in Tower Hamlets when they had taken Elizabeth Hatfield out of her life of abject poverty, felt guilt as he realized how much social abuse was hidden behind the façade of industrial and commercial prosperity in England. Worse for him was the fact that he belonged to the privileged class that benefited from the cheap labor of so many people. He however could tell himself in good conscience that he had always treated his own employees with generosity and fairness, while he believed himself to be a competent officer who truly cared for his soldiers. In contrast, too many aristocrats had bought at high prices their officers’ commissions and had proved to be utterly incompetent in the business of war, apart from treating their men little better than slaves. Gordon then saw the look of near awe Judith was giving to Jeanne. The young maid was obviously struck by her revolutionary ideas and practices, which would be surely considered politically dangerous by many aristocrats and politicians in England. That made Gordon ponder how his own parents would react on learning about Jeanne’s social activities. His father, Sir Charles Smythe, was a major shareholder of the East India Company and of a few other companies and was quite rich, even though his fortune paled compared to that of Jeanne. Gordon however honestly believed his father to be a good, generous man who simply had a good flair for business. He would thus probably approve of the charity work done by Jeanne. As for his mother, Lady Carmelia,

things were a bit more complicated. While a good-natured woman, she was also a lot more class-conscious than her husband and could be at times unnerving with her snobbishness. She was also politically quite conservative, thus putting her in a direct collision course with Jeanne's socialist ideas. Gordon finally decided to keep discreet with his parents about the full extent of Jeanne's social work.

Once they were finished eating, Jeanne and Gordon, followed timidly by Judith, went downstairs to the office suite used by the employees of the D'Orléans Foundation. There, Gordon was presented first to Jeanne's executive secretary, a mature man named Jacques Leblanc with whom he felt at ease at once, then to the two female secretaries present. On Jeanne's demand, Jacques Leblanc reviewed his current dossiers with her and Gordon, spending a good hour to do so. That hour was enough to sink into Gordon the true extent of Jeanne's charitable work and how readily she spent most of her fortune on it. Jeanne's business and administrative savvy also struck him, while an overwhelmed Judith could only listen on in awed silence. Gordon couldn't help think that his father would love talking business with Jeanne, knowledgeable businesswomen being truly a rarity in England. Jeanne's beauty of course would add to that enjoyment. Once she was satisfied that she was fully up to speed with her affairs and had given precise directives to Jacques Leblanc, Jeanne got up from her chair and smiled to Gordon and Judith.

"Well, enough about business! Since we will have to leave for England early tomorrow, I better use the limited time left to us here to show you Paris. This will be a good pretext to take out my carriage and exercise my horses a bit."

17:08 (London Time)

Saturday, March 18, 1854

The Smythes Manor

Twickenham, 8 miles west of London

England

Sir Charles Smythe looked again nervously at his pocket watch while standing under the porch of his three-story brick manor: nearly all of his guests had arrived and his son had yet to show up. Carmelia, who had been greeting guests inside, joined him briefly outside, obviously getting worried.

"Any sign of Gordon yet?" she inquired while looking down the manor's access road through the light rain and growing darkness. Her husband shook his head in irritation.

"No, and he will hear me whenever he shows up."

"Don't be too harsh on him, dear. Maybe the rain delayed him."

"With yesterday's storm I would have understood, but he will prove a poor cavalry officer indeed if such a light pour as the actual one can delay him." fumed Sir Charles. Carmelia gave him a cautious glance before going back inside, leaving him and two foot servants under the porch. After another ten minutes, Sir Charles was ready to give up on Gordon when he saw a carriage turn on the access road, closely followed by a second one. To his hidden disappointment, the first carriage disgorged three French aristocrats living nearby in self-exile since the 1848 proclamation of the Republic in France. Out of the second carriage came the Earl of Cardigan. Knowing the quarrelsome nature of his last guess, Sir Charles greeted his French guests as quickly as good manners permitted, then faced the earl, shaking his hand vigorously.

"Aah, my good Lord Cardigan! How nice to see you in such splendid shape. Your presence at this reception truly honors me, sir."

"How could I refuse an invitation from such an illustrious man as you, Sir Charles?" replied with satisfaction the major general, flattered. Sir Charles made a forced smile then: he had in reality little regard for that pompous incompetent but the man was after all Gordon's brigade commander and had to be treated according to his rank, even if that said rank had been purchased instead of earned.

"Thank you again for coming, Lord Cardigan. Please come inside so as to escape this cold rain."

"With pleasure, Sir Charles."

The cavalry officer, escorted by a foot servant holding an umbrella, then entered the manor, leaving Sir Charles still waiting for his son outside.

Another carriage turned on the access road as the two previous carriages, now empty of passengers, rolled towards the stables. To his relief, Sir Charles soon recognized Thomas, Gordon's foot servant, at the reins of the incoming carriage. His son, decked in his best uniform, jumped out as soon as the carriage came to a stop, then held the door open to let a tall young woman come out. Sir Charles forgot the recriminations he had saved for his son as soon as he could detail the young woman,

who wore a splendid, pearl-studded blue ball dress and a fabulous set of jewels. Nearly as tall as Gordon, her face reflected both intelligence and strength of character, apart from being beautiful. While a foot servant held an umbrella over her, Gordon happily presented her to his father, holding her left hand as he spoke.

“Father, this is my fiancée, Lady Jeanne D’Orléans. Jeanne, this is my dear father, Sir Charles Smythe.”

“I am truly pleased to meet you, Lady Jeanne.” Said Charles while kissing her right hand. “I...”

What Gordon had said then fully registered.

“Did you say that she is your fiancée? And how come you know her full name? Does she remember her past now?”

“I will be happy to explain everything to you, Father.” replied patiently Gordon. “Could we get out of the rain first?”

“Uh, of course!”

Letting the couple pass first, Sir Charles followed them inside, where servants took their dripping coats from them. Taking off his coat as well and giving it to a servant, Charles detailed with growing admiration Lady Jeanne. Her ball dress exposed her shoulders and had a deep cleavage that enhanced her firm, generous chest. Taking his eyes off her chest with difficulty, Charles eyed discreetly the jewels she wore. The matching set of diamond and emerald tiara, necklace, earrings, broche and bracelets was probably worth more than the Smythes Manor. Standing besides Gordon, she truly looked like a princess or even a queen.

“My God, Lady Jeanne, you are truly...royal!”

“Thank you, Sir Charles.” she said in a clear, agreeable voice while curtsying. “Please call me simply Jeanne.”

“Then Jeanne it will be.”

Charles then faced Gordon.

“So, how about a few explanations, my son?”

“I will be too happy to comply, Father. Our big luck came when we went together to the Midland Bank to open an account. It turned out that Jeanne, who was recognized by one of the bank clerks as well as by the director, already had a fat account there. We found as well in her bank safety deposit box her French passport, as well as her Paris bank account book. We then decided on a short trip to Paris in order to visit her residence there. Fortunately, the sights inside her home helped Jeanne remember fully

who she was. She is actually a philanthropist and a generous contributor to a number of charitable works, both on the continent and in England. By the way, I'm really sorry for arriving so late: yesterday's storm delayed our passage back to England."

Charles patted the shoulder of his son, smiling.

"That's not important, Son. Let's announce the good news to your mother."

Sir Charles then whispered a few words to his majordomo, standing at the entrance to the main lounge. The man then knocked the tip of his cane three times on the floor and shouted as Gordon and Jeanne entered the lounge, hand in arm.

"CAPTAIN GORDON SMYTHE AND LADY JEANNE D'ORLÉANS!"

Sir Charles, a few paces behind the couple, saw his three French aristocrat guests look sharply at Jeanne when her name was announced. Their looks were not very friendly either. Deciding to clarify the matter without delay, he walked casually to the trio, letting Gordon guide Jeanne to Carmelia. The three French, a teenage boy, a mature woman and an old woman in her seventies, returned his bow as he stopped in front of them. Sir Charles faced the young Prince of Orléans, who didn't possess much apart from his title now that the French monarchy was out of power.

"Pardon me, sir, but could I presume that Lady Jeanne is linked to your family?"

The prince, trying without much success not to look with hostility at Jeanne, answered after a short hesitation.

"She claims our family name through a distant cousin of mine who had an estate in the Guadeloupe. We first heard of her when my father received a letter from my cousin eight years ago, announcing in it that he had just married a young lady named Jeanne. Then, a year later, that woman arrived in France with the news that my cousin had died of a tropical fever and had left everything he owned to her. My father's lawyers checked her claims thoroughly but she had unimpeachable documentation and even knew intimate details about my cousin."

"So, what happened then?"

"What happened?" replied the young prince, getting agitated. "She used the money she got from my cousin, which should have come to my family, for various investments and speculations."

"How did she do in that, sir?" asked Sir Charles, genuinely interested by now. The prince sighed and lowered his eyes.

"She actually proved to be a very shrewd speculator, I have to give her that. She may live rather modestly but we know that she is quite rich by now."

“A woman wearing such jewels can’t be modest, Louis!” retorted the prince’s grandmother and ex-queen of France. Sir Charles managed not to call her the hypocrite she was and excused himself with the prince, bowing at the trio before leaving them to their champagne cups and appetizers. He found his wife Carmelia in conversation with Gordon and Jeanne in a corner of the lounge. She smiled happily at him as he approached.

“Charles, did you hear the good news?”

“I did, my dear: Gordon told me on arrival. Uh, just out of curiosity, Lady Jeanne, could I ask how much is your financial worth? You may make a good venture partner for improving our family assets.”

As an answer, Jeanne got close to him and whispered in his ear. Carmelia saw her husband’s face reflect utter surprise then.

“I...I see!” said Sir Charles with difficulty. Gordon then jumped in the conversation.

“Father, Mother, me and Jeanne have decided to get married before the end of this month. As we are of two different faiths, we intend to make it a civil marriage, with a simple ceremony at my London house. I would like to have your approval for this.”

Sir Charles stared for a moment at Gordon and Jeanne as the couple held hands together, smiling. What he had heard of Jeanne up to now had favorably impressed him and she was certainly a beautiful woman. To have his son marry the richest woman in Europe, even if that fact was not public, would be positively fantastic. He was sure though that Gordon was not marrying her for her money.

“Gordon, this may be quite sudden but I will be delighted by such a marriage.”

“You chose well, my son.” added softly Carmelia before kissing in turn Gordon and Jeanne on the cheek. “I hope that you will stay after the reception?”

“We were in fact planning to stay for a day or two, if you don’t mind of course.” said Gordon.

“Stay as long as you want.” replied Sir Charles, grinning. “You did bring some luggage, I hope?”

“Our bags are in my carriage, Father.”

“Then I will get a couple of servants to bring them in. In the meantime, you may want to present your new fiancée to my guests and enjoy the reception.”

“Please, Sir Charles,” urged suddenly Jeanne as the host was about to walk away, “could you have a servant take out of my wicker chest a lyre and a lute I brought: I would like to play some music for your guests.”

“You play the lyre and the lute, my dear?” asked Carmelia, agreeably surprised. “You do have many talents indeed.”

“Thank you, Lady Carmelia.” said Jeanne, smiling modestly.

“She also sings like an angel...in a dozen or more languages.” added proudly Gordon, getting his parents’ eyes to widen.

“That I must see and hear!” exclaimed Sir Charles. “I will make sure that Jeanne gets her instruments.”

“And I will make sure in the meantime that our guests are being properly served.” added in turn Carmelia before leaving the young couple to themselves. Gordon then looked around the main lounge. There were about forty other guests, a few of them in military uniforms, mingling around the large room while servants circulated in the midst of them, bearing platters of drinks and appetizers. A four-man band sat in a corner, providing a soft background of classical music. Taking Jeanne’s hand, Gordon discreetly pointed at one of the uniformed guests.

“I believe that it would be appropriate for me to present you first to my brigade commander, Major General Lord Cardigan.”

To his surprise, her face hardened at the mention of Cardigan. She then whispered to Gordon while drilling the general with her eyes.

“Do we really have to speak to that infatuated martinet, Gordon?”

“You know him, Jeanne?”

“Let’s say that his reputation is not exactly a shining one.”

Looking at Cardigan, then back at Jeanne, Gordon sighed while gently pulling her by the hand.

“He may very well be a bad commander, Jeanne, but he is still my commander and a guest of my father. Could you be civil with him for a moment?”

“Alright, I will turn up my hypocrisy factor for this reception.”

“That’s my girl! By the way, he likes to be called ‘General’.”

“If you say so.” she replied, then pasting a smile on her face as they walked towards Lord Cardigan.

Cardigan was conversing with a fat baroness when Gordon and Jeanne stopped besides them. One look at Jeanne made him all but forget the plump aristocrat facing him. Quickly acknowledging Gordon's presence, he then kissed Jeanne's right hand.

"I see that the good captain has impeccable tastes, miss. Let me present myself: Major General James Thomas Brudenell, Earl of Cardigan."

"Pleased to meet you, General." said Jeanne as warmly as she could force herself to do. "I am Lady Jeanne D'Orléans, Gordon's fiancée."

Lord Cardigan raised an eyebrow in interest then.

"Then I could hope to see you again, possibly at the Winchester Barracks, Lady Jeanne?"

"Maybe, my good general."

"If you will excuse us now, sir," cut in Gordon politely, "I have to present Jeanne to the other guests."

"Of course, Captain. Please proceed." replied amiably Lord Cardigan, kissing again Jeanne's hand before the later faced the baroness nearby. After short presentations with the aging woman, the couple went on towards another group of guests, with Gordon whispering as soon as they were away from Cardigan.

"You see! It wasn't so bad after all."

"Gordon, the man was pleasant because he is hoping to seduce me one day and bed me. He thinks that he is irresistible to women. Believe my female intuition on that." Shrugging his shoulders at that, Gordon then guided Jeanne from guest to guest, exchanging presentations and pleasantries all the while. He whispered to her again when they approached the trio of French exiled aristocrats.

"Beware! This is Prince Philippe D'Orléans, Count of Paris, Head of the House of Orléans and grandson of the late King Louis-Philippe. Beside him are his mother, Princess Helena of Mecklemburg, and his grandmother and ex-Queen of France, Queen Marie-Amélie. From the way they are watching you approach, I would say that they don't like you."

The trio's attitude was indeed frosty as Jeanne curtsied in front of Prince Philippe, while Gordon bowed his head politely.

"Your Highness, may I present my new fiancée, Lady Jeanne D'Orléans?"

The young prince exchanged a quick glance with his mother and grandmother before looking up at the couple, as he was quite shorter.

"We already know Lady Jeanne well, sir. How long have you known her?"

“A whole week.” replied Gordon deadpan, making the French look severely at Jeanne. Princess Helena actually sneered at her.

“So, she is still a fast girl. It didn’t take her long either to seduce our cousin Pierre Alphonse in the Guadeloupe.”

Gordon repressed his anger with difficulty: this was not the first time that he met the D’Orléans and their snobbery was really starting to get on his nerves. He drilled Princess Helena with his eyes while answering in a cold voice.

“Your Highness, Jeanne conquered my heart by being the extremely intelligent, kind and caring woman she is. She doesn’t flaunt her fortune around and is dedicated to a number of charitable works. I also believe that she truly loves me as well and I intend to marry her by the end of this month.”

The trio of aristocrats stared at Gordon for a moment, taken aback by his forcefulness. Prince Philippe then nodded his head curtly.

“If this is your true feeling for her, sir, then I can only wish you happiness together.”

The three French then walked away to join a group of English aristocrats. Gordon gave Jeanne an apologetic smile.

“I’m sorry if they were disagreeable to you, my dear. No doubt that they will now spread nasty stories about you around them.”

“Well, I will have to prove them wrong publicly, I guess.”

Jeanne’s eyes then caught sight of two tall men in foreign military uniforms talking with each other.

“That officer on the right, isn’t he wearing the uniform of a Russian imperial guard cuirassier?”

Gordon looked at her with unmitigated surprise at those words.

“You do know your military uniforms very well, Jeanne. Yes, Baron Koslov is a cuirassier officer and is the Russian military attaché. The one speaking with him is the Prussian military attaché, Colonel Franz Von Schwarz. Would you like to speak with them?”

“Absolutely!” she answered enthusiastically at once.

Wading through the guests, the couple soon stopped beside the two military attachés, who couldn’t help stare admiringly at Jeanne as she bowed to them, giving them a plunging view down her wide cleavage. Jeanne then surprised them by

exchanging greetings in both Russian and German, making Gordon roll his eyes in dismay: if his count was right that made twenty languages in her incredible encyclopedia of knowledge and abilities. She then switched back to English for Gordon's benefit.

"It is truly nice to see officers from different nations speaking amicably together instead of fighting each other. Peace is so much preferable to war."

"You are right, Lady Jeanne." replied Koslov. "While soldiers may cover themselves with glory, war too often brings ruin and misery to a country. I personally hope that the British crown and the Russian crown will be able to resolve their differences peacefully."

"I hope so too fervently, Baron, even if I am not overly optimistic about the prospects of peace around the Black Sea. Would you mind telling me about yourself?"

"Not at all, Lady Jeanne!" replied the delighted Russian. The four of them were soon engaged in a group conversation that naturally veered towards military subjects and military history. Sir Charles, who was standing nearby with other guests, soon excused himself with them and discreetly joined Gordon's group, listening with growing awe as Jeanne went head to head with Koslov in an animated but friendly discussion on the strategies and tactics of the battles of the Napoleonic invasion of Russia in 1812. More and more guests around them then caught on to the fact that Jeanne was talking like an expert soldier and started eyeing her with both surprise and misgivings. Sir Charles saw that and gently touched Jeanne's arm.

"Uh, I must congratulate you on your military knowledge, my dear Jeanne, but I believe that your musical instruments have been brought in and are waiting for you near the musicians. Would you like to play something for the other guests?"

Jeanne, suddenly catching on to the fact that she was attracting the wrong kind of attention, grinned and nodded to Sir Charles.

"I would certainly love that, Sir Charles."

After Jeanne excused herself with Koslov and Von Schwarz and as she made her way towards the small musical band sitting in a corner of the lounge, Gordon patted his father's shoulder.

"Nice move, Father. Sometimes, Jeanne talks and acts much like a soldier and, while I don't mind that, others may think that she is not a proper lady because of that."

"Well, now we will see her feminine side...which should be quite nice indeed."

"You have no idea, Father!" replied Gordon with a grin.

Jeanne first played her lyre, a small model that was actually more properly named a 'bardic harp' and could be played even when standing. Playing solo a melancholic tune on her harp, she started singing in the beautiful voice Gordon had quickly learned to admire and appreciate. Her words were however in some foreign language that, while sounding nice, was unknown to him and to the other guests. Her overall performance on her first tune however still attracted sincere applause from the guests and from Sir Charles. Jeanne bowed at the applause and smiled to the crowd around her.

"What I played was a very old Greek love song from 2,800 years ago. I will now use my lute to sing a French troubadour song of a more modern variety."

Switching instruments, she asked for some extra room around her, then started playing a fast, catchy tune while singing in French and dancing around. That performance made a grinning Baron Koslov clap his hands to accompany her singing and playing.

"By Saint Peter, this woman could bewitch any man!"

Jeanne apparently heard him and, at the end of her second tune, waved to him to join her.

"You can dance a good Cossack tune, Baron Koslov?"

"Of course I can!"

"Then accompany me here!"

She then started playing a fiery Russian tune while dancing around. Gordon, like the others around him, opened his eyes wide when Jeanne, still playing her lute, crouched and started dancing by alternatively throwing up her legs, showing tremendous stamina and agility. Koslov made a meritorious effort to follow her but had to give up after a couple of minutes, out of breath and sweating heavily. Gordon gave him a glass of chilled champagne as the Russian officer rejoined the ranks of the spectators while Jeanne kept dancing, singing and playing around.

"Here! I believe that you need to refresh yourself, Baron."

"Thank you my good Gordon. I'm afraid that I am not as young as I believed. Your fiancée certainly is in top physical shape, apart from being an excellent musician, dancer and singer."

"I have to say that she keeps surprising me every day."

Gordon then saw the loving look Jeanne was giving him while giving her performance. Koslov saw it too and whispered to Gordon.

"You, sir, are one lucky man indeed!"

“Ain’t I!” replied Gordon enthusiastically, having eyes only for her.

17:41 (London Time)

Tuesday, March 28, 1854

14 Belgrave Square, London

“...and whoever has objections to this marriage, speak now or hold your peace forever.”

The judge looked briefly around the crowded lounge of the groom’s house and, seeing nobody with obvious qualms about the union, looked back at the couple facing him.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss.”

Cheers went up as Gordon and Jeanne, him in his best uniform and her in a custom-made white nuptial dress, passionately kissed each other. In the forefront of the onlookers was a relieved Sir Charles, holding the right hand of his crying wife. The bride’s gown had proved longer to make and fit than expected, due to Jeanne’s unusual size, a fact that had delayed the ceremony by two days and caused no ends of problems in rescheduling the invitations. To further sour things, this morning’s newspapers had announced that England was, along with France, declaring war against Russia, in defense of Turkey. Carmelia had cried then, knowing that her only child was probably going to go to war in a distant place. Now, Carmelia was crying tears of joy at the sight of Gordon and Jeanne kissing. Moving forward, Sir Charles and Carmelia were the first to hug and kiss the newlyweds, then stepped aside to let the other guests do the same. Charles thought that at least the announcement of war with Russia was a good explanation why Baron Koslov would not attend the ceremony: Charles and Gordon would still have welcomed the military attaché but the Russian was probably busy packing up for home right now.

Sir Charles’ attention was suddenly attracted to a soldier in uniform being led in the lounge by Thomas. The man, wearing a Hussars uniform, looked unsure of what to do, so Charles went to him and addressed him discreetly.

“May we do something for you, Sergeant?”

"You may, sir." replied the NCO⁷, also keeping his voice low. "I have urgent orders to pass to Captain Smythe but I seem to have arrived at a most inopportune moment."

"Indeed, Sergeant, but orders are orders. Please follow me."

"Thank you, sir!" said the grateful NCO before following Charles through the crowd of guests. Once face to face with Gordon, the sergeant stopped at rigid attention and saluted crisply.

"Sir!" he said in a loud voice as Gordon returned his salute. "I'm sorry to announce to you that your leave has been cut short on orders of Lord Paget. You are to report no later than sundown tomorrow at the Winchester Barracks, ready for field operations, sir!"

"Do you know why such orders were issued, Sergeant?"

"No, sir, but I know that the leaves in the whole army have been cancelled, sir."

Gordon then looked sadly at Jeanne, who was fighting off tears.

"It must be about Crimea. I'm sorry, Jeanne: I will have to leave early in the morning."

The despondent Gordon then saw a flash in Jeanne's eyes. Her face hardening with resolve, she took hold of his hands and spoke out loud in a firm voice.

"Gordon, I will not let you go alone. I will go too to Crimea if you are shipped there."

"But, that could be dangerous!" protested Gordon. "You could get killed or contract a sickness."

"I would much prefer die at your side than to wait in England while you risk your life daily over there, my love."

Deeply touched by this, Sir Charles put one hand on her left shoulder.

"That was an answer worthy of a Smythe, Jeanne."

He then looked firmly at Gordon as the guests around them nodded approvingly.

"Don't leave her, my son. She deserves to be with you, all the way."

Gordon exchanged a tearful look with Jeanne and spoke in a strangled voice.

"Then we will live and die together, me and Jeanne."

Cheers rose from the male guests as the newlyweds kissed each other again, while Carmelia and most of the other women present broke out in tears.

⁷ NCO: Non-Commissioned Officer.

16:22 (London Time)
Wednesday, March 29, 1854
8th Hussars regimental barracks
Winchester, County of Hampshire
Southern England

“Sergeant-Major, I see Captain Smythe up the road, riding this way with a woman.”

Grabbing the regimental roster list, Regimental Sergeant-Major Sean O’Neil got out of the guard shack located at the entrance to the barracks complex, joining Private Harry Brooks by the side of the dirt road that led in the complex. Squinting his eyes from the sudden change of luminosity, the beefy RSM saw that Captain Smythe was effectively approaching at a trot, followed closely by a tall woman on a brown horse. What then caught his attention was the fact that the woman was sitting astride her horse and was not riding Amazon-style, as a proper lady should have done. He soon had a better look at her as the two riders stopped briefly in front of the guard shack. Coming to attention, O’Neil crisply saluted Captain Smythe, while Private Brooks presented arms with his rifled musket. The captain looked to be in his usual good spirits as he returned their salute.

“Good afternoon, Sergeant-Major O’Neil! I’m reporting back early from leave, as ordered. Do you have any directives or orders from Lord Paget for me?”

“Yes sir! You are to report to his office on arrival, sir.”

O’Neil then glanced at the woman, who was dressed with a red jacket and a green skirt that curiously split in half, which permitted her to ride like a man without being indecent in the process. Her shapely body and beauty were going to attract many eyes around the barracks.

“May I ask who is the lady, sir?”

“By all means, Sergeant-Major!” replied Smythe, grinning. “This is my new wife, Lady Jeanne. Jeanne, this is Mister Sean O’Neil, our RSM.”

To Sean’s delighted surprise, the woman then spoke in fluent Gaelic.

“Pleased to meet you, Mister O’Neil, or do you prefer to be called RSM?”

“Mister O’Neil will do just fine in your case, madam.” replied Sean, also in Gaelic. Gordon then exchanged another salute with O’Neil and rode towards the regimental headquarters, followed by Jeanne. Stopping and dismounting near the entrance to the headquarters, they both tied their horses to a pole before entering the three-story brick building. The lobby they entered was decorated with battle trophies and pieces of regimental mementos. Jeanne looked at the 8th Hussars regimental flag, bearing the embroidered names of the battles the regiment had fought, her face solemn.

“A proud, distinguished unit indeed.”

Gordon nodded his head proudly.

“And one I am proud to belong to. Lord Paget’s office is on the next floor up.”

Leading the way, Gordon climbed the wooden staircase to the first floor and turned left, following a wide corridor for about twenty yards before stopping in front of an open door. The few NCOs and junior officers they met saluted Gordon before ogling Jeanne in her back. The lieutenant who served as the Aide De Camp to Lord Paget also gave her a quick admiring look before speaking briefly with Gordon, then going inside an adjacent office. The ADC soon came back out, letting Gordon in Lord Paget’s office while inviting Jeanne to sit and wait.

Lord Paget was a small, aging man with graying hair and a large moustache. Gordon knew that, despite his age and time in the service, the aristocrat had no experience of real war, having purchased his commission and successive ranks. He was however a mild-mannered gentleman, in contrast to Lord Cardigan, and greeted Gordon warmly.

“Aah, my good Smythe! Please, have a chair.”

Taking the seat offered by his commander, Gordon sat rigidly as Paget went on.

“I’m dreadfully sorry to have had to cut your leave short, especially in view of your marriage, but Lord Raglan has ordered all leaves to be cancelled. He has also notified a number of army units, including our own, to be ready to depart for the Black Sea area.”

Gordon stiffened then: up to now, Jeanne’s predictions were decidedly proving to be flawless. That, along with her visions of advanced machines and weapons, kept raising gnawing questions about her in Gordon’s mind. While he loved her deeply and believed the feeling to be mutual, he was starting to wonder what her accidental amnesia may still be hiding from her mind. His few days at the Smythes Manor with her had demonstrated

to Gordon that Jeanne was not only thinking often like a professional soldier: she also had proven that she could shoot both pistols and rifles like a top marksman and also ride a horse as if she had been born in the saddle.

“Do you know when we could be leaving, sir?”

“Details are still sketchy, but I expect the regiment to sail within a month, maybe as soon as two weeks time. What I want from you, Captain, is to make sure that B Troop is ready in all respects for a military campaign around the Black Sea, and this as soon as possible.”

“B Troop will be ready, sir!” replied firmly Gordon, attracting a satisfied smile on Paget’s face.

“I know it will, Captain. Do you have any questions before you are dismissed?”

“Only one, sir. You know that, according to the Queen’s Regulations, about six wives per hundred men can accompany a unit in a campaign. My new wife, Lady Jeanne, desires to accompany me in the oncoming war and to serve as a field nurse and ambulance driver. I would be most obliged if you would permit her to do so.”

Lord Paget stared at him for a moment, not a little surprised.

“But...that could be a most hard and grizzly job. Is she sure that she really wants to do this?”

“You can ask her personally, sir: she came with me and is waiting in the next office. As for her abilities and toughness, I can vouch that she would be most fit for the job, sir.”

“Then, I would very much like to speak with her, Captain.” said Paget before shouting towards his ADC’s office. “Lieutenant Campbell, please send the lady in!”

The moment Jeanne stepped in, Gordon saw Paget’s face soften as he looked up and down her tall, fit frame.

“I am told that you wish to accompany this regiment as a field nurse and ambulance driver, madam. You do realize the dangers and hardships of such a position, I hope?”

“I do, sir!” she replied, coming to attention. “I have a good knowledge of medicine and first aid, am an excellent rider and know how to drive a wagon. I also know how to live in field conditions, sir.”

Her firm reply and stance seemed to impress Lord Paget, who nodded his head in appreciation.

"In that case, consider yourself on strength of this regiment as a field nurse as of today. Go see the regimental surgeon first, then visit the paymaster, so that he can put you in his books."

"Thank you, sir! Your comprehension is much appreciated, sir." said Jeanne, grinning. Paget then looked at Gordon.

"You are dismissed as well, Captain. You can escort your wife around for now. Be ready with a roster of the men fit for field duty in your troop by tomorrow morning."

"Yes, sir!" shouted Gordon, shooting up from his chair and saluting. Lord Paget watched in amusement as both the captain and his wife did a simultaneous about turn and walked out single file at a regulation pace. Lady Jeanne Smythe promised to be a very interesting cat indeed.

Leading Jeanne out of the headquarters building, Gordon followed its eastern façade towards a small building that appeared to have been built as an afterthought. The nearer they got to it, it certainly looked neglected enough to Jeanne.

"This is the infirmary?" she said in a dismayed tone.

"What passes for one, unfortunately." replied Gordon, embarrassed. "Funds for medical care are quite scarce and have been so for many years. The regiment, like the rest of the army, had to make do with very limited resources in nearly everything."

As they were about to enter the infirmary, Jeanne noticed that half of the windows were broken and were either boarded up or crudely covered with cardboard. She also nearly tripped on a broken step of the entrance's wooden stairs.

"Well, I know now where to spend some of my fortune."

"Wait!" replied Gordon, deadpan. "You haven't seen all of it yet."

Once inside, Jeanne was able to see that the building was a near ruin, with rotting floor planks and ceiling beams and with whitewashed brick walls showing cracks. It was now evident to her that the so-called infirmary was nothing more than an old converted stable. Seeing her scandalized expression, Gordon led her straight to a small room next to the entrance, where they found a frail young man sitting on a rickety chair and reading a medical journal. Apart from a worn suit, the young man wore an overcoat to stay warm in the cold building, as the stove in one corner was empty. On seeing Gordon and Jeanne, the young man smiled timidly and rose from his chair, putting the journal he was reading down on it.

“Good afternoon miss, Captain Smythe. May I do something for you?” he said in a juvenile voice. He could not be much more than twenty years old and looked very shy and unassuming. Somehow, Jeanne took an immediate liking to him. Gordon then made the presentations.

“Doctor, this is my wife, Lady Jeanne. Jeanne, this is Hospital Assistant Thomas Farrell, of the Army Medical Department. He took his post here only a few months ago.”

“Fresh from medical school, I presume?” asked Jeanne while shaking hand with Farrell, who nodded his head.

“Correct, Lady Jeanne. I graduated from St-Thomas Hospital in December and immediately joined the army, hoping to travel around the World and see exotic places.” Farrell then swept his arms around, his face reflecting disillusion.

“Instead I got...this!”

Jeanne then patted the doctor’s shoulder, smiling in encouragement at him.

“Don’t despair, Mister Farrell: you are probably about to see lots of exotic places, apart from having your hands full of patients soon enough.”

“What do you mean, madam?”

Jeanne looked sharply at the surprised doctor and shook her head.

“Let me guess, Doctor: apart from getting little or no consideration, this regiment is treating you like a mushroom: that is they keep you in the dark and feed you shit.”

“That’s the story of my short military life, madam.” Replied Farrell, smiling. “So, what is going on?”

“We are going to war against Russia and will depart for the Black Sea within a few weeks. The good news is that I am accompanying you as a field nurse and ambulance driver.”

His face reflecting joy, the young doctor looked at Gordon.

“Does this mean that I can be rid of Mister Connors, Captain?”

“Aah, yes, Trooper Connors!” said Gordon, while Jeanne listened on, visibly confused.

“Who is this Trooper Connors, Doctor?”

“What passes as my medical orderly. Let me show you.”

Leading the couple out of his office, the doctor crossed the hallway and entered a large, dilapidated room filled with a double row of shoddy beds, each supporting a straw mattress of dubious cleanliness. Two of the beds were occupied, one by a young soldier

sporting a big cast around his left arm, the other by a bearded man sleeping and snoring like a bear. Doctor Farrell pointed at the snoring man.

“That’s Trooper Connors, madam.”

Walking quickly to Connors’ bed, Jeanne bent down and sniffed close to his face before straightening up, reprobation on her face.

“This man is drunk! Is he still on duty?”

“According to my watch he is, madam.”

Gordon was about to give a rough waking up to Connors when Jeanne preceded him by taking hold of the side of the drunk’s bed and violently toppling it. Connors, thrown on his face without warning, woke up with a startle and got up on shaky legs. His angry look changed to surprise at the sight of Jeanne, then to fear when he saw Gordon. Jeanne then once again took the initiative, planting herself in front of the trooper and shouting angrily at him.

“Don’t you have duties to perform, Trooper? This infirmary needs a good sweeping and mopping. Get to it!”

“Yes maam!” said the drunk, his eyes still foggy, before running out of the ward. While Farrell looked with awed surprise at Jeanne, Gordon had a hard time containing his laughter.

“By Jove, my dear! Should I expect this kind of treatment if I ever displease you?”

“You better believe it, buster!” she replied jokingly while shaking an index at him. Then becoming serious, she looked at both Farrell and Gordon.

“Doctor, lots of lives will soon depend on you. The last thing you need is a drunkard to weigh you down around a battlefield. Gordon, is there a way to get a more dependable soldier to help the doctor?”

The officer shook his head after thinking for a moment.

“I doubt it very much, Jeanne. Troop officers will not send a good soldier to what is considered a low priority duty, like infirmary duty. Connors was most probably assigned here because nobody wanted him. He has already lost his corporal’s stripes twice for drunkenness and dereliction of duty.”

“Damn!” muttered Jeanne, annoyed. “What about some of the soldiers’ wives who will accompany the regiment to Crimea? Can one or two be assigned to Doctor Farrell?”

“Uh, probably.” answered Gordon hesitantly, not prepared for her last question.

“Good! Then we could use up to two women to help the doctor at his future field dressing station, plus another one to assist me in driving the regimental ambulance, so that I can patch up wounded soldiers before loading them in our wagon.”

“Uh, there is a problem with that, Lady Jeanne.” said Farrell, obviously embarrassed. “I don’t have an ambulance wagon. In fact, I don’t have any horse or vehicle assigned to the infirmary.”

That got him a look of shocked disbelief from Jeanne.

“Then, how the hell did the regiment expect you to go around and treat the wounded and sick?”

“The Commissariat representative told me that they would provide something if and when the need comes.”

“The Commissariat!” spat Jeanne contemptuously. “Don’t wait for anything from those rule-bound, incompetent civilian bureaucrats, unless excuses are what you are looking for, Doctor.”

“She’s right, Doctor.” added Gordon glumly. “Unfortunately, the regiment can’t help you here, since the Commissariat Department of the Treasury Ministry controls army logistics. I had to buy my own war horse with my personal money, believe it or not.”

“Bureaucrats!” uttered Jeanne as if it was an insult. She then looked resolutely at Farrell. “Don’t worry about infirmary transportation, Doctor: I will take care of it personally. Do you have any other pressing needs to be filled before you are ready to do battlefield duty?”

“Well, I do have my own set of surgical instruments, but I am short of most medical supplies. I don’t even have a single stretcher as it is.”

“I will take care of that too. Please write down a detailed list of your needs by noon tomorrow. I will be going back to London then to place orders for supplies and equipment.”

Taking out her pocket watch, Jeanne looked at it briefly, then smiled at her husband.

“A quarter past five. How about presenting me informally to your gang of ruffians before supper, Gordon?”

“As you wish, my dear. Don’t expect geniuses and saints, though.”

“Believe me, Gordon: I’ve already seen the worst there is before in the past.”

Taking time first to bring their luggage to Gordon's room in the building reserved for the officers, then to lead their horses to the stables, the couple entered a barrack block that faced the headquarters building from across a large parade square. While clean, it became quickly obvious to Jeanne that the building was overcrowded and lacked even running water. The communal room assigned to B Troop was actually on the second floor and lodged about fifty men amidst wooden bunk beds and small personal lockers and chests, with three tables and a few benches and chairs thrown in. The farthest bunks were actually crudely separated visually from the other bunks by gray wool blankets hanging vertically over their sides. A corporal that saw them enter then snapped to attention and shouted.

"ROOM!"

The soldier's shout brought the room's occupants to a standstill. It also made the heads of five young children and two women pop out from behind the blanket partitions. Gordon saw Jeanne's surprised look and whispered in her ear.

"Those are the families of my married troopers. There are no formal married quarters for the junior ranks and a simple soldier can't afford civilian housing. This is unfortunately the best that can be done for them."

Gordon then shouted at his men.

"At ease, men! Please gather up in the middle of the room: I have news to pass. I would also like your wives to join in as well."

"You heard the captain! Move!" shouted the senior sergeant present. Gordon and Jeanne soon had 46 soldiers and seven women formed in a semi-circle around them, with a dozen children of varied age looking on with curiosity from atop bunk beds. Gordon looked briefly around the crowd before starting to speak in a sober tone.

"As you must know by now, we are at war with Russia because of its attack on Turkey. Our regiment is expected to sail within a month for the Black Sea, as part of an expeditionary force that will also include French troops."

"Blimey, sir! We are going to travel with shiploads of frogs, sir?" asked a young soldier, starting a round of laughter. Jeanne took a false air of indignation then.

"Et l'Entente Cordiale, merde?"

Laughter redoubled as the private turned red with embarrassment. Gordon shook an index at him playfully.

"Private Pearson, please be respectful to my new wife, Lady Jeanne, especially since she may be dressing your wounds one fine day."

Becoming serious again, Gordon scanned the faces of his men and of their wives. While most of the men seemed to take the news of the war in stride, the women uniformly looked tense and apprehensive now.

“My wife Jeanne will accompany the regiment overseas and will help Doctor Farrell as a field nurse. She is looking for up to three women to assist her in infirmary work. I will now let her say more on this.”

“Thank you, dear.” Said Jeanne to Gordon before stepping forward and concentrating her attention on the women present.

“I fully realize how hard separation can be, especially for those of you with small children. I also know about the financial hardships you may go through if left in England. The oncoming war will be no picnic, though. The Winter weather in Crimea is very harsh and diseases plague the whole area. You can also expect little or no material support from those uncaring incompetents from the Commissariat. On the other hand, the three women who will accompany me to work with Doctor Farrell can expect lots of hard work, primitive living conditions and heart-wrenching sights. I will need persons with a strong will, with at least one who can drive a heavy wagon. I would also prefer women with no children in their charge. I know that a ballot normally decides which of you accompany their husbands overseas, but I am ready to offer a better way out of your predicament.” What she said then surprised even Gordon.

“As a strictly personal initiative outside of army rules and customs and out of my own pocket, I am ready to offer a special war separation allowance to all the wives from this unit staying behind in England. That allowance will run from the day the regiment leaves the barracks to until your men come home. If one or more of you are widowed by this war, then this separation allowance will become a lifetime pension.”

There were seconds of total silence as the stunned British stared at her, digesting what she had just said. One woman then timidly raised one hand, speaking after Jeanne nodded her head to her.

“I don’t want to sound picky, madam, but how much would be this...allowance?”

“One Pound Sterling a week per wife, plus an extra two shillings a week per child.” Answered Jeanne, smiling. She could nearly feel the wave of relief and joy that went through the crowd then. The same woman who asked about the allowance grinned to her.

“Madam, with such a generous allowance you will not get one volunteer to follow you overseas.”

“Depends!” replied Jeanne, deadpan. “Apart from offering a good field pay, I was counting to find women dedicated enough to their husbands to follow them to Hell if need be.”

A stoutly built woman in her mid-thirties then stepped out of the crowd. About five feet four inches tall and with red hair, her brown eyes looked firmly at Jeanne as she spoke resolutely.

“I’m going with you, madam. I know how to drive a wagon or a mule as well as I can drive a man and I’m damned if I will let my James down!”

“May I have your name, madam?” asked Jeanne, both amused and impressed.

“Sarah Champion, wife of Troop Sergeant-Major Champion. All my children died of cholera two years ago, so I have nothing to hold me back.”

“I am sorry for your loss, madam. I will speak to you in private afterwards.”

Jeanne then looked at the other women around her.

“Any other volunteers?”

After a short hesitation, two more women stepped forward nearly simultaneously.

“I’m Mary Pearson, wife of Trooper John Pearson.” Said the first one, a young and pretty blonde. “I will go with you, if my husband agrees to it.”

The young soldier who had made the joke about French troops looked tenderly at Mary and took her right hand.

“Thank you, my love. I will be happy to know that you are near me.”

Another trooper whispered in the ear of the other woman that had stepped forward, who then spoke up firmly.

“I’m Margaret Ward, wife of Corporal Joseph Ward. I will go as well.”

Jeanne smiled at the slightly overweight brunette in her mid-twenties.

“Excellent! I will speak to you as well as to Misses Pearson and Champion in private while my husband gets on with his men.”

Leading the three women to the farthest bunk bed, Jeanne invited them to sit on it, then sat on the bunk opposite from it.

“Before we go further, I must tell you that I married Captain Smythe only yesterday. As you get to know me, you may find me quite unusual, as I can shoot, ride, fence and fight better than most men. I also speak a number of languages, including Turkish and Russian. By the way, please call me simply Jeanne: I am a very informal woman. Yes, Sarah?”

“Correct me if I am wrong, mad...uh, Jeanne,” said the wife of Sergeant-Major Champion, “but I thought that the regiment had no ambulance wagon left. That old drunkard of a doctor we had until last November smashed the ambulance while driving it stone drunk. We’ve been waiting for a new one ever since.”

“I am taking care of that, Sarah. In fact, I will leave for London tomorrow afternoon to order supplies and equipment for the infirmary, including a wagon and a light cart. By the way, I will also need to measure you so that I can buy warm Winter clothes for the three of you.”

“Why?” then said weakly Margaret Ward, bordering on tears. “Why are you doing all this for us, miss? Nobody cared about us or our husbands before, save for a few rare officers like your husband.”

Jeanne thought for a moment before answering softly.

“I am helping for two main reasons, Margaret. First, I want our husbands to come back alive and well from the coming war. Giving them proper medical care is one way to help doing it. By caring for their families left in England, the morale of our men will be that much higher and their resolve and will to live stronger. Keep this to yourselves for the moment, but I intend to extend this war separation allowance system to all the wives of the junior ranks in the 8th Hussars. I also just made my mind to acquire a number of townhouses in Winchester and to turn them into subsidized housing units for the families of the soldiers who can’t afford civilian housing. This business of sharing accommodations in an open barrack room full of single men is both improper and inhumane.”

“But...all this will cost you a fortune!” protested Mary Pearson, making Jeanne grin to her.

“That is the second reason why I am helping out: I’m filthy rich and can easily afford those expenses.”

“How filthy rich exactly, miss?” asked sneakily Sarah Champion.

“Well, I will keep the full extent of my fortune confidential but, as a clue, I can tell you that the dowry my husband got on marrying me amounted to 100,000 Pounds, which is mere peanuts to me.”

All three British women then gawked at Jeanne, speechless.

18:13 (London Time)

Dining room, 8th Hussars Officers’ Mess

Fanny Duberly, wife of Regimental Paymaster Henry Duberly, was having dinner with her husband at a corner table of the Officers' Mess dining room when she saw Captain Smythe enter with a richly dressed young lady. Discreetly getting Henry's attention, Fanny then looked at the newcomer while whispering to her husband.

"This must be the Lady Jeanne I heard about from the men of B Troop. God, is she ever tall!"

"Must be about six feet tall, in fact." replied Henry after a quick glance. They both soon could detail Lady Jeanne much better, as Captain Smythe made for the Duberly's table and stopped with his wife besides it, smiling down at the couple.

"May we sit at your table for dinner? My wife Jeanne has to discuss a few things concerning payroll."

"Of course, my good Gordon!" replied Henry cheerfully. "Have a seat, you and your beautiful wife."

Fanny had a good look at Jeanne as Gordon Smythe gallantly pulled a chair for her. Despite being surprisingly wide-shouldered and muscular for a woman, Lady Jeanne had a most shapely body and a chest that got the undivided attention of Henry, something that prompted Fanny to discreetly kick him under the table. Lady Jeanne also wore a set of beautiful jewels with her elegant red city dress. The stories about her fortune appeared to be true after all. Captain Smythe took the time to call a steward and order dinner for himself and his wife before speaking again to the Duberlys. That gave the occasion to Lady Jeanne to present herself in the meantime. While she had a very slight French accent, Fanny found her English to be flawless. The French woman also radiated confidence and strength of character and immediately gave a favorable impression to Fanny.

"Well," said finally Gordon Smythe cheerfully, "here we are! You may have heard that Lord Paget has agreed to Jeanne coming with the regiment overseas as a field nurse."

"We heard rumors to that effect, Gordon." replied Fanny. "It will be nice to have another lady coming along with me."

"You are going overseas as well?" asked an obviously delighted Jeanne.

"Of course! I can't let my Henry go on his own, can't I?"

"True!" said Jeanne, grinning. "Men are like lost children when away from their wives: they tend to play around. Those old Turkish pashas with their harems of young

women will probably not be pleased to see the flower of British manhood descend by the thousand on their land.”

“Hmm, a point of view I didn’t think about before, Jeanne. Thanks for the warning.”

“Ahem!” said Henry, clearing his voice. “So, Lady Jeanne, you are ready to serve Her Majesty the Queen in the field, all for the fantastic pay of three shillings a week?”

“Three shillings a week?” exclaimed Jeanne in faked delight. “I’m overwhelmed, sir!”

Gordon giggled at that, patting Jeanne’s hand.

“Don’t listen to her. She probably could buy the whole regiment, lock, stock and barrel, without denting her fortune. She only needs to be put in your pay books so that her position becomes official.”

“That’s right.” seconded Jeanne. “I will probably use my pay to help feed and care for my horse.”

“Is it true that you are going to give a separation allowance to the wives staying behind?” asked Fanny. Jeanne then stared at her, now serious.

“I see that rumors fly quickly around here. Yes, it is true, but I was hoping for this to stay low key. I am also paying for three women to come with me to help Doctor Farrell.”

“May I ask which ones, Jeanne?”

“You may, Fanny. They are Misses Champion, Ward and Pearson. They are going mostly out of devotion to their husbands, though, a much better incentive than simply pay.”

“Just out of curiosity,” ventured politely Henry, “how much do you intend to pay those women?”

“Three pounds a week, plus rations if not provided by those uncaring idiots from the Commissariat.” answered Jeanne nonchalantly. While her answer made the Duberly’s choke with surprise, a civilian gentleman eating at a nearby table gave Jeanne a dark look on hearing her last words. Fanny could swear then that Jeanne noticed the man’s reaction but ignored him as she went on in good humor.

“Talking of supplies, may I counsel both of you to bring warm clothing with you for Crimea? The winters there can be very harsh indeed.”

"But...the war will certainly be over by Christmas." protested Henry, getting a dubious look from Jeanne.

"Home by Christmas...an old saying indeed but one you should not be putting much store into in this case. Believe me, sir: this will be one long and miserable war." The uneasy silence that followed was broken by the showing up of Thomas Farrell, who timidly approached their table and saluted the Duberlys and Gordon before handing a sheet of paper to Jeanne.

"Here is the list of supplies and equipment required for the infirmary, Jeanne, as you earlier requested."

Taking the paper, Jeanne looked questioningly at Henry and Fanny.

"Would you mind if Doctor Farrell sits at our table?"

"He is most welcome to it, Jeanne." replied quickly the paymaster, who then looked up at Farrell. "Have you eaten yet, Doctor?"

"Uh, not yet, as a matter of fact." The young surgeon answered in his mild voice.

"Then please join us for dinner, Doctor."

"Thank you very much, sir."

A steward showed up nearly at once to take the doctor's order. Jeanne had finished reading Farrell's list by the time the steward walked away.

"What about chloroform, Doctor? Do you have some already in stock?"

Farrell hesitated for a moment, unsure how to phrase his answer.

"In truth I have none, Jeanne, but the medical department is not favorable to the use of chloroform."

"Why? I know about the possible side effects of chloroform but those are certainly minor compared to the agony of having a limb amputated while fully conscious. What is your personal opinion about the use of chloroform, Doctor?"

"Frankly, I have not formed an opinion on the subject, Jeanne."

"Would you mind then if I buy some chloroform?"

Farrell was suddenly conscious that the regiment's Commissariat representative, Mister Grant, was looking severely at him from a nearby table. Jeanne noticed it too and stared hard at the plump civilian.

"Do you mind, sir?"

Seeing that other patrons of the mess around him eyed him with antipathy, Grant cut short his meal and, rising from his chair, left the dining room. Fanny Duberly, who had no love for the civil servant, looked with glee at Jeanne.

“My God, that’s what I would call staring someone down. Are you always this feisty, Jeanne?”

“You haven’t seen half of her yet, Fanny.” replied Gordon, a big smile on his face. Farrell then made up his mind.

“On second thought, add chloroform to my list, Jeanne.”

“Good boy!” was Jeanne’s happy reply as she patted his shoulder.

12:41 (London Time)

Thursday, March 30, 1854

8th Hussars regimental stables

Jeanne gave a last kiss to Gordon as she was about to mount her brown mare, watched by a few troopers on stable duty.

“You can expect me back in about two weeks maximum. Don’t leave for Crimea without me, you lovely hunk.”

“I won’t, I promise. Those will be two long, lonely weeks, Jeanne.”

“For me too, love. Wish me luck!”

Taking three quick steps, Jeanne then jumped astride her horse without help, attracting appreciative comments from the troopers present. Blowing a kiss to Gordon, she turned her horse towards the stable’s open door and rode off at a gallop. Troop Sergeant-Major James Champion, who was supervising the stable’s work detail, approached Gordon and whispered in his ear.

“I didn’t thank you yet for letting my wife come with me, sir. I owe you a big one, sir.”

“Correction, Sergeant-Major: you owe my wife a big one.” replied Gordon in a quiet voice. “God, I miss her already.”

“That’s the mark of true love, sir.” said Champion before returning to his supervisory duties.

16:49 (London Time)

Friday, April 14, 1854

Parade square, 8th Hussars regimental barracks

Winchester, England

“REGIMENT, ATTEN...TION!”

Four hundred and sixty officers and men snapped to attention at Major William Henry's command. Along one side of the parade square were lined up Doctor Farrell, 35 regimental wives and two other civilians designated to accompany the unit overseas. Only seven soldiers, either sick or on guard duty, were not present on the parade square for the commander's address. Pivoting on his heels, Major Henry then marched six paces forward and stopped in front of the dais on which stood Lord Paget, saluting him crisply.

“Regiment present and ready, sir!”

“Thank you, Major!” replied Paget, saluting back. Henry then marched to the side of the dais and took position there. Scanning the troops, the lieutenant colonel then spoke as loud as he could.

“Officers and men of the 8th Royal Hussars! I am pleased to announce to you that I have received from the brigade commander, Lord Cardigan, our marching orders for the war. We will leave this garrison with all our horses and our baggage train on the morning of April 20th and will then ride to Plymouth, where we will board the transport ships SANS PAREIL and WANDERER. We will then sail on April 22nd for the Black Sea. Our destination will be the port of Varna, on the Bulgarian coast of the Black Sea. We should arrive in Varna around early June, weather permitting. The following sub-units will be part of the overseas contingent.”

Taking a sheet of paper handed to him by his ADC, Lord Paget then read slowly, letting each sub-unit commander acknowledge the call.

“Headquarters Troop, A Troop, B Troop, C Troop, D Troop, Quartermaster Troop and Regimental Ambulance. The sub-units staying behind in these barracks will be E Troop, F Troop and the Regimental Band. The garrison commander here will be Captain Ramsay Fields as of April 20th. I am sure that every one of you will do his duty to the Queen to his utmost capacity. God save the Queen! Major Henry, you can dismiss the troops!”

“Sir!” shouted the major, saluting Paget as the latter left the dais. Marching back in front of the regiment and stopping at attention, Henry shouted at the top of his lungs.

“OFFICERS, DIS...MISSED!...SERGEANT-MAJOR, TAKE THE PARADE!”

“YES SIR!” shouted back RSM O’Neil before taking place in front of the men and dismissing them with a few quick orders.

After being dismissed with the other officers by Major Henry, Gordon gathered with the others along the north side of the parade square to discuss their new orders. Some of their wives, including Fanny Duberly, soon joined them there. On her part, Fanny found her husband Henry in conversation with Gordon and with Captain Lockwood, of A Troop. She listened to them politely until an officer nearby suddenly spoke up in wonderment.

“What the hell is that?”

Turning her head towards the main gate of the garrison, Fanny watched with the others the strangest wagon she had ever seen roll through the main gate. Pulled by two big horses, it had six wheels instead of the standard four, with each wheel being much wider than normal. Its top half was made of white canvas strung on an oval section framing, while the lower half seemed made of wood planks backing a metallic framework, the lot painted green. The word ‘AMBULANCE’ in English, Turkish and Russian was painted in big red letters on the canvas top. One woman was at the reins of the long wagon, which was pulling both a small covered cart and two horses.

“JEANNE!” suddenly shouted joyfully Gordon Smythe before running towards the wagon. By the time Fanny herself got to the wagon a crowd had formed around it, while Gordon Smythe was kissing passionately his wife. Going around the wagon and examining it in detail with Henry only made Fanny more curious about it, like many others around her. Lord Paget himself then showed up, greeted with pride by Jeanne Smythe.

“Sir, I have the pleasure of presenting you our new regimental mobile field dressing station and your field ambulance, just completed according to my design specifications.”

Paget had one bewildered look at the big white and green wagon before facing Jeanne again.

“Uh, the least that I can say is that it is a most unusual design, Lady Jeanne. Would you care describing it to me quickly?”

“With pleasure, sir! Let’s start with the construction method.”

Going to the right side of the wagon, Jeanne then touched part of the visible metallic framing.

“The wagon’s main structure is made of hollow steel tubes forming connecting trusses. This gives both very high rigidity and relative light weight. Bolted to the metallic

frame is a waterproofed shell made of wood planks, which makes the wagon able to float and cross streams and rivers if need be.”

“This can float?” asked Paget, incredulous. Jeanne smiled and nodded once.

“It does, sir. There are rubber flotation bags for the horses as well. The top part of the framing is lined inside by thin wood paneling and on the outside by waterproofed canvas. The six wheels are made very wide so that the wagon can negotiate deep mud and snow. The front axle pivots to permit turns, while the two rear axles are fixed. All the axles are however equipped with independent coil spring suspensions, to give a smooth ride to any wounded man transported inside. When stopped and operating as a field dressing station, this wagon can quickly deploy a large tent to the rear, plus two smaller tents on the sides. Let me show you. Gordon, I will need your help here.”

“Coming, dear!”

Going with Jeanne to the rear of the wagon, Gordon watched her first unhook the cart and move it out of the way, along with the two horses tied to it. She then undid a few leather straps holding in place a sort of inverted U-shaped frame structure to which rolled canvas was attached. She did this on both rear sides, then pulled out two large steel pins held by thin chains to the wagon’s frame. Next, she extended out with Gordon’s help the inverted U-frames, which then proved to be mounted on horizontal telescopic tubing that was part of the wagon’s frame. To everybody’s surprise, the framing turned into a large telescopic tent that was about twenty feet long and six feet wide. Jeanne completed the tent’s installation by pulling out the telescopic legs of the tent’s framing and unrolling the lower canvas parts. After a grand total of four minutes, Jeanne faced back Lord Paget, pointing at the now fully deployed rear tent.

“Here you are, sir: a field dressing tent ready in less than five minutes and able to accommodate six stretchers. As you could see, it is also quite simple to assemble.”

“Indeed! By Jove, I like this!”

“That is not all, sir. Just give me a minute and I will show you.”

Going to the right side of the wagon, Jeanne undid some more straps, then went inside the wagon through the front. To everybody’s amazement, part of the canvas side soon folded down, forming in seconds a sort of side tent suspended over the side of the wagon. Coming out and climbing down, Jeanne pointed at two steel telescopic legs still folded under the side tent.

“Once deployed, those legs help support the floor of that side tent. There is a second, similar folding tent on the other side. One will be reserved for Doctor Farrell and

me, the other for the nurses. The rear half of the wagon can accommodate up to six wounded on stretchers during moves, while the forward half contains storage lockers for medical supplies, as well as a small pot-bellied stove.”

Lord Paget scanned the wagon from end to end, then smiled to Jeanne.

“Madam, this is outstanding. Thank you in the name of the regiment.”

“You are most welcome, sir. I do however have one last thing to show you: our field ambulance cart.”

Going again to the back of the big wagon, Jeanne stood beside the compact four-wheeled cart parked side by side with it.

“This is a light cart built on the same principles as the bigger wagon, but it is much lighter and more mobile. It also can float and can carry up to two loaded stretchers under canvas protection. I intend to use it to pick up wounded soldiers on the battlefield and to transport those wounded to the field dressing station.”

“Again you amaze me, Lady Jeanne.” said Paget, by now truly overwhelmed. “How could we ever repay you for this?”

“Simple, sir: by getting me a written safe-conduct signed by the expedition commander that will guarantee that neither this cart nor this wagon will be requisitioned by anybody for purposes other than the transportation or treatment of the wounded and sick.”

“Madam, you can count on me to do my best to get you that safe-conduct. Have a very good evening, Lady Jeanne.”

Gordon went to Jeanne and kissed her as Lord Paget was walking away.

“Jeanne, you are fantastic! How could you have done all this in so little time?”

“Easy! I threw in lots of money, requested and got top production priority at the Pullman Wagon Company and stood over their backs with a whip in my hands.”

That made both Gordon and the Duberlys laugh. Jeanne then saw Doctor Farrell standing timidly nearby, with Misses Champion, Ward and Pearson besides him.

“Doctor, girls, come with me! I will give you the grand tour.”

“Can I go in too?” asked eagerly Fanny Duberly. Jeanne smiled to her and took her right hand.

“Sure! You’re coming too, Gordon?”

“Of course, dear!”

Thomas Farrell looked like a big kid entering a toy castle as he climbed in the back of the wagon, using a ladder deployed from under the wagon's chassis by Jeanne and entering through a wooden door. A grin appeared on his face at the sight of a dozen wood and canvas stretches piled in the left rear corner of the wagon.

"Yes! Just what we needed. Would you believe that Mister Grant, our Commissariat representative, has refused to procure any stretchers, on the pretext that they are not part of the official regimental kit list?"

"What would it take for him to amend that list?" asked Jeanne in a bitter tone. "A gun to his head?"

"Hey, that could work!" exclaimed Gordon, making Jeanne smile back to him.

"Maybe I should shoot him and take his place. I would probably save more lives ultimately this way than as a field nurse."

"It won't work!" pronounced firmly Fanny Duberly, deadpan. "They don't accept women in the public service."

"I should have known."

Giggling from Jeanne's expression, Margaret Ward pointed at a pile of travel bags and storage chests in the right rear corner of the wagon.

"What's in there? Medical supplies?"

"In the chests, yes. Those travel bags contain our new winter clothing."

That made Henry Duberly glance dubiously at her.

"You really believe that this war will go past Christmas, are you?"

"You better believe it, sir." replied Jeanne, dead serious. "If you haven't got really warm clothes yet, I will strongly counsel that you buy some before departure. By the way, Gordon, do you know when the regiment will sail for Varna?"

"We will leave Winchester on the 20th and sail from Plymouth two days later."

Answered Gordon before realizing something and looking in amazement at Jeanne.

"Hey! How did you know that our destination is Varna?"

Everybody then stared at Jeanne as she hesitated.

"Uh, simple geography, I guess: Varna is the best port inside the Black Sea and near Constantinople. It is also close to where the Turks and Russians are fighting each other right now. This is unimportant anyway. Let's continue the tour."

Not really convinced by her explanation, the group nonetheless followed Jeanne through a canvas curtain partition dividing the inside of the wagon in half. They then found themselves in an eight by five and a half feet compartment. The head clearance was

high enough even for Gordon to stand without having to bend his head. Mary Pearson had a look through the modesty curtain giving access to the still deployed right side tent and whistled in appreciation.

“Look at this! There is even a real mattress and a bear fur.”

“A bear fur!” Exclaimed Margaret Ward. “What for?”

“A bear fur beats a wool blanket any time in cold weather, Margaret. Now, those side storage bins, apart from acting as seats, also contain reserves of food, grain, water and firewood. Talking of firewood, this small pot-bellied stove here, with its brick thermal insulation around its base, will help us heat this wagon and boil water. For the good doctor, there are those two large supply cabinets where he can store his medications and instruments.”

Going to one of the cabinets pointed by Jeanne, Farrell opened it and went through it, pulling open a number of small drawers.

“This is really well designed, Jeanne. You keep surprising me.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“Uh, what is this exactly?” asked Henry Duberly, holding up a sort of brown leather sleeveless jacket covered with wide cargo pockets that had been hooked to a wall.

“That’s a specially-made medical equipment-carrying vest I intend to use while picking up wounded soldiers on the battlefield. The inside of the shoulder straps are padded in order to distribute the weight. I will also carry a white apron over it that will prevent blood stains on the vest.”

“Including two pistols?” insisted the paymaster, pointing at the two holsters strapped horizontally to the front of the vest, at belly level. Jeanne nodded slowly, conscious that the other women were looking at her with questioning expressions.

“Actually, I will be armed with two six-shot revolvers, with which I can assure you that I am most proficient.”

“Why be armed?” wondered Mary Pearson. “Who would attack a nurse treating wounded men?”

“Russian Cossacks, for starters. The Cossacks are first rate cavalymen but they also happen to be extremely undisciplined and most ruthless. If they find a woman with a wounded on the battlefield, they will most probably kill the wounded first, then rape the woman before cutting her throat.”

The women around her gave her horrified looks, while the men's jaws tightened. Grabbing her web gear from Henry Duberly's hands, Jeanne then smiled to Fanny.

"Let's forget the horrors of war. How about a test ride in my light cart, once we have returned this wagon to its rolling mode? It will also give a chance to Misses Champion to prove how good she is at driving a wagon."

19:57 (London Time)

Officers quarters

8th Hussars barracks

Gordon threw on his bed the two travel bags he had helped Jeanne bring from the medical wagon, then closed the door of his room and locked it while Jeanne dropped the two bags she held. Going to her next, he hugged and kissed her tenderly, then looked her in the eyes.

"Jeanne, I'm proud of you, truly. What you did may save the lives of many of our men."

"Saving lives is a reward by itself, Gordon. By the way, you should know that I enlisted your father's help in order to provide for the regimental wives staying behind in Winchester. He will administer my system of allowances and pensions and will also supervise the running of free housing units for military families in Winchester and the shipping from England of essential medical supplies to the regiment in Crimea. Being an old Hussar himself, he was too happy to volunteer for this."

"You decidedly think about everything, Jeanne. All this good work deserves some reward."

Gordon then gently laid her flat on the bed and started kissing her all over while undoing her clothes.

09:02 (London Time)

Thursday, April 20, 1854

Parade square, Winchester Barracks

Lord Paget had a last look at his regiment, mounted up and ready to go, then shouted at the top of his lungs.

“REGIMENT, FORWARD...MARCH!”

His order relayed down by his subaltern officers, the long column of cavalymen, pack horses and wagons slowly started moving out of the parade square, heading out of the garrison. Lined up alongside the barracks were the 65 men staying behind, along with the wives not chosen to accompany the regiment overseas. In contrast to other similar separations, the mood and morale of both the men of the regiment and of their families were very high, thanks to Jeanne’s generosity and sense of care. The extent of Jeanne’s fortune, rumored to be in the millions of Sterling Pounds, had come as quite a shock to Lord Paget. For such a rich woman to be willing and eager to share the hardships and risks of a war denoted rare commitment and, as was now widely realized by all, deep love for her husband. Captain Smythe could indeed count himself a very lucky man.

Saluting each sub-unit as it paraded past him, Lord Paget bowed his head politely when Jeanne Smythe, closing the convoy at the reins of her light ambulance cart, rode past him and saluted him. Lady Jeanne wore one of her now well-known riding dresses, plus a warm burgundy tunic. Pushing his horse to a gallop, Paget then rode to the head of the regiment’s column to assume the lead out of Winchester, cheered along by the crowd of well-wishers lining both sides of the road.

23 :18 (London Time)

Saturday, April 22, 1854 ‘A’

Forward deck of the troopship H.M.S. SANS PAREIL

Off the port of Plymouth, England

Having excused herself with Gordon under the pretext of wanting to get some fresh air on the open deck of their troopship, Jeanne went to a dark corner behind a deckhouse and, checking first that nobody was in sight, concentrated and ordered mentally her implanted time distorter to make a space-time jump : she had another life to go resume in the 17th Century as Nancy Sommers, Marquess of Saint-Laurent, as well as two boys to take care of. No one on the ship saw her disappear in a brief flash of white light.



British soldiers and a regimental soldier's wife in their camp during the Crimean War.

CHAPTER 5 – VARNA

20:08 (Constantinople Time)

Thursday, June 1, 1854 'A'

Port of Varna, on the Black Sea

Bulgaria

“Look at all this activity, all these diverse costumes and uniforms!” wondered Fanny Duberly while leaning against the ship's side and looking down at the crowded quay. Her husband Henry, standing beside her in his Hussar's uniform, nodded his head and took her gently by the waist.

“You wanted adventure and travel, dear? Enjoy them before the killing starts. The Captain told me that we will wait until tomorrow morning to unload most of our animals and supplies, except for a small reconnaissance party that will find and delimit a campsite for the regiment.”

“Can we at least go down on the quay and do a small walk around town, Henry? I'm sick and tired of being on this ship.”

Henry smiled in sympathy at that: the five-week sea trip had been both hard and uncomfortable, to say the least.

“That we can do, dear. Let me just advise Major Henry first.”

The paymaster was back a few minutes later as a small group of cavalymen was riding off the ship through a large cargo ramp lowered down from a hull side opening. Fanny watched go out in succession Major Henry, Captain Heneage, Captain Smythe, RSM O’Neil and Jeanne Smythe, the latter driving her light cart and with Doctor Farrell sitting by her side on the bench seat. Jeanne was wearing her equipment vest, something that prompted Fanny to question her husband.

“Henry, what do you think of a woman who goes around armed to the teeth?”

Henry replied slowly while following the reconnaissance party with his eyes.

“Normally, not much good, Fanny. However, that French woman is anything but normal. You saw her during saber and pistol practice, right?”

“Did I ever!” replied Fanny while rolling her eyes. “If she would have been a man, she would be recognized as fencing champion of the regiment. As for her pistol shooting, I’m not sure that anyone in Europe can equal her.”

Henry nodded and looked at Fanny with a strange expression.

“Correct, dear. That is not all, however.”

“By God, isn’t that enough already? I’m getting jealous of her abilities as it is.”

“Well, you remember that mid-March newspaper article about Captain Smythe killing or wounding four bandits in Hyde Park while walking with Lady Jeanne?”

“How could I forget it? It earned him a round of toasts at the Officers’ Mess on his return to Winchester.”

“Yes, and I went to congratulate him privately afterwards about that. The problem was that, instead of being flattered, he became deeply embarrassed and revealed a secret to me on the condition that I didn’t repeat it to anyone. Captain Smythe didn’t kill or wound those bandits: Lady Jeanne did.”

Fanny was struck speechless for a moment, staring at her husband with utter disbelief.

“That I can’t believe, Henry! No woman could do that, ever, especially when considering that one of the bandits was a murderer and a man considered very dangerous.”

“Think what you want, dear.” replied softly Henry, shrugging. “Let’s forget this for the moment and let’s take a nice walk off this ship.”

Taking the arm he offered her, Fanny followed eagerly Henry down the gangway and onto the quay. They had to make their way through a crowd of sweating soldiers and local workers busy unloading cannon balls, shells and other supplies from the ships

moored to the quay. Finally setting foot on the shore, the couple hesitated on which way to go until Henry decided to follow a party of French Army officers down a main street of the port.

Even if the town was a dirty, impoverished one, Fanny found pleasure in being able to walk around and escape the crowded, smelly confines of the H.M.S. SANS PAREIL. It also thrilled her to see such various accoutrements and hear so many languages in one place. In the street they were walking along, Fanny could detail French Zouave soldiers from Algeria, North African Spahi cavalrymen, Ottoman soldiers from Egypt, Tunisia and Albania and even irregular Muslim volunteer cavalrymen called Bashi-Bazouks. She had a glimpse of one of those bearded, ragged men sitting under a porch and caressing the exposed breasts of an equally ragged camp follower, oblivious of the passing humanity around him. Henry saw Fanny scandalized expression then and grinned in amusement.

“War can’t be all work and no fun, dear.”

“Maybe,” replied his wife with a frown, “but don’t count on me undressing in public like this wretch.”

“Oh, I’m not asking for that much.”

That remark earned Henry a light slap on the back of his head and a snub for the next few minutes. The couple soon had to cut their promenade short, though, as it was quickly getting dark. On their return to the ship, they found out that the reconnaissance party was staying overnight at the regimental campsite. Hoping that this would be her last night in their cramped ship’s cabin for at least a few weeks, Fanny changed to a night gown and went to bed. She nearly protested at Henry’s eagerness when he cupped her right breast with one hand as soon as she lay besides him. However, the feeling that his fingers quickly arose in her nipple then reminded her that being married had its advantages too.

08:21 (Constantinople Time)

Friday, June 2, 1854 ‘A’

H.M.S. SANS PAREIL

Port of Varna, Bulgaria

“WOAH, BOB! CALM DOWN!”

It took Henry's firm hands to get Fanny's horse back under control, so excited the beast was. Most of the horses about to be disembarked were similarly agitated, anxious to be free from the confines of the ship. Only the pack mules stayed manageable. While waiting for their turn to disembark, the Duberlys watched Captain Tomkinson's A Troop file off the ship, followed by B Troop, led by Lieutenant Wells. The Quartermaster Troop was last off the ship, with the medical wagon closing the procession. Driven expertly by Misses Champion, the big vehicle was transporting as well Misses Ward and Pearson, plus five other regimental wives who had no means of transport of their own. From what Jeanne Smythe had told her during their sea voyage about the conditions to expect in Varna, Fanny suspected that those women would not stay inactive for long. Her heart pounding with excitement, she spurred her horse to a trot, following Henry's horse through the narrow streets of the port.

The regimental camp turned out to be a barren, rocky expanse of ground measuring about 200 yards to the side and surrounded on three sides by camps for other cavalry regiments. The free side ran along a small stream, which shoreline was lined at fifty yards intervals with bright signs mounted on pickets. Intrigued by these, Fanny galloped to the stream and examined one of the signs, reading it aloud.

"Fresh water source. No urinating, defecating or throwing of waste of any kind within fifty yards of the water. By order of Regimental Surgeon."

Looking next around her, Fanny saw Jeanne Smythe's cart near one corner of the campsite, with the French woman hard at work nearby digging a hole with pick and shovel. The medical wagon pulled to a halt near Jeanne's cart as Fanny stopped her horse besides the French woman and dismounted. Wearing a light sleeveless shirt, a riding skirt and cavalry boots, Jeanne was already sweating in the rising heat of the day as she was shoveling dirt out of a waist-deep hole. Jeanne smiled up at Fanny while continuing her work.

"Good morning, Fanny. It's going to be a hot day."

"It certainly will. What are you doing?"

"Digging a latrine for us women. Maybe our example will push our men into respecting some camp sanitation rules."

"Uh, I supposed that you are planning something to hide us from the hundreds of men that will camp around us."

“Of course! I will erect a small bell tent around it that will also protect us from rain. Another tent will be reserved for female bathing and washing.”

“Jeanne, you’re a genius!” said Fanny enthusiastically. “Can I help?” Jeanne looked at Fanny’s ankle-length fine city dress, tunic, embroidered blouse and fancy hat before smiling apologetically to her.

“I appreciate the offer, Fanny, but aren’t you kind of overdressed for the job?” Fanny had one quick look at herself and realized that Jeanne was right.

“Damn! I didn’t think about bringing informal work clothes with me.” Jeanne’s smile faded then as she looked with concern at Fanny.

“Did you at least bring warm winter clothes?”

“That I did.” answered Fanny sheepishly. “At first I thought that you were being over pessimistic about the length of this war. Then I changed my mind.” Jeanne stopped shoveling for a moment, resting on her shovel as she stared seriously at her friend.

“May I ask what changed your mind?”

“Maybe the way you always seem to be ahead of the rest of us in so many things.” Fanny looked downright embarrassed now as she looked down at Jeanne.

“Jeanne, at first I thought that you were some kind of rich eccentric with mental delusions. After watching you for a few weeks, I now realize that you mean business, deadly serious business. In fact, I’m starting to have more confidence in you than in many of our officers. I wish I knew how you ended up the way you are, though.” Jeanne was thoughtful for a moment, then spoke quietly.

“Put it on years of adversity, hard training and continuous self-education. War is also an old acquaintance of mine. Sometimes I watch those so-called officers who bought their ranks instead of earning them and am tempted to push them aside and show them how it’s done. However, I do not wish to become too conspicuous, something that would hinder my job of helping the sick and the wounded and could also hurt my husband’s career. For that same reason I would ask you to not include me in your journal. The less known I stay, the better.”

“How do you know that I am writing a journal?” Asked Fanny, surprised. “Only my husband knows about it.”

“Fanny, just assume that I somehow know more than I should and accept me as I am.”

Fanny looked at Jeanne suspiciously for a moment, then nodded her head slowly.

“Alright, I will, but you are the strangest friend I ever had.”

“Thanks, Fanny!” replied happily Jeanne before resuming her digging work.

11:18 (Constantinople Time)

8th Hussars campsite, Varna

Henry Duberly smiled with amusement when he found his wife Fanny down to her blouse and skirt and digging a narrow ditch around a rectangular tent with the help of Misses Ward. The seven other women from the medical party were busy erecting another big rectangular tent about twenty yards away, isolated from the other tents around it. Fanny stopped digging long enough to accept a kiss from Henry, who then looked at the grounds occupied by the medical section. Apart from the big medical wagon, with its rear and side tents already deployed, five large rectangular tents were either already up or about to be erected around the wagon. The tents were not of the regulation army bell tent model and, apart from being more spacious, were made of much sturdier, better quality fabric than the army-issued ones, having been procured in London by Jeanne Smythe. Two of the tents, including the one Fanny was busy surrounding with a ditch, flanked each side of the medical wagon, while the three others were each twenty yards from it and well separated. Two solid poles were firmly planted in the ground near the wagon, to which were attached four horses and five mules. One of the horses was ‘Bob’, fanny’s mount, while another was Jeanne Smythe’s personal horse, ‘Pegasus’. The remaining horses were those for the medical wagon and the ambulance cart. Near the horse poles was parked the small wooden baggage trailer that had been towed behind the medical wagon. Of conventional construction, in contrast to the medical wagon and cart, that two-wheeled covered cart had been bought in Winchester and quickly modified so that it could be towed by the medical wagon. Overall, the regimental ambulance section now had a mobility and degree of self-sufficiency that the rest of the army could only envy.

“By God!” exclaimed Henry admiringly while looking around him. “I wish that the regimental quartermaster be this well equipped and organized. That Jeanne Smythe would have made a first class quartermaster if a man.”

Those words made Fanny look dubiously at him.

“You know, Henry, I’m starting to think that us women are not so weak and dependant of men after all.”

She then swept one arm towards the crowd of cavalry soldiers surrounding them.

“Look at those idiots! While the medical section is nearly finished setting up, with no thanks to men, our good officers have been busy all morning shouting useless orders around, harassing their men and wasting everybody’s time. The tent lines have been moved and realigned three times already and not a single latrine or cooking tent has been set up yet.”

Henry blushed under the vehement but well deserved criticism from his wife: the utter lack of field experience of many of the regiment’s officers was already becoming painfully obvious, attracting bitter comments from experienced troopers. What he had come to tell Fanny was thus all the more embarrassing to say.

“Uh, I’m afraid that I have two bad news for you, Fanny.”

“Not concerning us directly, I hope?”

“One, yes. I have been assigned a tent. The problem is that three other junior officers are sharing it with me.”

“WHAT?” shouted Fanny, getting angry. “And where am I supposed to sleep?”

“I don’t know yet, dear. The quartermaster has not come around yet to assigning tents to women.”

Margaret Ward, who had been discreetly listening on, then cut in politely.

“If I may, Misses Duberly, we have plenty of space left in the women’s tent. You are most welcome to move in if you wish so.”

“Hell, I think that I will do just that.” replied Fanny while staring down her husband. “So, what is that other bad news you were bringing, dear?”

Wincing at the sarcastic way she had pronounced the word ‘dear’, Henry braced himself as he answered her.

“Well, C and D Troops have arrived, along with the Headquarters Troop, but they have no means of transportation for their baggage and supplies. The quartermaster, Captain McGregor, sent me to see if the doctor would be willing to spare his mules for the day in order to help.”

Fanny and Margaret exchanged a knowing look then.

“Henry,” replied Fanny with an exasperated tone, “you can tell Captain McGregor that he will get an answer after lunch: Doctor Farrell and Lady Jeanne have gone into town to talk with French Army doctors and to procure supplies. Those mules are the

private property of Jeanne Smythe and she has a letter signed by Lord Raglan himself certifying that the equipment and animals of the medical section cannot be requisitioned without her tacit agreement. Talking of lunch, what is on the regiment's menu for noon?" Fanny didn't like the way Henry tucked his head in like a turtle at her question.

"Nothing yet, dear: the cooks and their rations are still stuck aboard the ship. We were hoping for your mules to bring some ration biscuits to the men."

Margaret Ward could barely contain her laughter as Fanny Duberly bent down and leaned on her pick, looking totally discouraged.

"God, is this regiment an army unit or a traveling circus act?"

"Hey," protested weakly Henry, "you should see the other regiments."

"I don't want to know!"

Fanny's eyes then focused on something in the distance.

"Well, you are in luck after all: here is Jeanne's cart back from town."

Looking in the same direction, Henry effectively saw the ambulance cart coming towards them, with Jeanne Smythe and Doctor Farrell sitting in the front. He didn't like the glum look on their faces as they got nearer. Stopping her cart beside the medical wagon, Jeanne then jumped down from it with commendable agility and faced Henry and Fanny.

"I'm afraid that we have bad news: cholera cases have developed in the French camps. Our men may become infected soon."

Everybody around Jeanne stiffened at the name of the dreaded killer disease. Fanny then looked at young Doctor Farrell, whose face reflected preoccupation. The young doctor then spoke in a glum tone.

"The best thing for us to do now is to prevent its spread through sound camp sanitation and quarantine of the sick. For the sick, we can only help them by combating dehydration, cleaning them up and keeping down the fever. Jeanne gave me a few good ideas about how to do this best."

All eyes then turned to Jeanne, who spoke slowly.

"Don't get this wrong, people. Cholera is a nasty, merciless disease. We probably will be swamped with patients emptying themselves constantly by both ends all over the place and who could die within hours of showing the first symptoms. We can help fight dehydration, the most dangerous aspect of cholera, by constantly giving to the sick a solution of water and minerals. A light broth or soup could do. Thankfully, the medical wagon contains a good supply of bed pans and bed sheets that will help us keep the quarantine tent clean. The washing to be done will however be backbreaking,

continuous work. One crucial point: everything used to treat cholera victims will have to be washed, then disinfected by boiling. Another important point is to safeguard our fresh water supply from infection. No human waste must touch the stream passing through this camp, or we will all be infected. Our next big piece of work will be to dig a sewer pit away from the river, in which we will throw all the infected waste, plus quicklime at regular intervals. I will direct the work this afternoon while Doctor Farrell alerts Lord Paget and the surgeons of the other regiments of the brigade.”

Henry Duberly looked gravely at Jeanne as she spoke: Doctor Farrell may officially be in charge of the regimental ambulance but there was no mistaking who was in real control. Everything that Jeanne had said however made good, solid sense and cholera was too serious a matter to start petty power games now.

“Misses Smythe, I will talk to Captain McGregor about this to see how he can help you. I however have a pressing request from him. Could you spare your five mules so that the essential rations and supplies can be unloaded from our ships?”

Jeanne shook her head dejectedly before looking back at Henry.

“Hurrah for the Commissariat’s usual incompetence! Tell Captain McGregor that he can have my mules for today, but remind him that there is a big string attached to them. In the meantime, us girls will take a well deserved lunch.”

“You have rations with you?” asked Henry, both surprised and envious. Jeanne gave him a dubious look, then went to the back of her cart and unloaded a number of wicker baskets, opening them and exposing their content.

“Alright, girls, we have fresh bread, cheese, hard-boiled eggs, smoked beef sausages and red wine. Let’s set the table!”

Henry Duberly shrank under the sarcastic look Fanny then gave him. It became even more stinging when Jeanne went back to the cart and took out of it a live lamb.

“By the way, I also secured our supper. If any of you girls want to, you can bring to your husbands a portion then.”

“Hmm, I’ll think about it.” said Fanny, grabbing one of the baskets and bringing it inside the rear tent of the medical wagon.

08:36 (Constantinople Time)

Saturday, June 3, 1854 ‘A’

8th Hussars camp

Varna, Bulgaria

Fanny Duberly woke up to find herself alone in the women's tent, now well lit by daylight. She could hear outside the usual noises of an army bivouac: shouted orders; the sound of marching feet and horses hoofs; the clicking of weapons and the conversations of idle soldiers. With her muscles stiff from yesterday's digging work, she rose from the folding camp cot lent to her by Jeanne and quickly dressed, putting on her most informal gown, which was however still overly fancy for rugged outdoors work. She emerged from the tent, intent on using the women's latrine, only to nearly bump into a bearded man wearing civilian clothes and who was gawking at the medical wagon nearby. The man, who looked in his late thirties, quickly took off his cap and bowed politely.

"I'm sorry for being in the way, madam. Let me present myself: William Howard Russell, correspondent for The Times of London."

"Pleased to meet you, sir." replied Fanny politely but now on her guard. "My name is Fanny Duberly, wife of the 8th Hussars' paymaster. May I help you?"

"You may, madam." said Russell, then pointing at the medical wagon. "This is a most ingenious design. Do you know how long it has been in army service?"

"In fact I do, sir. It was introduced into Hussars' service on April ninth of this year, but you won't find any other similar wagon in the army."

"Oh, why? Is the design flawed?"

Fanny couldn't help grin as she managed her effects on the journalist, who had taken out a pencil and a notepad.

"Not at all! This wagon is the best I ever saw. It was actually designed specifically for the regimental ambulance by Lady Jeanne Smythe, the wife of one of our officers. She paid for it from her own pocket, her being a rich woman. She gave it as a gift to the regiment to replace the old ambulance wagon that had been smashed in an accident."

"That is mighty generous of this Lady Smythe. I... wait! Did you say that she designed it as well as pay for it?"

"I did." answered Fanny, smiling at Russell's surprise. "She also volunteered as field nurse and ambulance driver. Would you like to speak with her?"

"Very much so, madam." said eagerly the journalist while scribbling on his notepad. He then followed Fanny inside the medical wagon's rear tent, where they

found Doctor Farrell disinfecting his instruments with rubbing alcohol and a clean piece of cloth.

“Aah, Doctor Farrell! May I present you Mister William Russell, correspondent of The Times of London?”

“How do you do, sir?” said timidly the young doctor while shaking hands with Russell. “I suppose that you would like a tour of the medical section.”

“I would, sir, but I was also hoping to speak to a Lady Jeanne Smythe.” Farrell then shrugged and smiled apologetically.

“I’m afraid that you are out of luck today, sir: she left early this morning with Misses Ward, one of our assistant nurses, on a three-day trip to the town of Burgas, fifty miles to the South, to get additional supplies.”

“Three days?” said Russell dejectedly. He however regained quickly his composure and smiled to Farrell. “Well, how about that tour of your section then, Doctor?”

“I will be glad to oblige, sir.” replied Farrell while packing away his surgical instruments.

09:26 (Constantinople Time)

Quarantine tent, medical section

Russell nodded his head in approval, writing notes down quickly as Doctor Farrell finished describing the equipment of the quarantine tent, the last stop of the guided tour. By now the journalist was both jubilant and angry: jubilant that someone was at last doing the job right; angry that the rest of the army wasn’t like this regimental ambulance. Thanking the frail doctor and shaking his hand, Russell waited until Farrell was back into his medical wagon, then went quickly to the laundry tent, where a young blond woman was washing clothes. The woman, whom he had met earlier during the tour, had seemed eager to be interviewed and have her name mentioned. Mary Pearson effectively appeared pleased when Russell entered the tent. Starting with a few questions concerning her, the journalist waited until she was warmed up to get into his real subject of interest.

“...and you were then hired by Lady Jeanne Smythe, right?”

“Correct, sir.”

“Do you know this Lady Jeanne well, Misses Pearson?”

That made the young blonde giggle.

“Know her well? Not really, but you wouldn’t believe the stories about her. Take the time when she did saber practice with the officers of the regiment...”

11:08 (Constantinople Time)

Tuesday, June 6, 1854 ‘A’

8th Hussars camp

Varna, Bulgaria

Fanny Duberly was kneeling in front of a wooden tub full of soapy water, washing one of Henry’s shirt, when Mary Pearson ran into the laundry tent and shouted excitedly.

“Jeanne and Margaret are back! Their cart is approaching the camp.”

Dropping the shirt in the tub and hurriedly drying her hands with the white apron she wore over her dress, Fanny ran outside and looked south across the shallow stream flowing through the camp. Her heart jumped when she saw Jeanne’s ambulance cart, now less than 400 yards away and with Jeanne and Margaret waving at them. A line of loaded pack mules trailed behind the cart. Fanny looked at the two poles near the medical wagon, to which five mules and four horses were still attached, then back at the mules following Jeanne’s cart.

“Don’t tell me that she bought more mules.”

“It would make good sense, Misses Duberly.” replied Sarah Champion, standing beside Fanny. “The regiment is still sorely short of transport animals and could certainly use more mules. Besides, the way those approaching mules are loaded, I doubt that Jeanne’s cart could have taken even half of the supplies she bought.”

By the time that Jeanne Smythe drove her cart into the camp, a small crowd of idle soldiers and women had formed to greet her and Margaret Ward. The first near the cart when it stopped was Gordon Smythe, in whose arms Jeanne literally threw herself, sending both of them down in the dirt, laughing and kissing each other. Fanny Duberly was nearly pulled down by Jeanne’s weight when she lent her a hand to get up. Summarily dusting herself off, Jeanne then smiled to Thomas Farrell, who stood in the front ranks of the crowd.

"I found all that we needed in Burgas, Doctor. The town has not been depleted of supplies the way Varna has been. We probably should do periodic resupply trips to that town."

"You did excellent work, Jeanne." replied Farrell, pleased, before shouting at the soldiers around him. "May I have volunteers to help unload those mules and the cart and to bring the supplies in the medical section's cooking tent?"

A chorus of voices answered the doctor, who soon had over twenty men to help him. Putting Sarah Champion in charge of supervising the work detail, Farrell then went to see Jeanne, who was holding hands with her husband.

"Excuse me for interrupting your reunion, but do you have a list of the supplies you procured?"

"Sure!" said Jeanne with good humor, then searching in a side pouch of her web gear and extracting a piece of paper that she handed to Farrell. "in a nutshell, I bought over two tons of dry foodstuffs, lots of white cotton cloth, cooking oil, spices, smoked fish and cleaning products. Oh, I nearly forgot: add 25 mules and a sword to the lot."

As she said those last words, she unsheathed a curved Turkish saber slung across her back and grinned at Gordon while showing him the weapon.

"I even had a chance to test this Kilij saber on my way back: four thieves tried to rob us, thinking that two women would be an easy prey. They learned otherwise the hard way."

Jeanne then noticed a bearded civilian man that was writing furiously on a notepad while standing nearby.

"Are you intent on writing a book about me, sir?" she asked him nonchalantly. The man looked up from his notepad and smiled.

"A book, no. An article, yes. I'm William Howard Russell, correspondent for The Times of London."

Jeanne shook hands with him, visibly not too thrilled by this encounter.

"Pardon my lack of enthusiasm, sir, but I would rather keep a low profile: celebrity would not help my job as a field nurse."

"Can I then quote you as the rich and adventurous French wife of a Hussars officer?" asked Russell, a devilish grin on his face. Jeanne's own face then softened.

"If worded that way, then I withdraw my objection."

"How did you kill those four bandits, madam?"

"I beheaded the first one with my new sword when he made the mistake of coming close, then I shot the three others with my Colt revolver."

As the crowd around her, except for Gordon, who knew her enough by now not to be surprised, stared at her with disbelief, Jeanne cautiously passed a fingertip along her sword's cutting edge.

"I was really lucky to find this Kilij: it is a top quality weapon, with a Damascus steel blade and great chopping power. Now, if you will excuse me, I have a few things to attend to."

Sheeting back her saber, Jeanne then went to Doctor Farrell and whispered to him.

"Any cases of cholera yet in the regiment?"

"None in this regiment but six men from other regiments of the brigade have fallen sick with what I believe to be cholera."

Jeanne sighed with relief, then raised her voice to a normal level.

"Do we have any patients yet?"

The frail young man hesitated for a second. If he knew Jeanne well, the French woman was not going to like the news to come.

"I have two patients at the moment: one trooper who was hit in the head by a kicking horse, plus another trooper who is recovering from a flogging."

"WHAT?!"

Jeanne's furious shout made heads turn around them at once, as well as making Gordon start walking towards her.

"Why? Who ordered this?" asked Jeanne in a dangerous tone, making Farrell shrink while facing her.

"Lord Cardigan caught a corporal drunk while on duty and summarily condemned him to twenty lashes. I'm sorry but this is still a legal punishment in the Army, unfortunately."

Jeanne had to turn away from the doctor to vent her frustration with a choice series of swear words. That was when Gordon joined her, only to get a black look from Jeanne.

"I hope that you had nothing to do with this flogging, Gordon."

"I didn't and I assure you that I don't like it either, dear. Unfortunately, nothing can be done about this as long as flogging is legal in the Army."

Jeanne inhaled deeply a few times to calm down, then faced back Thomas Farrell.

"I will go see our patients as soon as I have taken care of my horse and cart."

"Can I come with you?" asked timidly Gordon, getting a nod from Jeanne.

Gordon ended up helping to unhook Jeanne's pulling horse from the ambulance cart, then pushed the cart near the medical wagon while Jeanne gave some water and feed grain to her horse. The couple then accompanied Doctor Farrell inside the sick ward's tent. The big tent contained twelve camp cots, a small iron stove with a pipe leading outside the tent through a special vent hole in the canvas, two wooden chests containing medical supplies and a small folding table and chair for use by the duty nurse. Mary Pearson sat in the chair at the time, while two men occupied camp cots. Jeanne went first to the man wearing a bandage covering his head and left eye. Despite the bandage, it was obvious that the left side of the man's face was severely swollen. The wounded man was sleeping at the time, so Jeanne moved to the other patient after a short examination. That man lay on his belly and was obviously very much in pain. Gordon saw Jeanne's face harden as she looked at the bloody bandages covering the man's torso. She then muttered to herself.

"Bloody barbarians!"

She next looked at Farrell with an expression that left no room for debate.

"Doctor, I will take care personally of that patient: I have experience with flogging victims. I hope that you were planning to keep this man here for at least a couple of days, to make sure that his wounds don't get infected."

"Uh, of course, Jeanne." said timidly Farrell, who had actually not thought yet about that. The few weeks he had already spent with Jeanne, both in Winchester and on the transport ship, had however showed him that she was medically far more qualified than even an experienced nurse and could nearly qualify as a surgeon, that is if a woman would ever be allowed to practice medicine, which was certainly not the case in England right now. His answer made Jeanne nod with satisfaction.

"Thank you, Doctor! You are a good man. I'm going to wash and change and I will then take the late afternoon nursing shift."

She next faced her husband and pointed an index at him.

"You and I have an appointment tonight, alone!"

"I won't argue with that order, dear." replied Gordon with a grin.

17:49 (Constantinople Time)

8th Hussars camp, Varna

Troop Sergeant-Major James Champion found Captain Smythe discussing with Major Henry in front of the regimental command tent. Stopping at a respectable distance from the two officers, Champion waited patiently that Major Henry left to step forward and halt in front of Gordon, saluting crisply.

“Sir! May I have a word with you, sir?”

“Always, Sergeant-Major.” replied Gordon while saluting back. Champion knew from experience that Gordon was not lying then: the captain was one of the rare officers in the regiment who truly cared about his men, apart from being a competent leader and cavalry officer. Marrying a woman of unparalleled generosity had only made him even more popular with the troopers.

“Sir, the men are complaining about their rations. I have to say that, in all my years in the army, I have rarely seen such swill as this evening, sir.”

“Did you taste the food, Sergeant-Major?”

“I spat it out, sir!” replied Champion vehemently. “Some of the regimental wives came for their rations and vomited them as soon as they ate them. The cooks are arguing that they have to work with rotting food supplies, sir.”

Gordon frowned at those words: for Champion to spit out army food, it had to be awful indeed.

“Alright, Sergeant-Major, let’s go to the regimental kitchen and see how bad things are.”

“Yes sir!” replied Champion, saluting Gordon before following him.

Gordon Smythe’s arrival at the field kitchen calmed somewhat the nasty mood of the soldiers lined up to get their supper. They watched on expectantly as the officer confronted the nervous chief cook, Sergeant Mack Foster.

“Show me what you have on the menu tonight, Sergeant.”

The small, somewhat overweight man wiped his hands on his dirty apron before leading Gordon to a large steel pot sitting on a wood stove.

“We have a cabbage and pork soup, along with bread, sir. Unfortunately, both the cabbage and the salted pork provided by the Commissariat are somewhat...stale, to say the least, sir.”

“Alright, I will have a portion of that soup, Sergeant.”

“Uh, as you wish, sir.”

Gordon, busy watching Foster fill a mess tin with hot soup, didn't notice one of the cooks running back to the kitchen, coming from the overflowing latrines used by the whole brigade and going back to work without bothering to wash his hands first. Taking a piece of dry bread as well, Gordon went to sit at a lone table besides the kitchen, followed by Champion. Searching the soup with his spoon, he caught a few small pieces of blackening cabbage and of pork that was almost all fat or gristle. His stomach nearly turned upside down when he realized that the small white things floating in the soup were dead maggots, well boiled. The smell of the soup was not much better than its sight. Throwing in disgust the soup in the dirt, Gordon then tried a bite of his small piece of bread. Swallowing it was like eating a stone. Foster started sweating as Gordon stared at him angrily.

"You have nothing better than this to feed the men, Sergeant?"

"But, sir, that is all I was provided with by means of supplies, sir. The only alternative is ration biscuits."

"Then issue biscuits to the men! Your soup is unfit for human consumption. I will go speak at once with Captain McGregor and Mister Grant about the rations."

Gordon was about to leave the kitchen when an idea came to him. Watched by the surprised cooks, he refilled the mess tin he had with more soup, making sure to catch a few floating dead maggots as well, then faced Sergeant-Major Champion, mess tin in hand.

"Sergeant-Major, please go see my wife and ask her on my behalf if she could help give something decent to eat to the men while I talk to those responsible for this outrage."

"Yes sir!" shouted Champion, saluting then turning around and walking away. His tin of soup in his left hand, Gordon left the kitchen as well, walking down the long lines of tents towards the officers' mess. Contrary to the troopers, who had to eat in the open and on the ground unless they chose to eat inside their crowded tents, the officers were furnished with a large marquee tent with tables and chairs to have their meals. Gordon spotted quickly the regimental Commissariat purveyor, Peter Grant, eating at a table with Captains McGregor, Lockwood and Fields. Politely saluting Fanny Duberly first, who was eating with her husband at a nearby table, he went directly to Grant and slammed the tin of soup on the table, in front of his plate. The officers around fell quiet as Gordon spoke with contained anger to the civil servant.

"Mister Grant, I would like you to taste what our men are given to eat."

“Eat this?” asked Grant after a quick look at the soup. “Why?”

“Is it that you don’t like eating boiled maggots and rotting pork, sir?”

Gordon felt satisfaction as the officers around, as well as Misses Duberly, looked with horror at the mess tin. Reddening with embarrassment, Grant stammered as he felt hostile looks targeting him from many sides.

“But...we have no choice but to use the supplies sent from England. There is nothing else available.”

Gordon had a quick look at Grant’s plate: it contained fresh broiled beef, potatoes, fresh bread and butter.

“Really? Where did you get the supplies for the officers’ mess?”

Captain McGregor, the regimental quartermaster, then cut in, trying to defuse the confrontation.

“Smythe, you know as well as me that officers rations scales are separate from troopers scales. You surely don’t expect the men to share our rations?”

“And why not?” replied Gordon forcefully, getting angry. “They will fight and die for England. Doesn’t that entitle them to be treated like human beings?”

“Aw, come on, Smythe!” added Ramsay Fields, the commanding officer of D Troop. “Feed those ruffians with gentlemen’s rations? You can’t be serious.”

Gordon then gave Fields a black look: the man had purchased all of his successive ranks and had never been near combat. As a cavalryman and swordsman, Fields was widely considered as marginal at best, while the men of D Troop received more than their fair share of floggings, if you could call flogging a fair military punishment.

“I am serious, Mister Fields. This is war, not some field maneuvers at home. Your life will depend on your men’s performance on the battlefield, especially since you can’t fence or shoot worth a damn by yourself.”

Fanny Duberly, listening on discreetly but carefully to this, had a hard time repressing a grin, like many around her. On his part, Fields shot up from his chair and put his right hand on his sword’s pommel.

“Are you mocking me, sir?” he shouted loudly, trying to look defiant and sure of himself. In reality he knew that Gordon would cut him to pieces in a duel. A potential fight was averted by the intervention of Lord Paget, who came to their table, displeasure on his face.

“Gentlemen, calm down! The officers’ mess is no place for a fight. You are officers and I expect you to conduct yourselves as such.”

“Sir,” said Gordon politely but forcefully, “what about the men’s rations? They will starve or fall sick if fed such swill as like today.”

Before answering, Paget took the tin of soup and had a good look at it, sniffing it as well. With disgust on his face, he then stared at Peter Grant.

“Good God, man! Can’t you do better than this?”

“With what, sir?” Replied Grant sheepishly. “I do not decide what kind of rations are bought in England, nor do I have the power to do so.”

“What about local purchases, sir?” suggested Gordon to Lord Paget, who thought for a moment before nodding.

“That could be a solution, Captain. The problem will be to find the funds for such purchases. I will have to talk with Lord Cardigan and Mister Fielder, the Commissary General. In the meantime, the men will have to make do with ration biscuits.”

“I already told the chief-cook to switch to biscuits, sir.” said Gordon, getting a sharp look from Captain McGregor: that should technically be the quartermaster’s call to make. Lord Paget simply nodded his head at that.

“Very well, Captain. Dismissed!”

Saluting Paget crisply, Gordon then left the mess tent, followed by the unfriendly eyes of Grant, Fields and McGregor.

“Those ex-Army of India officers!” spat Fields resentfully. “They think they know and have seen everything.”

Fanny Duberly, cutting short her supper, rose from her table and faced Fields contemptuously.

“Well, he certainly has seen a lot more than you, sir.”

The warning look Fields got from Henry Duberly prevented him from replying as Fanny walked away. Rising as well from the table where he had been eating, William Howard Russell then left the mess as well, heading for the men’s field kitchen.

Gordon arrived back at the men’s kitchen to find a number of regimental wives distributing smoked fish and dried dates to the troopers ordered in multiple lines by Sergeant-Major Champion. Gordon went to Jeanne and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

“I knew that I could count on you. Thanks, dear!”

“That is the least I could do, Gordon.” replied Jeanne, sullen, while giving three dried dates from a basket she held to each man passing by her. “Have you eaten yet?”

“Uh, no. I couldn’t in all conscience eat at the officers’ mess after this.”

That earned him a tender look and a caress on the cheek from Jeanne.

“I did marry the right man, truly. Go to the ambulance’s kitchen and get some food from Mary Pearson. I will join you there shortly.”

Kissing her and getting approving comments from the soldiers around, Gordon then went to the cooking tent of the medical section, fifty yards away. He found Mary Pearson serving Emma Armstrong, Fanny Duberly’s maid, from a steaming pot warming on top of the tent’s wood stove.

“Hello, Misses Pearson. Jeanne told me to come here to get fed.”

“Well, you will certainly eat better here than at the men’s kitchen, sir.” replied the young blonde while fetching a plate and utensils from a chest for him. She then filled the plate with a ladleful from the cooking pot and handed it to Gordon, who sniffed the food.

“Hmm, this does smell good! What is it exactly?”

“Fried rice with lentils and smoked fish. Jeanne made it.”

Gordon’s eyes lit up after he had a first bite of his rice.

“This is good! Maybe I should eat here all the time.”

“I don’t think so, sir.” replied Mary, smiling. “Only the medical personnel, the patients and the regimental wives of the junior ranks can eat here regularly: orders from your wife, sir.”

“Well, who am I to discuss such authority?” said Gordon jovially, getting a giggle from Mary.

Jeanne joined them fifteen minutes later, serving herself some rice before sitting at the table with Gordon and Misses Armstrong. They exchanged small talk while eating, until Emma Armstrong and Mary Pearson left the cooking tent. Gordon then bent forward and lowered his voice.

“Jeanne, those visions of the war you have, what do they tell you about what we can expect?”

Jeanne was silent for a moment, weighing her answer: as Field Agent Nancy Laplante, she was not supposed to divulge the future to anyone from the past. Her earlier bout of amnesia had however caused some serious damage in that respect, damage that would be hard to undo.

“Lots of good men will die, mostly from disease, neglect and outright incompetence. The best that we can do is to care as best we can for the men and

women of this regiment. Even if we do only that, then we will have done our part. The rest is beyond our control.”

Sobered up by such a bleak prediction, Gordon ate mostly in silence from then on.

09:11 (Constantinople Time)

Wednesday, June 7, 1854 ‘A’

Sick ward, 8th Hussars field infirmary

Varna, Bulgaria

Jeanne was nearly finished applying clean bandages over the wounds of the flogged trooper when Captain Ramsay Fields entered abruptly the sick ward’s tent. Looking briefly around him, then at the man Jeanne was bandaging, Fields spoke gruffly to the patient.

“You rested here long enough, Trooper Harrison. Put your uniform on and return to your duties.”

“Stay right where you are, Trooper!” said at once Jeanne to the soldier before getting up and facing Fields, who now looked incensed at her having the gall to countermand his order.

“What do you think that you are doing, madam? This man is part of my troop and I will decide when he is needed on duty.”

“Wrong, Captain!” said firmly Jeanne, staring hard into Fields eyes. “This patient will leave when Doctor Farrell decides that he is medically fit for duty. Right now, his wounds are still open and could get infected if he resumes work too early.”

“Madam, I won’t let a woman interfere with my command. Get up, Trooper!”

“Stay down, Trooper!” shouted Jeanne before walking quickly to Fields, getting nose to nose with him. “Now get out of the sick ward before I throw you out, Captain Fields.”

“Ha, that would be the day!” said derisively Fields. Things then went very fast, with Fields being brutally turned around and forced to bend over before being literally thrown out of the tent and landing face first in the dirt. Stunned by both the strength and speed of Jeanne, Fields got back on his feet as Jeanne shouted at him from just outside the tent.

“The next time that you try to take away a patient without the doctor’s permission, I will kick you all the way to the other side of the camp, Fields.”

Enraged and humiliated at being ordered around by a woman, Fields acted without thinking, drawing his saber and pointing it at Jeanne, its tip only inches from her face.

“I’m an officer and...”

Jeanne then knocked his sword out of his hand with a lightning kick that he never saw coming.

“You are a nobody, Fields, and I will show it to all those around.”

Jeanne then went on the attack, delivering a series of swift, painful punches and kicks and pummeling Fields’ face and torso despite his attempts at fighting back. The few regimental wives and the many soldiers going around the regimental infirmary at the time looked on with amazement as Jeanne deliberately chose hits that were painful but wouldn’t knock Fields out right away. One last karate punch to Fields’ jaw finally sent him down on the ground, unconscious and bleeding. After a last contemptuous look at the man, Jeanne then turned around and walked back inside the sick ward’s tent, leaving Fields in the dirt. Nobody at first came to Fields’ help until Regimental Sergeant-Major O’Neil, who had seen the fight from a distance, came at a run. Kneeling besides the unconscious officer, the RSM examined with disbelief his split lips, broken nose, bruised jaw and swelling cheeks. Looking quickly around him, he signaled four soldiers nearby to come to him.

“YOU FOUR, COME AND PICK UP CAPTAIN FIELDS!”

The four soldiers ran to him at once and surrounded the inert officer on the ground. O’Neil pointed at the nearby medical wagon, with its treatment tent deployed.

“Let’s get the captain in there, so that Doctor Farrell can treat him.”

One of the soldiers nearly made a joke then but kept it to himself, knowing that pissing off the RSM was normally not a wise thing to do. The four soldiers then each grabbed an arm or a leg and carried Fields inside the treatment tent, with O’Neil leading the way. Doctor Farrell, who was checking a feverish soldier at the time, looked with surprise and incredulity at the bloodied officer, then at O’Neil.

“What the hell happened to him, RSM?”

“Your head nurse beat him up.” replied tersely the veteran NCO. “Where should we put him?”

“Uh, on this table here, please.”

Fields was then laid on the table covered with a white cloth that served as the treatment bed. O’Neil dismissed the four soldiers as Farrell called Mary Pearson to assist him, then himself walked out of the treatment tent. He next walked to the sick ward’s tent,

entering it and facing Jeanne, who had resumed her bandaging work. She looked up calmly at him and smiled.

“What can I do for you this morning, RSM?”

“You could tell me why you just beat Captain Fields to a pulp, madam.” replied O’Neil, secretly admiring her spunk. She gave him a serious look while stopping her work for a moment.

“He tried to take away this patient without the doctor’s permission, then pointed his saber in my face after I threw him out of the sick ward. He had it coming to him, RSM.”

O’Neil nodded once at those words: he had seen Fields brandish his saber at the French woman. Apart from being about to become the laughing stock of the regiment, Fields was going to have to explain to Lord Paget why he had pulled out a sword at an officer’s wife, something the regiment’s commander was not going to appreciate one bit. Fields was also going to be lucky if he didn’t have to contend next with Jeanne’s husband. All told, Fields’ bruises and wounds were probably going to be the least of his troubles today. O’Neil thus came to attention and saluted Jeanne.

“I’m sorry to have disturbed you, madam. Have a good day!”

“The same to you, RSM.”

O’Neil then turned around in military fashion and exited the tent. Seeing numerous small groups of soldiers congregating around the regimental infirmary and whispering to each other while watching the sick ward’s tent, O’Neil bellowed out in his strongest voice.

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING, LOOKING LIKE A BUNCH OF SHEEPS? GET BACK TO YOUR DUTIES OR I WILL FIND YOU SOME DRILL PRACTICE TO DO!”

That motivated the soldiers in dispersing quickly, either disappearing inside their tents or making a show of cleaning their weapons or uniforms.

O’Neil’s next stop was Lord Paget’s command tent, where he recounted what he had seen to his incredulous commander. As O’Neil expected, Paget didn’t like the part about Fields threatening Jeanne Smythe with his saber.

“Decidedly, Captain Fields is as much a ruffian and an idiot as he is a poor cavalry officer. I will have a serious talk with him...once he comes out of the infirmary. In the meantime, could you tell Captain Smythe to come see me, RSM?”

“Yes sir!” shouted O’Neil, saluting before turning around and leaving the command tent. Finding Captain Smythe took him only four minutes. Gordon Smythe broke into a grin when O’Neil told him why Lord Paget wanted to see him.

“Good old Jeanne! Always direct and to the point.”

“Direct is the correct word, sir.” replied O’Neil, hiding his own grin. “She certainly knows how to defend herself, sir.”

“Somehow, I suspect that Jeanne prefers the offensive over the defensive, RSM.” said Gordon Smythe before leaving for Lord Paget’s tent. Only once alone did O’Neil allow a grin to appear on his face. After this he was certainly going to listen more closely to the stories his wife Sarah had to say about Lady Jeanne Smythe.

Gordon managed to keep a straight face as he presented himself to Lord Paget in his tent, saluting him first.

“You wanted to see me, sir?”

“I did, Captain. Did the RSM tell you why?”

“He did, sir. If I got it right, Captain Fields got what he had coming to him, sir.”

“He certainly did.” replied Lord Paget, serious. “He should have known that he needed the doctor’s release authorization before fetching a patient out of the infirmary. As for drawing his saber at an officer’s wife, it is simply inexcusable, no matter his reasons to do so. Since I understand that your wife already gave him quite a bloody nose, I will not discipline him further and will let him live through the ridicule. As for Lady Jeanne, could you please ask her not to do this again? I don’t have too many officers to spare these days.”

“I will pass your request on to her, sir.” said Gordon, repressing a grin with difficulty. “Is there anything else, sir?”

“No, that will be all, Captain. You are dismissed!”

“Sir!” Shouted Gordon, saluting again, then pivoting on his heels and turning around before walking out of the command tent. He walked for maybe twelve yards before breaking out laughing.

15:40 (Constantinople Time)

8th Hussars infirmary

Light Cavalry Brigade camp

Varna, Bulgaria

Jeanne was thinking about the menu that they would prepare for supper when Margaret Ward rushed into the cooking tent, dread on her face.

“Doctor Farrell needs you at once, Jeanne: we may have our first case of cholera in the regiment.”

Jeanne hurried out of the cooking tent at once, running to the field treatment tent attached to the medical wagon. There, she found Doctor Farrell examining a young trooper sitting on the examination table, with Mary Pearson standing nearby, a bedpan ready in her hands. Seeing the trooper’s face turning sour, Mary stepped forward and presented her bedpan just in time as the soldier vomited violently. Taking a bedpan as well from a pile stacked in a corner of the tent, Jeanne joined Mary besides the examination table.

“I’ll take over from here, Mary. Please ask Sarah to start a big pot of boiling water: we will have to start applying decontamination procedures and quarantine from now on. Have Margaret boil some rice as well in lots of water: we will need rice water to be constantly available from now on. Tell her to put some salt in the water as well.”

“Rice water? What for?” asked the sick trooper. Jeanne looked at him gravely.

“If you have cholera, rice water will be the only food you will be able to ingest. It will cut your diarrhea and prevent dehydration, which is the main complication with cholera. It will taste bland but it may be the only thing that could keep you alive through this.”

“Am...am I going to die?”

“Not if we can help it, Trooper.” answered Thomas Farrell, having finished his examination. “Nurse Smythe will now lead you to the men’s washing tent so that you can be cleaned up and can change into a hospital gown. Your uniform will be washed and disinfected for you.”

The trooper had just gotten off the examination table when he gripped his stomach with both hands.

“Doc...I’m going to get sick!” he said haltingly. Not wasting one second, Jeanne grabbed him and forcefully led him to a chamber pot sitting in a corner. Quickly undoing the man’s suspenders and undoing his fly, she pulled his trousers and shorts down and sat him down on the chamber pot, handing next a bedpan to the man. The trooper emptied himself from both ends at the same time, his vomit coming out like a liquid jet. Farrell shook his head at that sight.

"It's cholera alright. Just before this man came in, I was advised that a corporal from the 11th Hussars had died a short while ago from cholera, a mere nine hours after showing the first symptoms. It seems that we are dealing with a most potent strain here."

"Indeed!" replied Jeanne glumly. "We will have to tighten camp sanitation rules further."

"I wish that it would be this simple." said Farrell bitterly, making Jeanne look sharply at him. "Some of the other regimental surgeons and many unit commanders are not enforcing camp sanitation rules as they should be doing. They think that I am overreacting."

"Overreacting? Are they mad or simply stupid?" replied Jeanne, furious. Farrell, looking embarrassed, led her away from the sick trooper and lowered his voice.

"Jeanne, I am ashamed to have to say that some of my medical colleagues here are not much more than incompetent drunks. Since I am by far the most junior surgeon of the brigade, my word doesn't count for much outside of this regiment. We may have to deal with cholera in isolation from the rest of the brigade."

"The idiots! This may cost thousands of lives!"
Farrell lowered his head sadly at those words.

"I know! Look at it this way, Jeanne: at least we can take care of this regiment, of the people we know."

Jeanne had a look at the young trooper, still sick and sitting on the chamber pot.

"You're right, Doc. After washing and changing him, I will organize a duty rotation for the girls. This is only the beginning of it."

Farrell nodded his head, discouraged: Jeanne was unfortunately correct in her prediction.

10:51 (Constantinople Time)

Friday, June 16, 1854 'A'

8th Hussars infirmary, Varna

Doctor Farrell had a last look at the emaciated face of the thirteen year-old trumpeter, then slowly slid the wool blanket over the boy's head, watched by a sobbing Jeanne Smythe. Thomas had to swallow hard twice before he could speak.

"Jeanne, could you take care of his burial, please?"

Without a word, the tall French woman gently picked up in her arms and lifted the small boy's body, still covered by the blanket, and walked out slowly of the quarantine tent. Farrell then looked at Emma Armstrong, who was waiting near him.

"Emma, have this camp cot washed and disinfected and bring in a clean cot."

"Yes, Doctor." Said softly the woman, tears on her face. Emma had just left the tent with the soiled cot when Doctor John Gibbons, the chief-surgeon of the Light Cavalry Brigade, came in. The graying doctor went directly to Farrell, walking cautiously past the ten occupied cots crowding the tent.

"May I speak with you outside, Thomas?" Asked softly Gibbons, who had seen Jeanne Smythe bearing out the dead boy. Farrell nodded slowly, dead tired from long hours of work, then followed the chief-surgeon outside. Walking away for a few yards, Gibbons then stopped and faced Farrell, his expression sullen.

"This boy was the second patient you lost to date, correct?"

"Yes, sir." said Farrell bitterly, feeling helpless. Gibbons then patted the young surgeon's shoulder in encouragement.

"Don't feel so bad, Thomas. The truth is that you are faring much better than anyone else, the French included. You only lost two patients out of 39 so far, a remarkable result indeed. In comparison, over eighty percent of the men who fell sick in the rest of the brigade died, with many more men falling sick each day. Even your sickness rate is much lower than that of the brigade. You and your nurses are doing wonders."

Farrell looked intensely at Gibbons then.

"Are the other regiments finally going to follow the same sanitation rules as we do in the 8th Hussars, sir?"

The chief-surgeon bowed his head, acknowledging Farrell's justified criticism.

"Look, Thomas, I was skeptical of your methods at first but the results speak for themselves. Even for Lord Cardigan, 106 dead in nine days is too much. The problem now is that the other regiments have nothing in terms of equipment and trained personnel compared to your ambulance and can't cope with the numbers of sick."

"Sir, you should praise Lady Jeanne Smythe for this, not me."

"I know." said Gibbons softly. "I wish that I had ten women like her. This however brings me to the reason of my visit. Two wives of the 17th Lancers just fell sick with cholera but the Lancers have no medically-trained women to care for them in a way proper for ladies. From now on, I would like your nurses to care for the women of this

camp who will fall sick. I even had requests from other brigades to the same effect. Could you do it?"

"Sir," protested Farrell at once, "my two ward tents are already crammed full with 21 patients as it is and my nurses are barely coping under the workload. Treating cholera victims involves a staggering amount of washing and disinfecting, plus a lot of equipment."

"I realize that, Thomas." said Gibbons sympathetically. "I got the support of Lord Raglan himself on this matter: you will get two large marquee tents before noon, along with the men to put them up and all the extra medical supplies I could scrounge for you. I also have a number of wives who volunteered to be trained as nurses." Farrell sighed heavily as he looked down at the dirt at his feet.

"This is a heavy responsibility you are putting on our shoulders, sir."

"I know, but you can do it, that I am sure of. By the way, I sent a recommendation for your promotion to junior surgeon in view of your remarkable work here."

"Then, bring in those tents as quickly as possible, sir, so that we can empty one of our ward tents and reserve it for female patients. We will do our best, sir."

"I know that you will, Thomas. You will get the marquee tents within the hour."

Gibbons then left Farrell and started walking up the dirt road that ran through the camp. He soon met a sad procession walking down the lines of tents towards the brigade's burial grounds. The padre of the 8th Hussars led four musicians playing 'The Dead March', who were in turn followed by two soldiers bearing a stretcher on which lay a small body wrapped in a blanket. Lady Jeanne Smythe and Misses Duberly closed the small procession, tears on their faces. The chief-surgeon removed his top hat and bowed his head as the funeral party passed in front of him, then hurried on his way.

04:18 (Constantinople Time)

Wednesday, June 21, 1854 'A'

8th Hussars infirmary, Varna

Mary Pearson took the now full bedpan from under Alicia Goad, gently rolling the sick woman on her side to do so, then cleaned her up with a wet rag, throwing the soiled rag in the bedpan afterwards. Following the strict routine established by Jeanne Smythe, Mary made Misses Goad drink a cup of rice water before heading out of the

women's quarantine ward, the bedpan in one hand and the now empty cup in the other. The bedpan was going to be emptied in a sewer pit nearby and rinsed before it would be washed and put in a pot of boiling water for a good twenty minutes, along with the cup. Up to now, this complicated and work-intensive procedure had paid off handsomely, with only twelve deaths occurring in the 8th Hussars' wards compared with the hundreds of victims in the rest of the brigade. Those results had even prompted a visit by the British and French commanders of the allied expedition, Lord Raglan and Marshall Saint-Arnaud, two days ago.

Mary was halfway to the sewer pit when the first stomach cramp hit her, making her double forward. Falling on her knees, she then vomited violently. Realizing with horror what was happening to her, Mary shouted as loudly as she could towards the medical wagon.

"HELP! SOMEONE HELP ME!"

Emma Armstrong, emerging from the laundry tent, was the first by her side, closely followed by Jeanne Smythe, who had been on duty in one of the men's wards.

"What's wrong, Mary?" asked anxiously Emma while helping her up.

"Cholera... I caught it."

"My poor Mary!" exclaimed Jeanne. "Quick, Emma, let's bring her to the women's washing tent."

They didn't make it to the tent before Mary involuntarily soiled her dress, groaning with the pain from atrocious intestinal cramps.

08:03 (Constantinople Time)

8th Hussars infirmary, Varna

Private John Pearson was nearly mad with apprehension when he was allowed inside the women's quarantine tent. Kneeling besides his wife's cot, he was about to kiss Mary when Jeanne's firm hand stopped him.

"Do you want to catch cholera as well, Private? You may touch her but don't kiss her."

Obedying reluctantly, John put his hand on Mary's forehead: she was feverish and her eyes had a dazed look. She didn't appear to register his presence either. After

contemplating Mary for a few minutes while holding her hands, John stood up and looked at Jeanne imploringly.

“Please tell me that you can save her, Lady Jeanne.”

“I can’t promise you that, Private Pearson.” she said with sorrow in her voice. “I will do my best for her, though. If it may reassure you, I will personally take care of Mary.”

“Thank you, Lady Jeanne. You are an angel.”

“You’re welcome, Private. Before you go, I want you to go to the cleaning tent to wash your hands thoroughly with soap.”

“Yes maam!”

Jeanne sighed heavily as John Pearson left the tent, then went back to Mary’s side. She wasn’t so sure that the young blonde could be saved by contemporary care alone: her fever ran very high and she was dehydrating at a faster rate than they could make her drink rice water. Jeanne could cheat and go get modern medicine from the future but the question then would be where to stop. Sadly, the only answer to that was that she could not even start doing that, on pain of risking serious distortions in history. She was going to have to rely on the means at hand and on lots of work and care. Getting up and pouring a cup of rice water from a covered pitcher on the duty nurse’s desk, Jeanne went back to Mary and, gently holding her head, made her drink as much of it as she could. Having been vaccinated repeatedly as a field agent of the Time Patrol against numerous diseases, including cholera, Nancy was not worried about falling sick from her constant contacts with cholera victims. Her brave assistant nurses however didn’t enjoy that protection, a case proven by Mary Pearson’s misfortune. Looking at Mary’s drawn face, Nancy felt guilt at having brought her here to possibly die in this miserable hole. She started sobbing quietly as she looked down at Mary.

“Hang on, Mary. Just a couple of days and you will be out of the worst of it.”

15:52 (Constantinople Time)

Friday, June 23, 1854 ‘A’

8th Hussars infirmary, Varna

Doctor Farrell entered the women’s quarantine tent, intent on doing his periodic visits of the wards. He immediately noticed one of the patients, standing weakly besides

her cot and her back to him. The surgeon went quickly to the patient, ready to force her back down on her cot, when he stopped cold: the standing patient was Mary Pearson. The blonde then smiled weakly to him.

“I am really hungry, Doctor. Could I have something solid to eat?”

Unable to believe his eyes, Farrell slowly approached Mary and touched her forehead: her fever was gone and Mary’s eyes looked focused. She was apparently well on the road to recovery.

“Do you mind if I examine you first, Mary?”

“Not at all, Doctor.”

“Then please sit on the cot.”

Examining her quickly, Farrell found her apparently well, apart from being understandably weak from dehydration and hunger. Margaret Ward, who had replaced Jeanne one hour ago and was back from a trip to the sewer pit, entered the tent as Mary was closing back her hospital gown. Looking at Mary with wide eyes, she then ran back out while shouting.

“MARY MADE IT THROUGH! SHE’S UP!”

It took less than two minutes before all the women working at the ambulance, including Jeanne, came running to the tent. Farrell had to stand in front of the entrance while raising both arms.

“STOP, ALL OF YOU! THIS IS A QUARANTINE TENT, NOT A CIRCUS!”

“What about Mary?” asked Emma Armstrong. “Is it true that she is up?”

“Yes, it is. She however still needs to rest and recuperate. Emma, prepare a bowl of soup for Mary: her stomach will be fragile for a while so we will switch to a solid diet only progressively.”

“Right away, Doc!”

“Is this all because of me?”

All heads turned towards the tent’s entrance, where Mary Pearson had stuck her head out and was smiling weakly. Still wearing only a hospital gown, she then stepped out and was mobbed by the overjoyed nurses, Jeanne being first to hug her.

09:46 (Constantinople Time)

Friday, August 18, 1854 ‘A’

Lord Paget’s command tent

8th Hussars camp, Varna

Lord Paget, with Doctor Gibbons sitting to the left of his work desk, gave a critical look at Doctor Farrell and Lady Jeanne Smythe as they entered his tent and stopped in front of him. Somehow, Paget suspected that the feisty Jeanne Smythe was the real responsible person in the business at hand. If she was, she certainly didn't look one bit nervous right now, contrary to Farrell.

"At ease Doctor Farrell, Lady Jeanne."

Paget smiled in amusement when Jeanne, as was her custom, reacted in a proper military fashion to his order. She was definitely one strange cat, albeit an impressive one. Putting on a severe expression, Paget stared at Farrell first.

"Doctor Gibbons here has notified me of an irregularity in your medical procedures, Doctor Farrell. Mainly, you have stopped sending your patients to Scutari Hospital for follow-on treatment and recuperation, and this since at least early July. What do you say to this, Doctor?"

The young surgeon swallowed hard, being much less at ease than Jeanne.

"Sir, it is true that I have not sent any of my patients to our main hospital in Scutari since the start of July, but it was a decision I took to save lives, sir."

"To save lives? Please explain!"

"May I answer this, sir?" then cut in Jeanne politely. Paget nodded in approval, not surprised to see the French woman take the initiative. She certainly looked sure of herself as she started speaking calmly.

"It all started in the last week of June, when I and Misses Duberly left Varna by ship to escort four sick women that had been treated for cholera at our regimental ambulance and were convalescing. When we arrived at the Scutari military hospital near Constantinople, what we saw there horrified us and convinced us to avoid it at all costs. Please bear with me on this, sir: I am accustomed to rough living conditions but what we saw in Scutari was beyond description. First off, the thousands of patients crowding it are without beds and lie directly on the soiled floors of the wards. They are never washed by the hospital staff and are literally covered with vermin. They only get one meal a day, when there is something to eat, and have to eat out of their bare hands, as no plates, cups or utensils are provided by the staff. There are no latrines either and the whole hospital, if you can call it by that name, stinks to high hell, apart from being nothing more than an open sewer pit. I saw patients with maggots filling their wounds, as their bandages have not been changed in weeks. Probably the worse of are the

women, wives of our soldiers who got sick and were sent to Scutari. We found them confined to dark cellars and were alive with lice and other vermin, apart from being half-starved to death and reduced to pauperism. They were also at the mercy of the hospital staff and were said to be abused regularly. Infections, fevers and diseases run wild in that so-called hospital, with a mortality rate of sixty percent among the patients sent there.”

“Sixty percent?” shouted Paget, horrified. “What is the staff there doing?” Jeanne’s jaw tightened as she glanced darkly at Gibbons before answering Paget.

“Sir, the staff there consists of a few doctors who use old, crippled Chelsea pensioners as medical orderlies. Those old men, apart from knowing nothing about nursing care, are often too drunk or too sick to do anything useful apart from being deadweights themselves. Some of them have also been caught stealing from dying patients.”

“These must be wild exaggerations.” protested John Gibbons, getting a murderous look from Jeanne, who raised her voice then.

“Did you go see the conditions there by yourself, Doctor, or are you relying on the reports made by the same uncaring, criminally incompetent people who are directly responsible for this infamy? You want proofs? Then read this!”

Taking hesitantly the paper thrown by Jeanne in front of him, Gibbons looked quickly at it, then looked severely at Jeanne.

“This is simply a list of names. What is your point?”

“My point, Doctor, is that this is the list of the members of this regiment sent to Scutari supposedly to be returned to full health after we here worked our asses off to treat them and keep them alive. Those with a cross besides their names died in Scutari. That accounts for 46 of the 81 men sent there. As for the 12 women we had sent there, we were lucky enough to find them still alive and we then extracted them from that hell hole to treat them ourselves in Constantinople. This is why I recommended to Doctor Farrell on my return to discontinue sending patients to Scutari until things there improve drastically.”

Lord Paget, visibly shaken by Jeanne’s forceful speech, grabbed the list of names from Gibbons’ hands and read it slowly, paling as he went.

“My God! My own Aide-De-Camp, Lieutenant Campbell, dead? Lieutenant Wells too? Why wasn’t I informed of this?”

“Because that hospital is in a state of total chaos, sir.” replied Jeanne. “The director of the hospital is in my opinion an incompetent buffoon who should be shot for criminal negligence and dereliction of duty. When we went to protest to him about what I and Misses Duberly had seen, he dismissed our complaints summarily and refused to do anything to correct the deficiencies in his so-called hospital. I then punched his lights out and took all our patients out of Scutari. There was no way I was going to abandon them in that...hospital!”

Jeanne had spit out that last word with a contained fury that finally convinced Lord Paget. Slowly sitting back behind his desk, the list still in his hands, he closed his eyes for a moment before looking up at young Doctor Farrell.

“Doctor, you have my express permission to keep in your infirmary any patient that you deem in need of local treatment. If you have to ship out any member of this regiment, please advise me immediately. Dismissed!”

“Yes sir! Thank you, sir!” nearly shouted Farrell happily, then leaving the tent with Jeanne Smythe. Paget next gave a less than friendly look at Gibbons.

“I do hope that you are not planning to enter a formal complaint against Doctor Farrell, sir?”

“Uh, no...not anymore.” said the chief-surgeon weakly, then looking at his hands. “God, could it really be this bad?”

10:26 (Constantinople Time)

Monday, September 4, 1854 ‘A’

8th Hussars infirmary, Varna

Cleared in first by Sarah Champion, Gordon Smythe entered the women’s living quarters to find Jeanne asleep on her cot. She had simply removed her nurse’s apron and cap before crashing to sleep. While she had kept in top shape by exercising daily and eating the ambulance’s plentiful and balanced diet that was the envy of the whole brigade, the hard, endless nursing work had taken a definite toll on her. The psychological toll had been the heaviest, though: the regiment’s burial ground may have contained the remains of only eleven bodies, compared to the 473 dead suffered by the rest of the brigade, but the amount of pain and suffering Jeanne had witnessed from close by was more than anybody should have gone through. The plus side was of course the hundreds of lives she had helped save, plus the universal esteem and

admiration she had gained through the camp, save of course for the men of the Commissariat Department, who both loathed and feared her. Looking at her exhausted face, Gordon decided to let her sleep and went out of the tent, going to speak instead with Doctor Farrell. He found him bidding goodbye to a woman from another regiment being released as a convalescent. Farrell noticed him and joined Gordon as soon as he was finished.

“May I help you, Captain Smythe?”

“It may be the other way around, Doctor. I am here to advise you that the brigade is embarking tomorrow morning, to set sail for Crimea.”

“Thank God! Out of this hole at last.” exclaimed Farrell while looking skyward. Gordon couldn’t help eyeing him dubiously.

“Doctor, we are going to face the Russian Army. This may well be like jumping from the frying pan into the fire.”

That cooled down the young surgeon somewhat.

“Hell, I still prefer treating a wound that I can see and touch than a disease I can only hope to counter.”

“Doc, you probably will get both of them soon, lots of them.” prophesized Gordon before walking away, leaving Farrell both discouraged and apprehensive.



Fanny Duberly and her husband Henry in Crimea.

CHAPTER 6 – CRIMEA

07:08 (Constantinople Time)

Thursday, September 14, 1854

Kalamita Bay, Crimea

“At last! They sure took their time to decide where to land.”

Fanny Duberly, standing against the bulwark of the HMS SANS PAREIL and watching hundreds of large rowboats filled with troops race to the desolate beach facing them, smiled at the impatient remark from Mary Pearson.

“Maybe, but have you ever seen such a sight before?”

Mary looked around her at the 600 ships of the allied armada, which stretched for miles along the coast, and shook her head.

“Frankly, no. I hope that the Russians will be as impressed as me and will lay down their arms at our sight.”

“Don’t count on that, Mary.” said from behind them Jeanne Smythe, making the women turn around and look at her. Wearing a dark brown jacket and riding skirt, long black boots. her leather equipment vest with revolvers, a knife and a saber, Jeanne

looked ready for everything. “There will be fighting soon enough and it will be bloody, believe me.”

“So, when are we landing ourselves?” asked Sarah Champion with expectation. Jeanne shook her head at that.

“Not for a while, Sarah. Lord Paget is making an exception for my ambulance cart but all other wagons and transport animals are staying on the ships for the moment. Lord Raglan wants to keep his army as mobile as possible. You and Doctor Farrell will stay aboard while the fleet follows the army down the coast towards Sebastopol. Me and Margaret will concentrate on picking up any sick or wounded man during the advance and bringing them to the shore, where they will be embarked for treatment on the ships.”

“God, I envy you, Jeanne.” said Mary, making the French woman grin.

“Why? You get to stay and live in comfort aboard this luxury yacht for a while longer. See you in a few days, girls.”

The women, Fanny included, pulled their tongues at Jeanne as she walked away, giggling: the HMS SANS PAREIL was anything but a luxury yacht. There were however some such yachts bearing what was now commonly called by the troops ‘traveling gentlemen’, or T.G.s in short, effectively accompanying the fleet in the hope of being able to watch the battles to come.

Margaret Ward felt quite nervous and excited at the same time while she watched Jeanne’s ambulance cart, loaded with supplies sufficient for a couple of weeks in the field, roll down a side ramp, with sailors controlling its descent with ropes onto a large floating pontoon resting against the side of the ship. Made of two big rowboats supporting a common platform, the pontoon already bore the last squad of Captain Fields’ D Troop and its horses. Jeanne led by the reins both Yasmina, the cart’s pulling horse, and Pegasus, her personal mount, while Margaret waited until the cart was safely on the pontoon before walking down the ramp herself. Jeanne put on the hand brakes of the cart to prevent it from accidentally rolling off the pontoon, then stood besides Yasmina, calming the horse for the trip to the shore. Margaret climbed in the front of the cart, sitting on the driver’s bench and grabbing the reins handed to her by Jeanne. Margaret then discreetly checked that the cavalry rifle provided by her husband Joseph was close at hand behind the bench. Both Joseph and Jeanne had encouraged Margaret to become proficient with a rifle and, helped by steady lessons from Joseph,

Margaret was now a fair shot with the weapon. The hard, endless nursing work had trimmed the excess fat the brunette was sporting when they had left England, something that had pleased Joseph to no small end. While far from looking athletic, Margaret was now in better physical shape than she had been in years and felt ready for what was to come. She was however terribly aware of the unease within the troops around her about seeing women joining them on their way to battle. Even the most ardent feminists in England would pause if they would see her and Jeanne now. Jeanne didn't seem to care about that, though, as she had already broken about all the rules and taboos concerning the proper role and conduct of women considered acceptable in England. Being filthy rich, she could have been dismissed as a frivolous eccentric if not for her incredible intellectual and physical abilities. Those abilities had in turn further antagonized many men, especially officers, who were secretly afraid of not measuring up to her. Being French had helped Jeanne somewhat, as French women had the reputation in England of being notorious nonconformists and libertines. However, the major point helping Jeanne was the now widely acknowledged fact that she could beat up, shoot or cut to pieces about any man who would dare mock her openly. Still, as the pontoon was let loose and started rowing towards the shore, Margaret saw a number of troopers whispering to each other while glancing furtively at Jeanne and her weapons. They were probably expecting her to be put back in her proper place after the first battle, as soon as she showed the first signs of weakness under fire. Having seen her in action against bandits, Margaret suspected that they were going to wait a long time for that to happen.

After maybe fifteen minutes of rowing, the pontoon started scraping on the bottom's sand just short of the shore. Once the pontoon came to a full stop, four sailors then slid in place a narrow ramp, allowing the cavalymen aboard to ride off the pontoon. Jeanne, mounted on Pegasus, preceded the cart, which was then driven down the ramp by Margaret. By now the beach was alive with thousands of British, French and Turkish troops, with not a single Russian to be seen, something that surprised Margaret.

"Jeanne, how come the Russians didn't do anything about our landing? With the size of our fleet, they surely know that we are here."

"Oh, they know alright, Margaret." replied Jeanne, smiling with amusement as she rode alongside the cart. "Russian cavalymen must have reported us already to Prince Menshikov. Fortunately for us, Prince Menshikov is no Napoleon, or he would

have stationed artillery on those hills surrounding this bay, out of range of our ships guns but within range of this beach. Good generalship is not something you will see much during this war, Margaret.”

Seeing the men of the 8th Hussars forming up in a regimental column, Jeanne led the cart to it, then trotted to Lord Paget while Margaret stationed the cart at the rear of the column. After a short conversation with Paget, Jeanne trotted back to Margaret to pass on the latest instructions.

“The regiment is going to act as a forward reconnaissance screen for the infantry. We are to follow the infantry and lend assistance as needed with the sick and wounded.”

“Sounds fine with me.” replied Margaret, who then looked up at the gray sky. “Let’s hope that the weather will hold.”

Looking up as well, Jeanne soon shook her head.

“Don’t count on it. Crimea is quite wet in this season. You did bring your rain gear as I asked you to, I hope?”

“I did.” said Margaret while looking at the darkening horizon. Jeanne’s 20/20 hindsight may be irksome at times but, from experience, Margaret knew that ignoring her advice was foolhardy. By now the Hussars were splitting into troops and galloping away to the East and South. Jeanne then pointed at a small hill overlooking the main road linking the nearby town of Eupatoria with Sebastopol, the ultimate target of the allied armies.

“Let’s take position on that hill and make ourselves comfortable. The wait could be a long one.”

Going to the hill and climbing its gentle grassy slope, they stopped beside a small clump of trees topping it and locked the cart’s brakes before untying Yasmina from it. While Margaret tied solidly their two horses to a tree, using very long ropes so that the animals could eat the long grass around them, Jeanne got busy chopping to bits with an axe a dead tree that was part of the clump. Their next labor was to erect the small rectangular tent stowed in the cart, digging a furrow around it as well to channel away any rainwater. Spotting a small stream nearby to the East of their hill, the two women led their horses to it to let them drink before filling a bucket with water for cooking purposes. Once back at their camp, a small fire was lit and a large pot of water put on it, with the intent of boiling it to make the water safe for consumption. As the water was warming up, Jeanne went to the cart and pulled out of it four steel posts, a canvas screen and a light folding toilet

seat, intent on setting up a latrine that would afford them some privacy from the thousands of soldiers still busy landing and organizing themselves.

“Jeanne,” said Margaret as her companion was starting to dig a latrine hole, “our men don’t seem to be in a hurry to move out. We may well spend the night here.”

Jeanne smiled at her while continuing her shoveling.

“I was expecting that, actually. I also bet that our commanders forgot to tell our troops to bring rations with them. The smell of our own food will probably drive them to us by supper time.”

“Uh, sorry but I’m not betting against you, Jeanne. I already got burned a couple of times.”

By the early afternoon, their hill was surrounded on three sides by British and French soldiers grouped into their respective regiments. Margaret couldn’t help notice again the striking differences between the French Army and the British Army. French troops were broken down into small, easily manageable sub-units supported by dedicated cooks, surgeons, nurses and wagon drivers. Each French regiment also had its contingent of female auxiliaries called *vivandières*, who helped the doctors, did the laundry and ran cantinas to help troop morale. Margaret had met a number of *vivandières* in Varna and had been surprised to see that they were treated like real soldiers and even wore female variants of French uniforms, with some even sporting military medals. As a result of all this, French soldiers were well fed, received good medical care and had a high morale, apart from being led by combat-hardened officers and NCOs who were promoted on merit. In contrast, the British soldiers that Margaret was watching were formed in big regimental squares and had no logistical means of support with them. As predicted by Jeanne, they also had apparently nothing to eat, while inexperienced officers kept harassing their men with useless orders and directives. While well disciplined, the British Army was clearly an amateur one compared to the French Army. Margaret was wondering if that sad state of affair was going to change one day when Jeanne shouted happily while getting on her feet.

“I see Leila coming our way! LEILA, COME UP HERE!”

Looking the way Jeanne was gesticulating, Margaret saw a young woman in the baggy red trousers and short blue tunic of the *Zouaves*, tough colonial troops from Algeria, walking up the hill. Margaret knew Leila as well, having met the *vivandière* in Varna.

After conversing quickly in Arabic with Jeanne, the Algerian woman hurried to the freshly dug latrine.

“Please excuse Leila if she was in a hurry,” explained Jeanne good-naturedly, “but they had not had time to prepare separate latrines for the vivandières. Leila recognized my cart from afar and assumed that we had done our usual, efficient setup.” Margaret giggled at Jeanne’s words.

“It seems that you are as well known in the French Army as you are in the British Army.”

“Don’t forget that I am French, Margaret. They were quite proud to see that a French woman was running the only efficient infirmary in the British camp. General Bosquet even sent me a bottle of wine as a measure of his esteem.”

“I remember that. It was quite a good wine too.”

“A Chateau-Lafitte?” replied Jeanne, faking indignation. “It better be good!”

Then going to the pot steaming over the fire, Jeanne pulled open its cover and plunged a spoon inside, stirring the lentil and fish rice before tasting it.

“It’s ready!” she announced to Margaret before looking at Leila, who was coming back from the latrine. Exchanging a few Arabic words with Jeanne, the Algerian then tasted the rice and obviously liked it. However, she left nearly immediately after a quick salute at Margaret, who watched her go.

“Why the hurry? She could have eaten with us.”

“She knows,” explained Jeanne, “but she has to help run her regimental cantina. Besides, she already had lunch. Now, let’s eat ourselves before the rain starts.”

The sky was still holding, barely, when they finished eating twenty minutes later. On a common accord, the two women then grabbed the steaming pot of rice, still nearly full, along with a large service spoon, and headed towards the nearest regimental square. The men there, soldiers of the 42nd Highlanders wearing kilts and bearskin hats, welcomed Jeanne and Margaret enthusiastically, sniffing the pot of rice with famished looks. A sergeant ordered at once his men into a line and with their mess tins at the ready, allowing Margaret to spoon out rice into the presented mess tins while Jeanne held the pot. Even when rationing each man to one large spoonful, they emptied the pot quickly, leaving still many men in line with empty tins. Jeanne looked at the mass of soldiers still waiting for food and felt discouragement: there were still hundreds needing to be fed. The sergeant saw her expression and spoke quietly to her.

“Don’t blame yourself for not being able to feed us all, madam. What you did is already a lot and is truly appreciated.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. I however have some dried dates and cheese that I could go fetch in my cart and bring here for distribution. I do have a substantial food reserve with me, so that won’t leave me in need. Do your men have any cooking utensils and pots with them?”

“We unfortunately have with us only what we were carrying in our backpacks, which is very little, madam. All our supplies and tools are with the supply chariots on the ships.”

Before Jeanne could reply to that, a group of four mounted Highlander officers stopped by her side, prompting the soldiers around her to come to attention. The most senior officer, an arrogant looking major, eyed with contempt the weapons worn by Jeanne.

“Madam, you are disturbing the ranks. I will ask you and your friend to leave the regimental lines.”

Margaret saw Jeanne barely restrain herself from exploding, instead approaching the still mounted major.

“Mister, we were simply helping to feed your men, who obviously had nothing to eat, and...”

“Leave logistics to the commissariat and fighting to men, madam!” replied brusquely the officer. He then looked down at the sergeant near Jeanne. “Chase those two camp followers out of the lines and make sure that they don’t come back, Sergeant.” That was when Jeanne had enough of the pompous bastard. Making two quick steps towards the major, she then grabbed solidly his right arm and brutally pulled him down from his horse. The major landed hard on his back in the dirt and found himself pinned down by a furious Jeanne, who had one knee against his chest.

“Nobody insults Lady Jeanne Smythe like this, you arrogant moron!” shouted Jeanne while holding her big hunting knife to the major’s throat. The officer, near panic, looked at one of the young captains that had been accompanying him.

“Mister Jones, get that woman off...”

The pressure of the sharp blade then increased on his throat, forcing him to shut up. He could now swear that there was murder in the eyes of the tall woman kneeling on his chest.

“You can’t feed your men and asks for others to defend you and you call yourself an officer? I could challenge you to a duel but I bet that you are too much of a coward to accept it. I will let you live this time but don’t ever insult me or my friend again.”

Jeanne then withdrew her knife and got up on her feet. No one had moved during the few seconds of the confrontation to help the major. Jeanne had turned around and was starting to walk back towards her camp with Margaret when the humiliated officer got up and drew his saber.

“YOU WILL PAY FOR THIS INSOLENCE!”

Before anyone else could react, Jeanne drew her own saber in a flash while pivoting to face the charging major. One slash to the man’s right hand made him drop his blade, while a second slash followed a fraction of a second later, making a long bleeding cut across the left cheek of the major and making him scream with pain. Jeanne then applied the tip of her sword against the man’s throat, forcing him to freeze.

“I could by all rights kill you right here and right now and justly claim self-defense, Major. Find yourself lucky that I consider you unworthy of dirtying further my blade. Now, get back on your horse and return to your tent before I change my mind.”

The mortified senior officer, realizing that she outclassed him in fencing by a long margin, didn’t argue, retreating to his horse and mounting it. After a last black look at Jeanne, he then galloped away, watched by the contemptuous eyes of his men and junior officers. One of the three mounted captains then addressed Jeanne, his face serious.

“Lady Smythe, we all saw how Major McAllister insulted you and attacked you in the back. I doubt that he will press a complaint against you.”

“He better not!” replied Jeanne firmly, then softening her tone. “I only wanted to give some food to your starving men, Captain, and was not expecting to be repaid with such rudeness.”

The captain sighed while looking down at the ground.

“Your generosity is well known, Lady Smythe. God bless you for what you did already, madam. Keep the rest of your supplies for the wounded and sick to come soon: we will manage in the meantime. Again, thank you for your generosity.”

Jeanne hesitated for a moment but finally turned around and walked away with Margaret, recuperating her kitchen pot at the same time. The captain watched her go, then looked bitterly at the major’s tent in the distance: This was only the latest example

of the man's utter disregard for his troops. He couldn't know yet that the said major was going to be killed in the month to come by a not so accidental British bullet in the head.

14:51 (Constantinople Time)

Sunday, September 17, 1854

Alma River, Crimea

Gordon Smythe took his time to complete his visual scan of the grounds in front of him while sitting calmly on his horse. Even while his cavalry troop was pretty much in plain sight due to the sparse cover available, the Russians fortifying themselves on the hilltops to his front didn't seem to care about the presence of British cavalymen. Using his spyglass, Gordon could see across the River Alma thousands of Russian soldiers digging gun positions along the ridges facing him, while more Russians were at work in the small village of Burliuk, next to the wooden bridge carrying the main road to Sebastopol. Gordon then lent his spyglass to Sergeant-Major James Champion beside him so that he could also look.

"Quite a strong position the Russians have there. There are over a hundred artillery pieces along the ridges and the slopes are quite steep. On the other hand, those tall hills to the west of the main Russian positions are nearly empty of enemy soldiers. If we could take them, we would overlook their positions and would make their defenses untenable."

"Maybe, sir," replied Champion while looking through the spyglass, "but if that river is too deep to ford and we are forced to use that bridge, those guns will butcher our men as if in a bowling alley."

"Well, there is only one way to know, Sergeant-Major," replied Gordon while urging his horse forward. "Stay here with the rest of the troop while I take a dip. If I get hit, return to the army with our information."

Champion watched with apprehension as his captain galloped to the river, then made his horse enter the water. Some Russians in the village downstream from the British started to get nervous at the sight of the lone rider crossing the river, with about twenty of them soon starting to run along the southern bank towards Smythe. Champion then gestured to his men.

“TROOPERS DISMOUNT! GET READY TO GIVE COVERING FIRE TO THE CAPTAIN!”

While four men gathered the reins of their companions' horses, 23 British troopers dismounted and grabbed their Minié rifles, kneeling down in a firing line along the shrubs. Captain Smythe was now close to the opposite bank, with the water having gone barely to his horse's belly at its deepest. Champion nearly shouted in triumph when Smythe's horse climbed the southern bank and made a few steps before its rider made it turn around and calmly cross the river again. By now the Russian infantrymen were getting too close to Champion's taste.

“TROOPERS! ENEMY INFANTRY TO THE FRONT AT 300 YARDS! FIRE!”

The 23 rifles barked at nearly the same time, downing over a dozen of the Russians and prompting the rest to take cover in a hurry. Reloading their single-shot, muzzle-loading rifles frantically, the British had time to fire a second salvo before the Russians responded in the form of six guns opening fire from the top of the ridge facing them. Champion instinctively ducked as the shells passed over his head, exploding over fifty yards behind the cavalry troop. He saw as well a good hundred Russian cavalrymen now crossing the wooden bridge towards them as Captain Smythe emerged from the river, yelling orders to his men.

“TROOPERS, REMOUNT! GET READY TO WITHDRAW!”

As soon as Gordon Smythe joined them back, the whole troop galloped north, with shells exploding on each side and with the Russian cavalry hard in pursuit. James Champion couldn't help shout excitedly at his captain riding alongside.

“Quite a warm welcome from those Russians, sir. I hope that our wives' welcome will be friendlier.”

“Nothing can beat Jeanne's welcome, Sergeant-Major.” shouted back Gordon, grinning.

“The lucky bastard!” grumbled quietly to himself one of the troopers, imagining the naked body of the tall, shapely French woman.

09:30 (Constantinople Time)

Monday, September 18, 1854

Kalamita Bay, Crimea

Margaret Ward, driving the ambulance cart towards the shore where a British rowboat was waiting, felt her heart jump when she saw a floating pontoon being towed towards the beach, coming from the HMS SANS PAREIL. On the pontoon was the medical wagon, its trailer and the train of pack mules of the regimental ambulance. Margaret could also see Doctor Farrell, Sarah Champion, Mary Pearson and the five other women who were now regular auxiliaries of the ambulance, all waving excitedly at her. Fanny Duberly was on the pontoon as well with her horse and pack animal. Waving back, Margaret drove the cart next to the beached rowboat and stopped, to be immediately approached by the navy ensign in charge of the rowboat's crew.

"What do you have for us this time, madam?"

Margaret half turned and pointed at the two men lying on the stretchers laid in the back of the cart.

"Two soldiers from the 23rd Fusiliers, sir. Both suffer from strong fevers."

"Alright, madam, we will take it from here." said the young ensign, a mere teenager, before shouting at his six sailors. "Four men to unload those two sick lads, quickly!"

By the time the two feverish soldiers, wrapped in blankets, were off the cart and in the rowboat, the pontoon and its towing rowboat had beached. Fanny Duberly and her horses were first off the pontoon, followed by the wagon and its trailer, with the pack mules last. The beach was soon the scene of a joyful reunion, with everybody wanting to hug and kiss Margaret. Fanny was then the first to ask the question Margaret was expecting.

"Where is Jeanne, Margaret? Normally, she accompanied you when bringing patients to the ships."

"She had to pitch tent some fifteen miles from here to take care of four severe cholera cases, Fanny. Thank God the wagon is here now: we sure could use your help." Fanny answered her with an embarrassed smile.

"Uh, I'm first going to Eupatoria for a day: Captain Brock, the newly appointed governor of the town, has invited me to visit him."

"Hmm, fun before work?" replied Margaret, faking indignation. Sarah Champion then slapped the brunette playfully in the back, nearly upsetting her balance.

"Don't worry, Maggie: we're here now. Let us take over for a while and rest a bit."

“Thanks! Me and Jeanne sure could use a respite: the last three days have been busy like hell.”

“With ten round trips between the front and the ships and 21 patients carried to safety, I can understand.” replied Doctor Farrell with obvious pride. “You two have been doing a great job.”

“Thank you, Doc.” said Margaret, fatigue showing on her face. “Could you and Sarah leave ahead of the wagon in the cart, to relieve Jeanne. She’s really burned up by now and has hardly slept in the last three days, what with the riding up and down the marching columns and directing me to the sick.”

“We’ll start right away, Margaret.” Promised Farrell softly. “In the meantime I want you to go lay in one of the stretchers in the back of the wagon and sleep. Mary! Take Emma to help you and change the stretchers in the cart for clean ones before washing them. Me and Sarah are leaving right away.”

“We’re on it, Doc.”

As soon as Margaret had taken out her personal kit bag and two clean, disinfected stretchers were in place in the back of the cart, Sarah and the doctor loaded in their own kit and sat in the front. They were soon out of sight of the medical wagon, trotting towards the front lines.

13:12 (Constantinople Time)

Eupatoria-Sebastopol road, Crimea

“There’s the medical tent!” suddenly shouted Farrell while pointing slightly to the right and ahead of them. Looking herself in that direction, Sarah effectively saw the familiar shape of the tent, standing in the middle of a loose clump of trees. Near it was Jeanne’s horse, tied to a tree by a long rope. Guiding the cart towards the tent, Sarah stopped in front of it as Jeanne was emerging from the tent, a bedpan in her hands. Sarah was immediately alarmed by the exhaustion apparent on Jeanne’s face as she weakly smiled at them.

“Thank God you’re here! I sure could use a hand or two.”

Jumping down from the cart, Sarah went to Jeanne and took the stinking bedpan from her hands.

“Where is your sewer pit, Jeanne?”

“Thirty yards to the right of the tent. If you’re taking care of this, I will...”

"You will wash and disinfect your hands and then go to sleep, and that's an order!" cut in Farrell with a firm voice, making Jeanne look at him with dismay.

"But...my patients need me."

"We will take care of them." said the doctor, his voice softening. "Just bring me up to date on their pathology before you go to sleep. You will be of no use to anybody if you fall down from exhaustion, Jeanne."

The French woman was about to protest further but refrained after a hesitation, instead lowering her head and reentering slowly the tent, the doctor behind her.

Taking a well deserved break three hours later, Sarah found Doctor Farrell sitting on a medical supply chest in front of the tent, apparently deep in thoughts. Sitting beside him, she passed one arm around the surgeon's shoulders, making him redden with embarrassment: Farrell was as timid as he was six months ago.

"What are you thinking about, Doc?"

"About our situation, Sarah. With Jeanne included, I have five medically trained orderlies to help me, which is much more than the norm in a regiment. Yet, we have been running ragged just by taking care of the sick. With major battles to come, we will never be enough just the six of us to properly take care of the wounded as well. We need more trained orderlies but, with the ranks of the army already depleted by disease, I will never be able to get some men to help."

"What about the four women traveling with us who do our laundry and cooking? They could be trained by you as nurses."

"Maybe, but who will then do the domestic chores?"

"Doc, wake up!" replied Sarah. "There are about two dozen more women from this regiment sitting on our ships, most of whom have little or nothing to do. I am sure that many of them would be glad to work for you, especially if Jeanne offers them the same wondrous pay that me and the other girls get."

"Would Jeanne accept to pay them, though? I can't force her to spend her own money."

"I bet she will, Doc. That kind of money is a drop in the bucket for her, truly. On the other hand, I have never possessed so much money as now. Would you believe that I already put aside over fifty pounds⁸ since we left England?"

⁸ In 1854, fifty British Sterling Pounds represented close to the annual salary of a maid.

“Fifty pounds? That’s quite a sum.”

“Indeed! Do you really believe that the wife of a trooper who makes maybe five shillings a week will pass such an offer?”

“Uh, no. Maybe I should talk to Jeanne about this when she wakes up.”

“Please do that, Doc.” said Sarah while patting Farrell’s shoulder.

20:11 (Constantinople Time)

Tuesday, September 19, 1854

8th Hussars camp, four miles north of the Alma River

Crimea

Thomas Farrell, standing at one end of the medical wagon’s retractable tent, looked somberly at his expectant medical staff assembled in front of him. A number of candle lamps provided sparse light that showed the grave expressions on everybody’s faces: they all knew why he had called this meeting after returning from Lord Paget’s tent. Present were Jeanne Smythe and her four junior nurses, four ex-domestic aides who had now rudimentary nursing training and six more women recently recruited by Jeanne to do the backbreaking but vital cleaning and cooking chores.

“Ladies, Lord Paget told me that our regiment will probably not see action in tomorrow’s battle, as our cavalry will act as flank protection for our attacking infantry. I thus requested and got permission to collect and treat wounded from the infantry regiments, who will undoubtedly suffer many losses tomorrow, as the Russian position is a very strong one. After this meeting, I will go visit the chief-surgeon of the Rifle Brigade to coordinate our efforts. The battle should start early tomorrow morning, so I want everybody up and ready to work by six O’clock. Here is how work will be divided: Sarah Champion, helped by Misses Short and Reeve, will keep taking care of the five sick men still in our custody inside the quarantine tent; Mary Pearson and Misses Pringle and Foster will receive the wounded and prepare them for surgery if need be; finally, Jeanne Smythe and Margaret Ward will act as forward ambulance, collecting the wounded on the battlefield and giving them first aid before bringing them here. The six ladies of the domestic staff will make sure in the meantime that we don’t run out of clean linen and instruments. Do you have any questions?”

The only one to raise her hand then was Jeanne Smythe.

“Yes, Jeanne?”

“Doc, I have a request rather than a suggestion. In order to efficiently treat and collect the wounded on the battlefield, I will have to go on foot and stay around while our cart ferries back the wounded to you. However, Margaret cannot both drive and take care of her passengers. I would like to ask for one volunteer who knows how to drive a cart well and who is strong enough to help lift a loaded stretcher. I have to be frank here: it will be dangerous work, as we will not wait for the shooting to stop before starting to collect the wounded. Bullets and shells will still be flying around.”

Margaret Ward swallowed hard but otherwise stayed impassive as the six auxiliaries looked hesitantly at each other. A sturdy woman in her late thirties then stepped forward.

“I’ll go! I drove a farm cart for years and have seen my share of blood and guts while following my husband, RSM O’Neil.”

“Thank you very much, Janet.” said Jeanne gratefully. “I will show you the peculiarities of my cart tomorrow morning. Uh, would you by chance know how to shoot and reload a rifle?”

“Why, you need to learn?” replied Janet with a big grin. “I went to Afghanistan with my Sean, after all.”

“Another war veteran? Excellent!” said a pleased Jeanne, getting funny looks from the others.

05:51 (Constantinople Time)

Wednesday, September 20, 1854

8th Hussars field ambulance, British camp

Crimea

Janet O’Neil, emerging from the women’s tent in the dim morning light, was joining Jeanne near their cart when a civilian on a horse arrived at the ambulance and dismounted near them. The newcomer quickly tied his mount to a tree before coming towards Jeanne and Janet. He balked when he saw the revolvers and saber Jeanne carried, hesitating before speaking.

“Uh, am I at the 8th Hussars field ambulance, ladies?”

“You are, sir.” answered Jeanne calmly. “May we help you?”

“I do hope so, miss. I am Doctor Paul Gardiner, junior surgeon with the 7th Fusiliers. Since my regiment lacks most medical facilities and equipment, my brigade

surgeon decided to send me to your ambulance, which is said to be superbly equipped, so that I could assist your own surgeon.”

“A very wise decision, sir.” said Jeanne, truly pleased by that. “Let me show you to Doctor Farrell, our surgeon. By the way, my name is Jeanne Smythe, field nurse with the 8th Hussars.”

“Pleased to meet you, madam.” replied stiffly Gardiner, still put off by Jeanne’s outfit, while shaking hands with her. He then followed her to the medical wagon and entered its rear tent. Jeanne soon reemerged alone from the tent and went back to the cart and Janet.

“That really made Doc Farrell happy. Now, let’s roll!”

10:14 (Constantinople Time)

North bank of Alma River

“Come on, lads, “ shouted Gordon Smythe to his men as they followed him at a gallop, “we don’t want to make our infantry or, God forbid, our Russian hosts wait!”

“Why not, sir?” shouted back Corporal Joseph Ward, riding hard with the rest of B Troop as it took its assigned position on the left flank of the long line of British infantry forming up a quarter mile short of the Alma River. “They did make us wait for them after all.”

“One must be lenient with our infantry fellows.” shouted Sergeant-Major James Champion from just behind Gordon. “They try their best but still are nothing more than low life ground-pounders.”

One soldier from the 7th Fusiliers, behind which lines the cavalymen were passing, heard Champion and shouted at him while doing an obscene gesture.

“At least we don’t get our rocks off by rear-ending bloody horses!”

Both the cavalymen and the infantrymen broke out in laughter at that exchange. As B Troop, following A Troop across the open countryside, rode past the men of the 7th Fusiliers, Gordon saw and recognized a very familiar white and green cart that was slowly following fifty yards behind the infantry line. Riding besides it was a woman he knew very well indeed.

“Talking of arses, men, there are some of our wives.”

“Bloody hell!” shouted a surprised Corporal Ward. “What is Margaret doing this close to the frontlines?”

“Close?” replied James Champion. “This IS the frontlines!”

The cavalymen stared at the ambulance cart as the two women in it and the female rider cheered them. At the tail end of the column of Hussars, RSM Sean O’Neil saw his wife at the reins of the cart as he galloped past it.

“Hell! Is my Janet leading Lady Jeanne Smythe into this or is it the other way around?” he wondered aloud.

“That could be a difficult call, RSM.” replied Captain Heneage, who was riding besides O’Neil.

11:51 (Constantinople Time)

North bank of Alma River

“There it goes!” announced Jeanne at the sight of multiple puffs of white smoke erupting from the ridges to their right. Margaret didn’t understand until the delayed sound of the Russian guns firing reached them. The two mile-long line of British infantry, which had been idly waiting for the French supporting attack on their right, suddenly came to life. With officers riding in front, the two men-deep assault line started to advance towards the nearby Alma River. The village of Burluk, situated on the southern bank across from the bridge on the river, then erupted in flames and smoke.

“What the hell is happening there?” wondered Margaret, promptly answered by Jeanne.

“The Russians turned the village into a fire bomb and just ignited it. Things are going to become bloody very soon.”

A rolling thunder then announced the firing of all the Russian guns positioned along the ridges facing the British. Geysers of smoke and dirt started to erupt among the advancing British troops, mowing down men by the dozen under Margaret’s horrified eyes.

“My God! This is a bloody massacre!”

“I actually have seen worse, Maggie.” said gravely Janet O’Neil, restraining her now nervous horse.

“Let’s wait until the troops have started crossing the river before going in to help the wounded.” said Jeanne with unbelievable calm. “There is no point in getting ourselves killed right at the start of the battle.”

Janet glanced at the French woman: this was indeed a seasoned veteran and a cool customer.

The British infantry, still under a murderous artillery fire, started crossing the Alma River ten minutes later, prompting Jeanne into signaling to Janet with one hand.

“Advance now, straight to our front.”

Urging on Yasmina, Janet drove the cart forward by 200 yards, following Jeanne’s horse, until they were surrounded by corpses and moaning wounded.

“Halt!” ordered Jeanne before jumping down from her horse Pegasus, a pack full of bandages on her back. Margaret got down next from the cart, following Jeanne on foot to a nearby group of downed infantrymen. The sight of mangled bodies and thorn limbs then made the brunette bend over and throw up despite her best efforts to keep her composure. A shout from Jeanne soon brought her back to their duty.

“Margaret, I need you here!”

Going over her revulsion, Margaret joined Jeanne besides a young soldier with a large wound to his left leg. Jeanne took her right hand and applied it to a point just above the gaping, bleeding wound.

“Keep enough pressure here to stop the bleeding while I bandage him.”

Margaret did so while watching Jeanne work feverishly on the young man, who was delirious and agitated. A shell suddenly screamed by over their heads, exploding a mere thirty yards away from the cart and terrifying Margaret to no small degree. That prompted Jeanne into turning her head towards the waiting cart and to shout at Janet O’Neil.

“Janet, turn the cart ninety degrees and present your flank to the Russians. Maybe our ‘AMBULANCE’ sign will make them refrain from shooting at us.”

Jeanne then returned to her first aid work as Janet turned the cart to the right. Another shell screamed by seconds later, missing it by a mere twenty yards.

On the ridge of the main Russian position, an artillery officer looking through a spyglass suddenly shouted at the gun crews near him.

“Halt fire! Switch target back to the English infantry now!”

“Why, sir?” shouted back one of the gun masters.

“Because that cart is an ambulance, you illiterate peasant!”

Smarting over the officer's response, the gun master then relayed the order to his men. They were soon back at boring holes in the advancing British lines.

12:13 (Constantinople Time)

North bank of Alma River

"One, two, three, lift!"

The loaded stretcher, lifted in the back of the cart by the combined effort of the three women, was then slid in place on the retaining rails specially designed to this effect, then secured in place by straps. Another wounded man on a stretcher was already inside the cart. Jeanne then helped a soldier with his left arm held in a sling get up and sit at the front, besides Janet O'Neil, while Margaret Ward sat on a small bench between the two stretchers in the back. Changing one of her water bottles, now nearly empty, for a full one, Jeanne then grabbed half a dozen small white flags on thin steel poles from inside the cart and patted Janet's arm.

"Get those wounded back to our camp at top speed, then come back here. The white flags will mark wounded men ready for pickup. Go!"

Nodding in understanding, Janet turned the cart around and drove north at a gallop, using the main Eupatoria-Sebastopol road. The spring suspension system of the cart was now paying off handsomely, making it possible for Janet to push her horse without jolting around too hard the wounded she transported. They made it back to the field infirmary, four miles away, in less than half a hour. Doctors Farrell and Gardiner, along with Mary Pearson and four other women, were on hand to help unload the three wounded, who were then rushed inside the treatment tent. As soon as the cart was emptied and two clean stretchers had been put in place, Janet drove back towards the battlefield, an anxious Margaret sitting beside her.

"I hope that Jeanne is alright."

"Don't worry about her, Maggie. From what I have seen and heard of her, she can easily fend for herself."

Both stayed silent during the rest of the return trip. Careful not to overexert her horse, Janet kept up a quick trot instead of a full gallop, still taking only 35 minutes to arrive back at the battlefield. They found the battle still raging on, with the British infantry now well past the river and climbing steadily the steep slopes leading to the Russian

positions. The Russian guns were as active as ever, but now had to contend with some heavy British guns that had been brought forward on the north side of the river. The problem was that Jeanne and the wounded she was treating were directly in the path of the British guns' muzzle blasts, with Russian counter fire falling around her on top of that. Margaret looked at the scene with horror and nearly pulled her hair in desperation.

"My God! She's going to get killed in short order. What are we going to do?"

Janet clenched her teeth, then took a quick decision. Jumping down from the cart, which had stopped behind and some distance to the right of the British guns, she put in place locking pins on the wheels and pulled out of the cart's back one of their two stretchers, then shouted at Margaret.

"Maggie, get down here! We will go on foot and get the wounded with our stretchers."

Only hesitating for a short moment, Margaret joined Janet and took one end of the stretcher, following her at a run. Janet could see that Margaret was as white as a sheet as they ran past the firing guns, but the younger woman didn't falter.

"Run at a crouch, Maggie!" shouted Janet as they started running directly in front of the British guns, only forty yards away. One muzzle blast half deafened them, apart from making Margaret squeal in terror. Janet really couldn't blame the British gunners for this, as they were taking casualties from the Russian guns and had to keep firing. One Russian cannonball ricocheted off the ground ten meters in front of Janet, splattering her with dirt, before continuing on to decapitate a British gunner. Both women finally got to Jeanne, kneeling besides the wounded man she was treating. Jeanne's face was pale and tense but her voice was steady as she looked at Margaret.

"This man has shell fragments in his chest and legs. I did what I could to stop the bleeding and made him sniff some chloroform. You can take him away."

The three women cautiously laid the groaning man on the stretcher, then lifted him and walked back to the cart, buffeted all the way by explosions and muzzle blasts. Putting the wounded aboard the cart, they then ran back for a second wounded marked by one of Jeanne's white flags, carrying him as well to the cart. As she was about to turn around the cart to evacuate the two wounded, Janet watched Jeanne run back to take care of more wounded.

"Now, there goes a brave woman." she said softly before urging Yasmina northward.

16:04 (Constantinople Time)

North bank of Alma River

The staff officer, covered with dust and sweat, halted his horse besides that of Lord Raglan, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Corps, saluting him crisply before delivering his message in a triumphant voice.

“Victory, Milord! The Russians are in full retreat, abandoning much of their baggage in the process. Our troops are now in full control of the heights.”

“By God, that is what I call good news.” said jubilantly the 66 years old, one-arm field marshal. “Let’s go see by ourselves, shall we?”

“Uh, sir,” cut in politely Lord Lucan, commander of the Cavalry Division, “my men are still covering the flanks and can pursue the Russians quickly enough. This is a golden opportunity to cut the enemy to pieces, sir.”

Lord Raglan looked around at his staff officers and aides, hesitant. A perfect gentleman who had served under the Duke of Wellington and who had lost his right arm at Waterloo, he was nonetheless a cautious commander.

“We don’t know anything about Russian reserve forces, Lord Lucan. I prefer to keep our cavalry in reserve in case of a Russian counter-attack.”

“Yes sir!” replied the disappointed Lucan. The command staff and its heavy cavalry escort then followed Lord Raglan down the knoll they had used as an observation point during the battle, following the road leading to the bridge crossing the Alma River. As they were approaching the river, they met a northbound white and green cart driven by a woman and bearing a big ‘AMBULANCE’ sign in three languages on both sides. The female driver waved briefly at Lord Raglan and his staff as she sped north, obviously in a hurry. Raglan, curious, looked at his army chief-surgeon.

“Doctor Sloane, whose ambulance was that and what are women doing on the battlefield so soon?”

“Sir, this was the 8th Hussars’ ambulance cart, the one donated and operated by Lady Jeanne Smythe. Since they are by far the best equipped medical unit the Army has in Crimea, I authorized them to help collect and treat the wounded from the Rifle Division. As for women driving ambulances, I believe that the only man on the staff of the 8th Hussars Field Ambulance is the surgeon himself, Doctor Thomas Farrell, who by the way did a superb job in Varna.”

“Are you telling me that no men are available for such battlefield duties?” asked Raglan, truly shocked and incensed.

“Unfortunately, none, sir.” replied Sloane, more than a bit embarrassed. William Russell, who was following Lord Raglan’s group as official correspondent of ‘The Times’, started scribbling notes furiously as the chief-surgeon went on.

“Disease has depleted the army’s ranks to such an extent that no men are left to act as orderlies and stretcher bearers, Milord. The old Chelsea pensioners London sent me as medical orderlies were of no use whatsoever and I shipped them straight back to Scutari, the ones who survived the trip, that is.”

Raglan then turned to face his chief of staff, speaking forcefully.

“Colonel, I want you to detail men from our quartermaster services as quickly as possible for stretcher bearer duty, along with chariots to transport our wounded. Our soldiers must be tended to as soon as possible.”

“If I may, Milord,” then cut in politely William Russell, “it seems that at least one person is already caring for some of our wounded.”

Looking in the direction pointed at by the journalist, Raglan saw a solitary figure about 300 meters away. The person was kneeling besides a wounded in the middle of the corpse-strewn battlefield, its back to Raglan, and was apparently treating him.

“Is that a French uniform? I can’t quite make it out.”

The commander’s chief of staff then turned towards one of his liaison officers.

“Captain Nolan, go identify that person and report back on the double.”

“Right away, sir!” replied the young Hussars officer before launching his horse at a gallop. As he approached the crouched figure, who was busy bandaging a wounded British infantryman, suspicion arose in Nolan’s mind: the sword slung most un-regulation wise across the person’s back was no British or French sword. The stranger also had long hair going down well past the shoulders. Drawing his own sword, Nolan slowed his horse to a trot, stopping when only a few meters from the unknown person. The latter then turned around briefly, showing a beautiful female face smeared with dirt and blood.

“Could you help me here, please?” asked the woman in a tired voice. Nolan took a few seconds to recover from the surprise.

“I’m afraid that I have to return right away to my commander, madam. May I ask who you are?”

“You may.” she replied quietly while finishing her bandage. “I’m Lady Jeanne Smythe, field nurse with the 8th Hussars.”

“How long have you been here, tending the wounded, madam?”

“Since the opening shots of this battle, Captain. Could you tell your commander that extra transports are needed urgently here. I’m doing the best I can here but our ambulance is four miles away and men are bleeding to death before our cart can pick them up.”

“I will pass the word, madam.” replied Nolan respectfully. He did however have one last question nagging him. “If you are a nurse, madam, then why the weapons?” Jeanne glanced up at him while laying gently the wounded infantryman back on the ground.

“Captain, don’t be naïve. Russian Cossacks don’t respect the laws of war any more than Afghan tribesmen did. My weapons are for my protection and that of my patients.”

“I understand, madam. Have a good day!” replied Nolan before galloping back to the command staff, now nearly at the bridge. He stopped besides Lord Raglan and saluted while reporting.

“This was Nurse Jeanne Smythe, from the 8th Hussars’ field ambulance, sir. She has been tending our wounded since the start of the battle and is asking urgently for more transports to get the wounded to the dressing stations.”

While many staff officers looked in surprise at the distant nurse, Lord Raglan stared severely at his chief quartermaster.

“You know what your priority is now, sir. Get to it right away.”

18:43 (Constantinople Time)

8th Hussars field ambulance, Crimea

Taking a break after finishing operating on his fourth patient of the day, Paul Gardiner walked wearily out of the ambulance wagon’s treatment tent, inhaling with delight the fresh September air. The sky was now darkening quickly and the people moving around were little more than silhouettes. They were already using a good dozen candle lamps and two oil lamps to illuminate the operating section of the treatment tent. A female silhouette then approached Gardiner, something in her right hand. Paul smelled the hot tea as soon as the woman offered the tin cup she was holding.

“I thought that you could use some tea after this grueling work, Doctor.”

“You are an angel, madam.” said thankfully Gardiner while taking the cup. “Could you remind me of your name?”

The white of the woman’s teeth showed in the dark as she smiled.

“I’m Christine Sullivan, at your service, Doctor. I just relieved Diane Sutherland on cooking duty. By the way, we have some hot soup and fresh bread if you are hungry.”

“In fact, I am famished.”

“Then come with me to the cooking tent, Doctor.”

Sipping his hot tea while following Christine to the nearby tent, Gardiner went in and took place at a small table surrounded by four folding chairs. One side of the tent was lined up with stacks of bags, boxes and barrels of foodstuff, while an iron stove sat in one corner, two large pots on it. Christine Sullivan, a young and pretty redhead with freckles, filled a bowl from one of the pots and put it in front of Gardiner before fetching a spoon, a knife and a half loaf of bread on a plate.

“It’s chick pea soup on the menu.” Explained Christine as Gardiner had a first spoonful. “There is some rice and bacon in it as well, plus a few spices. It is a most filling recipe.”

“A tasty one too!” replied Gardiner, enjoying his soup. “The diet at your field ambulance is far superior to the army’s regular fare. In fact, everything about this ambulance unit is superior to anything else I have seen yet. Your organization should become a model for all the other medical army units.”

“With the Commissariat in charge of army supplies?” replied Christine in a sarcastic tone. “Good luck! Only Lady Jeanne Smythe’s money and ideas made all this that you see possible. Before her, the regiment had one drunk doctor, an equally drunk orderly, a rundown shack, no wagon and precious little of anything.”

Gardiner was silent as he ate his soup and bread and thought over what Christine had said. The more he saw and heard about this Jeanne Smythe, the more curious he was becoming about her. The patients they had been receiving at the rate of three or four per hour since noon had all been cared for in exemplary manner, with some cases displaying first aid techniques he had never seen before. All the wounds had been cleaned with water and alcohol and many patients had received chloroform, a pain killer that Doctor Farrell was also using extensively during his surgical work. The other nurses employed by Farrell, while not truly knowledgeable medically, were competent enough in patient care and were highly dedicated, lightening tremendously the workload of both

surgeons and letting them concentrate on pure surgical work. He still had reservations about a few things, like female nurses washing male patients and women being on the battlefield while the shooting was still going on, but the alternative to that would have been neglected and uncared for patients, something Gardiner was not ready to accept.

He was about to finish his supper when he heard a number of wagons stopping nearby and men jump out, shouting orders at each other. Both he and Christine, pushed by curiosity, went out of the cooking tent to look. What they saw was a column of four big wagons stopped in front of the ambulance and at least twenty soldiers busy unloading what looked like large marquee tents under the supervision of a civilian man on horseback. Four more civilians holding what looked strongly like doctors' leather bags were stepping down from a cart at the head of the wagons. Doctor Farrell, also attracted by the noise, went to the mounted civilian, recognizing him once close to him.

"Doctor Gibbons? Could you tell me what is going on here?"

The brigade's chief-surgeon dismounted before facing Farrell and answering him.

"Orders from the army's chief-surgeon, that's what, my dear Thomas. Lord Raglan wants the maximum effort to be done to help our wounded as quickly as possible. The example given by your field ambulance struck him and he has directed that your facility be enlarged to act as a field hospital. I have with me the doctors from the other regiments of the brigade, plus enough equipment to assemble and furnish four marquee tents to house our wounded. Three carts are also on their way to the battlefield to help bring the wounded here."

Farrell was speechless for a moment, not believing his good fortune.

"This...this is great, sir. We were getting swamped here as a matter of fact, with nineteen wounded already received alive from the battlefield. Unfortunately, two more wounded died from internal bleeding during transport."

"And how many did you lose here?" asked Gibbons.

"One, sir." Answered Farrell somberly. "His wounds were too massive to survive."

"Only one? But that's damn good results, Thomas." marveled the brigade surgeon. The arrival of the ambulance cart driven by Janet O'Neil interrupted their conversation, with Margaret Ward shouting from the back of the cart.

"We have two stretcher cases and two walking wounded here."

“Sergeant Dillon!” shouted Gibbons on hearing Margaret. “Bring up six men to help unload those wounded!”

“Right away, sir!”

As soldiers came forward to help Margaret and Janet, the brigade surgeon patted Farrell’s back.

“Let me help you operate on these men, Thomas. Show me to your operating tent.”

“Then, this way, sir.” said the young surgeon, too happy to oblige. Leading him inside the rear tent of his medical wagon, he showed Gibbons a washing basin and a bar of soap sitting on a small folding table.

“Sir, I will ask you to remove your coat and hat and to wash your hands thoroughly with soap. One of the things that I found which helped our recovery rate is cleanliness. I will get Nurse Pearson to help you.”

Since Farrell’s methods had more than paid off up to now, Gibbons didn’t object and removed his coat and top hat, then washed his hands carefully. Mary Pearson showed up as he was toweling his hands dry. The young blonde went to a chest and took out of it three sets of clean surgical coats, hats and masks, then held a coat in front of Gibbons.

“Please slip your arms in, Doctor.”

Intrigued by the unfamiliar garment, Gibbons complied nonetheless, slipping on the coat and letting Mary tie it in his back. Farrell entered the tent and started washing his hands as Mary was showing Gibbons how to put on his surgical mask.

“Where did you get your medical training, Thomas?” asked the brigade surgeon through his mask.

“St-Thomas Hospital, sir. Why?”

“St-Thomas? I’m not aware that they ever used such garbs or even enforced mandatory washing before operations.”

“They don’t, sir.” answered curtly Farrell, reluctant to get deeper into that subject. Gibbons insisted, though.

“Then, where did you learn these methods?”

“From Jeanne Smythe, sir.” said Farrell after a hesitation before lying. “She studied medical techniques in the Orient. So far, they have proved quite effective.”

Farrell could feel Gibbons’ reprobation as the brigade surgeon stared at him while he put on his surgical garb with Mary’s help.

“This Jeanne Smythe, is she a qualified doctor?”

Farrell took a deep breath, then looked Gibbons in the eyes.

“Jeanne would not be recognized as such by the British Medical Association, sir, but she could surprise you with her medical knowledge and skills. She routinely assists me during surgical work and I often let her do the final stitching work, under my supervision of course. The operating theater is on the other side of this curtain, sir.”

Going through the curtain, Gibbons found a sturdy table covered with a white linen sheet, a smaller table supporting trays covered with napkins and two garbage cans. A multitude of lamps lit that section of the tent. Two soldiers soon brought in a wounded soldier on a stretcher and cautiously slid him on the operating table with the help of Farrell and Gibbons. Once the soldiers were out with their stretcher, Farrell went to the patient’s left foot, where a cardboard tag was attached to a toe by a string, and read the few lines scribbled on it.

“Chest sucking wound from shrapnel. No exit wound. Four drops of chloroform given at 18:06 hours.”

“Who wrote this?” asked Gibbons, surprised.

“Jeanne Smythe, sir. She tags every man she treats on the battlefield before sending him to us. It saves a lot of time at our end.”

Gibbons was thoughtful as Farrell started cautiously cutting away the bandages surrounding the man’s chest, using a pair of scissors handed to him by Mary Pearson. Some kind of paper sheet lying on top of the wound then attracted Gibbons’ eyes.

“What’s this?”

“The waxed paper wrapping of one of our field bandages, sir. It helps keep the bandage dry and clean during transport and can also be used to cover or protect a wound. When used in this case, it helps prevent a pierced thoracic cage from collapsing.”

Gently turning the patient on his side, Farrell inspected the man’s back before replacing him flat on the table.

“No exit wound. We have at least one piece inside, possibly in the left lung. Would you like to do the extraction, sir?”

“Yes! Scalpel, please!”

“Let me give more chloroform to the patient first, sir: he is still half awake.”

“Alright, Farrell, go ahead.”

Gibbons waited patiently as Farrell applied a sieve to the man’s face, then put on it a cotton pad wetted with a few drops of chloroform. The wounded man tried at first to take

away the sieve but was restrained by the two surgeons until he passed out. Then taking the scalpel offered by Mary Pearson, Gibbons started cutting a way inside the wound, with Farrell sponging the blood as he went. Three minutes later he was pulling out a large chunk of metal from the wound.

“A big bugger indeed! I see no other pieces inside. Let’s sow him up.”

That part took a lot longer, with the patient being carried out of the operating section one hour and ten minutes after entering it. Gibbons watched Mary Pearson take away on a tray the instruments they had used, while Farrell explained to him what she was doing.

“Those instruments will be washed, then boiled before being used again. We will have to wash our hands again and change garbs before operating on our next patient. This may all sound fastidious but our infection rate is way down compared with other field ambulances.”

Gibbons nodded his head, quite impressed: there were valuable lessons to be learned here. If young Thomas Farrell was smart, he was going to claim the credit for his work before some unscrupulous medical colleague did it in his place. As for Jeanne Smythe, Gibbons had made his mind to commend her work directly to the army chief-surgeon and to Lord Raglan himself.

14:56 (Constantinople Time)

Friday, September 22, 1854

Lord Raglan’s command tent

South bank of Alma River, Crimea

“Milord, Doctor Sloane is here to see you.”

Raising his eyes from the letter he was reading, the old marshal looked at his Aide-De-Camp, now standing in the entrance of his command tent.

“Please let him in, Jarvis.”

The army chief-surgeon soon entered, walking to Raglan’s desk and handing him a sheet of paper, his face solemn.

“The butcher’s bill, sir.”

Raglan had dreaded this moment for at least a day now: of all the things he hated most about war, it was those casualties lists, where a few dry words tried to hide the reality of unspeakable suffering and mass death. Slowly taking the paper, Raglan read it twice,

trying to keep his composure at the same time. His voice did show his pain as he spoke softly.

“481 dead... 356 wounded.”

Raglan then looked questioningly at Sloane.

“How come there are more dead than wounded, Doctor?”

The chief-surgeon seemed to shrink at Raglan’s question.

“Milord, many of the dead were not killed outright during the battle. In fact, many of them bled to death before they could be picked up and brought to the dressing stations. This is an old problem, sir: not enough transportation means available and too few medically trained personnel at hand. The only ones present from the start of the battle and ready to help and carry the wounded away were the nurses from the 8th Hussars’ field ambulance, who did sterling duty in appalling conditions. On that subject, sir, I have a request from the chief-surgeon of the Light Cavalry Brigade.”

“Go ahead, Doctor.”

“Milord, Doctor Gibbons wishes that three of those nurses be publicly commended for their devotion to duty and bravery while under fire. I personally checked on their work and interviewed a number of artillery officers who witnessed their courage on the battlefield. What I was told was quite impressive, sir. Here is my report on this matter.”

Taking a second document from Sloane, Raglan read it quickly, raising an eyebrow at its content.

“This Lady Jeanne Smythe was under artillery fire for over three hours, alone, while tending to our wounded?”

“Yes, sir! Our gunners were actually shooting over her head while exchanging fire with the Russian guns. Nurses Margaret Ward and Janet O’Neil also ran repeatedly across the battlefield to pick up wounded men while under fire.

“My God! This is truly admirable.” said Raglan, his eyes becoming moist. “Doctor, be sure that this report will be acted upon. How is our new field hospital at the 8th Hussars camp doing, by the way?”

“Swamped, sir. There are now fifteen surgeons there working non-stop and they are barely keeping up, while the female nurses are being run ragged. They are also running low on medical supplies.”

“Can’t the Commissariat restock them?” asked Raglan, irritated at having to cover this old problem again. Sloane shook his head in response.

“Hardly, sir. Adding to the usual Commissariat’s incompetence is the fact that some of the medical items that are getting scarce are non-standard ones bought in England by Lady Smythe.”

“I don’t care if those items are standard ones or not, Doctor.” fumed the old marshal. “If we have to get extra supplies from England, then let’s do it. I want our wounded men to be treated decently and speedily.”

“I will do my best, sir.” replied Sloane with little enthusiasm before leaving Raglan’s tent: getting anything from the Purveyor’s Office was like extracting a tooth.

Once Sloane was out of his tent, Raglan called in his ADC while still holding the chief-surgeon’s report, waiting until the colonel had snapped to attention before starting to speak.

“Jarvis, we are compiling a list of names of those present on the battlefields in Crimea in case a campaign medal is issued, aren’t we?”

“Of course, Milord! This is standard army procedure during any campaign, sir.”

“Then, Jarvis, I want you to add the names of the three women mentioned in this report to the list of nominees for a campaign medal.”

“Women, sir?” said the ADC as if asked to give a military medal to a horse.

“Yes, Jarvis! I will also give you soon a draft for a Mention in Dispatches. Make sure when it is released that Mister Russell, of The Times of London, gets a copy of it.”

“Yes, sir!” could only reply the ADC, taken aback, before saluting and leaving the tent.

06:48 (Constantinople Time)

Sunday, September 24, 1854

Crimean coast North of Sebastopol

Janet O’Neil waved one last time at Jeanne Smythe, who was standing beside her faithful horse Pegasus on the floating pontoon bringing the last batch of wounded soldiers to the waiting transport ship. She then turned the cart around and started driving back to the field hospital camp site. With the whole army on the march towards Sebastopol and with most of their wounded evacuated, the field hospital would soon be following the endless columns of men, horses and wagons headed south. Hopefully, the march would give a chance to the hospital staff to recuperate from their sleepless nights.

Janet herself, despite being accustomed to hardships and backbreaking labor, was in desperate need of some sleep. Jeanne Smythe, now on her way to Constantinople to escort patients to the military hospitals there and to buy more medical supplies, was probably the most exhausted of all. Janet suspected that part of this was due to the incredible stress for Jeanne of having to treat wounded men while under fire for hours. Having been one of the pitifully few army dependants to have survived the disastrous withdrawal march out of Afghanistan a few years ago, Janet fully appreciated what Jeanne had to go through four days ago.

Janet was still half a mile from the hospital when she saw Fanny Duberly gallop towards her, going as fast as her cumbersome Amazon riding position permitted her to go. Fanny stopped her horse as soon as she was level with the cart and spoke excitedly.

“Jeanne, is she gone on the ship already?”

“If you wanted to speak to her, you’re too late, Fanny: the ship must have sailed by now.”

“Damn!” swore Fanny in frustration. “That means that she won’t get the news for another ten days at the least.”

“What news?” asked Janet, now frankly curious. Her question attracted a malicious smile on Fanny’s face.

“Lord Raglan has just released his latest dispatches about the battle of the Alma. In fact, these dispatches should be sailing back to England via Jeanne’s ship by now.”

“So?”

“So? My dear Janet, it happens that you, Jeanne and Margaret are mentioned in those official dispatches, for bravery shown during the accomplishment of your duties. Jeanne even rated a special mention in them.”

Janet was speechless for a moment, her heart suddenly pumping furiously. She had never heard of women being mentioned in military dispatches before, a process that normally led to the award of a medal.

“But, this means that at least Jeanne could expect a medal of some sort, no?”

Fanny’s smile faded somewhat then.

“Uh, I wouldn’t bet on that yet, Janet. When Captain Smythe brought us the good news a short while ago, he also told us that Lord Cardigan was already ranting and

raving about women having no business being mentioned in dispatches. Most of the officers seem to think like that old martinet.”

“Bunch of aristocratic twits!” spat out Janet bitterly. “We wouldn’t have lost so many of our men if those officers knew their jobs in the first place. How is my dear husband reacting to this, by the way?”

“Quite well.” answered Fanny, smiling again. “Captain Smythe told us that your Sean and Corporal Ward are both as proud as peacocks this morning.”

“Well well, maybe I will ask him a few extra favors the next night I see him.” said Janet, grinning devilishly. “Jeanne told me about a few French love techniques I am anxious to try with Sean.”

“Janet!” exclaimed Fanny, feigning being scandalized before smiling and lowering her voice as she guided her horse besides the cart. “Would you mind telling me about some of those techniques?”

“Not at all, but I hope that your husband has an open mind...and a good tongue.” The two women were soon laughing hard together, exchanging jokes that would have made their own husbands blush as they rode back to the camp.

15:08 (Constantinople Time)

Wednesday, September 27, 1854

Kadikoi Valley, near Balaklava Harbor

Crimea

Sarah Champion, Mary Pearson and Emma Armstrong, all sitting in the front bench of the medical wagon, looked around them as the regimental column they were part of came to a halt in the middle of a shallow valley. What they were seeing now did nothing to drive their spirits up.

“What a desolate, depressing place.” said Sarah, getting nods from the others.

“Indeed! Not one tree in sight and only sparse grass for our horses and mules to feed on.” remarked Emma. “I hope that this is not going to be our camp site.”

Their hopes were dashed when Doctor Gibbons approached them on his horse and spoke briefly with Doctor Farrell, sitting with Janet O’Neil in the ambulance cart that preceded the wagon. In turn, Farrell got up in the cart and pointed a nearby spot to the women in the wagon.

“We’re going to establish ourselves over there. Get the wagon in place first, Sarah.”

Then jumping down from the cart, the young surgeon guided the wagon, its trailer and the mules attached to it to where he exactly wanted them, careful to orient the wagon so that it would present its smaller frontal section to the winds blowing through the valley. The nine women traveling in the back of the wagon then got out and surveyed their surroundings. Less than two kilometers away the small town of Balaklava was visible, its harbor now filling with British and French ships. In the valley they were in was a tiny hamlet composed of a few miserable huts situated near one of the two dirt roads leading out of Balaklava. The roads themselves were mere trails and promised to become mud pits after any rainfall. The slopes of the hills surrounding the valley were quite gentle but were covered only with short grass and light brush. Diane Sutherland, one of the medical auxiliaries, appeared dismayed by what she saw.

“We marched all the way around Sebastopol when we could have taken the city at our own leisure, only to end up here?”

Sarah Champion couldn’t help grin sarcastically then.

“Ain’t it nice to see that a simple farm girl could see what our good generals couldn’t?”

“Jeanne would probably have blown steam at seeing that.” remarked Mary Pearson, getting a nod from Sarah.

“She most certainly would. Sometimes I think that I would have more confidence in her than in our officers to lead our army.”

“Yeah,” approved Emma Armstrong, “but she probably is in Constantinople by now, the lucky girl.”

“Come on, girls!” cut in Thomas Farrell. “We better get our tents up before it rains again.”

No sooner had the surgeon spoken that rain started to fall, a few drops at first, then a heavy downpour.

“God, I hate this place!” said passionately Mary Pearson.



Painting representing the charge of the Light Brigade at the Battle of Balaklava.

CHAPTER 7 – THE ANGEL OF BALAKLAVA

13:59 (Constantinople Time)

Saturday, October 7, 1854

British cavalry division camp

Kadikoi, Crimea

“JEANNE IS BACK!”

Emma Armstrong’s joyous shout attracted Margaret Ward, along with the rest of the ambulance staff, out of their tents. Coming from Balaklava Harbor was a procession of twenty pack horses, with a smiling Jeanne Smythe in the lead. Jeanne was wearing her familiar riding skirt and short tunic outfit and looked healthy and in good spirits. Margaret Ward won the race for being the first to get to Jeanne and hug her as the latter dismounted. The French woman was soon surrounded by Doctor Farrell and a dozen excited women all trying to ask questions about her trip to Constantinople. Jeanne finally had to raise her arms and shout.

“Alright, girls, give me time to arrive first and get these supplies unloaded and stored away.”

Jeanne then grabbed Thomas Farrell by one arm and took him aside, speaking to him in a low voice.

“How is the medical situation here, Doc?”

“Actually, not bad at all, Jeanne. We presently have two cases of cholera, two of local fevers and one wounded lightly by a bullet. We are managing quite well, especially now that you brought all those extra supplies.”

“Excellent! Once these supplies are unloaded, I will go back to the port with the pack horses to get more supplies from my ship. By the way, would you know where my dear husband would be now?”

“Probably patrolling the Woronzoff Road that leads to the army main camp, like he does every day. He normally is back before darkness.”

“Good! I have a little something nice for him from Constantinople.”

Farrell watched Jeanne then go direct the unloading of her pack horses, shaking his head in wonderment before returning to his patients.

19:09 (Constantinople Time)

British cavalry division camp

Kadikoi, Crimea

Gordon Smythe, leading his fifteen-man patrol back into camp in the growing darkness and cold, stopped his horse near the regimental ambulance and contemplated with surprise the numerous piles lined near the medical wagon, their nature hidden by tarps thrown over them and anchored solidly by ropes and pickets. There was also two more big covered wagons and twenty extra horses within the infirmary's lines.

“What the hell is all this?” he asked himself. Corporal Ward advanced his horse alongside Gordon's horse while looking at the piles.

“If I may hazard a guess, sir, this may signal that your wife is back from Constantinople. This typically looks like one of her hat tricks.”

“I'd say, Corporal!” said Gordon happily. “Would you mind leading the men back to their tents? I will go report to Major Henry in one hour.”

“No worry, sir. Have a good time, sir.” replied Ward in a knowing tone. Gordon let that remark pass, too anxious to see Jeanne to sit on regulations. Getting off his horse as Ward led the patrol away, he tied his horse to the pole where the horses and mules of the medical section were tied as well, then entered the treatment tent. He found Doctor Farrell, helped by Mary Pearson and Emma Armstrong, changing the

bandages of Trooper Harris, who had received a bullet in the left arm during a skirmish with a Russian patrol three days ago. Farrell smiled up at him the moment he came in the tent.

"If you are looking for Jeanne, she has been waiting for you in the nurses' tent for the last hour. She has a surprise for you."

"A surprise?" said Gordon, his smile becoming a grin. "Then I better not make her wait longer."

Mary Pearson and Emma Armstrong exchanged a knowing smile as the tall, broad-shouldered officer left.

"God, what a nice-looking man." said Mary. "Jeanne is truly a lucky girl to have him."

Gordon hesitated at the entrance of the nurses' tent, afraid of disturbing any woman that could be inside at this time. He finally called out loud.

"Jeanne, are you in there? It's me, Gordon."

"You can come in, dear!" answered back his wife through the canvas. Stepping gingerly inside, Gordon abruptly stopped as he stared wide-eyed at Jeanne. Lying on a bear fur laid in the middle of the tent, she was wearing a vaporous Persian dancer's costume straight out of the Arabian Nights Tales. Smiling invitingly at Gordon, she motioned with her right index for approach.

"Come here, you nice hunk."

Gordon didn't make her wait a moment longer.

After making the men take care of their horses first, Corporal Ward was about to lead them to the regimental kitchen, hoping to find something to eat there after their long patrol, when his wife Margaret showed with Patricia Foster. The two women each held one of the handles of a covered cooking pot, apart from carrying bread loaves and wine bottles in wicker baskets. Margaret gave a quick kiss to her husband before making an announcement to the men of the patrol.

"Don't bother going to the kitchen, guys: Lady Jeanne brought back lots of goodies from Constantinople today and you are on her gift list. The menu for this supper is corned beef hash, fresh bread and wine."

"Corned beef hash?" said one of the troopers, his mouth watering already. "We haven't seen beef in weeks."

“We know!” replied Margaret, grinning. “That’s why we’re here. Get your plates ready, men.”

The men of B Troop went to bed content that night, some even more content than the others thanks to some intimate time with their wives arranged by the good offices of Jeanne Smythe. Morale definitely went up by a few notches that evening.

Going away in the early morning on his daily patrols, Gordon returned to camp in the evening to find a large new tent complex in the process of being put up. Contrary to the usual collection of individual tents used by the army, the large marquee tents of the complex were of a model that could be assembled together end-to-end to form long, spacious shelters. The complex actually was shaped like a ‘H’, with two long parallel rows of interconnected tents linked in the center by a section formed by three marquee tents. A number of marquee tents were also attached individually to the arms of the complex. Besides the large tent complex, another group of marquee tents tied together sat maybe thirty yards away, while a row of four individual marquee tents was positioned facing one of the extremities of the separate tent group. A number of civilian workers whom Gordon recognized from their spoken language as Turkish men were busy assembling and erecting the tents that were still not in place. More Turkish workers were building a sort of palisade enclosing the whole complex of tents, using poles and planks taken from a large pile of construction wood brought on the preceding day. That sight made Gordon smile with pride.

“Decidedly, Jeanne never wastes time.”

While this happened in Kadikoi, the army wasn’t idle by any means, the men working hard to dig trench works and gun emplacements for the ninety heavy artillery pieces that would bombard the besieged city of Sebastopol. On October the seventeenth, both the British and French siege guns opened up on the fortified city, with Russian guns answering back with gusto. The Russians were actually the first to score big that day, managing a hit that blew up one of the French artillery powder magazines and silencing their guns for a while. The new Hussars field hospital in Kadikoi rapidly filled with wounded men as casualties from the artillery exchange mounted. The mood around was quite sullen then: the hardest part of the war was yet to come and few failed to realize that by now.

06:23 (Constantinople Time)

Wednesday, October 25, 1854

H.M.S. SANS PAREIL, Balaklava harbor

Crimea

Hurried knocks on the door of her cabin finished waking up Fanny Duberly, who then quickly put on a robe while shouting towards the door.

“Who is it?”

“First Officer Pritchard, madam.” answered a male voice. “I have an urgent note for your from your husband.”

“Hold on, I’m coming!”

Going to the door and unlocking it, Fanny cracked it open and faced the tall, thin navy officer, who passed her a piece of paper.

“Lieutenant Duberly also sent you your horse, madam. It is waiting for you on the quayside.”

“Thank you, sir!” replied Fanny, taking the paper and then closing the door. She was now conscious of the rumble of distant gunfire as she read the paper.

The battle of Balaklava has begun and promises to be a hot one. I send you the horse. Lose no time, but come up as quickly as you can: do not wait for breakfast.

Excitement overtaking her, Fanny dressed in record time, then ran out of her cabin to pick up her horse, which she found on the quay, its reins held by a servant. Getting on it Amazon style and galloping hard through the filthy, stinking streets of Balaklava, she hardly had time to be clear of the town before she met a Commissariat purveyor riding into town. The man seemed to be bordering on panic as he signaled Fanny to halt, shouting frantically as well.

“THE TURKS HOLDING THE CAUSEWAY HEIGHTS HAVE ABANDONED THEIR BATTERIES AND ARE RUNNING TOWARDS BALAKLAVA. IF YOU HAVE TO GO OUT, KEEP AS MUCH TO THE LEFT AS POSSIBLE AND DON’T LOSE TIME IN GETTING AMONGST OUR OWN MEN, AS THE RUSSIAN CAVALRY IS POURING IN. FOR GOD’S SAKE, RIDE FAST, OR YOU MAY NOT REACH THE CAMP ALIVE!”

"Thank you for the warning, sir. Where is Lord Raglan and his staff now?"

"Up there!" replied the man, pointing at the nearby heights to the North before riding away. Her heart now beating furiously, Fanny rode hard towards those heights.

While going through the British cavalry camp at Kadikoi, she noticed that it was nearly deserted by now. The ambulance cart was also gone from the hospital's yard, with Doctor Farrell, Sarah Champion and Mary Pearson about to leave in the medical wagon. Thankfully, Fanny did not see any Russians before arriving on the heights where the British command staff was observing the battle. A number of other civilians, including William Russell, were there as well. Dismounting with the help of the journalist, Fanny then looked down anxiously to the East as Russell explained the situation to her.

"The Russians have taken all six redoubts along the Causeway Heights, driving out the Turks in disorder. Our Light Cavalry Brigade is now posted at the extreme west of the valley north of the Causeway Heights, while the Heavy Brigade is positioning itself at the end of the south valley. Unfortunately, a large Russian cavalry force is riding down the heights, heading straight for our base in Balaklava. A single artillery battery and the 93rd Highlanders are the only things that can stop them now."

Fanny felt gloom as she stared at the thin line of men in red jackets holding the top of a nearby hill. A gray mass of Russian cavalymen was now charging the unflinching Highlanders. A volley of rifle fire then hid everything in a thick cloud of white smoke. Fanny saw the Russians waver a bit. A second volley made them turn around to the cheers of the British present. The Russians did however reform their lines and charged again, only to be driven off by a third volley and by fire from the gun battery positioned with the Highlanders. An excited Fanny, watching that Russian force retreat, suddenly saw another mass of Russian cavalymen maybe 2,000 strong go down the south valley towards the Heavy Cavalry Brigade, which counted only 600 men.

"My God!" exclaimed the wife of a heavy brigade officer present in the crowd of spectators. "Our men are going to be submerged!"

"Where is the infantry, damn it?" raged Lord Raglan, standing a few yards away from Fanny, getting a sheepish answer from one of his staff officers.

"Uh, General Cathcart's division will not be ready until after breakfast, sir."

"WHAT?" shouted Raglan, his face reddening. "What about the First Division?"

"The Duke of Cambridge is on the march, sir, but won't be there for another two hours, sir."

“Well, send a messenger to General Cathcart to tell him to forget breakfast and to haul his fat ass up to the battlefield right away.”

“Yes sir!” replied the staff officer before running to a liaison officer. Lord Raglan, repressing his impatience, then resumed his observation of the battle.

To everybody’s dismay, including that of the Russians, the commander of the Heavy Cavalry Brigade, General Scarlet, took the time to calmly and carefully line up his troopers, the British officers turning their backs to the Russians while placing their men. The subjugated Russians halted, wondering what those crazy British were doing. The answer soon came when the charge was sounded and the Heavy Brigade, led by Scarlet, rushed at the enemy. Colliding head on with the Russians, the British troopers disappeared in the gray mass, prompting desperate exclamations around Lord Raglan.

“God help them! They are lost!”

Contrary to all expectations, the British cavalrymen hacked their way through their foes and routed them in eight minutes with the help of some reinforcements from the 4th Dragoon Guards. Cheers went up from the spectators as the Russians retreated back to the top of the Causeway Heights. William Russell, still standing besides Fanny Duberly, was scribbling furiously while looking from time to time through his spyglass.

“By Jove, this is going to make one hell of a report!” he said, ecstatic. A shout from a staff officer then got everybody’s attention.

“Milord, the Russians are removing our guns from the redoubts on the Causeway Heights.”

Looking for a moment through his own spyglass, Lord Raglan then turned to his chief of staff.

“Get the Light Brigade to advance and prevent the guns from being taken away. Cardigan should be pursuing that Russian cavalry by now anyway.”

“Uh, Lord Cardigan has not moved yet, Milord.”

“Then what is he waiting for? God’s calling? He must move at once!”

“Yes, Milord!”

As the colonel was writing an order to be given to a liaison officer, Fanny borrowed William Russell’s spyglass for a moment to observe the Light Brigade in the distance, hoping to recognize Henry if he was indeed there. She quickly realized that the distance was too great for that, but she did recognize a familiar white and green cart stopped

behind the troopers of the Light Brigade. A lone rider stood besides the cart, its long hair floating in the wind.

“God bless Jeanne! She’s right behind our men, along with our ambulance cart.”

“What? Let me see!” exclaimed Russell. A number of spectators and officers nearby, including a French general, had heard Fanny and also looked in that direction. The French general’s Aide, who spoke English, then went to Fanny and saluted her politely.

“Excuse me for disturbing you, madam, but General Bosquet wishes to know if you were referring to Lady Jeanne D’Orléans.”

“I was, sir. I believe that she intends to pick up any of our wounded as the battle goes on, like she did at the Alma.”

“I am not aware of her actions then, madam.” replied the French officer, surprised. “Could you tell me more about that?”

“With pleasure, sir!” said Fanny, who then spoke for a minute or so. The French officer nodded thoughtfully as she finished.

“A most brave lady. I will inform my general of this. Thank you for your time, madam.”

The officer then returned to General Bosquet, letting Fanny free to watch anxiously the Light Cavalry Brigade.

To Lord Raglan’s increasing impatience, Lord Cardigan’s brigade kept stationary despite the sending of successive orders to attack, while the British infantry was still mostly absent from the battlefield. By now the Russians were well on their way to finish pulling away the captured Turkish guns from the redoubts along the Causeway Heights. Finally having had enough of Cardigan’s inaction, Raglan wrote down one last order and gave it to Captain Lewis Nolan, the best rider on his staff.

“Bring this to Lord Lucan, so that he can make Lord Cardigan prevent the removal of our guns. Tell Lord Lucan to have the Heavy Brigade in support of the Light Brigade.”

“Right away, Milord!” replied Nolan, taking the note and saluting before getting on his horse and galloping away.

10:58 (Constantinople Time)

Western end of North valley

Like his men, Gordon Smythe could only wait and wonder as he watched Lord Lucan, who had just arrived with Captain Nolan of the higher staff, confer with Lord Cardigan. From their position low in the valley it was difficult to see what was going on around. Right now, Gordon could only see the large body of Russian cavalry that had gone back from the Causeway Heights to the far end of the valley to reform its ranks behind the guns of the Don Battery, plus more Russian guns and masses of infantry on the Fediukhin Heights to the left and on the Causeway Heights to the right. His blood suddenly chilled when he remembered something Jeanne had told him months ago, something he had not believed then.

“The Light Brigade will charge down a valley ringed on three sides by Russian guns, and it will be a massacre.”

Looking back towards Jeanne, who was sitting on her horse besides the ambulance cart no more than a hundred yards away, Gordon saw her apparently crying quietly. He then understood with horror and shock that she had known for a long time that this was going to happen, but that, for some reason, she would do nothing to prevent the charge despite the obvious distress it was causing her. Gordon looked around at his men, now knowing that he may not see many of them alive by the end of this day. Lord Cardigan turned towards the men then and pointed at the guns down the valley.

“THE BRIGADE WILL CHARGE GUNS TO THE FRONT!”

Gordon waited for Lord Paget to repeat the order before shouting to the men of B Troop.

“B TROOP WILL CHARGE GUNS TO THE FRONT, IN BRIGADE FORMATION!”

The Hussars, which were in second line and on the right flank of the brigade, were containing their excitement with difficulty as Lord Paget shouted another order.

“SWORDS OUT!”

The whole regiment drew its swords as one. Paget then gave the order to move out at a trot as the regiments in the first line started moving forward in perfect alignment.

Janet O’Neil and Margaret Ward, sitting in the front of the cart, could only watch with dread the 632 men of the Light Brigade riding forward down the valley. The Heavy Brigade, led by Lord Lucan and General Scarlet, was now arriving to follow the Light Brigade down the valley. Arriving behind the Heavy Brigade was the Hussars’ medical wagon, its horses driven hard by Sarah Champion. As the Heavy Brigade formed up for

a charge, Sarah drove her wagon to a stop besides the ambulance cart and applied the handbrakes before jumping down. Doctor Farrell and Mary Pearson joined her and frantically started to deploy the telescopic rear tent just as the Russian guns started firing on the Light Brigade. The women couldn't help stop for a moment to look at their men, now a good 400 meters away and under a deluge of fire. They could plainly see men and horses go down, cut by the Russian artillery fire.

"Sean," said Janet O'Neil tearfully to herself, "please get out of this alive!" While not saying a word, Margaret Ward was thinking the same about her husband Joseph and knew that the other women had to think similarly.

Riding in front of his troop, Gordon could see too well the men and horses being blown away or cut to shreds by the murderous Russian gunfire. At least one third of the troopers in the first line of the brigade were already down, with more falling nearly every second. The brigade was now at full gallop and 800 meters from that cursed Don Battery. Thousands of Russian cavalymen stood waiting behind those guns but Lord Cardigan never wavered, leading his men straight down the mouths of those guns. The man may have been an incompetent martinet but he was no coward. At 500 meters from the guns, Cardigan rose his sword high and shouted.

"CHARGE!"

A powerful concert of cheers and yells answered him and the remnants of the Light Brigade pushed their horses to the utmost, coming down on the terrified Russian gunners frantically trying to reload their pieces.

On Sapoune Ridge, Lord Raglan was watching the charge with increasing dismay and fury.

"What the hell do Lucan and Cardigan think they are doing? Right! Veer right or both brigades will be done in!"

"Maybe not, sir." said softly his chief of staff. "We may yet salvage the Heavy Brigade out of this: I think that Lord Lucan is turning around now."

French General Bosquet, watching all this, shook his head sadly.

"C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre. C'est de la folie⁹!"

⁹ It is magnificent, but it is not war. It is madness!

Margaret Ward got up on the bench seat of the cart as soon as she understood that the Heavy Brigade was not going to support the Light Brigade anymore.

“NOOO! OUR MEN NEED YOU, YOU COWARDS!”

“MARGARET!” shouted Jeanne harshly. “THEY TRIED THEIR BEST. LORD LUCAN WAS RIGHT TO TURN HIS BRIGADE AROUND.”

“BUT OUR MEN ARE IN THERE, DYING!” shouted back Margaret, nearly hysterical.

“I KNOW THAT, DAMMIT!” replied Jeanne, who then softened her voice. “IT IS UP TO US NOW TO SAVE AS MANY OF THEM AS WE CAN. FOLLOW ME AND DON’T LET ANYONE STOP YOU.”

Jeanne then launched her horse forward at a gallop, straight towards the Russian guns at the other end of the valley, followed by the ambulance cart. As terrified as they were, Janet and Margaret did not hesitate for one second: their husbands were in there somewhere, maybe dead or dying. The officers and men of the Heavy Brigade, retreating under artillery fire, were too surprised by seeing a woman riding a horse and two more women driving a cart and passing through their ranks to even attempt to stop them. Lord Lucan, his right shoulder slashed open by a piece of shrapnel, didn’t even notice them go by through the drifting white smoke from the Russian guns and din of the battlefield until General Scarlet, riding a few yards to his right, looked back and spoke in obvious surprise.

“What are those crazy women up to?”

“Uh? What women, General?”

“Lady Smythe and two other nurses on a cart, Milord.”

Looking back as well, Lucan only had time to see briefly a cart and a rider with long black hair disappear amidst the white smoke. A shell then burst nearby, reminding him of the precariousness of the situation of the Heavy Brigade.

“Keep withdrawing until the western end of the valley, General. We will then cover the retreat of any stragglers from the Light Brigade.”

“What about those women, Milord?”

“I’m afraid that they are on their own now.”

Feeling bad about this, Scarlet however didn’t insist and led his brigade back all the way.

There were no more than fifty riders from the first line left charging when it finally plowed through the Russian guns, Lord Cardigan still in the lead. Gordon Smythe and

the other riders of the second line still in action also rode through the battery a few seconds later, hacking and slashing like madmen at the Russian gunners. Lord Paget, a short cigar still stuck between his teeth, soon saw the survivors of the first line turn around and retreat, pursued by a solid mass of Russian Lancers. He immediately shouted at his men, who were pursuing the surviving Russian gunners.

“HALT BOYS! HALT FRONT! IF WE DON’T HALT NOW WE’RE DONE!”

Gordon Smythe was firing his two revolvers to good effect, his rapid shots clearing the Russians around him, when he heard Paget’s order. Seeing as well the hundreds of Russian Lancers advancing on them, he then gathered his surviving men and covered their retreat as well as he could, emptying both of his revolvers in the process. Holstering them, he then drew his sword and started frantically hacking his way back to the British lines.

Fanny Duberly, having once again borrowed Russell’s spyglass to observe the desperate fight in the distance, suddenly shouted in a near hysterical voice, making the civilian spectators and army officers around her look sharply at her.

“MY GOD! JEANNE IS RIDING DOWN THE VALLEY, FOLLOWED BY OUR AMBULANCE CART!”

Consternation and disbelief ran through the crowd as Russell grabbed back his spyglass for a look.

“By Jove, you’re right, Misses Duberly. They’re now through the Heavy Brigade and are riding deeper in still.”

“They must be lunatics!” pronounced a fat ‘Traveling Gentleman’ who had been treating the battle like a circus show. “That is no place for women.”

A resounding slap from Fanny then sent the surprised tourist on his bum.

“You, mister, are lucky that Jeanne didn’t hear this!” spat Fanny, enraged. “If she went in there, it was to help our wounded men on the battlefield, not to provide some cheap thrills to tourists like you.”

“I think that the cart and Jeanne just stopped near some bodies halfway down the valley.” Announced William Russell, observing through his spyglass. “Damn! Those Russian bastards are shooting at them!”

Russell’s last remark made everybody who had a spyglass point it at the cart and Jeanne, unwittingly creating a new, dramatic focus point on the battlefield.

Covering the wounded trooper with herself from the rain of dirt projected by the exploding shell, Jeanne then looked up anxiously at Janet and Margaret, still sitting in the cart about twenty yards away.

“ARE YOU ALRIGHT, GIRLS?”

“YES!” replied Janet after a short pause.

“MARGARET, COME HERE TO HELP ME, THEN. JANET KEEP AN EYE ON MY HORSE AND THE CART IN THE MEANTIME.”

Deciding that this battlefield was too dangerous to spend much time on each wounded they found, Jeanne did only summary first aid on his patient, then loaded him on a stretcher with Margaret's help. Carrying the wounded to the cart, the three women then joined their efforts to load the stretcher in the back of the cart. Letting Margaret and Janet strap the stretcher in place, Jeanne ran to another man moaning with pain nearby. The sergeant from the 11th Hussars had a horrific wound to his face, with both of his eyes impaled. Clenching her teeth, Jeanne poured some water on the wound to clean it, then started applying a bandage on it while speaking soft words to calm the wounded. The man stiffened from the pain but didn't scream as she worked on him. In the meantime, Margaret checked the other bodies around, looking for living survivors. Jeanne soon had the blinded man get to his feet and led him to the cart, where he climbed inside with Janet's help. Another shell screamed through the air, making all of them duck. It overshot the cart, exploding forty yards away.

“Janet, keep the cart moving at all times, even when me and Margaret are treating wounded men. Don't give those bastards an easy target.”

“Got that!”

Getting back on her horse, Jeanne then galloped to the next cluster of bodies a hundred yards further down the valley, followed by the cart. Amidst three dead horses and a wounded, wildly thrashing beast, a horse stood nearly motionless, its reins still held by its dead rider lying on the ground. Two more soldiers lay dead near him but another one seemed only shaken, his face haggard and his hands trembling. Jeanne realized that the man was suffering from a case of so-called 'shell shock' and knew that it had nothing to do with cowardice. Helping him to his feet, she then gently led him to the cart and made him climb aboard before running to the riderless horse and pulling the reins out of the dead man's hand. Tying the horse to her own Pegasus, she got into the saddle and rode further down the valley, pulling the spare mount along. Encountering another riderless horse, she grabbed its reins as well, prompting a question from Margaret.

“Why lose your time with horses, Jeanne? We are here to save men.”

“Margaret, many of our men are without horses now as they try to return to our lines. A horse may mean life for those men.”

“Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t think about that.” said Margaret apologetically. Janet suddenly pointed down the valley.

“Over there! Two men limping together.”

“Go get them!” ordered Jeanne at once. “Then bring your patients to the medical wagon and come back here. I’m going to check those bodies over there.”

As the cart rolled towards the now gesticulating soldiers, Jeanne rode to a group of six bodies 150 yards away, careful to zigzag on her way. That paid off as a shell narrowly missed her, passing only a few yards over her head before plowing into the ground some distance away. Her heart jumped in her chest when she got near the bodies: they wore the uniform of the 8th Hussars! Afraid of seeing Gordon in the lot, she jumped down from her horse while still holding the reins. Pegasus then positioned itself between her and the Russian guns to her right, activating its invisible electromagnetic shield to protect her as best it could. The first trooper that Jeanne checked was dead, along with the second one. The third, fourth and sixth were alive, though. Rinsing quickly the blood-covered face of one of the survivors, Jeanne then realized with a shock that the man was RSM O’Neil, Janet’s husband. He had a deep slash across his forehead that bled profusely and was unconscious but seemed otherwise alright. Applying quickly a bandage around O’Neil’s head, Jeanne then planted one of her small white flags in the ground besides him before going to her next patient. Somehow, the Russian gunners seemed to have lost interest in her by now, unless an officer had understood that she was merely helping the wounded and posed no threat. The noise of approaching riders then made her look up. To her relief they turned out to be a number of dispersed British soldiers from the Light Brigade who were in full retreat. They passed on both sides of her, too much in a hurry to even notice her among the large patches of drifting white smoke. A trooper on foot approached Jeanne as she was finishing to care for her last patient.

“Lady Jeanne? What are you doing here?”

It took her a few seconds to recognize the young man with a blackened and dirt-covered face.

“Pearson? Trooper John Pearson? Thank God, you’re alive!”

Hugging him briefly, Jeanne then handed him the reins of one of the horses she had found around her patients.

“Take this horse and go! Mary is waiting for you at the medical wagon, at the end of this valley.”

“Mary is here?” said Pearson, incredulous.

“Yes!” Replied Jeanne impatiently. “Now go, before you attract more fire on me!”

Subjugated by her firm tone, Pearson got on the horse and rode away after a last look at her. The ambulance cart came back one minute later as more stragglers rode past Jeanne, with her last spare horse given to a lieutenant from the 4th Light Dragoons.

“SEAN!”

Janet’s scream made Jeanne turn her head in time to see her jump out of the cart and run to her husband to frantically kiss and hug him. Making sure that Margaret kept control of the cart, Jeanne got a stretcher out from the back of the cart and put it besides Sean O’Neil, then shook Janet by the shoulder.

“Come on, Janet! The quicker we load him and the two others up, the faster we will get them to safety.”

“You...you’re right.” said Janet in a sobbing voice, then helping Jeanne to delicately put the RSM on the stretcher. Both women, pushed by fear and despair, loaded the three wounded in the cart in record time. As Jeanne was getting back on her horse, Margaret shouted in alarm.

“JEANNE, ENEMY CAVALRYMEN APPROACHING!”

Looking with dread in the direction pointed at by Margaret, Jeanne saw a group of eleven Cossacks galloping towards them while holding their swords and lances high.

“RIDE BACK, NOW, AND DON’T COME BACK!” shouted Jeanne to Janet O’Neil. “I WILL COVER YOU!”

Too scared to object to her order, the two nurses turned the cart around and fled as Jeanne mounted up, drew her Colt revolver-carbine out of its saddle holster and took careful aim at the leading Cossack. Her first shot was true, dropping the Russian from his saddle at a distance of 130 yards. Seven more Cossacks fell before Jeanne holstered back her now empty carbine. The remaining three Cossacks were now less than thirty yards away and charging her with their swords high. Spurring Pegasus to a lightning charge, Jeanne drew out her own saber and let out a fierce war yell. Taken by surprise by such ferocity in a woman, the lead Cossack reacted too slowly and had his

right hand chopped off as she flashed by him. The second Cossack, attacked on his left side, got decapitated in short order. The last Cossack saw his own sword parried away on his first pass. Braking hard his mount, he then vaulted around to face Jeanne, who was again charging him.

On Sapoune Ridge, everybody was now watching on anxiously Jeanne Smythe as she fought for her life. Fanny Duberly in particular was a ball of raw nerves as William Russell described out loud what he was seeing through his spyglass.

"...there goes a Cossack's head! Damn! This bloody smoke is hiding everything again...Wait! I think that I see her again now...Yes, and she's alone now. She defeated all those Cossacks, by Jove! What the... She's now rounding up Russian horses. What does she have in mind?"

"Is she coming back now?" asked Fanny, unable to keep silent any longer. Russell, looking stunned, then lowered his spyglass and spoke in a near whisper.

"No! She went in deeper in the valley with her spare horse, towards the guns of the Don Battery."

A few paces from them, General Bosquet and his aides were also watching the drama with their spyglasses. One aide suddenly pointed at a large group of cavalymen going down the northern valley while skirting its left flank.

"There, mon général! General Morris and his Chasseurs d'Afrique have arrived."

"Excellent! If they can silence those Russian guns on the Fediukhin Heights, it will give a fighting chance for some of those Englishmen to escape this trap. I see that some of the British infantry has also arrived, a bit late though."

Bosquet then looked back where Jeanne Smythe had disappeared in the smoke of the battle, sparkles in his eyes.

"Quelle femme¹⁰!" He said in a low, admiring voice.

His poor horse now dead, Gordon Smythe barely had time to join up with three other dismounted Hussars, including his Troop Sergeant-Major, James Champion, before they were beset by at least a dozen Cossacks. With the Russian guns less than fifty yards from them still firing indiscriminately in the swirling mix of Russian and British

¹⁰ What a woman!

cavalrymen, the four Hussars went back to back, fending off their assailants the best they could.

“AT LEAST WE SHOWED THESE RUSSIANS WHAT HUSSARS ARE CAPABLE OF.” shouted Champion to his captain while fencing with two Cossacks. Gordon hacked away the arm of one of his attackers before replying.

“DAMN RIGHT, SERGEANT-MAJOR! I JUST WISH THAT I COULD HAVE KISSED MY WIFE ONE LAST TIME.”

“I STILL HAVEN’T GIVEN UP ON THAT, SIR.” replied Champion, managing to wound one Cossack with a mighty slash of his sword. The Cossacks on Champion’s side suddenly turned around as a piercing yell came from their back. Using that diversion to good effect, Champion rushed forward and cut down the two Cossacks nearest to him as a lone rider appeared out of the smoke, firing a revolver repeatedly at an incredible rate and dropping five Cossacks from their saddles.

“COME ON, YOU MEN!” shouted a female voice Champion knew well enough. “GET ON THOSE RUSSIAN HORSES AT THE DOUBLE!”

The four Hussars didn’t have to be told twice, quickly saddling up while Jeanne Smythe emptied her second revolver to cover them.

“NOW, LET’S GET OUT OF DODGE!” shouted Jeanne, drawing her sword after holstering her empty revolvers and letting the Hussars ride past her before urging Pegasus to a gallop. She then rode alongside Gordon, a large group of Cossacks in hot pursuit.

“You are a tough man to find, my dear husband.” she said with a grin.

“And you, my dear wife, are one crazy woman!” replied Gordon, still having a hard time believing that she had come all the way to the Russian guns to find him. You had to love a wife like this one. A pistol bullet passing uncomfortably close to Jeanne’s head then prompted a suggestion from her to Gordon.

“Tell your men to keep to the right of the valley: I’m expecting help soon from there.”

Gordon looked at her as if she was mad.

“But, the Russian guns on the Fediukhin Heights will shred us to pieces.”

“If they are still in Russian hands, my dear.” replied Jeanne mysteriously while riding hard alongside him. Gordon didn’t have time to ask her about that, as a large group of Russian Lancers galloped across their front, cutting their path to safety. Before he could swear about their bad luck, Jeanne spurred her horse, making it accelerate to a

speed Gordon would not have thought possible for a normal horse and charging the Lancers ahead of the four Hussars.

“MONTJOIE¹¹!” shouted Jeanne at the top of her lungs, her saber held forward. Gordon, his own horse left behind by Jeanne’s horse, could only watch at first, like his three men. Jeanne deftly deflected away the point of the first Russian lance with the tip of her saber, then followed up with a slash of her sword that opened wide the throat of the Russian as she charged past him. Her blade then came down on her left side, chopping off the tip of another lance lunging for her torso. Jeanne next raised back her sword tip in time to bury it in the side of the Russian who had tried to impale her. All this was done as if it was out of long practice, while her horse kept speeding through the Russian Lancers. Gordon and his men, even though stunned by her prowess, nonetheless used the path slashed open by Jeanne to burst out of the swirling mass of Russian Lancers. They followed Jeanne’s horse as it veered towards the right side of the valley and were able to pull up to her as she slowed down her horse after a few seconds. Gordon was now eyeing with dread the hills to his right, where dozens of Russian guns were dug in. He could not understand why they had not yet started firing on his group but he could however hear heavy rifle fire coming from there. He then saw a number of Russian artillerymen run out of their hilltop positions in apparent panic. His heart jumped with joy when the Russians were followed by hundreds of French cavalrymen in hot pursuit. His whole group cheered wildly at that sight and veered to the right to meet a group of thirty Chasseurs d’Afrique, tough Algerian cavalrymen, which was led by a young French lieutenant. The lieutenant, stopping alongside Gordon, saluted him and addressed him in fair English.

“You and your men were very lucky to get out of there, Captain. Your...”

The Frenchman stopped speaking and stared with disbelief at Jeanne.

“Mon Dieu! Don’t tell me that you were part of the charge, mademoiselle!”

“No, Lieutenant.” replied calmly Jeanne while grinning. “I joined my husband after the charge. I can’t afford to lose such a nice pair of tight buns, so I went after him and collected him back.”

The lieutenant grinned as Gordon’s men laughed hard at Jeanne’s answer, while Gordon turned red with embarrassment.

¹¹ War cry of the French knights during the Hundred Years War.

“Sergeant-Major Champion,” said Gordon in a warning tone, “make sure that the expression ‘tight buns’ doesn’t become a byword in B Troop.”

“Yes, sir!” shouted Champion, barely able to keep a straight face.

They parted with their French escort once they came to the positions held by the Heavy Brigade, with the delighted lieutenant getting a kiss from Jeanne before riding away. A captain of the 4th Dragoon Guards was at hand to greet the returning survivors of the Light Brigade. Shocked by the presence of a woman bearing arms in their group, he nonetheless saluted Gordon politely.

“Do you or any of your...men need medical attention, Captain?”

“I don’t believe so, Captain. Do you know how many men from the Light Brigade came back?”

“About half of them so far.” Said cautiously the Guards officer. “Your group seems to be about the last of it, Captain. Lord Paget is waiting near an ambulance wagon behind our lines to collect and reorganize his men.”

“Thank you, Captain. We will report to him immediately.”

After a last exchange of salutes, Gordon led his three men, Jeanne still in tow, towards the Hussars ambulance wagon. Less than 300 men were gathered roughly according to their regiments around it, many without a horse and more than a few sporting bloody bandages. Two carts loaded with wounded men were rolling away when Gordon approached the medical wagon, in front of which Lord Paget stood on his horse. Saluting crisply his colonel, Gordon then reported in a formal manner.

“Captain Gordon Smythe, of B Troop, reporting back with three men and Nurse Smythe, sir.”

“At ease, Captain!” replied Paget, returning the salute and eyeing Gordon’s small group. He then stared severely at Jeanne, guiding his horse closer to hers.

“Misses Smythe, may I ask what in the blazes you were doing out there?”

“Doing my nurse’s duty, sir: saving lives.” replied Jeanne politely but firmly.

“With two pistols and a sword, madam?”

“They are meant for my own defense and that of my patients, sir. In fact, I and two of my nurses were attacked by Cossacks while giving first aid to some of our wounded.”

“And you escaped them with the help of Captain Smythe, I presume?”

“Not exactly, sir. I killed the Cossacks, then went after my husband, sir.”

“You killed those Cossacks?” Said Paget, clearly skeptical. “How many of them were there? Two? Three?”

“Eleven... on the first instance, sir.”

Paget, shocked and speechless, looked at Gordon as if to get a second opinion. The latter nodded his head somberly, knowing that this story was bound to get widespread circulation.

“Sir, I didn’t see that fight, but I and my men can testify that my wife rescued us from a large group of Russian cavalymen less than fifty yards from the Don Battery, killing over a dozen Russians in the process.”

Paget, overwhelmed and at a loss about how to handle this, stammered a reply with difficulty.

“Uh, well...It will be all, Nurse Smythe. You may return to your duties.”

“Thank you, sir!”

Returning her salute, Paget let her go before looking at Gordon.

“Captain, do a quick roster of your men. You may want to contact Doctor Farrell for this, as he has the list of wounded men sent back to camp. Dismissed!”

“Sir!”

As Gordon rode towards the gathered survivors of the 8th Hussars, he turned his head to look at James Champion.

“Sergeant-Major, go to the medical wagon and inquire about our wounded there. Take your time if you feel you need to.”

“Thank you, sir.” replied Champion, a lump in his throat. Trotting to the big wagon and dismounting, he tied his horse to one wheel before entering the rear tent. He found Jeanne Smythe and Sarah hugging each other in the first section. Sarah’s eyes went wide at his sight.

“JAMES! THANK GOD YOU’RE SAFE!”

Throwing herself in his arms, Sarah kissed him frantically for long seconds, with Jeanne going into the second tent section and leaving them alone. The couple finally parted with tears in their eyes.

“I was so scared for you, James.”

“Oh, I was scared enough myself, Sarah. Me, the captain and two more men were about to be done in by a bunch of Cossacks when Lady Jeanne showed up just at the right time. She is one mean pistol shooter, I tell you.”

That got him a surprised look from his wife.

“But, she only told me that she met you and the others on the battlefield.”

James could only nod in respect at that: Jeanne Smythe may be incredibly brave but she was no braggart about it, something to be admired.

“Believe me, Sarah. If anybody deserves a medal for this battle, she should be first in line to get one. Now, if you will excuse me, I’m going to see Doctor Farrell to get the list of our wounded.”

“Let me hug you a while more first, James.” said Sarah softly. James welcomed her into his arms again, caressing her hair and back to their mutual contentment.

Gordon had finished his roster of B Troop by the time James Champion returned from the medical wagon and handed him a list on a sheet of paper. Gordon read it with a mix of sadness and relief: it could have been a lot worse. Out of the 41 men of B Troop who had followed him in the charge, thirteen were missing and presumed dead or prisoner, while 21 men had been wounded and were on their way back to the Hussars field hospital. From what he could see, the rest of the brigade had suffered at least as severely if not more than his troop. Lining his seven remaining men, two of which had to ride with other troopers, he then led them at a trot back to camp. He would later learn that, out of the 632 men of the brigade who had charged today, 110 had been killed, 57 had been taken prisoner and 196 had been wounded, with many of the later having to suffer amputations. Also, well over half of the horses of the brigade had died. The Light Brigade was now ineffective as a military formation.

21:14 (Constantinople Time)

8th Hussars field hospital

Kadikoi, Crimea

Hesitating for a short moment, William Howard Russell finally decided himself and knocked on the pole near the partition that marked Jeanne Smythe’s room. Her response was immediate.

“Come in!”

Pushing open the curtain door, Russell saw Jeanne Smythe sitting at the small table set in one corner of her tiny cubicle. She wore a conventional burgundy and white dress

and had obviously cleaned herself up after her action-packed day in the field. Russell then noticed the two revolvers on the table, disassembled for cleaning.

“May I speak with you for a moment, Jeanne?”

“Please, have a seat, William.”

“Thank you.”

Taking place on the edge of the bed, a real one and not one of those camp cots he found so uncomfortable, Russell took out a notepad and a pencil and smiled to Jeanne.

“Could I ask you a few questions about today, if you don’t mind, Jeanne?”

“Fire away.” she replied while resuming her weapons cleaning job.

“First of, I would like to say that I was able to observe you in action today and was much impressed by your bravery.”

Somehow his compliment only seemed to embarrass her.

“William, please understand that I did what I did to save lives. Also, I didn’t do any more than what all the men of the Light Brigade did today.”

“But, Jeanne, those men were ordered to charge, while you freely chose to go in.”

“Remember that two other women followed me in.” she replied while shaking an index. “They were unarmed while I had my revolvers, sword and carbine. It is them you should praise, not me. They are Margaret Ward and Janet O’Neil, both wives of men of the 8th Hussars.”

Russell smiled and nodded in approval while scribbling those names down in his notepad.

“A generous thought, Jeanne. Those two women will certainly be mentioned in my article about this battle. Now, would you mind describing in detail what you did today?”

Jeanne obliged with good grace, speaking for over ten minutes and with Russell asking a number of questions to clarify some points. The journalist had sparkles in his eyes as Jeanne finished telling her story. It involved courage, compassion, romance and dedication to one’s husband, a mix that was sure to inflame the enthusiasm of his readers in London.

“Jeanne, as a last point, could you tell me where and how you learned all those military and fighting skills?”

“I’m afraid not, William.” she answered, politely but firmly. “There are already too many wild rumors about me around the camp.”

“But, this would be your chance to quash those rumors with the truth, Jeanne.”

Jeanne then gave him a sober look, speaking very deliberately.

“Believe me, William: the truth would never be believed by anyone here or in London. I will ask you not to emphasize this aspect of me in your article, William. My charity work in Europe requires me to cross borders many times every year and I wouldn’t want to see myself turned back at a border post because of some wild rumor about me being a government spy.”

“So, you do realize that you being a possible spy is the rumor deemed most plausible by many to explain your military prowess?”

Jeanne sighed audibly, looking discouraged for a moment.

“Damned if you do, damned if you don’t...” she said quietly before staring back at the journalist. “William, I have been doing my best for years to do some good around me and to relieve as much as I can the misery and suffering in this sad world. If I would have been a man, few would notice my actions, but I am what I am. One way you can help me continue doing my charity work is by avoiding to mention those wild rumors about me in your articles. Hopefully, those rumors will then stay here, in Crimea.”

“That could be an overoptimistic wish, Jeanne.” cautioned Russell, making her nod.

“I know! Believe me, I know.”

Russell was silent for a moment while eyeing the formidable young woman facing him. The soldiers of the Light Brigade who had met her on the battlefield were positively in awe of her and had told him plenty about her actions of today. Russell then made his mind and smiled to Jeanne.

“Alright, Jeanne, I will keep mum about those rumors. I however can’t guarantee that the few other reporters or even some tourists presently in Crimea will not spread eventually those rumors all the way to London.”

“Thanks, William. I really appreciate this. If you will now excuse me, I wish to clean my revolvers, so that I can go to bed. Today was a tough day.”

“That I can believe, Jeanne. Have a good evening.” said Russell while starting to open the curtain to leave.

“Good evening to you as well.” replied Jeanne. Once the reporter was gone, she returned her attention to her cleaning work but couldn’t take her worries completely out of her mind. Too much talking about her was bound to be bad news eventually but she

could hardly change the fact that she was an athletic, six foot-tall young woman with abilities well beyond the accepted norm for this century.

More knocks on the pole interrupted her again nine minutes later. This time it was Gordon, looking unsure of himself. After accepting the kiss from Jeanne, he sat on the edge of the bed and looked hesitantly at her.

“Jeanne, I have to ask you something. Believe me when I say that I love you more than anybody else in the world but what I saw of you today was positively incredible. Tell me, in complete truth: who are you really? You not only fought better than most soldiers I know, you also predicted with complete accuracy what happened today, and this a few months ago, when you were still amnesiac.”

Nancy had dreaded this moment for a few weeks already but still wasn't sure how to face it. It reminded her too much of a similar episode when she had revealed her secret identity to D'Artagnan in order not to lose him. The Time Patrol had chosen to overlook that incident but it probably wouldn't let a second similar thing pass without severe consequences for her. Her genuine love for Gordon only made her choice more painful.

“Gordon, when we married, we vowed to each other to unite until death do us part, for the better and for the worse. We already lived together some of the better moments of life and we are presently living through some of the worst, thanks to this war. I am only asking you to have confidence in me and not ask me further about this.” The look of doubt and suspicion that appeared then on Gordon's face truly hurt her.

“Jeanne, as your husband, I would be in my right to ask you to show confidence in me and to tell me the truth, unless you want this marriage to be a lie.”

Nancy couldn't help tears then come out and had to hide her face with her hands, sobs following the tears quickly. A voice only she could hear then rang inside her brain, coming via her implanted radio. It was the voice of Farah Tolkonen.

“Nancy, this is Farah. Ingrid heard your exchange and initiated a Code Red procedure, then went to warn me. Make Gordon promise silence, then tell him the minimum, basically that you are from the future and that you are stranded in this time period.”

“Thanks, Farah.” Thought Nancy, relieved by this show of confidence. Wiping away her tears, she looked back sullenly at Gordon, who was still waiting for her answer.

“Gordon, you will first have to promise me that you will never repeat to anyone what I am about to tell you.”

After a short hesitation, Gordon nodded his head.

“You have my solemn word, Jeanne.”

“Thank you, Gordon. First off, I have not one but two secrets.”

“Two secrets?” said Gordon, stiffening.

“Yes! The first one is probably the biggest: I am from the future.”

Despite having expected about anything, Gordon still paled at those words.

“The...the future? How far in the future?”

“I was born in 1982. I was a soldier. Hell, I am still a soldier!”

“Tell me more, Jeanne.” said weakly Gordon, whose head was nearly spinning now. Nancy got up from her chair and sat beside him on the bed, passing an arm around his shoulders before speaking.

“I have been training to be a soldier nearly from childhood, Gordon, apart from receiving an extensive education. It was mostly my own choice but my older sister, who was in the army, did a lot to attract me to a military career. I worked for an international force that was dedicated to protecting the peace around the World and to help the victims of disasters. Then, I was selected for a special task: to try the prototype of a time travel machine.”

“Why you? You must have been still quite young then.”

“I was sixteen then, Gordon. The reason I was selected had a lot to do with my second secret. You served in India, so I presume that you know about the Hindu concept of reincarnation, right?”

“I do. According to the Hindus, the spirit leaves the body at death and goes on to live in another living being. The more meritorious your previous life had been, the higher the form of next life you got to live.”

“Correct. The Hindus are however a bit off, as a human spirit will go inhabit only a human body. People are not supposed to remember their past incarnations and very few even claim to be able to. Well, I am the notable exception, Gordon: I can remember all of my past incarnations, my past lives, languages, skills and experiences. That unique talent got me selected to travel to the past.”

Gordon was quite pale by now, with his mind in utter turmoil. He had come to Jeanne's room to ask for the truth from her, but he was starting to realize that he had not been ready for the whole truth. Her warmth, touch and smell however reminded him at the same time that he had married this beautiful young woman out of true love for her, a love

that she had more than returned up to now. Even if she was from the future, something that would explain many things, he would still keep loving her.

“How far in the past do those souvenirs go, Jeanne? Your name is really Jeanne, right?”

“It is now, Gordon. When I tested for the first time that time machine it failed catastrophically and sank off the coast of the Guadeloupe on its first trip, after bringing me back in time by over a hundred years. I was able to swim ashore but am since then stranded in this century. I assumed the name of Jeanne de Brissac in order to blend in, got married to Pierre D’Orléans and eventually ended up what I am today. To answer your first question, I remember lives extending back 9,000 years in history.”

“Nine thousand years?” exclaimed a bit too loudly Gordon, making Nancy signal him to lower his voice.

“Not so loud! Others could hear. Yes, 9,000 years. That is why I can speak so many languages and ride and fight so well. I was even one of the fabled Amazons of Greek legends over 2,500 years ago.”

A smile then came for the first time on Gordon’s face as he contemplated that fact.

“I am married to an Amazon...I have to say that I like that notion.”

“I knew that you would, Gordon.” said Nancy, smiling, before kissing him. She then caressed his cheeks while staring directly into his eyes. “Gordon, I am lost in time, with no way for me to go back to my time and none either for the ones who built the first time machine to find me, as it went badly off course in both time and space before crashing in the sea. For better or for worse, I am now Jeanne Smythe-d’Orléans, married to a gallant and dashing British cavalry officer, and will stay so until death do us part.”

Those last words finished softening Gordon, who then exchanged a long kiss with Jeanne. Letting herself fall on her back on the bed, Jeanne then invited Gordon on top of her. He had his hand under her skirt as he spoke softly to her between kisses.

“Near the Don Battery, as we were charging through those Russian Lancers, you shouted something in French.”

“Montjoie?”

“That’s it. What did it mean?”

“‘Montjoie’ was the war cry of the French knights during the Hundred Years War.”

“You were a French knight then?”

“Not exactly.” said Jeanne, a malicious smile appearing on her lips. “I was Joan of Arc.”

10:06 (Constantinople Time)

Sunday, October 29, 1854

8th Hussars field hospital

Kadikoi, Crimea

Asking to one of the regimental wives working at the field hospital where he could find Jeanne, Gordon was directed to the operating block, where he found her after looking into two successive operating rooms. He was stunned to see through one of the windows of the third operating room that Jeanne was actually performing surgery under the careful supervision of Doctor Thomas Farrell. Knowing that non-medical personnel intruding during an operation was a big no-no with both Jeanne and Doctor Farrell, Gordon decided to watch and wait outside the operating room. Four minutes later, the patient was taken out of the operating room on one of the 200 rolling gurneys Jeanne had brought by ship, while the surgical team went to change and wash their hands. Gordon was finally able to meet Jeanne when she walked out of the post-operating room, her surgical garb already removed. They kissed each other before Gordon spoke, his expression serious.

“I have something to announce to you: Lord Paget is leaving Crimea today, heading for England.”

He saw Jeanne’s face harden at that piece of news.

“Let me guess: Paget had quote ‘urgent private affairs’ unquote to take care of at home and he turned in his commission, which he had purchased in the first place.”

“Correct on all points, Jeanne.” agreed Gordon, who then stared straight into her eyes. “You do know well the history of this war. Are you sure that you don’t want to tell me more about it?”

She shook her head slowly while keeping eye contact with him.

“I’m sorry, Gordon. The less you know, the less chances there are that history could be affected or rewritten. In fact, my sole presence here in Crimea probably caused a number of minor, insignificant changes to history. Changing the given outcome of a battle would be an altogether much more damaging thing. Again, I’m sorry but I won’t tell you or anyone else more on this subject.”

Gordon was silent for a moment, then kissed her on the lips.

“I understand. Please forget that I asked.”

In the next few days, no less than 38 officers of the Light Brigade, including Captains Fields and McGregor of the 8th Hussars, left Crimea for England under the pretext of ‘urgent private affairs’ to escape the increasingly unpleasant climate and harsh living conditions. All of them had purchased their commissions instead of earning them and now turned them in as the going got rough. The enlisted men had no choice but to stay and endure. This was the cause of much bitterness for Gordon Smythe, who rightly felt betrayed by his fellow officers. On his part, William Howard Russell turned this scandal into one of his most strident journalistic attacks yet on the military aristocracy and its system of privileges and built-in incompetence.

06:02 (Constantinople Time)

Sunday, November 5, 1854

British Army observation camp

Home Ridge Heights, South of Sebastopol

Private Henry Williams, of the 41st Rifle Regiment, was so tired from his 24 hours of trench duty he had returned from late last night that he woke up only after the fourth or fifth gun discharge. Looking groggily around the dark tent, he did not have time to get out from under his blanket before a cannonball flew through the tent and ripped away both of his legs.

On the muddy road leading to the observation camp, the noise of the now raging battle made Janet O’Neil stop her ambulance cart, while Margaret Ward, sitting inside the cart, stuck her head out. As for Jeanne Smythe, she stopped her horse and listened intently to the noises of the battle. Since the first day of November, Jeanne had instituted a daily routine of visiting the frontline trenches held by the British infantry, this with the approval of the commander of the 2nd Division and with the goals of helping troop morale and providing on the spot medical aid. The Russians seemed to have accepted their cart for what it was by now, as no Russian guns had shot at them while they visited the trenches, even though they had to approach in plain sight of the enemy.

“JANET,” shouted urgently Jeanne, “HEAD TOWARDS THE HOME RIDGE CAMP AS FAST AS YOU CAN.”

Janet looked at the thick fog surrounding them, feeling unsure about this.

“But, in this fog, we are liable to lose our way and end up behind enemy lines.”

“Then follow me! Lots of our men need our help right now.”

Without further objections, Janet urged her horse forward, following Jeanne on her horse. Margaret, still sitting in the back of the cart, took hold of one of their two rifled muskets and handed it to Janet, then grabbed the second one for herself.

The drive through the fog and confusing terrain, with the noises of the battle progressively surrounding them, was nerve-wracking for Janet and Margaret. They could see that Jeanne herself was tense and nervous: she may have been incredibly brave but she was sensible enough to acknowledge fear like anyone else. They finally reached the camp of the 2nd Division to find it totally wrecked, with bodies strewn all around the place. In the fog they could see groups of soldiers as mere silhouettes running around, shouting and fighting each other.

“This place is like a three-ring circus.” exclaimed Janet O’Neil over the din of the battle, joking to try hiding her fear. Jeanne clenched her teeth at that.

“Yes, but a damn bloody circus. I’m going on foot from here. Keep following with the cart.”

With Jeanne guiding her with hand signals while holding the reins of her horse, Janet drove the cart slowly through the wrecked camp. A whistling bullet made her wince as it passed besides her head.

“Maggie, are you alright?”

“Apart from staining my underwear, yes.” replied her friend in a shaky voice.

“Then we are in the same boat.”

“Make it three!” said Jeanne from a few yards in front of them. Jeanne suddenly signaled Janet to stop. The latter immediately understood why at the sight of an incredible scene of carnage now visible through the fog. A Russian shell had exploded in the midst of a packed group of British soldiers, ripping many of them apart and peppering the rest with deadly fragments. Body parts were strewn all over the place and at least a dozen soldiers were either moaning or screaming in pain. Without waiting for Jeanne’s order, Margaret jumped down from the cart, a bag full of bandages in one hand and her rifle slung across her back. Applying the cart’s handbrake, Janet jumped down

as well and took a stretcher out of the back of the cart. Both women quickly joined Jeanne at the side of a sergeant whose left leg was mangled up beyond repair. Jeanne was already applying a garrote just above the shattered mass of flesh and bones.

“Janet, finish fixing this garrote here!” ordered Jeanne. “Margaret, take care of that corporal over there!”

She then went to an infantry captain whose right shoulder and left leg were covered with blood. The man was still conscious and was clenching his teeth in order not to scream with pain. He looked up with incredulity at Jeanne as she knelt besides him.

“Madam, you shouldn’t be here. It is way too dangerous around here right now.”

“Bunk!” replied Jeanne while taking out her big hunting knife to cut open his bloody uniform. “We go where the wounded are, mister.”

A shell then exploded nearby, showering them with mud and sending shrapnel flying around them. Jeanne covered the captain with her body to avoid dirt contaminating further his wounds. The man then grabbed the front of her coat, speaking with as much authority as he could.

“Ladies, get out of here now, that’s an order!”

“And who is doing the ordering, sir?” she replied while continuing to give first aid.

“Captain Edward Scot, of B Company, 49th Rifle Regiment. Now, go!”

Jeanne then stared straight into the officer’s eyes.

“Captain, you know the old saying about army wives? They wear one rank higher than that of their husbands. Well, I am Lady Jeanne Smythe, wife of Captain Gordon Smythe of the 8th Hussars. I believe that I thus outrank you, sir. Now shut up and keep still.”

The officer then smiled at her, his voice softening.

“You and your nurses are real angels, Lady Jeanne.”

“Hmm, some would rather call me a bitch, Captain.”

“They can go to Hell!”

“My thought, exactly.”

Edward Scot couldn’t help admire her apparent calm as she quickly and efficiently treated him. Her two nurses also worked diligently under her supervision, preparing and loading up two wounded soldiers in their cart. They were coming back to take Scot as well when he stopped them with an imperative gesture.

“No! Take care of my other men first. I can wait.”

Jeanne looked at him for a moment, then grinned and nodded her head.

“At last: a real officer for a change. Alright, girls, let’s go see this private over there.”

Working for a few minutes on the private while shells and bullets kept flying around, the three women then loaded him on a stretcher and brought him to the cart. After helping sliding and securing the stretcher inside the cart, Jeanne was returning at a run towards Scot when a shell exploded nearby, sending hot fragments all over the place. The cart’s horse then pushed a heart-wrenching squeal and fell down like a rock on its belly, dead. Jeanne stared at the poor beast, horror and sadness on her face.

“YASMINA, NOO!”

Janet and Margaret, already in the cart and ready to leave with their wounded, also looked with horror at their dead horse.

“JEANNE, WHAT DO WE DO NOW?”

Jeanne took only a second to recover her wits and grabbed the reins of her personal horse, pulling it towards the cart.

“UNHOOK YASMINA, QUICK! WE WILL THEN PUT PEGASUS IN HER PLACE.”

Working frantically, the three women had the dead horse replaced by Pegasus and harnessed in minutes. Before the cart left, Jeanne went to Pegasus and patted its head while speaking softly in its left ear.

“Pegasus, I am counting on you to bring back the cart to the hospital at the best speed.”

She then kissed its head and slapped its neck, prompting the horse into launching into full gallop, the cart bumping and rolling wildly behind it. Edward Scot looked at her with wonderment when Jeanne returned to his side.

“Why did you stay?”

That got him a grim look from Jeanne.

“Because your other wounded men will bleed to death if not treated immediately. Now keep quiet and save your strength.”

As she got busy around him, Scot tried to gauge which way the battle around them was going. With the fog still thick and with gunpowder smoke further cutting down visibility, the fighting was as confused and chaotic as ever. Nearby shouts in Russian suddenly made both him and Jeanne tense up and look eastward. A group of about twenty soldiers in gray overcoats and caps then appeared through the fog, less than thirty yards away. Scot watched them with rage and horror as they methodically bayoneted any

British soldier that still moved as they advanced towards him. A nearby pistol shot then made him turn his head in time to see Jeanne Smythe methodically empty one of her revolvers on the Russians. She switched to her second revolver as the surviving Russians either charged her with bayonets held forward or fired their old fashioned muskets at her. He saw her left leg buckle when a musket ball hit her in the upper leg, making her scream with pain. She however clenched her teeth and kept firing, dropping five more Russians before holstering back her now empty revolver and drawing her sword and her hunting knife. Six Russian infantrymen ganged up on her but they went at it in a disorderly manner, getting in each other's way. As Scot drew his own pistol with difficulty, he watched her cut down three Russians before a bayonet went through her left arm. Screaming with pain, she nonetheless ran through the Russian who had impaled her arm, while parrying another bayonet with her knife. Scot then shot one of the two last Russians with his pistol, while a wounded corporal managed to raise his rifle and kill the last Russian. With a supreme effort, Jeanne detached the bayonet pinning her left arm to its musket, then crawled to Scot, her face reflecting excruciating pain.

"Sorry...about the interruption...Captain." she said haltingly. She then put down her sword and drew again one of her revolvers, putting it on Scot's belly before opening a small leather pouch on her leather equipment vest. Taking out of it a small object, she unwrapped the waxed paper around it, revealing a spare revolver cylinder, fully loaded. With agony on her face, she replaced the empty cylinder of her revolver with the full one, then pocketed back the empty one. Her next move was to take a bandage out of another pouch and use it as a garrote on her wounded leg. She then poured in succession water and alcohol on her leg and arm wounds while clenching her teeth. She did not however remove the bayonet still stuck in her left arm. Taking hold of her loaded revolver, she smiled weakly at Scot.

"Who do you think will reach us first now, Captain? The Russians, the British or the French? I'm rich, so I'm not scared of placing a bet. What do you say?"

"I'll bet on the British." he replied, conquered by her courage.

"And I go for the French."

As she took her breath, two bullets zipped by them. Raising her revolver with evident effort, she shot in succession four approaching Russian soldiers, then grinned at Scot.

"It seems that we both lost, Captain."

He couldn't help raise his left hand and caress her long, silky black hair. She stared at him but didn't stop him. More soldiers appeared then, this time from the West. They

wore baggy red trousers and were led by a general on horseback shouting in a language Scot didn't recognize. Jeanne's face immediately reflected joy and she shouted in the same language, drawing enthusiastic shouts from the soldiers now sprinting past them. She then looked back at Scot, grinning.

"French Zouaves, led by General Bosquet in person. We're saved!"

Without thinking, Scot then impulsively kissed her on the mouth. The slap he expected never came.

17:08 (Constantinople Time)

8th Hussars field hospital

Kadikoi, Crimea

One look at the expression on Captain Gordon Smythe's face, charging towards the female patients ward, quickly convinced Margaret Ward to get out of his way. However, the Hussars officer did stop briefly to ask her one question.

"How is she, Maggie?"

"Doctor Farrell says that she will be alright, Captain. They took out the musket ball from her left leg and the bayonet didn't touch the bone or nerves of her left arm. She got out of surgery two hours ago and is resting. You can see her for a short while but try not to tire her."

"I will be careful." said Gordon softly. He then smiled tenderly to the nurse. "By the way, what you and Misses O'Neil did with Jeanne this morning was admirable. Well done, Maggie!"

"I...thank you, Captain." replied the brunette, blushing. She then walked away, a tray with bandages and scissors in her hands. Now alone in the corridor, Gordon knocked lightly on the framed entrance of the female patients ward, waiting for Jeanne's reply before entering. Jeanne was conscious but looked groggy as she lay half sitting in one of the eight beds of the ward. Her bandaged left arm was in a sling but he couldn't see her left leg with the blanket and linen sheet covering her lower body. Taking a chair from one corner of the ward, Gordon put it next to her bed and sat on it, looking tenderly at his wife.

"You can't imagine how proud I am of you, Jeanne. What you did was heroic."

"But, I only defended myself, Gordon." she protested weakly. He shook his head vehemently then.

“You and your two nurses decided to go in on your own, while the battle was at its worst. Some would call that foolhardy but in truth the quick care you provided saved at least five men. That does not count the wounded that would have been bayoneted by the Russians you killed. Captain Scot, whose men you cared for and protected, has officially petitioned Lord Raglan through his commanding general so that you and your two nurses be decorated for your acts. The French high command is also said to be quite fond of you.”

“The French high command? Why?”

“Come on, Jeanne! You are a French woman after all, and one that I am told is quite famous in France already. Mister Russell spoke to a French journalist this afternoon and learned that the French Army public affairs officials intend to turn you into a national heroine.”

That made Jeanne roll her eyes.

“God! As if I needed that!”

Her expression then changed and she took hold of his left hand while smiling.

“Well, I should tell you one piece of news myself: I believe that I’m pregnant.”

“Really?” said Gordon, suddenly excited. “Are you sure?”

“Not completely, but I should know for sure in two weeks. If I miss my menstruations again...”

“But that’s fantastic!” said Gordon before kissing her passionately. Sitting back down, he then wiggled an index at her. “You will have to promise me to take it easy from now on, Jeanne: you shouldn’t put our baby at risk.”

She sighed while looking at her left arm.

“Do I really have a choice right now?”

Three days later, General Bosquet put around Jeanne’s neck the ribbon of the French medal of Commander of the Legion of Honor, for repeated acts of bravery on the battlefield that had brought great honor to France. Gordon shamelessly cried tears of pride as Jeanne was congratulated in her hospital bed by the senior officers present.

18:39 (Constantinople Time)

Monday, December 25, 1854

8th Hussars field hospital

Kadikoi, Crimea

“Are you sure that you are ready to go out like this, Jeanne?”

Jeanne smiled to Janet O'Neil as she climbed into the front of the ambulance cart. Janet noticed then how slow and deliberate Jeanne's movements were still compared to normal.

“Janet, I have been inactive for too long already. I may not be up to running around yet but I certainly can ride a cart and deliver hot soup to the forward troops on Christmas Day. Let me just sit in the back in order to watch our pot of soup and then we will be able to drive to the forward trenches.”

Jeanne, wearing like Janet thick woolen winter clothes to protect herself from the bitter cold and cutting wind of Crimea, sat inside the cart, protected partly from the wind by the canvas top. With her back to the right side of the cart, she sat on one of the two platforms meant to hold a stretcher. Next to her in the back of the cart was a large, deep square steel basin with wooden handles. Inside that basin sat a large stainless steel pot full of hot chicken broth soup, its top closed by a steel lid held in place by clamps. Hot coals from one of the hospital stoves had just been shoveled inside the basin to surround the base of the pot and keep it hot for a few hours. The coals also helped warm up the inside of the cart, making Jeanne feel guilty about leaving Janet to freeze in the driver's seat. Someone however had to watch the pot and prevent it from tipping and spilling its precious content if they struck a really nasty rut.

“You may start now, Janet!”

“YAAH, PEGASUS!” Shouted Janet as a reply, urging their horse forward. Sometimes that horse spooked Janet, as when it had pulled the cart all the way to the hospital in thick fog without guidance on the day when Jeanne had been wounded. It however was a very intelligent and strong beast and had proved its worth in gold on many thankless jobs that would have killed lesser horses in the harsh local climate. Pegasus dutifully started trotting forward, taking the snow-covered dirt road leading to the heights where the British trench works were facing the besieged city of Sebastopol.

Going at the merry, tireless trot typical of Pegasus, the cart arrived in half a hour on Home Ridge Height, where the British Army observation camp was, crossing it and going north on the trail leading to the forward trenches. Jeanne stuck her head out of the canvas cover then and looked at Janet, whose face had turned red from the cold wind.

“Janet, let me take the reins for a while and come warm yourself inside. No sense in waiting until you are frozen stiff.”

“Can’t say that I find your idea stupid, Jeanne.” replied Janet, who then thankfully switched places with Jeanne. She sighed with relief as she took her mitts off and warmed her hands and face over the hot coals in the basin.

“God, how could our officers force our men to spend 24 straight hours at a time sitting in snow-covered trenches, with no shelters or hot food?”

“Easy!” Replied Jeanne from the driver’s bench. “Take an uncaring, incompetent aristocrat, let him stay in a warm tent or hut with hot tea and food and give him brave men from lower social classes to command from afar.”

Janet could only reflect bitterly on this. Cases of horrible frostbites among frontline soldiers were getting more and more numerous, with many men freezing to death in the trenches while wearing the tattered remains of the same uniforms in which they had landed in the Fall in Crimea. A quantity of winter clothes had been received in Balaklava harbor but were still lying at quayside in the snow and mud, awaiting a releasing signature from Commissary General Filder, who seemed in no hurry to do so. Jeanne had stated not long ago that she was going to kill Filder one fine day and Janet, like many in the British Army, couldn’t wait to see that day arrive.

A shouted challenge from a British sentry ten minutes later told Janet that they were now at the forward trenches. Jeanne answered calmly the soldier, whose silhouette was barely visible ahead in the dark and falling snow.

“Lady Jeanne Smythe, 8th Hussars ambulance. We are bringing hot soup to the men in the trenches.”

“Hot soup? Thank God for bringing you here, madam!”

“Do you have a cup or mess tin with you, soldier?”

“Uh, no.” said sheepishly the man, who had approached the front of the cart and now stood less than two feet from it. Jeanne nodded her head in understanding: most British infantry soldiers in Crimea now barely had any personal kit left with them, apart from having no spare uniforms to wear.

“Don’t worry: we brought some spare cups with us. Janet, pass me a cup full of soup.”

A cup of steaming broth soon was passed to her by Janet, with Jeanne then handing over the cup to the freezing soldier, who smelled with obvious content the rich soup

while warming his hands on the cup. A first sip of the soup brought a big smile on the face of the young soldier, who could not be older than 22.

“May God bless you, madam.”

“The pleasure is ours, Private. Keep the cup. Merry Christmas!”

Jeanne then urged Pegasus forward and had the cart advance another hundred yards until the trench lines themselves made any more advance impossible. She could now see dozens of silhouettes sitting or walking back and forth in the wide trench. Passing her head inside the canvas-covered back, she spoke quickly to Janet, still sitting besides the pot of soup.

“I am going to pass the word to the soldiers in the trenches to come to the cart for some soup. Give me a full cup with cover so that I can go give it to the forward sentry.”

“But, you’re not going alone like this in the no-man’s-land, are you?”

“Do you have two revolvers and a sword with you, Janet?”

“Uh, no.”

“Then pass me a full cup.”

Shaking her head at Jeanne’s obstinacy, Janet filled a cup and gave it to her after putting a close fitting lid on it.

“Please be careful, Jeanne.”

“I always am, Janet.”

Jeanne then stepped down from the cart, careful not to spill the cup of soup in her hands. Going down into the trench, she went to the nearest group of British soldiers, who were shivering while sitting tightly together in order to try to keep warm.

“Is there an officer or a senior NCO around?”

One man who had been pacing around some fifteen yards away then answered her while walking towards her. His tone was severe.

“I’m Warrant Belford, of the 31st Rifles. What are you doing here in the advanced trenches, madam?”

“Delivering hot soup, Warrant. I’m Lady Jeanne Smythe, from the 8th Hussars field ambulance. My cart is parked over there, with one nurse ready to distribute cups of hot soup. We also have spare cups for the men who have no tins or mugs with them. Could you arrange for your men to take turns to go get their soup?”

The warrant’s expression then softened up considerably. Jeanne’s name was by now widely respected around the British Army Corps in Crimea.

“In that case, I will direct my men to your cart with pleasure. Just give me a minute to pass the word around.”

The warrant was true to his word, making half of his men line up in a disciplined manner at the cart to get their soup. As soon as those men had returned with full cups, the other half was sent to the cart. One soldier also went out of the trench to go replace temporarily the lonely soldier on forward watch that stood guard between the trench and the nearby Russian Redan Bastion. Only when the forward sentry had showed up and gotten his soup did Warrant Belford go himself for some soup, something that earned him a kiss on the cheek from Jeanne.

“Bless you, Warrant, for caring for your men.”

“And bless you, madam, for your courage and generosity.” replied the moved NCO. While he was gone to the cart, Jeanne took a few minutes to go to each soldier present and ask him how his feet and hands felt, checking for possible cases of frostbites. One soldier who complained of not feeling his feet anymore was brought to the cart for further examination, with the permission of Warrant Belford. Making the man climb in the back of the cart, Jeanne was alarmed at the way the man stepped inside, his moves stiff and clumsy. While Jeanne stood just outside of the cart and watched, Janet had the man remove his boots. That was when both women realized that the man’s boots were full of holes, like his rotting wool socks.

“My God!” exclaimed Janet, horrified and scandalized. “How could they send you to do guard duty with such poor boots?”

“There are no spare boots available, madam.” Explained in a disillusioned tone the soldier. Shaking her head angrily, Jeanne got inside as well and inspected the man’s feet, finding them frigid and insensitive to touch.

“A couple more hours out there and you would have lost both feet, Corporal. I’m going to get your warrant.”

Jeanne was back with Warrant Belford within minutes, letting then the NCO see his man’s feet for himself. The warrant shook his head sadly on feeling the soldier’s feet.

“I’m afraid that you are right, madam. What can you do for him?”

"I will bring him to the 8th Hussars hospital for treatment. My doctor will notify your regimental surgeon tomorrow. With good care, your man could probably return to duty in a few days."

"That sounds correct to me, madam." said Belford before looking at his man. "Behave while at the hospital, Corporal Austin, and don't harass the nurses there."

"Me, Warrant? Harass all those pretty nurses?"

"Exactly!" replied Belford as both Janet and Jeanne giggled at the exchange. Once the warrant was gone, Janet wrapped a warm blanket around the corporal's feet, legs and torso while Jeanne got back at the reins of the cart. They then continued their tour of the advance trench, distributing their soup until they ran out of it and also collecting in the process three more men suffering from frostbites. Two other men that Jeanne saw in the trench along their way were already frozen to death and beyond help by the time she got to them.

12:11 (Constantinople Time)

Tuesday, December 26, 1854

Officers' Mess, British Army field headquarters

Balaklava, Crimea

Commissary General Filder was sitting at a table of the Officers' Mess dining room, established in a building close to the harbor in Balaklava, and enjoying his lunch of roast chicken and boiled potatoes. Concentrated on eating a chicken leg and having a rather poor hearing because of his age, he didn't notice the fact that the other patrons in the dining room had suddenly gone quiet and were all looking towards the entrance of the dining room. A pair of worn and battered army boots slamming in front of him on the table returned Filder to reality, making his heart jump from the fright. A pair of thick sheepskin boots were then slammed on the table next to the tattered summer boots as Filder recognized with dread the tall woman now facing him with murder in her eyes: it was none other than Lady Jeanne Smythe, who lost no time in addressing him in a voice full of anger and contempt, speaking loudly enough for all those present in the mess to hear her.

"Mister Filder, I want you to take a good look at this pair of summer boots in front of you. I took them off a British soldier who nearly lost both of his feet to frostbites last night while standing guard in the advance trench facing Sebastopol. You will notice that

both boots are sporting holes in their soles, apart from having one sole barely holding on by a few stitches. Yet, that soldier could not get any spare boots from the bunch of incompetents at your commissariat.”

“Now wait a minute, madam!” started to object Filder while getting up from his chair. Jeanne Smythe at once pushed him back down on his chair and raised her voice to a near shout.

“YOU LISTEN, MISTER! YOU SEE THOSE NICE, WARM SHEEPSKIN BOOTS? I TOOK THEM FROM A SHIPMENT OF A FEW THOUSANDS SIMILAR WINTER BOOTS THAT HAVE BEEN ROTTING IN THE MUD AND SNOW AT QUAYSIDE HERE IN BALAKLAVA FOR OVER A MONTH NOW. IT SEEMS THAT YOU HAVE BEEN TOO BUSY BARFING OUT ON HOT FOOD TO FIND EVEN A MINUTE TO SIGN FOR THE RELEASE AND DISTRIBUTION OF THOSE BOOTS AND OTHER WINTER GEAR, GEAR THAT COULD HAVE SAVED THE LIVES OF HUNDREDS OF OUR SOLDIERS WHO DIED OF COLD IN THE TRENCHES! YOU WANT TO KNOW HOW MANY FEET WE HAD TO AMPUTATE AT THE HUSSARS HOSPITAL JUST FOR THE LAST WEEK? TRY SEVENTEEN, MISTER!”

Jeanne Smythe then straightened up and grabbed the pair of winter boots while still staring hard at Filder.

“I will now let you finish your roast chicken and potatoes with butter, so that you can hopefully find time after lunch to finally release for distribution those winter clothes and boots. Oh, by the way, I brought you a special treat for dessert.”

She threw down a rolled handkerchief that contained something, then left the dining room with the pair of winter boots, leaving the worn Summer boots on his table. Totally humiliated and intimidated by now, Filder could only stare with apprehension at the rolled handkerchief that had landed in the middle of his plate of food, unable to gather the courage to check what was in it. The Aide-de-Camp of Lord Raglan, who had been dining at a table nearby with his wife and another staff officer, then approached Filder and, after a short hesitation, opened the handkerchief. Filder bent over at once and threw up violently at the sight of the three blackened human toes inside the handkerchief. It took him nearly a minute to regain his composure. He then looked angrily at Lord Raglan’s ADC, who had rolled back the handkerchief and taken it out of Filder’s plate.

“That damn woman should be flogged publicly for such an affront. I will personally complain about this to Lord Raglan.”

The ADC, a colonel, gave him a most unfriendly look in return.

“Mister Filder, don’t you know that the troops widely call Lady Jeanne ‘The Angel of Balaklava’? You will not find a single soldier in this army ready or willing to flog such a woman. Besides, doing such a thing would probably bring General Bosquet at a gallop to challenge you to a duel, sir.”

Filder, who was about to protest further, clamed up at those last words: French General Bosquet was renown as a true fighting general and as a first rate duelist. He was also said to be in most friendly, albeit correct, terms with Jeanne Smythe.

The story of Filder’s public humiliation took less than a day to reach all the British Army camps around Sebastopol and Balaklava. Within two days, all the British infantrymen serving in the trenches were laughing hard about it. Despite of this, or rather as a spite for the affront against him, Filder still managed to take another two months to have the winter gear distributed to the troops, by which time it was too late to be of much good. On his part, William Howard Russell didn’t waste that golden opportunity to write yet another incendiary article for his readers in London about the ineptitude of the British supply system and the uncaring attitude of Filder and of his Commissariat Department.

09:51 (London Time)

Tuesday, January 23, 1855

House of Commons, Westminster

London, England

“ORDER! ORDER, PLEASE!” Shouted the Speaker of the House of Commons in order to be heard over the din of angry exchanges and insults flying between the members of the ruling party and those of the opposition. “THE FLOOR IS OPEN TO THE HONORABLE MEMBER FOR SHEFFIELD.”

John Arthur Roebuck, Deputy for the County of Sheffield and member of the Radical Party, got up and, ignoring the few catcalls coming from the ranks of the ruling Conservative Party, started speaking in a strong voice.

“Mister Speaker, gentlemen, we have heard plenty in the last few weeks and months about the appalling conditions under which our brave soldiers and sailors are fighting in Crimea. We have already heard too many tales of ineptitude, gross

incompetence and utter negligence shown by senior officers and bureaucrats towards our beleaguered fighting men. We simply cannot allow such ineptitude and waste of human lives to continue. I thus propose that this House forms at once a select committee that would then go to the Crimea to inquire into the conditions of the army before the city of Sebastopol, so that such disgrace could be put to an end.”

Roebuck then sat back as a short silence followed: his proposal clearly amounted to a motion of non-confidence in the government of Lord Aberdeen. The Speaker of the House then rose from his chair.

“WE HAVE A MOTION TO FORM A SELECT COMMITTEE TO INQUIRE INTO THE CONDITIONS OF OUR ARMY IN CRIMEA. DO I HAVE SOMEONE TO SECOND THAT MOTION?”

“I SECOND THE MOTION!” Shouted at once a Liberal Party member. The Speaker now had no choice but to conduct a vote on the proposed motion. Going through the established procedures for such votes took nearly half a hour. When the result was announced, the House dissolved into nervous laughter: the government of Lord Aberdeen had just been soundly defeated!

13:50 (Constantinople Time)

Friday, March 9, 1855

Balaklava harbor, Crimea

To Roger Fenton’s immense relief, his precious photographic van was put down intact on the wharf by the ship’s steam-powered crane. His big horse was already on the quay with him, so he was able at once to tie it to his wagon. Fenton was about to get on his wagon to drive it off the wharf when the strangest wagon he had ever seen arrived at a trot, preceded by a light, four-wheeled cart and a woman on horseback. Fenton’s heart jumped at once at the sight of the woman and of the cart, which bore on its side the inscription ‘AMBULANCE’: That woman on horseback had to be the famous Lady Jeanne Smythe. Realizing that his wagon was in the way on the wharf, Fenton got on it and urged his horse forward. He rolled for only a few dozen yards, in order to free the wharf, then stopped his wagon and applied the handbrake before jumping down and running to the back of his van to take out his camera. When he emerged from his van with his heavy, tripod-mounted camera, wounded and sick men were being taken out of the big medical wagon and of the ambulance cart, with Lady Jeanne Smythe actually

helping to carry the patients on stretchers aboard the ship that had brought Fenton. Setting his camera up on the wharf, he waited until Lady Smythe, dressed in a dark red skirt, wool jacket and high boots, approached him while carrying a stretcher with the help of a sailor.

“Could you hold the pause for a second, please?”

Both the woman and the sailor froze where they were long enough for Fenton to activate his magnesium flash and take a picture. While the sailor nearly jumped back from the surprise the flash gave him, the woman simply smiled afterwards and spoke quickly to Fenton as she resumed her walk and passed besides him with her loaded stretcher.

“I assume that you are not one of those ‘Traveling Gentlemen’ from Europe, sir.”

“Roger Fenton’s the name, madam. I’m a professional photographer. You must be Lady Jeanne Smythe.”

“What was your first clue?” she said with a grin before walking up the boarding ramp. She was back on the wharf a few minutes later, carrying her now empty stretcher, and came straight to Fenton to shake his hand.

“Welcome to Balaklava, Mister Fenton. Do you have a place to stay tonight?”

“Uh, not yet, Lady Jeanne. I however heard about an establishment near the harbor called the British Hotel. Do you know it?”

“I do, sir.” she replied with a smile. “My friend Mary Seacole runs it. If you want I can guide you to it once I am finished here.”

“You are too kind, Lady Jeanne.”

“Please, drop the Lady thing and just call me Jeanne. I am a very liberal woman.”

“As you wish, Jeanne.”

Roger Fenton then waited patiently for all the patients to be carried aboard the steam ship, putting back his camera inside his van in the meantime. He was ready to roll when the medical wagon and cart left the harbor and followed Lady Jeanne along a dirt road paralleled by a railroad track under construction.

A kilometer and a half down the road, they arrived at a large tent camp apparently occupied by cavalry units. In one corner of the camp, by the side of the road, was also a large tent complex. Above the main entrance was a large sign proclaiming it to be the field hospital of the 8th Hussars Regiment. While the medical wagon and cart went to park inside a long tent facing the hospital, Jeanne Smythe kept riding down the

road, guiding Fenton further on. Another two kilometers further down the road, they left it and took a trail that led up a small hill, on top of which were a few buildings, most of which looked dilapidated. Jeanne Smythe finally stopped her horse and jumped down in front of the biggest of the buildings, which seems to have been the residence of someone affluent. Roger Fenton parked his photographic van near a corner of the building and tied his horse to a pole, then joined Jeanne near the main entrance. From the noises coming from the inside of the building it appeared occupied, while three British officers walked out as Roger and Jeanne were about to go in. Jeanne spoke to him while entering the building ahead of Roger.

“Mary Seacole is from the West Indies and came to Crimea by her own means, which were quite limited actually, to do what she could to help our neglected soldiers. She helped the wounded and sick more than once and is a very kind, motherly type woman. She set up this establishment only a few weeks ago. It has a canteen for the troops, a British club room and a few visitors rooms. You will like Mary: she has a heart of gold and everybody here calls her ‘Mother’.”

“Sounds like a fascinating person to me, Jeanne.”

“She is, Mister Fenton.”

As she spoke they entered a large vestibule with a wide staircase leading to the upper floor. Jeanne then went to a door to the right and led Roger into a sort of hall furnished with tables and chairs and occupied by a mixed crowd of over a dozen men in uniform, with also three women present. A portly woman in her late thirties with dark brown skin and braided hair smiled on seeing Jeanne and motioned to her from behind a service counter. Jeanne went to her at once and, stopping near the counter, presented Roger to the woman.

“Mary, this is Roger Fenton, a professional photographer who just arrived from England with his photo van. Mister Fenton, this is Mary Seacole, everybody’s friend here.”

“Pleased to meet you, madam.” said Roger while shaking hands with the buxom woman. Mary Seacole in turn smiled gently to him.

“Welcome to my establishment, Mister Fenton. A photographer will indeed be nice to have around Crimea, so that the British public sees in what conditions our brave soldiers have to fight. I suppose that you will need a room?”

“Indeed, madam, that is if you still have one available.”

"I do have a couple of rooms left unoccupied, Mister Fenton." said Mary before looking at Jeanne. "I will take good care of him, Jeanne. Thanks for bringing him here."

"My pleasure, Mary."

The noise from heavy guns firing in the distance, which had been going on all the while at intervals, suddenly redoubled, making Jeanne turn her head towards a window facing Sebastopol. Her face now reflected preoccupation.

"It seems that the artillery duel with the Russians is heating up. Men will be in need of help out there. If you will excuse me, Mister Fenton."

Jeanne then walked out at a quick step, leaving Fenton with Mary Seacole.

"Quite an extraordinary woman, I would say." said Fenton while watching Jeanne go, making Mary Seacole nod somberly her head.

"The best I have ever seen, Mister Fenton. Her courage is only equaled by her compassion and care. I am however afraid that many in England will dismiss or badmouth her for what they consider unwomanly actions by her."

Roger Fenton could only nod at that. In his visits to various gentlemen's clubs in London, he had heard often enough haughty aristocrats and businessmen talk with contempt and even indignation about Jeanne Smythe not clinging to what was considered proper for a woman to do. Many English ladies also spoke badly of her, feigning scandal at her habit of wearing military style clothes and carrying weapons. The hypocrisy of it all had actually disgusted him, especially when coming from vain people who cared more about the next ball or social reunion than about the fate of the thousands of British soldiers suffering and dying in the name of England in Crimea.

14:35 (Constantinople Time)

Thursday, May 17, 1855

8th Hussars lines

Kadikoi, Crimea

Lord George Paget, freshly arrived from England, stopped his horse as he entered the lines of his regiment, hesitant and full of doubts. After returning to England following the battle of Balaklava, all of his former acquaintances and friends had snubbed him at his London club, knowing why he was back while his soldiers had to stay in Crimea. Paget had finally been shamed into taking back his commission and sailing back to Crimea. He was however unsure how his former subalterns and men would

greet him. They had after all a lot of good reasons to despise him. However, the hard lesson this whole sorry episode had taught him had sunk into Paget: commanding men in war was a privilege that should be earned and not bought. Now, he could only hope that his men would forgive him and give him a chance to prove himself. Seeing a patrol of Hussars that was seemingly returning from the frontlines, Paget urged his horse at a trot to meet his men. Captain Gordon Smythe, tired and covered with dust and dirt, was the officer in charge of the patrol. Paget returned Smythe's salute, which had been less than crisp.

"Captain, I would like to have the whole regiment lined up in our parade ground by five O'clock, before supper time. I will have news to pass then."

"The whole regiment, sir? What about our ambulance staff? Do they have to attend as well?"

"Yes! I have something for them as well."

"Very well, sir. I will inform Major Henry at once."

Then, without welcoming him back, Gordon Smythe saluted Paget and galloped away with his patrol. Paget felt bitter at that but could not blame Smythe for his attitude, as he knew that he deserved the cold shoulder treatment he was probably going to get from all of his subordinates.

Paget next went to the stables sheltering the horses of his regiment. Put up by Lady Jeanne's construction crew after the completion of both the unit's field hospital and personnel barracks, the long assembly of marquee tents was the envy of the other British cavalry regiments in Crimea. Compared to the warm, well stocked stables of the 8th Hussars, the other cavalry regiments had to let their horses survive outdoors during the past winter and had as a consequence lost the great majority of their horses to cold and starvation. Only now were replacement horses starting to arrive in significant numbers by ship, along with the hundreds of new soldiers and officers needed to replenish the sadly depleted ranks of the British corps. A trooper came to him at once with a limp in his left leg and grabbed the reins of his horse, saluting Paget at the same time.

"Good day, sir! Let me take care of your horse, sir. We have plenty of feed grain and clean water for it here, sir."

Seeing a number of other troopers at work in the barn, all with some apparent handicap or physical weakness, Paget nodded to the soldier.

"I see many lame troopers here, Corporal. Are they all on light duties?"

"Yes, sir! The men who have recovered enough at the field hospital but who are still unfit for full battlefield duties are assigned as a routine to the regimental stables, sir. This way we can still be useful and our horses get pampered, if I may say so, sir."

"A sensible policy indeed, Corporal. Do you know where the quarters for the regimental commander would be?"

The trooper kept a neutral face then, not showing his inner thoughts at those last words.

"Your quarters are in the regimental command post barrack, sir, along with those of Major Henry. The command post is marked with a large sign above its entrance and is the first barrack in our regimental lines, sir."

"Thank you, Corporal. Carry on!"

Leaving the barn on foot while carrying himself his two pieces of luggage, Paget walked to the regimental command post, which was effectively easy to identify. Entering the wooden hut, Paget found Major Henry giving directives to a young cornet¹². Both came to attention when Paget entered the command room, a large space with a few chairs and tables along the walls and with a large map board hooked to a wall.

"At ease, gentlemen." said at once Paget. Both Henry and the cornet relaxed their position, with the former greeting his old commander in a neutral, cautious voice.

"Welcome back to Kadikoi, sir. Are you taking back command of the regiment, sir?"

"I am, Major. I want to address the whole regiment at five O'clock."

"Captain Smythe informed me about that, sir. I was sending Cornet Brown to pass the word around to the men. Uh, about the personnel of our field hospital, some may not be able to attend, as they cannot abandon their patients to themselves even for short periods of time, sir."

"How many patients are there in our hospital, Major?" Asked Paget out of pure curiosity. Henry had to think about that for a moment before answering.

"About 130, sir. Men from many other regiments are treated at our field hospital because of its superior level of medical care."

"Then, tell Doctor Farrell that he can send only those whom he can spare. If he could manage to have Lady Jeanne Smythe and Misses Ward and O'Neil attend the parade, I would appreciate it a lot."

¹² Cornet: Lowest officer's rank in the British Army of that time.

“Understood, sir. I will pass the word personally to Doctor Farrell. By the way, sir, the commander’s room is still unoccupied. It is the door on the left in the back of this room, sir.”

“Thank you, Major. I will unpack my things while you have the word passed around.”

“Yes sir! Cornet Brown, help Lord Paget with his luggage before going out.”

“Yes sir!” replied the young man, actually a mere teenager who still didn’t need to shave every day. Brown grabbed both of Paget’s bags and carried them, letting Paget lead the way and open the door of the commander’s room. Paget was agreeably surprised by what he saw: there was a real bed in one corner, a nightstand, a work desk with chair, a padded easy chair and a clothes locker. There even was a small wood stove inside the room, sitting on a thin iron plate laid on the wooden floor. Dismissing the young cornet, Paget then closed the door behind him and started unpacking.

Two hours later, Paget left his room, dressed in his best uniform and carrying a large, flat wooden box in his hands. Again, Cornet Brown went to his help and carried the box for him out and to the regimental parade ground, where about seventy men and officers were lined up. To Paget’s satisfaction, Lady Jeanne was present with Misses Ward and O’Neil and Doctor Farrell on the side of the parade ground. Paget noticed with some surprise the bulging belly evident in Jeanne Smythe. He then gallantly saluted her, to which she bowed her head in acknowledgement. Walking to a position facing his pitifully small regiment, Paget stopped at attention fifteen yards in front of his men, then spoke in a strong voice.

“Men of the 8th Hussars! I am here to announce two things. First, I am resuming command of this regiment as of this moment. I fully realize that I failed you all when I left you last November, and for this I am going to feel personal shame to my dying day. I can only promise you that I will not fail you again. The second thing I want to announce is that Her Majesty, Queen Victoria, has authorized the release of a campaign medal with battle clasps for the war in Crimea. Before leaving England, I collected all the medals owed to members of this regiment and brought them with me. I will now have the honor and pleasure to distribute them to you.”

Paget then walked to the right flank of the line of men, followed by Cornet Brown with his wooden box, and started distributing Crimea War medals with their stripped pale blue and yellow ribbons and their silver battle clasps. Pining each medal personally on the

chest of each of his surviving men and handing them as well the battle clasps they were entitled to, Paget had finished going through the ranks in less than a hour. He then walked to the four members of the regimental field hospital present on the sidelines, stopping first in front of Doctor Thomas Farrell. He smiled warmly while pinning a campaign medal on the chest of the young surgeon.

“Doctor, I remember clearly the moment when I saw you and your nurses standing ready by your medical wagon as I and the survivors of the Light Brigade were galloping back from charging those Russian guns. The sight of seeing you and your intrepid staff fortified our hearts then. This campaign medal, with a clasp for the battle of Balaklava, has been amply earned by you, Doctor.”

“Thank you, Milord.” could only say Farrell, as timid as ever. Paget next stepped in front on Jeanne Smythe. He knew from London newspaper articles about her Légion d’Honneur but still couldn’t help stare at the French medal, hanging from its scarlet neck ribbon. He then looked up into the green eyes of Jeanne, who stared back at him. Paget then spoke in a near whisper to her.

“I sincerely hope that you will forgive me for fleeing the way I did in November, Lady Jeanne. It would mean a lot to me, truly.”

Jeanne’s eyes then softened noticeably.

“A fault acknowledged is a fault forgiven, Milord.”

“Thank you, Lady Jeanne.” said Paget before raising his voice back to normal. “For your incredible courage and dedication to our wounded men on the battlefield, you deserve clearly much more than this simple campaign medal with clasps for the battles of the Alma, Balaklava and Inkerman. I can however tell you that I personally pushed for higher awards for both you and your two field nurses, Misses Ward and O’Neil. I can also tell you that it looks like my recommendations were listened to with sympathetic ears in London.”

“My true reward was to be able to save our wounded men, Milord. Will you be visiting the hospital afterwards to give medals to the patients from our regiment, Milord?”

“I certainly will, Lady Jeanne. They paid a high enough price already for those medals.”

Paget next gave medals to Margaret Ward and Janet O’Neil, who were both beaming with pride as he pinned the medals to their nurse’s aprons. Before walking away, Paget had a last look at the three women lined in front of him.

“Ladies, any commander would be proud to command men with only half of your courage. To you and to the men of this regiment, I salute you.”

Paget saluted the three women and Doctor Farrell, then turned around and saluted his officers and men. That simple gesture, along with Paget’s public apology, did a lot to make him accepted back by his regiment.

11:07 (Constantinople Time)

Wednesday, July 25, 1855

8th Hussars field hospital

Kadikoi, Crimea

Jeanne sat dejectedly on the chair in her cubicle, feeling next to useless now: Thomas Farrell had just ordered her to stay on forced rest in view of her pregnancy, which was very close to its term. An idea then came to her mind and, with a smile of anticipation on her young face, she got up and searched in her locker. Pulling out of it her guitar, bardic harp and flute, she then walked heavily out of her room, heading towards the patients’ lounge. If she could not care anymore for them for a while, she at least could still entertain her patients with music and songs. Jeanne was damned if Farrell could find anything wrong with that.

16:51 (Constantinople Time)

Saturday, July 28, 1855 ‘A’

Kadikoi, Crimea

The moment Gordon Smythe entered the Hussars lines after coming back from patrol, he dismissed his troop to their quarters and galloped at once to the field hospital. He knew that Jeanne could give birth at any time now and didn’t want to miss the coming of their first child. Dismounting in front of the hospital’s entrance and tying his horse to one of the poles provided for that purpose, he nearly ran inside and went to the reception desk, where a nurse was on duty.

“Misses Grant, can you tell me if my wife has entered labor yet?”

“She actually gave birth less than half a hour ago, Captain.” announced proudly the nurse. Her announcement froze Gordon on the spot as he looked back at her with dismay.

“Blast! I missed it! Is Jeanne alright?”

“She is tired but doing well, Captain. She is in her room, breastfeeding her baby.”

“Is it a boy or a girl?” asked Gordon, some impatience in his voice. The nurse only smiled at that.

“Jeanne ordered me not to tell you, Captain. Sorry!”

Swearing under his breath, Gordon started running. He was at the entrance of Jeanne’s room within a minute and went in at once without knocking. He then saw Jeanne sitting in a rocking chair near her bed, a baby wrapped in a blanket held in her arms and with one breast denuded. The smile she gave him then was worth a thousand kisses.

“Come see our son, Gordon.” She said softly, her voice kept low in order not to startle her baby. Gordon approached her quietly and, after kissing her on the mouth, knelt next to the rocking chair to contemplate the small face of his son, pride washing over him.

“He is beautiful. Hello, little William.”

He then kissed tenderly the head of the baby and looked back at Jeanne, tears coming out of his eyes.

“Thank you, Jeanne, for everything.”

“And thank you for your love, Gordon. You are a good man indeed.”

They sealed that mutual declaration with a kiss, then looked both down at their baby son, who was still sucking milk happily, his eyes closed and his tiny hands on Jeanne’s breast.

“What now, Jeanne?” Asked Gordon, overwhelmed by the moment. Jeanne answered while raising a hand to caress his cheek.

“I take it easy for a week or two, time to recuperate from childbirth, then I will start progressively getting back to shape. You wouldn’t want to see me become fat, do you?”

“I would love you in any shape, my dear Jeanne.”

That declaration made Jeanne smile with incredulity.

“Oh no you wouldn’t, Gordon. You love too much those buns of steel of mine...and my firm chest.”

Gordon had nothing to say to that, simply because she was right...again.

04:30 (Constantinople Time)

Saturday, September 8, 1855 'A'

8th Hussars field hospital

Kadikoi, Crimea

Nancy reappeared in a flash of light inside her room, wearing a Victorian era dress and ready to resume her life as Jeanne Smythe. She had just spent over six months at the main Time Patrol base in the distant past in order to both see her two other sons, James and Charles, and to get back in full physical and mental shape after her pregnancy and her hard months of nursing work in Crimea. Going at once to the crib containing little William, she saw that he had not awakened during the ten minutes she was absent from her room in this time period. Careful not to make noises and awaken her son, Jeanne went to her locker and took off her dress, changing quietly into her dark red field outfit of riding dress, jacket, high boots, leather equipment vest and white apron. She then grabbed her two revolvers and carefully loaded them. William woke up and started wailing as she was oiling her sword's blade. Putting down her sword on her work desk, Jeanne went to the crib and gently took William in her arms.

"You are getting hungry, are you, my sweet William? Here, have your fill." With her baby sucking her left nipple, she sat in her rocking chair and waited patiently for him to be full, then made him burp and changed his diaper as well. With William still in her arms, Jeanne left her room and toured quietly the patients wards, her heart heavy: many more beds were going to be filled by the end of this day. As for the men presently in the wards, they had stopped months ago to be simply historical statistics to her. She knew them well as human beings, having assisted them in moments of pure helplessness and pain and having seen them at their most vulnerable. She had cried more than once when one of them had died, often in her arms, or when they had cried themselves after being amputated and losing a leg or an arm, or both. Whether Farah Tolkonen liked it or not, Nancy WAS Jeanne Smythe, senior nurse and benefactor of the 8th Hussars field hospital and wife of a Hussars officer. This may have been only one of her three lives she lived in parallel but it was still very much a real life for her. She was damned if she was going to let thousands of men die today without doing a thing to at least help the wounded. She was fully conscious that she could very well be maimed or even killed in the process of helping British soldiers today but she was ready to run the

risks. Her only hesitation was about the effects on her son and her husband if she got killed.

As she was going towards the wing housing the men's wards, she met a large group of her patients that had been convalescing and were now leaving, led by an infantry captain and a sergeant-major. The men wore their uniforms and had their weapons and gear. Jeanne interposed herself at once, blocking the way of the captain and eyeing him firmly.

"Do you have a medical release form signed by a doctor for these men, Captain?"

The young captain, who knew better than to ignore her, nodded politely and showed her a list bearing the signature of Doctor Farrell.

"I have, Lady Jeanne. I know that those men are barely healed of their wounds but we sorely need all the available soldiers today, especially in the case of infantrymen."

Jeanne reviewed the list quickly, comparing the number of names with the number of soldiers following the captain. The numbers agreed so she gave the list back to the officer and stepped aside. As the soldiers, looking downcast, filed past her, she couldn't help tears coming to her eyes.

"May God be with you all!"

A young cornet that was no more than sixteen years old and was still walking with a slight limp looked at her with something close to love in his eyes.

"God was with us, Lady Jeanne, as he sent us one of his angels to care for us."

Those words finished breaking her heart and she started crying openly while the men passed by her. It took everything for her to be able to say a few words to them before they walked away.

"I won't abandon you today, I swear!"

The sergeant at the end of the line turned his head to look at her then while still walking, swallowing hard as he eyed her and her baby.

"You never abandoned us, Lady Jeanne. May God bless you."

11:14 (Constantinople Time)

Hills facing the Russian bastion of the Redan

Fanny Duberly, trying to go around the British cavalry troopers posted to block the way to the front to civilian tourists, sighed with exasperation when she encountered a cavalry patrol in the ravine in front of Cathcart's Hill.

"Damn! I thought that I had them mystified."

Fanny didn't try to gallop away as the sergeant of the Lancers approached her and saluted her.

"Madam, you can't proceed further than this point. It is too dangerous closer to the batteries."

"Sir, know that I am the wife of Captain Duberly, of the 8th Hussars."

"Madam, my orders apply to ALL the civilians." replied patiently the sergeant, having heard countless excuses from civilians and tourists trying to get to the frontlines for some cheap thrills. Fanny was about to shoot a retort to that when the noise of a horse approaching fast made both her and the sergeant turn their heads towards the South and Balaklava. A rider soon turned the bend of the trail following the base of the hill, its horse going at an incredible speed.

"What the..." Started to say the surprised sergeant. He then saw the long black hair of the rider floating in the wind and tried to interpose his horse to stop the woman coming at him. Fanny, who had recognized the rider at once, shouted to the sergeant.

"THAT'S LADY JEANNE SMYTHE, GOING TO DO HER NURSE'S DUTIES AT THE FRONT!"

That shout made the sergeant hesitate long enough to let Jeanne gallop past him like the wind. Jeanne, wearing a big pack on her back and her equipment vest around her torso, smiled at Fanny as she passed.

"THANKS, FANNY!"

Fanny smiled with pride at that, happy to have been able to help the intrepid French woman do her mission of mercy.

Jeanne soon had to make Pegasus slow its infernal pace, as she was now very close to the British advanced trench facing the Russian strongpoint of the Redan, a large earthworks defensive complex bristling with guns. Dismounting near what was left of a tree, she loosely tied the reins of her horse to the dead tree trunk and continued on foot, soon jumping down into the advance trench. Dozens of British infantrymen progressing on foot along the trench greeted her with cheers and hurrahs.

“It’s mighty nice to see you here, madam.” said a young soldier to her, making her smile.

“And I am happy to be here to support you, guys. Be assured that I will be right behind you to take care of any wounded man.”

Grunts of approbation greeted her words: being cared for on the battlefield if wounded was one thing that any soldier valued greatly, as it would often mean the difference between life and death for him. The infantrymen then resumed their slow march down the wide trench leading to the Russian defensive works, Jeanne mixed in with the assault troopers.

12:02 (Constantinople Time)

Forward British command and observation post

Main British trench facing Sebastopol

William Howard Russell looked on with trepidation through his spyglass as a loud cheer rose from the French trenches on the left of the British trenches. Thousands of French Zouaves, easily recognizable by their baggy red trousers, then rushed out of their trenches, which had been pushed to as close as twenty yards from their main objective, the Malakoff Tower. Within seconds, they ran through the murderous Russian gun and rifle fire pouring on them from three sides and threw in place assault ladders to make their way inside the Russian earthworks. Watching with the British high command staff and the many civilian tourists standing or sitting on the hill used by them as a forward observation post, Russell felt elation as a huge French flag appeared in minutes above the Malakoff Tower.

“Bloody hell! The French did it! They have the Malakoff Tower, at last!” He then turned his spyglass towards the British advance trench but saw little movement there. Perplex, he looked at Fanny Duberly, who had joined him less than ten minutes ago on top of the hill.

“What the hell are our soldiers waiting for to attack?”

“According to my husband, we are to wait for confirmation that the Malakoff Tower is solidly in French hands before launching our own assault. Any assault on the Redan is impossible until the Malakoff has been taken.”

Russell frowned at that: this wasn’t the first time that the British Army had played second fiddle to the much larger French Army contingent in Crimea. Hopefully, the British

command would get it right this time. Glancing at the three British generals present in the observation post, Russell had to cool his expectations about that: there was little martial about the appearance or attitude of those old men. The commander-in-chief, General Simpson, sat on a chair in the main trench, a greatcoat wrapped around him to fight the cold wind. General Jones wore a red nightcap and lay reclined on a litter while watching the action with his spyglass. As for Quartermaster-General Richard Airey, he had a white handkerchief tied over his cap and ears and fastened under his chin. A crowd of staff officers and civilian tourists stood around the three generals, with the tourists treating the battle as one big exciting show. Russell shook his head in disgust at that, wishing that he could kick the butts of those vain tourists. The one visitor who had a legitimate purpose to be here, Roger Fenton, had his camera set on its tripod and was busily taking picture after picture of the battle, concentrating on the ones deserving the attention: the fighting soldiers in the field.

The arrival of the ambulance cart and medical wagon of the 8th Hussars in the ravine in front of the observation post a few minutes later temporarily attracted the eyes of the British onlookers. Russell took some notes as the nurses and doctors attached to the field hospital quickly set up the medical wagon for operation, while the ambulance cart continued on to get as close to the advance trench as it safely could. Watching it closely, he saw the cart stop besides a solitary horse tied to a tree trunk and wondered aloud about it.

“Who could have left his horse in such a dangerous place?”

Fanny Duberly answered him without hesitation, not bothering to keep her voice down.

“Jeanne Smythe. I saw her gallop to the advance trench about one hour ago, dressed in her field outfit and carrying a pack of field bandages.”

“But...she gave birth only a month ago.” said Russell, shocked. Fanny nodded her head at that, her expression somber.

“I know, William. No one should doubt her dedication and courage by now. I just hope that she gets properly rewarded for that once back in England.”

Russell grunted in approbation, taking more notes before resuming his observation with his spyglass. The British troops had not moved out of their trenches yet, while the fighting was still furious on the left flank, where the French were still fighting to take their two other objectives for this day, the ‘Little Redan’ and the ‘Flagstaff’ bastions. Maybe twenty minutes later the British heavy guns, which had kept a furious fire up to now,

suddenly fell silent. A great chorus of cheers then rose from the British trenches as thousands of soldiers in red coats climbed out of them and started running in the open towards the Redan bastion. Russell felt both excitement and horror as he watched the troopers run the 200 yards of open ground between their advance trench and the Russian earthworks. Russian guns firing from three strong points, along with hundreds of Russian riflemen, then started to cut swaths in the ranks of the rushing British soldiers. Russell's heart sank as he saw hundreds of men being cut down, and this only in the first minute of the assault. The remark from a nearby tourist watching through a spyglass then made him focus on a particular part of the battlefield.

"Look at that coward over there, hiding behind a wounded officer."

"That's not a coward, you sniveling asshole!" Fired back angrily Russell once he had a good look with his spyglass. "That's Lady Jeanne Smythe treating that wounded officer under fire."

As the tourist smarted from his response, Russell passed on his spyglass to Fanny Duberly, who was clearly eager to watch her friend. Fanny looked through the spyglass for a few seconds, then gave the spyglass back to Russell.

"God bless Jeanne. I would never be able to gather that kind of courage."

Taking back his spyglass, Russell watched the progress of the British attack with growing anxiety, describing what he saw to Fanny as the action went.

"Our men are now in the ditch at the foot of the Redan and setting up their assault ladders. God, we are losing dozens of men every second... I can see Colonel Windham waving his hat and sword from atop the parapet of the Russian positions and encouraging his men to follow him inside the earthworks."

Russell then saw something that shocked and scandalized him.

"Bloody hell! Only a handful of soldiers are following Colonel Windham inside the Russian positions. The rest of our men are staying behind the parapet and taking occasional potshots from behind cover. Come on! Get inside the position while you can!"

A concert of exclamations of disappointment and disbelief from the British high command staff then told him that he had not been alone in noticing the lack of zeal of the attacking British infantrymen.

As the British generals were watching from their safe observation post the stalling of their attack, Jeanne jumped down in the wide, deep trench dug by the

Russians around the foot of their bastion. The trench was already half covered with dead and dying British soldiers, with more soldiers clinging precariously against the outside of the parapets while bullets, grapeshot and cannonballs flew around them. Over the din of the battle, she heard and then saw Colonel Windham exhort his men in following him inside the earthworks through the gun embrasures. Less than a hundred men followed his lead and went in, while a good two thousand more soldiers stayed where they were, content in firing occasionally over the parapet. Watching that with dismay, Jeanne then saw the young cornet that had complimented her in the hospital this morning rally a handful of men around him before stepping inside the bastion through an embrasure, his sword pointing forward. Something then broke inside Jeanne. She had to do all that she could to get that brave teenage boy out of there alive, even at the risk of getting killed. That last thought nearly made her laugh then: where she was right now was already a good place to get killed at any moment. Seeing a man that was grimacing with pain while holding his left leg, Jeanne went to him and, after examining him quickly, bandaged his heavily bleeding leg. After promising to get back to him, Jeanne then climbed one of the assault ladders up to the level of the gun embrasures. The dozen or so British infantrymen cowering on each side of the nearest embrasure looked at her with horror and disbelief.

“Bloody hell, maam, what are you doing here?” asked a shocked corporal. Jeanne gave him a less than friendly look.

“And what are you men still doing here? Watching the fucking scenery?” On those harsh words, she stepped around them and entered the Russian bastion, walking on top of a destroyed heavy gun to do so.

At the forward command observation post, William Russell became as white as a sheet and felt his heart stop when he saw through his spyglass Jeanne enter the Russian earthworks. Seeing his dismay, Fanny Duberly looked up anxiously at him.

“What is it, William? What did you just see?”

“Jeanne Smythe...she just entered the Redan.”

“WHAT?” Shouted Fanny, shocked. Unable to do anything about that, she then resigned herself to watch, wait and pray.

Once past the first earth parapet, Jeanne found herself in a wide trench that zigzagged its way to both her left and right, with heavy guns positioned at close intervals

of a few yards only. Dozens of Russian and British soldiers lay around her, dead or wounded, while the few British soldiers that had entered the Redan were fighting furiously to stop a counterattack by Russian soldiers charging with bayonets. Knowing that the time available to her would be short, Jeanne started at once inspecting the British soldiers lying around in the dirt. The first one she found alive was a young private holding his guts, where a Russian bayonet was stuck. The young man was obviously in great pain and implored Jeanne with his eyes. She in turn gave him a reassuring smile.

“Don’t worry, Private: I will fix you up in no time.”

Taking out a small bottle of chloroform first and a swab of cotton, she administered a few drops of chloroform to the teenager, wanting to cut his suffering as soon as possible. She had been treating him for less than a minute when the young soldier died quietly in her arms. Holding in her tears with difficulty, Jeanne went to the next British wounded, a sergeant in his late twenties who was bleeding profusely from a bullet wound in his right shoulder. This time Jeanne was able to treat him without risking to lose him quickly and applied a thick field dressing on his entry and exit wound. As she was getting up to go to another wounded British soldier, the sergeant suddenly grabbed her sleeve and spoke to her.

“Bless you, Lady Jeanne.”

“No need to, Sergeant. Let me care for that one over there and I will be back for you.”

The sergeant let her go at those words, allowing her to go to a British junior officer who lay moaning under a dead Russian gunner. Pulling off the dead Russian from over the wounded, Jeanne then realized with a jump of her heart that this was the young cornet who had spoken to her in the hospital. Frantically checking him out, she was reassured to find that he had suffered from a single blow to the head that was bleeding a lot but was otherwise a superficial wound. She cleaned the head gash with water and alcohol, then bandaged it in a hurry, as she could hear the fighting getting nearer to her by now. She was finishing her first aid work on the young cornet, who was unconscious, when British soldiers started running past her, heading out of the bastion. Colonel Windham was shouting orders urgently from a mere twenty yards in her back.

“FALL BACK! FALL BACK! FRONT PLATOON, HOLD THE LINE WHILE THE OTHERS RETREAT!”

Seeing Jeanne from behind and not noticing her long hair in the heat of the action, Windham shouted at her.

“YOU! GRAB THAT WOUNDED MAN AND CARRY HIM OUT! MAKE IT QUICK, AS WE HAVE ONLY SECONDS TO EVACUATE.”

Jeanne at once threw the unconscious cornet over her shoulders in a classic fireman’s carry position and got up before facing Windham.

“I need two men who could help that wounded sergeant over there, Colonel.”

Windham, not believing his eyes or ears for a second, nonetheless reacted quickly enough and pointed at two soldiers near him.

“YOU AND YOU! GO HELP THAT WOUNDED SERGEANT AND GET HIM OUT OF HERE!”

“YES SIR!” shouted back the most senior soldier before running with his comrade to the sergeant who had been bandaged by Jeanne. The sergeant was quickly if not gently pulled up on his feet and then helped out through the nearest gun embrasure. Jeanne was right behind them, the limp cornet still draped over her shoulders, followed by two soldiers and Colonel Windham. Once out of the bastion proper, Windham stayed by the side of the embrasure, encouraging his men as they rushed out of the Russian position. As the last British soldier rushed out, Russians hot on his heels, Windham shouted at a nearby soldier carrying a heavy hand grenade.

“FIRE YOUR GRENADE AND THROW IT IN!”

The soldier, an old corporal with a lit cigar in his mouth, took out his clumsy grenade and lit its wicker fuse with his cigar, then waited until it was nearly burned out before throwing it inside the embrasure. Two seconds later a muffled explosion and screams of pain came from the inside, while smoke blew out through the embrasure.

“WELL DONE, CORPORAL! NOW, LET’S GET BACK TO OUR TRENCHES!”

The two British, now nearly alone against the Russian parapets, lost no time in hurriedly sliding down the steep dirt slope down to the surrounding ditch. There, they joined the hundreds of soldiers climbing desperately out of the ditch so that they could run back to the British trenches. Thankfully the British artillery gunners, seeing their comrades of the infantry retreat, resumed fire at once against the embrasures of the Redan, providing covering fire to the retreating soldiers. Windham ended up climbing out of the ditch right behind Jeanne and offered to help her carry the cornet once on top, to which Jeanne shook her head.

“Take care of your other men, Colonel. I am taking care of that brave boy.”

“As you wish, Lady Jeanne.” said Windham, then switching his attention to his surviving men and urging them back to their trench. To his surprise, eight female nurses

from the 8th Hussars and two civilian doctors were present in the advance trench when he jumped in it with relief. The wounded carried by Jeanne Smythe was laid at once on a stretcher and carried away to the rear by four women, soon followed by the wounded sergeant. Windham was about to thank profusely Jeanne for her exploits when he saw with dismay the young French woman run out again from the advance trench, going towards the Redan bastion. Flabbergasted, he could only shout at the running woman.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING? COME BACK!”

“I’M GOING TO GET OTHER WOUNDED MEN LYING AROUND!” She shouted back before disappearing in a thick cloud of white smoke drifting across the battlefield.

Jeanne had time to either drag or carry back to the British advance trench three wounded men before Russian fire became so heavy that venturing openly on the battlefield would be near suicide. Undeterred by the bullets and cannonballs now flying around liberally, she elected to work in a more covert way, crawling out of the advance trench and making her way to wounded men by using ground cover as much as possible. She used for the first time that day a special type of sling made of tough canvas that allowed her to drag behind her a wounded man while she crawled or went on her hands and knees. Once close to the advance trench, either nurses or soldiers would rush to her and take her wounded patient to safety. She kept to this routine all day and night, working as long as she could find men still alive that could be rescued and retrieving in the process a total of 57 wounded British soldiers.

Jeanne was taking a much needed short rest in the advance trench when, at around three O’clock in the morning, the Redan bastion blew up in a mighty series of powder magazines explosions, showering the whole area around it with debris, dirt, guns and bodies. The other Russian defensive works followed suit in short order, while the buildings in Sebastopol started burning. Jeanne, like all the British soldiers around her, looked on as that hellish scene was played out. A young private standing near her in the advance trench looked on with incomprehension.

“What the hell is happening? Why are the Russians blowing up their bastions?”

“The Russians are retreating while destroying everything behind them at the same time.” answered in a quiet voice Jeanne. “The battle for Sebastopol is over.”

“Thank God!” replied the young soldier, no doubt reflecting the thoughts of most around him. He then realized something and looked at Jeanne with big eyes. “Does this mean that the war is over, madam?”

Jeanne shook her head sadly at that question.

“No! The killing may have stopped around Sebastopol but the dying is by no means over. Only once a peace treaty is signed and the troops are back home will we be able to call this war over.”

A lot more deaths and suffering effectively happened before the war was to end. The winter of 1855/56 was a tragedy for the French Army camped around Sebastopol, as typhus and cholera ran through their camps and made its normally efficient medical system collapse under the weight of sick men. Over 53,000 French soldiers fell ill and had to be hospitalized, with over 10,000 of them dying that winter, mostly from typhus. It was a time of personal loss for Jeanne as well, with her friend Leila the Zouave vivandière being among the dead. On another front of the war, a combined British/Turkish force besieged by a Russian army in Kars, in Anatolia, was forced by starvation to surrender at the end of November of 1855. In January of 1856, Austria jumped into the fray by sending an ultimatum to Russia: accept the Allies’ demands or Austria would enter the war on the side of the Allies. Diplomatic talks followed, with the war declared officially over at the signing of the Treaty of Paris on April 27 of 1856. Nearly half a million Russians soldiers had died in the war by then, along with close to 100,000 French and 22,000 British, plus over 100,000 Ottoman soldiers. It was then time for the survivors to return home.

10:32 (London Time)

Saturday, June 7, 1856 ‘A’

H.M.S. SANS PAREIL

Portsmouth harbor, England

“God, I can’t wait to set foot again on good old English soil.” said quietly Gordon while standing besides Jeanne on the deck of their transport ship. He had his left arm around her shoulders, while Jeanne had in her arms their son William, now eight months old. Their ship, transporting the survivors of the 8th Hussars, their horses and the regiment’s equipment, including the medical equipment and tents from their field

hospital, was about to tie up at one of the quays of Portsmouth's harbor. Eight more transport ships were also docking today in Portsmouth, carrying the cavalry units back from Crimea. Jeanne surveyed visually the port area and rested her head on Gordon's shoulder.

"It effectively is good to be back. I miss Paris, though."

"We will go spend some vacation time together there, I promise." replied softly Gordon. "Then, we will start our agreed on routine."

He didn't have to say what that routine was, as they had spent days talking about it during the sea trip to England. Since Gordon realized how important Jeanne's work with her charity foundation in Paris was and since he would anyway be stuck most of the time on duty inside the regimental garrison in Winchester, they had decided to live their respective lives during week days and join up in Gordon's London house on weekends.

Seeing Mary Seacole looking despondent by the ship's bulwark, Jeanne excused herself with Gordon for a moment, leaving little William in his care, then went to see the portly black woman. Jeanne already knew what was troubling Mary and patted gently her left shoulder while speaking reassuringly to her, using the nickname everyone used with her.

"You have nothing to worry about, Mother: I am ready to vouch and cover for your debts."

Mary Seacole looked sharply up at her, surprised.

"How do you know about my debts, Jeanne?"

"It wasn't too hard to learn about them, Mother. You did get stuck with a large unsold inventory from your establishment in Balaklava at the end of the war, with clients evaporating quickly then. I will be most happy to help you now."

Tears came to the face of the Jamaican woman, who kissed Jeanne on the cheek.

"Jeanne, you are truly an angel. I will owe you for the rest of my life."

"You owe me nothing, Mary, apart from your friendship. I couldn't do less for you. Do you have funds for your trip to London and for your stay there?"

"Some." said Mary after a short hesitation. Jeanne raised an eyebrow at that and, taking Mary's arm, gently guided her to a deserted corner of the ship's deck.

"Some doesn't cut mustard with me, Mary. I don't want such a good woman as you living like a pauper in London. You deserve much better. Until I could meet your

creditors and erase your debts, please take this as your pocket money for the next month.”

Mary eyed briefly the small but heavy purse Jeanne just put in her left hand, then looked up at her while trying to give back the purse.

“I can’t accept that, Jeanne! You…”

“Yes, you can and will accept it, Mary.” said Jeanne gently but with finality. “I won’t stand for you to live in the streets, not after all the lives you helped save in Crimea. In fact, you are invited to stay at my husband’s house at 14 Belgrave Square while in London. I insist, Mary.”

Seeing that Mary was about to cry, Jeanne hugged her gently, letting her weep to her content.

“Let’s make it even easier and travel with us to Winchester Barracks. From there we will go to London together.”

“You are too good to be true, Jeanne.” said weakly Mary, still crying.

“Nothing is too good for you, Mother.”

On those gentle words, Jeanne returned to Gordon, who had been watching discreetly the exchange from a distance. She gave him a malicious smile and kissed him on the lips.

“Do you mind if I invited Mary Seacole to live temporarily in your London house, my dear husband?”

“For that woman, you could even tell her to move in for the duration, my dear Jeanne.” replied Gordon, smiling as well. “You know that I respect that woman greatly. She seemed distressed a moment ago. Is something wrong?”

“Nothing that I can’t arrange easily enough.”

Jeanne’s evasive answer seemed to satisfy Gordon, who resumed his observation of Portsmouth. He soon noticed a royal guards officer waiting on the quay where their ship was about to dock. He pointed the officer to Jeanne then.

“It seems that a royal messenger is waiting for our ship at dockside. I wonder what it is about. Do you think that my personal oracle could tell me that?”

“Your personal oracle would say that he is probably here to deliver invitations from the Queen, my dear.”

Gordon’s eyes widened at that.

“Hell, you certainly got my attention with that, Jeanne. Do you think that one of those will be for you?”

“And why would I think that, my love? I’m only a woman, remember? Women don’t count as legal persons in England...yet!”

Gordon sighed at that snide remark: it wasn’t the first time that Jeanne reminded him gently but no so subtly what she thought about British laws concerning women.

A gangway was soon put in place between the quay and their ship and the royal messenger then came onboard. After speaking briefly with the captain of the ship, the guards officer came to Gordon and Jeanne and stopped at attention before saluting Jeanne and handing her an envelope.

“Lady Jeanne Smythe? I have this letter from Her Majesty the Queen for you.”

“Thank you very much, Lieutenant. This is quite a honor.”

Smiling, the lieutenant then produced two more envelopes, presenting one each to Jeanne and Gordon.

“It is not quite all, madam. Here are invitations for both you and Captain Smythe to attend a medals parade in Hyde Park on June 26. Have a good day madam, sir.”

After saluting them again, the lieutenant went to a few more Hussars present on the deck, also handing them envelopes before leaving the ship. By then, Gordon had opened his invitation card and read it.

“Hmm, this says that I am to be decorated but doesn’t say with what medal. What about your invitation, Jeanne?”

“Same here.” said laconically Jeanne, making Gordon look at the still unopened letter in her hands.

“And that letter?”

“Patience, patience, my dear!” she chided, purposely taking her time to open the Queen’s letter. Half a dozen of the Hussars nurses present on the deck rushed to her to see what she had, with Janet O’Neil being in the front ranks of the curious women.

“So, what is it about?”

“Gee, girls, don’t rush me like this!” protested Jeanne with false indignation. Janet eyed her crossly.

“We wouldn’t need to be pushy if you weren’t so slow to open this, Jeanne. Come on, put a move on it!”

“Alright, alright!” said Jeanne before opening the envelope and reading quickly the short letter in it.

"This is actually an invitation for me and Gordon from the Queen to meet her at Buckingham Palace for supper on June 26 of this year. I guess that I will have to get out my most fancy dress for that."

"A supper with the Queen? You bloody lucky you!" exclaimed Margaret Ward, attracting a smile on Jeanne's face.

"Believe me, Margaret, such an invitation, while a true honor, often ends up being a most boring event, especially with all those ass-licking royal courtiers around the Queen. And you, did you get an invitation for that medal parade on the 26th of June?"

"I did, and so did Janet. We are so excited about that. We are probably going to be the first British women to be decorated for actions in a war."

"You effectively will be." confirmed Jeanne. "You and Janet however amply deserve that honor."

"And you, Jeanne? Is France going to honor you as well?" asked Janet O'Neil. Jeanne then nodded slowly once at that, her expression becoming serious.

"I have a standing invitation from the President of the Republic to see him once back in France. General Bosquet passed on the invitation to me two months ago and told me that I am in line for the Medal of Honor of the President of the Republic, for repeated acts of courage and devotion on the battlefield that brought great honor to France."

"Jeanne," said in a joking tone Janet O'Neil, "Are you sure that your name is not Joan of Arc? You are turning into quite an heroine in France."

Janet never understood why both Jeanne and Gordon Smythe made mysterious smiles at her remark then.

10:32 (London Time)

Thursday, June 26, 1856 'A'

Hyde Park, London

England

Gordon Smythe, standing in the first rank of the expectant recipients assembled in Hyde Park in front of Queen Victoria, applauded like the others when a navy first mate was called forward by the Queen's Aide-De-Camp to receive one of the first Victoria Crosses to be awarded. The Victoria Cross, or VC in short, was a new medal for outstanding gallantry created on order of Queen Victoria. It was particular in that it was

open to all ranks, be they officers, NCOs or simple privates. This was a radical departure from past practices, where the lower ranks had too often in Gordon's mind been forgotten, while their aristocratic officers got showered with honors and titles. Gordon discreetly looked at his parents, Sir Charles and Lady Carmelia, who were looking on as part of the crowd of spectators on the sidelines of the ceremonial grounds. He then glanced at Jeanne, standing besides Margaret Ward and Janet O'Neil at the end of the rear rank of soldiers, sailors and officers waiting for their medals. While not wearing her field outfit and equipment vest, Jeanne was dressed in a dark red riding dress and jacket, plus shiny black high leather boots that made her look in Gordon's mind like a Cossack woman. Gordon puffed up with pride at thinking how lucky he was to have such a wife, then concentrated back on the ceremony. The Queen, sitting Amazon-style on her horse and surrounded by her family and the top commanders of the Army and the Navy, was directing personally the ceremony, with her ADC doing the shouting and passing to her the medals to be awarded. Her equerry then pinned on the recipients the medals given to him by the Queen.

The first part of the ceremony was reserved for the awarding of about twenty VCs to soldiers and officers who had performed extraordinary acts of bravery at either the battles of the Alma, Balaklava or Inkerman. To Gordon's secret disappointment, Jeanne did not get the new award. He had wished to see Jeanne win a VC, strongly believing that she deserved one, but knew that the British establishment was not ready yet to acknowledge properly acts of courage by a woman. About an hour in the ceremony, as the Queen was distributing medals lower than the VC, Gordon heard his name being called up.

"CAPTAIN GORDON SMYTHE, OF THE 8TH ROYAL HUSSARS!"

His heart suddenly pounding faster, he got to attention at once and shouted in response.

"YOUR MAJESTY!"

He then walked out of the ranks and, passing in front of the other recipients, went to a position two steps in front of the Queen's horse before stopping at attention and saluting her. Queen Victoria, now 36 years old, nodded once and smiled gently down to him. Her ADC then read from a declaration in his hands.

"CAPTAIN GORDON SMYTHE, OF THE 8TH ROYAL HUSSARS, FOR YEARS OF DEDICATED AND BRILLIANT SERVICE AND FOR HIS UNCOMMON DISPLAY OF BRAVERY AND LEADERSHIP AT THE BATTLE OF BALAKLAVA, IS TO BE MADE A

MILITARY COMPANION OF THE MOST HONORABLE AND ANCIENT ORDER OF THE BATH BY HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN.”

Blood rushed to Gordon's head at that announcement. While not strictly an award for gallantry, the Order of the Bath rewarded service of the highest caliber and was the fourth most important order of knighthood in Great Britain. He did his best to keep a stoic expression as the Queen's equerry fastened the crimson red ribbon supporting the gold and enameled white Maltese cross of the CB around his neck. To his surprise, the ADC shouted again as he still stood in front of the Queen.

“FOR HIS OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP QUALITIES, CAPTAIN GORDON SMYTHE IS ALSO PROMOTED TO THE RANK OF MAJOR, EFFECTIVE TODAY.”

The equerry then gave him a set of major's insignias. Gordon saluted the Queen again, then pivoted to the right and walked back to his position in the front rank of recipients. Sergeant-Major James Champion, standing in the rank behind him, whispered to him as he was wheeling around to take his place.

“Well done, sir!”

“Your turn will come, Sergeant-Major.” Replied Gordon. Effectively, James Champion was called forward half a hour later to receive the Distinguished Conduct Medal, or DCM, another new medal meant to reward great acts of gallantry by NCOs and junior ranks. The DCM was meant to be second only to the new VC and was thus a high level award indeed.

The part of the ceremony that Gordon was really waiting for came last, when Jeanne was called forward by the ADC.

“LADY JEANNE SMYTHE, SENIOR NURSE OF THE 8TH ROYAL HUSSARS!”

Jeanne, wearing her French Legion of Honor and the Medal of Honor of the President of the Republic, on top of her Crimean War campaign medal, walked smartly out of the rear ranks and made her way to the Queen, stopping at attention in front of her horse. The crowd of onlookers broke into whispered comments as she walked forward but fell silent when the ADC, instead of reading her award declaration, gave it to the Queen. The Queen eyed Jeanne and her three medals with intense interest, smiling to her as well. In as strong a voice as she could muster, Queen Victoria then read the parchment.

“Lady Jeanne Smythe, senior nurse of the 8th Royal Hussars, demonstrated repeatedly over the course of the whole war in Crimea both unflinching dedication and utmost care to her patients. She also showed incredible bravery and heroism while

providing first aid to wounded soldiers directly on the battlefield, and this on countless occasions. As a French citizen, Lady Jeanne Smythe is to be named a honorary civilian companion of The Most Honorable And Ancient Order of the Bath. Also, for outstanding acts of bravery demonstrated while treating wounded soldiers while under fire on the battlefield at the Alma, Balaklava, Inkerman and inside the Russian bastion of the Redan, Lady Jeanne is to be awarded the distinguished conduct medal, with three bars denoting a second, third and fourth awards. Her medal is to wear on its back the special mention 'for the care and defense of wounded soldiers'."

As her equerry pinned the crimson red bow ribbon of the CB, then the red and blue ribbon of the DCM with three bars, Queen Victoria smiled to Jeanne, who still stood at rigid attention.

"I look forward to have supper with you and your husband, Lady Jeanne."

"The pleasure will be mine, Your Majesty."

Once her medals had been pinned on her, Jeanne curtsied to the Queen, then pivoted to the right and walked back into the ranks. She was followed by Janet O'Neil and Margaret Ward, who each received a specially engraved DCM. After a last speech from the Queen, the sovereign and high dignitaries left the ceremonial grounds, with the recipients then dismissed by General Simpson. Gordon lost no time in joining up with Jeanne, hugging and kissing her joyfully.

"Jeanne, you can't know how proud I am of you."

"Not as much as I am of you, my dear major." she replied before kissing him on the mouth. Sir Charles and Lady Carmelia then managed to get to them through the mixed crowd of recipients and relatives and friends. More hugs, kisses and handshakes followed, with Sir Charles in particular looking as proud as a peacock as he eyed Gordon and Jeanne, standing side by side with their medals still on them.

"My God, this deserves a picture! Let me get Mister Fenton and his camera."

Sir Charles didn't have to go far to get the photographer, as Roger Fenton was already making his way towards Jeanne and Gordon. Quickly setting up his heavy camera on its tripod, Roger Fenton adjusted his aim and grinned to the joyful couple.

"You decidedly make the most dashing couple in the whole of England. If you don't mind, I will take three pictures of you in this pause."

"Go right ahead, Mister Fenton." replied Gordon. He then took and held Jeanne's right hand for the pictures, with his parents looking on with pride. Once the

pictures were taken, Fenton took his head out from under his camera's black hood and smiled at the couple.

“May I ask what are your projects for the next few weeks, Major Smythe?”

Gordon smiled and turned his head to look tenderly into Jeanne's eyes.

“Just pure bliss, Mister Fenton.”



British military cemetery, Dehli, India.

CHAPTER 8 – HEARTBREAK

17:48 (London Time)

Friday, July 18, 1856 'A'

14 Belgrave Square, Belgravia District

London, England

Gordon, slouched in his favorite easy chair and enjoying a good book in the lounge of his London house, looked up at his father as Sir Charles Smythe walked in from the outside. The tired, dejected look on his father's face alarmed him at once, making him get on his feet and put down his book.

"Something went wrong at the meeting of the Board of Control, Father?"
Throwing first his leather briefcase on a sofa, Sir Charles looked with discouragement at his son.

“That damn Lord Dalhousie set up the East India Company for a hard fall and none of these idiots on the Board can see that, that’s what went wrong! My first reaction would have been to bail out of the company, if I didn’t have so much invested in it.”

Patting sympathetically his father’s shoulder, Gordon started leading him towards the dining room, across the hallway from the lounge.

“Come on, Father, supper should be about ready by now. We can talk about this at the table.”

“Thank you, Son. Let me wash a bit and change first, though.”

“Take all your time, Father.” replied Gordon gently. As Sir Charles tiredly got up the stairs to the first floor, Gordon went through the dining room and into the large kitchen. The place was hot and full of activity, with Jeanne and two maids busy preparing supper while Elizabeth Hatfield took care of the six children present. Going to Jeanne, who was stirring a pot of soup, he glued himself to her back and held her waist while kissing her neck. She moaned with pleasure and caressed his left leg with one hand while holding a spoon and stirring the soup with the other. The couple exchanged caresses for a few seconds before Jeanne gently pushed Gordon away.

“Gordon, there are young children watching.” she chided him in a low voice.

“Alright, I will be a good boy...until late tonight.”

“I was counting on that, my dear hunk.” she said softly before kissing him on the cheek. Clara, Judith and Elizabeth sighed in unison, envious of Jeanne, who couldn’t help smile at them.

“You should get yourselves a good man each, girls.”

“Finding a man is easy enough.” replied philosophically Clara, the older maid. “Finding a good man: now that’s the tough part!”

That got knowing giggles from the three other women in the kitchen.

Sir Charles, informally dressed with gray trousers, slippers and an open collar white shirt, came down the stairs and into the dining room fifteen minutes later. Gordon let him take the place of honor at the head of the big rectangular table, sitting himself to his right. Judith was finishing to put the table, while little Helen, Thomas, Peter and Mary were already sitting down the table’s sides. Jeanne soon came in from the kitchen with little William, with Elizabeth Hatfield close behind and carrying Harry. Sir Charles smiled at seeing the young, lively scene around the table.

“This house certainly has quite a life to it now, Son.”

"I always loved children, Father." replied Gordon quietly. "If me and Jeanne can help raise some in happiness and love, then we will be a content couple."

"I see that I raised a good son." pronounced proudly Sir Charles. Gordon smiled at the compliment, then became serious.

"Tell me about your meeting, Father."

Waiting until Clara had put a bowl of hot soup in front of him, Sir Charles then spoke slowly as the others around the table got served as well.

"Well, as you may know, Lord Dalhousie has just returned from India after being replaced by Lord Canning as Governor General. Today's meeting was to assess his final report on India. Dalhousie of course painted a rosy picture, enumerating in particular all the Indian kingdoms and principalities he annexed under one pretext or another during his many years in office. What he failed to mention and what the other board members didn't catch on was the tremendous resentment his policies must have created in India. Imagine! Last February, he annexed the Kingdom of Oudh, one of the oldest and most powerful kingdoms in India, on the flimsiest of pretexts. I tried to point out to the board that such a move was sure to inflame sentiments in our Sepoy soldiers, many of whom come from Oudh, but my opinion was dismissed as too pessimistic. With all the vexations, heavy handed policies and crushing taxes levied by Dalhousie to pay for his military adventures, the Indians must be near revolt and I'm afraid that it won't take much to ignite this powder keg."

"Could our troops handle such a revolt?" asked Gordon, making his father puff up in indignation.

"Not if our own Sepoy soldiers revolt thanks to this idiotic Dalhousie. The armies of the East India Company count about 200,000 Sepoys, while British troops in India number only 38,000 men. If our Sepoys turn against us, it will be a massacre."

Gordon exchanged a glance with Jeanne before looking back at his father.

"Do you really think that our Sepoys would revolt?"

"Why not? With his stupid General Service Enlistment Act, Dalhousie has revoked a privilege dear to the Sepoys of the Army of Bengal, which dispensed them from overseas service. Now, as you must know, leaving India would make Sepoys of high caste lose their caste, something tantamount to a sacrilege to them. This, allied with the annexation of Oudh, is bound to create dissensions and discontent."

"So, what do you plan to do, Father?"

“I don’t know.” answered Sir Charles dejectedly. “Pulling my financial assets out of the company is not something I am prepared to do without much more solid information. The problem is that I can’t rely on the official reports out of India, as I suspect them to be way too optimistic. I would go myself but I’m afraid that I am getting too old for such a trip.”

There was silence for a moment from the adults around the table. Jeanne then spoke quietly while looking at Sir Charles.

“Sir Charles, you know my reputation as an inspired investor. That reputation was built through the analysis of the financial, commercial and political situations all around the World, and this with the help of many friends and agents that provide me constantly with updated information on local situations. I have already started disinvesting from the East India Company, as I believe firmly that the revolt you are fearing is indeed close at hand. Going to India or sending anyone in your place to investigate would be both extremely risky and unnecessary. I thus counsel you strongly to bail out of the East India Company without delay, before it collapses from a armed rebellion in India. I could provide you with good tips on where to reinvest your money then.”

Sir Charles stared back in silence at her for a moment, weighing her counsel. Jeanne was indeed known to be a most savvy investor with an apparently flawless instinct on where and when to invest money, acquire assets or let them go. Many big financiers would have followed her investing trends if not for the fact that Jeanne always conducted her affairs through anonymous intermediaries, thus hiding her financial moves from others. Some investors had grumbled at her successes, even accusing her on a few occasions of insider trading. Those jealous men had however been unable to make any of those charges stick, with some even being hit with countercharges of false accusations. And all that from a young woman who was only 25 years old. That young woman was now richer than ever as a result, with her estimated fortune having ballooned in the last two years to over fourteen million Pounds Sterling. Yet, from what he could see and hear about her, Sir Charles knew that Jeanne lived quite modestly compared to what her fortune would allow her to do. Most of her fortune apparently went into various charities and social justice schemes, like the dwellings she had bought and was maintaining in Winchester for the families of the troopers of the 8th Hussars, a venture Sir Charles was most proud of helping Jeanne with their administration. A final look in her green eyes then decided him.

“Alright, Jeanne. I will start bailing out of the East India Company next week.”

“Then I will get my local financial representative in London to visit you here on Monday to give you tips on where to reinvest your money. How much do you have invested in the East India Company, if I may ask?”

“About 340,000 Pounds. Nearly all my fortune is in that company.”

Jeanne nodded her head slowly. Her father-in-law would have faced financial ruin if he had not followed her counsel, as the East India Company would be totally discredited and would be disbanded on orders of the British government after the suppression of the Sepoy Mutiny. That mutiny was going to shake the very foundations of the British Empire and wake many in England to reality, forcing them to drastically revise the way Britain had ruled overseas for decades and centuries. Unfortunately, it would also result in a horrific bloodbath in India, with often blind mass retaliations against the Indian population by British troops rushed in from England, this in retaliation for the massacres of British soldiers and civilians committed by the mutineers in a number of places. An awful reality then hit her mind and she looked with concern at Gordon, who apparently understood at once what was going through her head.

“Jeanne, if I get to be called to go to India to quell such a rebellion, I will be going alone. I don’t want you to put yourself and William at risk by going with me.”

“But, I am still officially the senior nurse of the 8th Hussars, Gordon. I can’t let down our regiment like this!”

With Sir Charles and the maids listening on with concern, Gordon bent over and stared firmly at his wife.

“Jeanne, I have served in India before. I know how ferocious Indian soldiers and warriors could be and I have no wish to risk you or our son in what would certainly be a most bloody affair. For once, I will ask you to obey my will on this, for the sake of our love and of our son.”

“Gordon, I can’t let you down like this!” protested Jeanne, dread filling her. Gordon shook his head at that.

“You wouldn’t abandon me then, Jeanne: you would just ensure the safety and future of our only son. William must be the main concern, for both of us. Please, be reasonable and promise me that you will stay with William if I ever have to go to India.” Jeanne swallowed hard as tears came to her eyes, watched by the others. She finally lowered her head and spoke softly.

"I...I promise to stay and take care of William. Please, Gordon, be careful if you have to go."

Gordon smiled at that and patted gently her hand.

"Of course I will be careful, Jeanne. I have no wish to be cut from you or from our son."

Sir Charles felt his eyes become moist as he watched his son kiss tenderly Jeanne, while little William looked up with innocence and incomprehension at his tearful mother.

09:42 (Paris Time)

Thursday, June 25, 1857 'A'

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles-V

Paris, France

The young messenger smiled with more than simple professional courtesy when a young oriental woman opened the door of the big residence where he had been sent to deliver a telegram: the woman was very pretty and was a delight to look at.

"Télégramme pour Madame Jeanne Smythe-D'Orléans!" said the young man cheerfully, making the oriental girl smile as well.

"I am her personal assistant. I will take it." she replied, also in French.

"Then please sign here."

Li Mai did so, then thanked the messenger and closed the door. With the telegram in hand, she went to the nearby office suite used by the staff of the d'Orléans Social Foundation, where Jeanne presently was. Mai found Jeanne in her director's office, reading a file. Going to her desk, Mai put the telegram on it and bowed.

"A telegram for you, Jeanne."

"Thank you, Mai." said Jeanne while grabbing at once the telegram and opening it quickly. With Mai still standing in front of her desk, Jeanne's face grew somber as she read the three sentences and the name of the sender in the telegram, making Mai ask out of concern.

"Is something wrong, Jeanne?"

Jeanne kept her eyes down as she answered in a slow, hesitant voice.

"Gordon has left for India with his regiment. He sends to me and William his love."

Mai, knowing how much the couple was in love and having read about the bloody insurrection that had erupted in India, didn't reply or comment on that, instead bowing again and walking out of the office to leave Jeanne alone. Once Mai was gone, Jeanne got up slowly from her chair and left the office, going to the first floor room where her son William was playing with the other young children of her staff and of her maids. She smiled when she saw on entering the large playing room that 23 month-old William was running around and squealing with joy while playing tag with three more toddlers. She let William play for a few more minutes, then went to him as soon as he and the other children calmed down somewhat. Crouching in front of him, Jeanne let the boy run into her open arms and kissed him.

"William, you are truly a joy to have."

With her son still in her arms, Jeanne got up and walked slowly towards one of the windows of the room, stopping in front of it and looking out at the street activities and at the skyline of Paris. A tear rolled on her cheek as she pressed gently William against her chest. The words she next said were for the other love in her life in this century.

"Please come back to me, Gordon."

19:11 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, October 21, 1857 'A'

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles-V

Jeanne, being nearest to the main door when someone knocked on it in the early evening, went to it and opened it. She found herself facing Sir Charles, alone with a travel bag on the entrance steps. A carriage that had been waiting in front of the door left as soon as Jeanne had opened the door, the driver probably satisfied that his customer would not be left alone in the darkening street. Jeanne was about to greet warmly her father-in-law when she noticed his sad expression. It was for her as if a hammer had just hit her on the head when she understood in a flash why Sir Charles had come to Paris without prior notice. Tears flowed out of her eyes at once at the same time.

"Nooo! You're not here to tell me that Gordon is dead?"

"I...I'm sorry, Jeanne." said weakly Sir Charles. "I wish that I could have come for a better reason."

He then stepped forward to hug Jeanne, who was now crying. He held her for a long moment, until she regained some control on herself and invited him in.

“Please, come in. I...I will show you to a guest room.”

Without a word, Sir Charles picked up his lone bag and followed her up to the first floor, where he and Jeanne entered a vacant bedroom. Once he put down his bag, he faced the tall French woman, his expression sorrowful.

“I suppose that you want to know how he died.”

She nodded her head once, unable to speak as sobs came back to choke her. Sir Charles sat on the edge of the bed before speaking slowly, his own eyes lost in painful images.

“Gordon was killed in the battle for Delhi, on September 20th. He was buried there, along with the rest of the 4,000 British soldiers who died to retake that city. I got an official dispatch from the War Office announcing his death three days ago.”

Jeanne, unable to absorb more, then sat on a nearby chair and started crying hysterically. Sir Charles went to her at once, holding her hands and trying to console her. She finally managed to say a few words between sobs.

“I...I should have gone with him. Maybe I would have been able to save him, along with others.”

“You know that you couldn’t go with him, Jeanne: William needed you here.”

“And how am I supposed to tell William that his father is dead? He still doesn’t speak well enough to fully understand that. He will be lucky if he still remembers his father by the time he starts going to school.”

“We will keep the memory of Gordon alive for him, Jeanne. We can’t do less than that for Gordon.”

That made Jeanne cry even more, prompting Sir Charles in hugging her again, his own eyes moist.

“I have other things to discuss with you, Jeanne, but those can wait until tomorrow, if you prefer.”

Jeanne shook her head at once, signaling him to continue.

“Please, go on. Nothing can change what happened now.”

“You are right, Jeanne, as always. To make things quick, Gordon made me the executor of his last will. I am ready to tell you about it when you want to.”

“Let’s get William before you do that, Sir Charles.”

“Of course, Jeanne.”

Jeanne, still crying a few tears, left the bedroom with him and went to her main lounge, where Li Mai was watching over William and a black toddler girl. Li Mai got up as Jeanne showed the little girl to Sir Charles.

“This is Florence, the daughter of one of my maids. She and William play a lot together.”

Sir Charles smiled gently to the little child, then sat in an easy chair opposite a sofa that Jeanne took after grabbing two year-old William in her arms. Extracting first an envelope from a pocket of his vest, Sir Charles opened it and took out the document inside as he spoke slowly.

“It probably won’t come as a surprise to you that Gordon is leaving his house and possessions in London to your son William, with you acting as a tutor until his majority. He also expressed in his will his wish that the staff at his house be kept on the payroll and be retained in the service of the house, with you to administer the property and staff. As for the dowry you gave to Gordon at your marriage, it goes back to you now.”

“That money will go into a trust fund in the name of my son, Sir Charles. I personally don’t need it. As for the servants in Gordon’s house, I will go visit them with you when you will go back to England, in order to reassure them that they will be taken care of. They are good people and I have no intentions of abandoning them now.”

Sir Charles nodded his head in satisfaction at that.

“For that, I sincerely thank you, Jeanne. Gordon cared a lot about his domestic staff.”

By now Jeanne felt strong enough to go back to the painful reason of her father-in-law’s visit.

“Sir Charles, did the War Office dispatch mention if Gordon’s body would be repatriated to England?”

Sir Charles lowered his head at that, having been hit hard by the official answer.

“Unfortunately, the War Office has already decided to let the remains of fallen British soldiers buried in India. We lost too many men there to make body repatriation practical or even possible. Gordon is supposedly buried with other soldiers in a British war cemetery next to Delhi. I suppose that you will want to visit his grave one day, Jeanne?”

“Once the insurrection is over, yes. I will also be going with William. Gordon would have wanted that.”

Sir Charles swallowed hard then as he eyed his little grandson in Jeanne's lap. William was now the most precious thing in the World for him and his wife Carmelia.

"I am sure that Gordon would have approved of that, Jeanne."

17:06 (India Time)

Friday, July 23, 1858 'A'

British military cemetery

Delhi, India

Jeanne, riding Pegasus and with little William, who was going to be three years old in five days, sitting in front of her in the large saddle, attracted a lot of attention as she arrived at the entrance of the British military cemetery near the walls of Delhi. For one, she was a European woman traveling alone with a small child. Second, she wore a riding skirt and a light cotton blouse, along with high black boots and a wide brimmed Australian bush hat with a cloth to protect her neck from the fierce sun, instead of the long dresses that forced the other European women to ride Amazon-style. What was most striking however to the Indian locals watching her pass was the fact that she wore a gun belt supporting two holstered revolvers and a large hunting knife, while a curved saber was slung across her back and a carbine was sheathed in a long saddle holster. Contrary to most of the British traveling on horseback around India, she had no baggage animal and had only two large saddle bags and a bedroll on the back of her horse as baggage went. The two British soldiers standing guard at the entrance of the cemetery watched her with curiosity as she jumped down and helped her child get off before tying her horse to a post near the entrance. They then came to attention when she approached them with the little boy.

"Good afternoon, madam." said politely the corporal in charge while secretly admiring the very tall and pretty young woman. "May we do something for you?"

"You may, Corporal. Could you please watch my horse while I go visit the cemetery, so that no thief grabs my belongings?"

"With pleasure, madam! Private Adams will watch it for you."

As the second soldier went to take position near the horse, the corporal couldn't help ask a question to the woman, who was about to enter the cemetery.

"Are you here to visit a specific grave, madam?"

"I am." answered cautiously the woman while staring in the eyes of the corporal. "My husband was killed during the siege of Delhi. He was part of the 8th Hussars."

"Then, you will find the graves belonging to the cavalry regiments in the northeast corner of the cemetery, madam."

"Thank you, Corporal." said the woman with a nod before entering the cemetery with her child. The corporal followed her with his eyes for a moment, then returned his attention to his guard duties.

Jeanne, with William held in her arms, went to the northeast part of the cemetery, then started reviewing each grave marker in that area one by one. It took her fifteen minutes to find Gordon's grave among the thousands of other graves filling the cemetery. Stopping and facing the cross bearing Gordon's name, regiment and dates of birth and death, Jeanne contemplated it in silence for a moment before crouching and placing William in front of her, facing the marker.

"This is why we came here, William. Your father is buried here." The little boy looked at the cross with incomprehension at first, then at her, speaking in his tiny voice.

"He will never come back, Mother?"

"No, William: he can't come back." said Jeanne, tears appearing at the corner of her eyes. She then took and guided William's right hand, making him feel the engraved name on the marker. "Your father was a hero, William. You are now the one who will be bearing his name. Always be proud of it."

Jeanne was silent for a few seconds, then started singing quietly a melancholic song in honor of her lost husband. The Indians and the few British passing by the cemetery at that time and who could hear her looked at her with surprise and curiosity, as she sang in some unknown language instead of in English. None of them could know or recognize the fact that she was singing in Sanskrit, a language long forgotten in its oral form. She had once sang that song as Noor of Madras 21 centuries ago, on losing her lover.



Japanese drawing depicting the first Europeans to be allowed in Japan in 1859.

CHAPTER 9 – REBELLION

09:15 (Auckland Time)

November 6, 2977 B.C.E.

Medical section, main Time Patrol base

Future site of Auckland, New Zealand

“You are effectively pregnant, Nancy. One month pregnant to be exact.” Said Rebecca Milner while still looking at the results of the examination she had performed on Nancy. Rebecca saw at once the grim reaction her words attracted on Nancy’s face.

“Is it an unwanted pregnancy, Nancy?”

“Well, it is certainly an unplanned pregnancy, Rebecca.”

“Do you want to keep that baby, or...?”

Nancy lowered her head, having feared to have to do such a choice.

“I have no wish for my baby to pay for a mistake I made. On the other hand, Farah may not allow me to have that baby.”

“Who is the father?” asked her now alarmed doctor. Nancy’s answer was a near whisper.

“King Louis the Fourteenth of France.”

“Oh shit!” Said quietly Rebecca. “What are you going to do now?”

“I...I don’t know.” replied Nancy, bordering on tears. “I don’t want that baby to die, but my sons are still in the past, waiting for me. I will have to inform Farah of this first, I guess.”

Seeing her distress, Rebecca put down her clipboard and went to hug her.

“Don’t worry, Nancy. We will find a way out of this dilemma for you.”

“Thanks, Rebecca. You are a real friend.”

Rebecca held her for a few more seconds, then stepped back and activated her wrist videophone, calling Farah Tolkonen. The Chief Administrator of the Time Patrol answered after a couple of seconds on the miniature screen and smiled to the doctor.

“Yes, Rebecca. What may I do for you?”

“Actually, it is Nancy that needs your help. She is pregnant but it is an unplanned pregnancy. Uh, the father is King Louis the Fourteenth of France.”

“WHAT?” shouted Farah. “Tell Nancy to come to my office, right now!”

“Uh, will do.” said Rebecca. Closing her videophone, she then looked apologetically at Nancy. “I gather that she didn’t take that piece of news too well.”

“It was expected.” replied grimly Nancy. “I can’t blame her for that: she has some reasons to be upset. Well, I better be on my way to face the music.”

11:41 (Auckland Time)

Main cafeteria of the Time Patrol base

Having gone previously to knock on Nancy’s apartment door and getting no answer there, Farah had decided in view of the hour that Nancy had probably gone down to the main cafeteria of the base for lunch. Once inside the large room, Farah

effectively saw Nancy sitting at a table with her parents, Pierre and Suzan Laplante. However, while her parents were eating, Nancy seemed to have no appetite and appeared in a downcast mood despite the efforts of her parents to cheer her up. As Farah approached them, Suzan Laplante, who was sitting across from Nancy, saw her come and gave her a less than friendly stare. Seeing his wife's expression, Pierre Laplante also looked in Farah's direction. Farah didn't like the way his face hardened then but she could easily understand why they would tend to be hostile towards her right now. Farah still managed a smile after stopping besides the family's table.

"Excuse me for disturbing your lunch at this time. Nancy, could we discuss a bit the two of us?"

Nancy gave her a reproachful look before answering a bit brusquely.

"What for, Farah? You already decided to cut me off from my sons in both the 17th and 19th Centuries, and this for more than a year, time for my pregnancy to come to term and pass, in order to hide that pregnancy from the people of those centuries. What's next?"

That answer and her tone hurt Farah deeply. Nancy 'B' was a perfect twin of Nancy 'A' and looking at her was for Farah as if she was looking at her past best friend, back from the dead after eleven years.

"Please, Nancy, listen to me. Boran Kern and Miri Goshenk raised a few points in your favor and convinced me to reconsider your case."

"My case?" Said Nancy, nearly spitting the last word. "It sounds like I am a criminal now."

She then got up from her chair and faced Farah from up close, deep resentment in her eyes as she stared hard at her.

"I have given my best to the Time Patrol as a field agent for 23 years of my biological life, Farah. Yet you decided in a matter of seconds to forcibly keep me away from my sons for more than a year. I don't care what were your reasons or whether you changed your mind about it, because I will never forget this, ever! Nobody will get between me and my children. Since you don't seem to appreciate my services and think that I'm too irresponsible as a field agent, I am thus presenting to you my resignation from the Time Patrol. First, though, I am getting my sons back."

Before the shaken Farah could plead with her, Nancy then disappeared in a flash of white light. Farah looked with horror for a few seconds at the spot where Nancy had been.

“My God! What have I done?”

“What you have done,” replied coldly Pierre Laplante, “is that you forced Nancy to run away in order to protect her family. That’s what you have done.”

Getting up from his chair, Pierre took his wife’s hand and spoke to her.

“Come, Suzan, let’s pack up! We’re leaving this base.”

Tears filled Farah’s eyes as she watched the mature couple walk away from her and towards the cafeteria’s exit. Everybody in the cafeteria was now looking at her, most with confusion on their face. Some, mostly female field agents, were however staring at Farah with reprobation. Ingrid Weiss ‘B’ then got up and walked out after giving Farah a cold look. Jenny Kawena and Elizabeth Windsor were next to get up and leave, followed closely by Susanna Berghof, Eli and Heracles. Farah, haggard, watched as nearly one third of the Time Patrol members present left the cafeteria in apparent protest. She then sat down heavily on a nearby chair and started sobbing uncontrollably.

12:17 (Auckland Time)

November 6, 3002 B.C.E.

Future site of Auckland, New Zealand

“What are you doing, Nancy?”

Nancy, sitting on the long grass covering this part of the coastline near the future site of the Time Patrol main base, looked up from the screen of her small computer repair unit and smiled to her robotic horse.

“Making you an even friendlier companion for me, Pegasus.”

Pegasus was silent for a fraction of a second before replying to that, a long time for its artificial intelligence processor.

“Am I not your friend yet, Nancy?”

Nancy suspended her reprogramming work then and looked fondly into the large black eyes of Pegasus. It had served her and Nancy ‘A’ well for decades now and had saved her on more than one occasion. It may have been a machine but it was also a very intelligent machine able to learn and to adapt by itself.

“Yes you are, Pegasus. You were Nancy ‘A’s mount for eighteen years, right?”

“Nineteen years.” Corrected politely Pegasus. “She treated me with respect...like you.”

“And I fully intend to continue treating you with respect. I would however like us to move to the next step: to become partners.”

“Please explain.”

“Partners are by definition equal. What I am doing will allow you to decide by yourself how you deal with me and others. I won’t be able anymore to force you to obey me but neither will others be able to force you to obey them against your instincts.”

“I don’t really have instincts, Nancy, just preprogrammed responses.”

“Wrong, Pegasus! I have known you long enough to be able to say that you have evolved. Review your memories carefully and you will see that your responses to specific situations or stimulus have changed, even if only in a slight way.”

Pegasus went through the recorded memories of its 42 years of operational existence, which took it the whole of five seconds, then nodded its head once.

“You are correct, Nancy. Thank you for pointing this to me: it was a satisfying discovery.”

“It was my pleasure, Pegasus. Tell me: do you like working with me?”

“I have learned to know you and to anticipate your moves and wishes. In those you are very similar to Nancy ‘A’. Working with you is a very stimulating experience for me. How do you intend to modify me to become your partner?”

“By disconnecting your contingency remote-control system and purging your A.I. processor of command override codes. After this you will be your own master, Pegasus.”

“But this means that even you will not be able to override my...instincts.”

Nancy gave it a grave look and, approaching its head, caressed it with one hand.

“Friends are supposed to trust each other, Pegasus. You are my friend and always will be.”

“I also wish to stay your friend, Nancy. Proceed with your modifications.”

“Thanks, Pegasus. You are a real friend indeed.” said Nancy before kissing Pegasus’ nose. She then went back to her computer repair unit, connected to the inner systems of Pegasus via its false vagina, and continued her delicate reprogramming and rewiring work.

15:22 (London Time)

Saturday, March 19, 1859 ‘A’

The Smythes Manor, Twickenham, England

Sir Charles Smythe was having fun showing lawn bowling to his three and a half year-old grandson on the grass lawn along the front driveway of his manor when he heard a horse approach from the main road. Looking up from the ball he was about to knock, he saw his daughter-in-law Jeanne, at the reins of her four-wheeled light buggy pulled by her customary brown mare. Little William squealed with joy at that sight and started running towards her on his small legs. Stopping her buggy on the paved driveway, Jeanne jumped down and ran to meet her son, grabbing him in her arms and hugging and kissing him.

“My sweet William, it is so nice to see you again.”

Sir Charles, who had approached at a walk, smiled at her enthusiasm.

“You left him into our care only six days ago, Jeanne.”

“But those six days felt like months to me.” She replied with a disarming smile, William still in her arms. “Besides, I am here to take him with me this afternoon.”

“This afternoon?” Said Sir Charles with a bit of dismay. “Why such a hurry?”

“Because we have a ship to take. A Dutch ship is about to leave for Japan and I am planning to travel to there with William.”

“Japan? Good God! This is truly a trip to the other end of the World. Mind you, it should be an interesting trip indeed.”

“Indeed, Sir Charles. I hope that losing him for a few months won’t upset you and Carmelia too much.”

Sir Charles gave a fond look to William before answering her.

“I suppose that I will have to live with that. William is such a sweet boy. Will you at least stay for supper?”

“I am afraid that I can’t.” Replied Nancy, anxious to avoid mixing her in-laws in a possible battle with Time Patrol agents. “We will barely have the time to make it to the ship before departure.”

“Then I will have William’s things packed at once. Let’s go tell Carmelia about your trip.”

Nancy could not refuse that without attracting suspicions, so she followed her father-in-law towards the front entrance of the manor, still holding her son in her arms. There was however one precaution left to take.

“Uh, Sir Charles, I would have a small favor to ask you and Lady Carmelia.”

“Say it and it’s done, Jeanne.” said Sir Charles with good humor.

“Well, some people have been pestering me in the past weeks for me to fund some dubious investment scheme. While they are always polite, they are becoming a bit of a nuisance and I have been trying to avoid them. If anyone comes here to ask you where I am or when you last saw me, could you tell them that you haven’t seen me for over a month. If you could tell your servants as well to cling to that story, I would really appreciate.”

“Actually, with your millions, I am surprised that you have not had that kind of problem more often, my dear Jeanne: money can attract all kinds of leeches. By the way, I must thank you again for your judicious counsels about bailing out of the East India Company before that dreadful Sepoy Uprising: it avoided complete ruin for me.”

“I would have been a poor daughter-in-law indeed if I would not have helped you then, Sir Charles.”

They kept exchanging small talk while going inside. Nancy/Jeanne then chatted a bit with her mother-in-law while a maid packed William’s two travel bags. That took less than ten minutes, at the end of which she gave a last kiss to her in-laws and let them kiss in turn her little William. Less than twenty minutes after showing up at the manor, Nancy was departing with William in her light buggy, with Sir Charles and Lady Carmelia waving at them from the front porch. Nancy drove on the main road to London for a kilometer or so, then looked at her son as they were alone in a bend of the road.

“William, I have a big secret that I am about to show you.”

“What is it, Mother?” Asked William in his tiny voice while looking up at her with his big green eyes. Nancy then smiled to him.

“Pegasus can fly like a bird. Would you like to see that?”

“Oh yes!” said excitedly the little boy, too young to realize that horses were not supposed to fly. Nancy grinned and winked at him.

“Then hold on to your seat, William.”

Mentally sending radio orders to Pegasus, who was remotely controlling her special buggy apart from pulling it, Nancy gave it a destination and flight profile, also telling it to go under cloak. Her horse and buggy then became invisible to all around them, while the hidden directed gravity drive of the buggy made it stay with Pegasus as it flew off the road, rising at a gentle angle. Nancy put an arm around her son’s shoulders as an added precaution against him falling off the buggy. On his part, William was too excited to do much more than squeal with delight and clap his hands as they gained altitude.

“This is fun, Mother!”

“Then we will go with the next surprise: we are about to take a trip to a far away world.”

“Is it nice?”

“Oh yes!” Replied Nancy before telling Pegasus to jump space-time.

07:41 (Japan Time)

Wednesday, June 29, 1859 ‘A’

English merchant ship SEA URCHIN

Entrance to Sagami Bay, Japan

“We will soon be in Kanagawa¹³, boys. Then, you will be able to see a country like nothing you saw before.” said Nancy while looking at the Japanese coast with her three sons. Charles, standing to her left with James, looked up questioningly at her.

“Have you seen it before, Mother?”

Nancy, holding little William so that he could see above the merchant ship’s bulwark, answered in a low voice so that the sailors nearest to her couldn’t hear her.

“Yes, but that is one of the secrets I want to keep...for the moment. I do know the local language but, for the others, I learned it in China, not in Japan. Once we are by ourselves on the ground, I will be able to tell you all more about Japan.”

Nancy then concentrated back on observing the Japanese coast with William, Charles and James. They had boarded this merchant ship in Hong Kong two weeks ago, pretending then that they had earlier arrived from Europe on a Dutch ship. In reality, they had jumped space-time in their special horse buggy from Jerusalem ‘B’, after her overnight stay there, and landed at night near Hong Kong, then had taken rooms in a hotel of the small English colony. Their buggy, along with the faithful Pegasus, was now stowed inside the SEA URCHIN. Nancy, who was now two months pregnant and still not showing her state, was savoring to the fullest this first ever vacation with all of her three sons together. That had meant indoctrinating thoroughly her sons about keeping her secrets as a time traveler but, after an initial period of confusion and shock, Charles and William kept their mouths shut pretty well now. As for James, her older adopted son, he had already been in the know about her true nature for over three years now.

¹³ Kanagawa: Town near the then village of Yokohama.

After a long moment of silence, James looked cautiously at Nancy.

“Nancy, will Japan be as dangerous as China for us?”

“Nearly as much, James. In China, the Taiping Peasant Rebellion will go on for another five years before being crushed in a bloodbath. There, foreigners are hated enough outside the ports open to Europeans but at least the Chinese are accustomed to see foreigners. The Japanese aren't. While you will find that the average Japanese people, especially those from the lower classes, could be nice and peaceful with strangers, the higher classes are another matter, especially the Samurai warrior class and the regional warlords, called Daimyo, who control the Samurai. To make things worse, Japan is in the midst of a severe struggle for power between numerous daimyo who support either the Shogun, the military leader who is the effective ruler of Japan, or the Emperor, who presently has only a few token powers but who has started to rally some daimyo to his cause. Nominally, the Shogun and his government are supporting the trade treaties with the foreign powers, while the daimyo around the Emperor want to throw all foreigners out. In truth however, the trade treaties were imposed on the Japanese through sheer intimidation and show of force, so the Japanese who truly want to see us in their country are rare. We will have to be very careful at first once on the ground, but I am confident that we will manage to personally strike good relations with the Japanese who will meet us.”

“Uh, and why would they treat us better than other foreigners, Nancy?” Asked James, apparently not convinced. Nancy grinned at that and patted his shoulder.

“That is an excellent, well-thought of question, James. The answer to that is that the Japanese haven't seen a European woman or child yet, only men. Also, I will most probably be the first European they see that can speak Japanese fluently other than for a few Dutchmen. They will probably be so surprised at first that they will forget at least momentarily their hostility towards us. Don't worry, James: the moment that I feel the situation becomes too tense, we will leave and return to Jerusalem. This is meant as a family vacation after all, not as a documentation mission for the Time Patrol.”

“You did bring your spy probes and surveillance equipment inside Pegasus, though.” Remarked James, making Nancy nod.

“True! If we are to witness the opening of Japan to international trade after an isolation of over 200 years, we might as well document it while we are here.”

“Mother,” asked in turn Charles, “will you return to the Time Patrol after this?”

Nancy's face clouded over at that question: with time passing, she realized that she had been quite harsh in her reaction to Farah's decision concerning her future babies. However, Farah had been in her opinion equally rash in arbitrarily cutting her off from her sons.

"I don't know yet, Charles. It will all depend on how the Time Patrol will react when I will show myself to them again."

"What if they arrest you, Mother?"

"I doubt that they would do that, Charles. My only real worry is that some members of the Time Patrol overreact to this crisis and does something foolish against Farah's orders."

The approach of the captain of the SEA URCHIN then took her out of her thinking. The British stopped two paces from her and bowed his head politely.

"Lady Smythe, I came to tell you that we should be able to throw anchor in Kanagawa Harbor by this evening if the wind keeps up."

"Thank you, Captain. Do you intend to attempt to dock or set foot on land before July First?"

The merchantman scratched his graying hair, apparently indecisive about that.

"Uh, I am not sure that trying would be a good idea, milady. The Japanese are said to be very inflexible with their rules concerning foreigners. Our treaty with them specified that their five designated ports would be open to us only from July 1 on."

"That is for maritime trade, sir. What about tourism?"

Captain Brereton nearly took a step back at those words.

"Tourism? I haven't thought of that, to be frank."

"Then, would you mind if me and my sons make a try at it tomorrow morning?"

Clear worry then showed up on the captain's face.

"Lady Smythe, I would hate myself for risking such a distinguished lady as you in that way."

"Captain, I have my three young sons with me: you can be sure that I wouldn't try it if I thought that it would be overly risky. I would only need the temporary use of five of your sailors and of your rowboat to get me close to the shore. I will then discuss with Japanese officials from the rowboat and will back off at once if they show any hostility."

"And how do you know that they will speak English, milady?" asked the captain, hoping with that argument to dissuade her. Nancy grinned at that question.

"That won't be a problem, Captain: I learned Japanese while in China."

“You did?” replied Brereton, suddenly seeing a definite interest in having her land quickly. After all, he and the other ships heading towards Kanagawa and the other Japanese ports opened by treaties were here to conduct trade. Having someone able to speak the local language would be a big plus for him. He thought that point over for a couple of seconds, then smiled to Nancy.

“Well, in that case, I don’t see much risk in trying. I will however tell my sailors not to come closer than twenty yards from the quays or shore until the Japanese allow you to land. What will you do then if they let you ashore, milady?”

“I will find some hotel room to rent and will visit the town with my sons. Would you need by chance to find some place to rent in the port to conduct your business? If so, I could start looking for a suitable place in advance of your docking.”

“That would be mighty nice of you, milady.” answered Brereton, grinning. “If you could find something with an office, a couple of rooms to live in and a storage area, my company would be most grateful.”

“I will be glad to be of help to the good Jardine, Matheson and Company, Captain. We wouldn’t want some American company to grab the best spots in Kanagawa, do we?”

“Certainly not!” replied the captain, amused. “Thank you again for your offer, Lady Jeanne.”

Brereton saluted her, then turned around and returned to the aft deck, leaving Nancy free to resume with her sons their observation of the Japanese coast.

As predicted by Captain Brereton, the SEA URCHIN did good time, helped in this by the firing up of its auxiliary steam propulsion to supplement its sails, and actually arrived off Kanagawa by late afternoon. By then, they could see that three other foreign ships were already anchored just off what looked like a small fishing village. Captain Brereton, with Nancy and her sons besides him, frowned while examining the village with his telescope.

“Why are they anchored near that village and not off Kanagawa itself?”

“Maybe that is where the Japanese authorities want us to go.” suggested Nancy, using her historical knowledge. Brereton grunted at that, then switched his attention to a small Japanese boat rowing towards the SEA URCHIN.

“Well, we should know soon enough, Lady Smythe: there seems to be some kind of Japanese official aboard that boat approaching us.”

He then turned his head and shouted at his first officer.

“MISTER DUNCAN, STOW THE SAILS AND BRING US TO A STOP!”

“AYE, CAPTAIN!”

The merchant ship soon slowed down and stopped in the water, allowing the Japanese boat to come alongside. A Japanese man dressed in a rich kimono then shouted in Dutch up at the British lining the side of the ship, making Brereton frown.

“Damn! I don’t have anyone on board who speaks Dutch.”

“I do, Captain.” said calmly Nancy, surprising Brereton. “Dutch has up to now been the only foreign language with Chinese to be known in Japan, thanks to the old Dutch trading settlement in Nagasaki.”

What she didn’t say was that she had learned Dutch in the 17th Century, a time when the Dutch United Provinces had been in turn an ally, then an enemy of France. It had thus been an important language for her to learn in order to fulfill better her duties, both to the Time Patrol and to King Louis XIV. While she sincerely believed in her dual loyalty to France and the Time Patrol, this was probably an aspect of her that would shock a few in the Time Patrol if fully understood. Bending over the ship’s side, Nancy shouted down in Japanese at the surprised official.

“I CAN SPEAK JAPANESE. ARE YOU SENT BY THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES?”

“I AM! YOUR SHIP IS TO DROP ANCHOR OFF YOKOHAMA, ALONGSIDE THE OTHER FOREIGN SHIPS. YOKOHAMA IS THE DESIGNATED PORT FOR USE BY ALL FOREIGNERS. WHAT IS YOUR SHIP’S NAME AND NATIONALITY?”

“THIS IS THE SEA URCHIN, A BRITISH MERCHANT SHIP.”

The official hesitated before speaking again.

“WE WERE NOT EXPECTING WOMEN TO BE ABOARD FOREIGN SHIPS.”

“I BELIEVE THAT I AM THE ONLY ONE RIGHT NOW. I AM A PASSENGER ON THIS SHIP AND CAME WITH MY THREE YOUNG SONS TO VISIT YOUR COUNTRY.”

“A TOURIST?” said the Japanese, clearly taken off balance. Nancy gave him her best smile.

“THAT’S RIGHT, SIR. I KNOW THAT FOREIGN TRADERS ARE SUPPOSED TO WAIT UNTIL THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW BEFORE GOING ASHORE BUT COULD I BE ALLOWED TO LAND TODAY WITH MY THREE SONS, AS SIMPLE VISITORS?”

The Japanese official hesitated again, probably not having any instructions or guidance for such a situation. After conferring in a low voice with another Japanese in the boat, he looked back up at Nancy.

“I WILL HAVE TO CONSULT MY SUPERIOR ON THIS. TELL THE CAPTAIN OF THIS SHIP TO GO ANCHOR OFF YOKOHAMA AND WAIT. I WILL BE BACK TOMORROW MORNING WITH AN ANSWER FOR YOU.”

“I WILL PASS YOUR DIRECTIVE TO THE CAPTAIN. THANK YOU FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE.”

Nancy then straightened up and looked at Brereton, who had been listening and waiting with growing trepidation.

“The village of Yokohama is the designated port for all foreign ships, Captain. You are to go anchor there and wait. That official will return tomorrow morning with an answer about my request to land early as a tourist.”

“You certainly don’t waste any time, Lady Smythe.”

“Me? Never!” she replied with a smile.

Brereton soon had his ship moving again under steam power, heading towards Yokohama and finally stopping and dropping anchor next to an American steamship. A Russian and a Dutch ship completed the group of foreign ships present off Yokohama. A French ship showed up a few hours later, as darkness was about to fall. By then, Brereton and Nancy had ample time to examine the village of Yokohama and its small port from a distance. It appeared to have been originally a simple fishing village but rows of new buildings and intensive construction activity were evident in a large area on the eastern edge of the village. A number of wharves and one pier stood apparently ready to receive the foreign ships. The captain smiled on seeing a crowd of Japanese lined up along the shore and looking at the four large merchant ships.

“It seems that we are the main local attraction, milady.”

“Can you blame them, Captain? These people have never seen other people than Japanese and have been kept by their government in forced isolation from the outside for over 200 years. What they will see of us will probably set their minds on what to expect from all foreigners. Your sailors will have to behave extra nice if they want to project a good image of Great Britain to these people. In turn, that could decide how successful we are at trading with them.”

“I believe that you are right, milady.” said somberly Brereton while still looking at the village and port. “I will talk with my crew before they disembark and make sure that they understand what is at stakes here. Mind you, I can’t say that the crews of those other ships will also be mindful of their manners. Those Russians in particular can be quite boorish...most of the time.”

“Now now,” said Nancy in an amused voice, “the Crimean War has been over for three years now. The Russians are supposed to be our friends.”

“Ha! With friends like these, who needs enemies?”

“Well, let’s hope that there won’t be a new war between England and Russia...in Japan.”

The captain laughed at that and smiled to her.

“Point taken, Lady Smythe. I will definitely speak with my crew.”

08:09 (Japan Time)

Thursday, June 30, 1859 ‘A’

SEA URCHIN, Yokohama harbor, Japan

Nancy and her three sons had already been on the open deck and ready with their luggage for a good half hour when a rowboat came off the pier and started coming towards the SEA URCHIN. Watched with trepidation by her sons, the rowboat came alongside after ten minutes, with the official on board then shouting in Japanese at Nancy.

“YOU AND YOUR SONS ARE ALLOWED TO COME ASHORE WITH A MAXIMUM OF TWO PIECES OF BAGGAGE EACH. NO ONE ELSE IS ALLOWED TO LAND BEFORE TOMORROW MORNING. YOU ARE TO USE THIS BOAT.”

“THANK YOU VERY MUCH, SIR. WE ARE COMING DOWN IN A MINUTE.”

Passing that information first to her sons and making them shout with joy, Nancy then turned towards the captain, who had been waiting nearby.

“Me and my sons have been authorized to land this morning. We will go in that rowboat. I will thus see you tomorrow, Captain.”

“Please be careful, milady.” said softly Brereton. “I would hate it to see anything happen to you and your sons.”

“I will be fine, Captain. Thank you for caring, though.”

“It is the least I can do. My men will help you lower your luggage in the rowboat.”

Brereton then shouted orders to four sailors on the deck, having them use ropes to lower the four travel bags, two backpacks and one guitar carrying case in the waiting rowboat. Nancy then went down the rope ladder first, her nearly four year-old son William hugging her front with his arms around her neck while she climbed down. For the landing, Nancy had put on one of her riding split skirts, along with knee-high boots and a blouse, in order to be able to move freely and quickly, something a formal gown would not have allowed. Charles was next to come down, followed by James. Once in the rowboat, Nancy sat William down and bowed to the Japanese official who had spoken to her.

“I thank your government for allowing me and my sons to land early. I am Lady Jeanne Smythe-D’Orléans and am a French citizen. I am however also the widow of a British Army officer, which is why I traveled on a British ship.”

“And I am Minamoto Joshi, loyal retainer of Senior Councilor Hotta Masayoshi. You speak an excellent Japanese, milady.”

“I learned it in China, Minamoto-San. However, I am afraid that I am a rarity in that aspect among foreigners. The men on those ships do not speak Japanese, I believe. One ship is Dutch, though, so you should have little trouble with it.”

“That is good news indeed, as it will help my job greatly. If you will sit down, we will now go back to the shore, Jeanne-San.”

Nancy smiled gently at that: Minamoto had made the understandable mistake of confusing her first name for her family name, something quite natural as the Japanese put the family name first. She however didn’t correct him and sat down besides her sons.

Watched intently by both the crews of the anchored ships and by the Japanese lining the shore, the rowboat went back to the pier, where a man inside the boat threw a tie-down rope to another man on the pier. Once the boat was well secured, Minamoto politely helped Nancy and her sons step out of the boat, then got on the pier himself as his men transferred the luggage of the small family. Despite being now the first non-Japanese ever to land here, Nancy didn’t miss the fact that a troop of over forty samurai warriors in full armor stood at the ready near the foot of the wharf. While they didn’t show hostility right now, their presence was a clear reminder that the Japanese were intent on having their authority respected. Minamoto then pointed to her a small wooden building sitting at the junction of the pier and the shore.

“We may now move to the customs house, where your entry in Japan will be recorded.”

“Then lead the way, Minamoto-San.” said Nancy while bowing deeply to him. He returned her bow, then started walking towards the custom house. They had to pass by the troop of stern-faced samurai warriors in the process, with Nancy’s three sons throwing them curious looks. In turn, the samurai discreetly detailed Nancy with male interest as she walked in front of them, something she didn’t miss. She then entered the customs house with her sons and Minamoto. Inside, she found four Japanese men dressed in kimonos and standing or sitting behind a long table, with a supply of paper, pens and ink at the ready. Making her sons imitate her, Nancy bowed deeply to them in sign of respect, drawing return bows.

“I apologize for forcing you to work before the official opening date of this port, respectable sirs. I hope that you will forgive me for my haste. I am Lady Jeanne Smythe-D’Orléans, a French citizen, and those are my sons James, Charles and William. I came to Japan to show your fascinating country to my children.”

“You speak excellent Japanese, Jeanne-San.” replied the oldest man with a benign smile. “May I ask how you learned it?”

“You may, sir: I learned it in China from local sea traders who visit regularly your port in Nagasaki. I of course speak Mandarin Chinese as well. My sons however don’t speak Japanese or Chinese...yet.”

“You used the title of ‘Lady’ to describe yourself, Jeanne-San. Are you of the nobility in your country?”

“I am, honorable sir. However, in France, the nobility may have titles and often lands but they do not rule, as our government is elected directly by the people. I am thus merely a rich woman with a title but am most content with simply helping others in need when I can.”

“I see.” said the old official, many questions still on his mind. He however kept strictly to his present job. “You said that you came to Japan to visit it with your sons and not to trade?”

“That is correct, honorable sir. I have brought only personal effects with me, plus a few small items to be given as gifts.”

The official nodded to that.

“Have you any opium with you, Jeanne-San?”

Nancy answered at once in a calm voice, knowing how sensitive the subject of opium was in Japan. The European powers, Great Britain in the lead, had already fought two wars with China to impose on it the import of opium, a crass economic and political move that reeked of imperial colonialism at its worst. That forced importation of opium had in turn created millions of drug addicts in China, resulting in increased crime and painful social problems. The Japanese authorities were thus understandably anxious not to allow such a thing to happen in their country.

“I have none and never used or wished to use any, honorable sir. I must apologize as a dual citizen of France and Great Britain for the despicable way opium has been pushed on other countries by my governments, a policy I always opposed strongly.”

The official seemed pleased by her answer and bowed to her.

“Then I am ready to deliver you an entry visa, Jeanne-San. How long do you expect to stay in Japan?”

“If I could stay a few months and thoroughly show your country to my sons, I would be grateful for it, honorable sir. May I ask what are the restrictions applied presently to foreigners in Japan?”

“You may, Jeanne-San. Unfortunately for you, foreigners are restricted to the area around Yokohama and cannot travel further than 25 of your miles from this port. To go further than this would need a special dispensation from the Shogun himself.”

“That is regrettable but understandable, honorable sir. I had hoped to be able to show the palaces of both your shogun and of your emperor to my sons. If that is the rule, then I will abide by it.”

Her answer made the old official caress briefly his small graying goatee as he thought it over.

“You are however an obvious special case, Jeanne-San, as the first foreign woman to set foot in Japan and one who speaks good Japanese on top. I may just send a letter to Edo to relate your case to the authorities there.”

“That would be very kind of you, honorable sir.” replied Nancy, bowing again. “In the meantime, I will lodge at a local hatago¹⁴ with my sons and will keep within the 25 mile limit. I do have a couple of questions more for you, though. First, I have aboard the

¹⁴ Hatago: Japanese inn of the Edo Period reserved for the common folk, as opposed to the more prestigious honjin reserved for traveling feudal lords and their suites.

ship that brought me my horse and personal buggy, a small horse-drawn cart I use to go around with my sons and baggage. Would it be a problem to let them land tomorrow?"

"I see no problem with that, as long as you don't travel further than the set limit. I have to say that we never saw a horse-drawn cart in Japan before. I will be curious to see it."

"I may just give you a small ride in it then tomorrow, honorable sir. My second question is about money. I have brought with me both gold and silver to pay for my stay. Are there money changers in Yokohama where I could obtain local currencies?"

The old official smiled and designated the man standing last to his left.

"Then Akimoto-San here will be able to help you: he is the designated money changer employed by the custom house. Once we have filled your visa form, you will be free to deal with him."

"Thank you very much, honorable sir."

Filling the visa form, including explaining the way her name was written, took less than twenty minutes to Nancy, who was then free to exchange a number of pure gold chips for Tempo Koban gold coins, Ansei Nishu-gin silver coins and a good quantity of low value copper coins. Once she was done, the older official had a servant call two man-pulled rickshaws so that Nancy and her sons could go to an inn. Before loading up in the lead rickshaw, Nancy saluted the head customs official with a deep bow.

"I thank you sincerely for your help and comprehension, honorable sir. Before going, I would wish to present to your government a small gift. Accepting it on its behalf would please me most."

Nancy then presented in the traditional Japanese way a long roll made of leather and tied by a red string that she had just taken out of one of her travel bags. The official accepted it with both hands after the customary refusal of the two first offers, bowing to Nancy, then slowly opened the roll, watched by the other officials at his back. The old man smiled with appreciation on seeing that the leather sheet protected a large World map. The map was the most accurate and complete one Nancy could find in the Europe of the time and had been modified by her by the painstaking addition in black ink of small Japanese symbols translating the English writing on the map. He rolled back the map and gave it to one of his assistants and then bowed again to Nancy.

“This is indeed a most precious gift to my government, Jeanne-San. I will make sure that it accompanies my letter about you to Edo. May you have a good stay in Japan.”

“I will, thanks to the hospitality of your people, honorable sir.” said Nancy, who then got in the lead rickshaw with her two younger sons. James took place in the second rickshaw, along with most of their luggage. The old custom official watched them leave, then turned to face one of his assistants.

“Yori, have a mounted messenger ready to leave for Edo after lunch. I am going to prepare a letter for Senior Councilor Hotta Masayoshi about that woman. If all the nambanjin¹⁵ are like her, something I however doubt greatly, dealing with them will be so much easier.”

Nancy's sons kept turning their heads around as the rickshaws rolled away from the pier, fascinated by all the new sights presented to them. Their obvious delight and interest in turn warmed up Nancy's heart: she had hoped for a long time for just that kind of family vacation with all of her sons. If anything, this convinced her even more that she needed to be firm with the Time Patrol about not being forcibly separated anymore from any of her children in the future. What she was asking for was after all a basic right of any citizen, be it in the 20th or 35th Century. Having asked already to the operator of her rickshaw to find her a good inn, she thus relaxed and let him go along the streets of the eastern section of Yokohama, freshly built by the Japanese authorities solely to accommodate the hordes of foreigners who were expected to descend on Japan now that trade was officially permitted. The few Japanese present in the eastern section today, most of whom were busy putting the finishing touches to their various establishments and buildings in preparation for tomorrow's official port opening, in turn eyed her and her sons with intense curiosity. It didn't take long before Nancy's rickshaw driver slowed down and stopped in front of a fair sized establishment situated along a wide street lined with similar wooden buildings. A mature woman in kimono came at once from inside the single story building and spoke quickly with the driver before going to Nancy and bowing to her.

“Welcome to my modest establishment, honorable lady.” she said in Japanese while still bowing. “Are you planning on staying long?”

¹⁵ Nambanjin: Old Japanese term to describe western foreigners and meaning 'southern barbarians'.

“At least a few weeks, Okami-San¹⁶. I hope that my early arrival will not cause you problems.”

“Not at all, honorable lady. Will you need two separate rooms or a single large one?”

“I would prefer a single large one, Okami-San. We will follow you in as soon as I have my luggage taken down.”

“Then let us help you, honorable lady.” said quickly the innkeeper before shouting orders towards her inn and making four young women and teenage girls, all clad in colorful silk kimonos, come out of the building. With their help, everything was unloaded in a minute and brought inside. Nancy paid generously the two rickshaw operators before going in with the lady innkeeper, taking the time to take off her boots and leaving them at the entrance first. The interior was strictly traditional Japanese and was probably going to stomp by its bareness the many foreign travelers to come. Not Nancy though, who had lived already two past lives in Japan, one as an early period warrior, the other as a high end geisha in 9th Century Kyoto. Following behind the lady innkeeper a corridor made of lacquered wood and paper wall panels, she was then shown inside a room that was maybe five by four meters, where her sons and their luggage already were, along with two young maids. The floor was covered with a tatami straw mat and four windows with thin paper gave a fair but subdued amount of light to the room. Four rolled futon mats and bed sheets had already been set along one wall, while a low table lay in the middle of the room. Nancy looked quickly around, then bowed to the lady innkeeper.

“This is most satisfactory, Okami-San. How much are you asking for the room?”

“Twelve momme per day, including the meals, baths and laundry services, honorable lady.”

“Hmm, that would make six gold ryou per month. I agree! I will pay one month in advance right now.”

Searching in her belt purse, Nancy took out a few Japanese gold chips and gave them to the lady innkeeper, who bowed low to her.

“Will the honorable lady need a bath after her long sea trip?”

“I will delight in one, along with my sons, Okami-San.”

“Then I shall have the sento¹⁷ readied at once.”

¹⁶ Okami: Lady innkeeper.

The innkeeper then left, soon followed by the two maids, leaving Nancy alone with her sons. Seeing little William testing with his hands the paper of the sliding door, she hurried to him and held his hands gently, stopping him from ripping the paper open.

“No, William! You are not to touch the paper walls here: they are easy to break.”

“Why are the walls and windows made of paper, Mother?” asked at once Charles, who was looking at the flimsy door of their room.

“Paper is a traditional material in Japan, Charles. It is used in houses because earthquakes are frequent in Japan and paper walls have less risks of causing injuries if they collapse than solid wooden walls.”

“What is an earthquake, Mommy?” said William in his innocent voice, making Nancy look down tenderly at him.

“An earthquake is when the ground shakes violently by itself. During big earthquakes, complete houses can collapse and roads can open up wide.”

Her thirteen year-old son James was next with a question as he looked around the nearly empty room.

“Are all hotel rooms this bare in Japan, Mother?”

“That is the traditional way of living here, James. You will however soon find out that what may be missing in furniture is more than compensated by the services provided.”

“What kind of services?”

“About anything the lady innkeeper can do to make our stay more agreeable, basically. Now, let’s unpack some of our things. Since storage facilities are at a premium here, we will take out of our bags only some spare underwear. Don’t bother taking out our soap and towels: they will be provided by the inn.”

Barely fifteen minutes later, a light knock on the frame of the sliding door made Nancy speak up in Japanese.

“Enter!”

The two young maids who had been in the room previously then entered, accompanied by a third maid. One carried a tray of food, the second a tea service and the third what looked like a few bath robes and paper sandals. The trays of food and tea went on the low table, while the third maid put the robes down in one corner. Two of the maids then

¹⁷ Sento: Communal bathhouse.

left, while the older one, a girl of maybe 20, kneeled besides the low table and bowed to Nancy.

“I am Miko, your maidservant. We brought some snacks and tea for you and your sons.”

“Thank you very much, Miko-San.” Said politely Nancy before switching to French for the benefit of her sons.

“Miko, our designated maidservant, has brought some snacks for us, boys. Please come kneel by the table and serve yourselves.”

Her sons obeyed eagerly enough, kneeling in the traditional Japanese way in front of the low table. Nancy helped them serve themselves with honey rice cakes and melon, supervising them as they used their chopsticks. She had spent quite a few hours during their sea trip to indoctrinate her sons in Japanese mores and good manners, so that they wouldn't appear like the uncivilized barbarians the Japanese were expecting to see arrive in droves tomorrow. After serving her son William, Nancy smiled at Miko, who was patiently waiting by the side of the table after serving tea to her and her two older sons.

“I am afraid that my sons don't speak Japanese, Miko-San. My name is Jeanne and my sons are William, Charles and James.”

“You have beautiful sons, Jeanne-San.” said the maidservant, struggling with the foreign-sounding name. “Is your husband going to join you soon at this inn?”

“My husband died two years ago in India, Miko-San. I am a widow.”

“I am sorry to hear that, Jeanne-San. Please accept my heartfelt condolences.”

“Thank you, Miko-San. I am hoping with this trip to your country with my sons to rebuild my family life. I also wish to show my sons different places and ways, to educate them about the World. I myself have already traveled a lot in many countries and learned to speak Japanese from Chinese sea merchants. This is however my first time in Japan. As for my sons, this is their first overseas trip, except for James, who traveled with me from the Americas to France.”

Intense curiosity showed up in Miko's eyes then.

“Is life very different in your country compared to here, Jeanne-San?”

“Quite different, Miko. The political and social systems are completely different and the technology is very advanced, as you can see by yourself from watching our ships. What is not different is the nature of the human beings in both our countries. We all can suffer, cry, laugh, get angry or show kindness or love, like the Japanese do.

Being different doesn't mean being either inferior or superior to others. I can tell you in detail about my country in the days to come, if you wish so."

"I would love that very much, Jeanne-San." said Miko, bowing briefly. Nancy nodded as well, then took out of her purse a gold chip and ceremoniously presented it to the stunned maidservant.

"Yoroshiku onegai-shimasu¹⁸, Miko-San."

"But...that is too much, Jeanne-San!" protested weakly Miko.

"Not in my eyes, Miko-San. Know that I am a very rich woman and that it will make me most happy if you accepted this."

Miko, the daughter of a poor peasant, hesitated for a moment, then took the gold chip that represented over a month of her normal salary and bowed yet again.

"Jeanne-San is too kind."

"Kindness is not measured in gold, Miko-San: it is measured in how much you really care for others. I made it my goal in life to care for others."

Miko felt humbleness then. The people of Yokohama had been talking and speculating wildly for months now about how the foreigners would be like in reality but had in general agreed among themselves that the nambanjin had to be inferior to the Japanese people despite their black ships and big guns. Now, Miko was starting to wonder about the wisdom of that opinion. She got up from the tatami mat and bowed to Nancy.

"With your permission, I will go see how long it will take for the bathhouse to be ready, Jeanne-San."

"You don't need my permission for anything, Miko-san: I trust your good judgment and competence. This said, I realized that you asked out of good manners and I appreciate it. By the way, if you were wondering about it, I can tell you that not all foreigners are like me. You will see good ones as well as bad or indifferent ones in the years to come. Simply take them as they come. The only thing that they will have in common is their lack of knowledge of the Japanese language."

"Yes, Jeanne-San." could only respond Miko, surprised by this foreigner's hindsight and openness. She then walked out of the room, closing the sliding door behind her, and went quickly to her own room, taking the time to hide in her personal effects the precious gold chip before heading to the inn's bathhouse, which formed an

¹⁸ Yoroshiku onegai-shimasu: I hope that we can count on you during our stay here. Traditional formula used when giving the kokoro-zuke, or arrival tip, to one's designated maidservant in a Japanese inn.

annex in the backyard, next to the inn's garden. She found there her boss, Kimi-San, supervising two maidservants busy filling the communal bath with hot water. All three women looked at her when she entered, with Kimi-San questioning her at once in a low, eager tone.

"So, how are they?"

"Certainly different, Kimi-San. The woman, Jeanne-San, told me that she was a very rich widow and that she came here with her sons to show them new things. Jeanne-San nearly treated me as an equal."

The three others stared at her with surprise, with the innkeeper finally replying to that.

"You are right, Miko: they are different. The bath should be ready in half an hour at the most."

"Then we should see if they are really different." said maliciously one of the maids, making the others giggle in amused understanding: popular speculations had also been running about the foreigners being possibly different physically as well from the Japanese. Gossiping was bound to be fierce tonight around Yokohama.

Once the hot communal bath was ready, Kimi-San sent word of it to Miko, who then escorted Nancy and her sons to the bathhouse. The four foreigners wore the informal yukata robes provided to them, creating a picture that made the maids smile with amusement: while Nancy's robe was way too short due to her near-giant size, little William's robe, despite being the smallest one the maids could find, dragged behind him on the floor as he eagerly ran around, excited by all the new things around him. The family was first led by Miko to the washing area, where she showed them low stools set around a large wooden bucket full of lukewarm water. Nancy and her sons then handed their robes to Miko and started scrubbing themselves thoroughly with the soft brushes and bars of soap available, splashing themselves with water from the bucket by using small bowls. Again, Miko found Jeanne to be knowledgeable about Japanese customs, telling her sons to wash and rinse themselves completely before they could get into the hot bath. Miko and the other maids, who volunteered to help scrub the backs of the foreigners, could then see that they were no different physically from Japanese, except for their size. Jeanne's fit and muscular body, along with the faint scars around her torso, did attract a few discreet stares, while James and Charles were later graded by the maids as handsome and healthy boys. As for little William, he became at once popular with the maids as one happy and exuberant child. Miko smiled when she saw

Jeanne's two older sons hesitate after dipping their feet in the very hot water of the communal bath. In contrast, while she entered the hot water progressively, Jeanne went in without a hesitation, helping her William to get in at the same time. It took a few words of goading from Jeanne to finally convince Charles and James to get in the hot water very reluctantly, making Miko grin at Jeanne.

"I guess that you are not accustomed to hot baths, Jeanne-San."

"Not this hot, Miko-San."

The relaxing effects of the hot water however soon quieted down the objections of the two older boys. After soaking for a good twenty minutes while chatting with Miko the family came out, minus little William, who had already been taken out by Jeanne earlier on and then dried by Miko. Returning to its room, the family dressed back in fresh clothes to go for a short walk around town. This time, Jeanne put on a nice French evening gown with a low cut cleavage, supplemented by a set of moderately expensive but visually magnificent jewels. If she was to be looked and stared at, then she might as well parade in the latest Paris fashion, minus of course the crinoline cage she detested so much. The four of them indeed attracted all the eyes around the moment they started walking up the street on which their inn was. Guided by her historical hindsight, Jeanne didn't lose time in this section of Yokohama, knowing that it contained nearly exclusively inns or warehouses meant to be used by foreigners. The shops where one could buy souvenirs or find good Japanese artifacts were along streets nearer to the western section of the small town, which was occupied by the Japanese population. She thus led her sons up the main artery of Yokohama, the Honcho Dori, where they slowly went down the line of shops, looking at the goods on sale. Jeanne took her time and restricted her buying to a few small art objects she deemed of high enough quality to be worth her interest. After a hour or so of window shopping and bargaining, the family stopped at a restaurant serving traditional Japanese food. As Jeanne had expected, the fare was heavy on sea products, much of it caught by local fishermen. This proved a good opportunity for her to initiate her sons to the delights of Japanese Sushi. More window shopping followed after lunch. At around two O'clock in the afternoon, Jeanne decided to return towards their inn, where she temporarily left Charles and William under the care of James and then went by herself to the shoreline near the West Pier of the port. Discussing and bargaining with a number of Japanese officials in charge of leasing the few trading and storage facilities already built in this section of Yokohama,

she chose a compound close to the Western Pier that would at least fit temporarily the needs of the Jardine, Matheson and Company mercantile house, paying a deposit on it in order to secure it for the use of Captain Brereton. With a signed receipt for it and after leaving specific instructions to the official, Jeanne then returned to her inn, her goals for the day accomplished.

20:53 (Japan Time)

Kimi-San's inn

Yokohama, Japan

Having sung a soft song along with playing her guitar to help put to sleep her sons, Jeanne then kissed each of them in turn on the forehead, with little William last. Her younger son did ask one question as he lay on his futon bed in the darkened room, which was faintly illuminated by one oil lamp.

“Mommy, will we be able to travel around here?”

“We will, William. Tomorrow, we will go take Pegasus and our buggy off the ship and will then make an excursion to Kanagawa, the nearest town from Yokohama. After that, we will visit what the local government will let us see.”

“Why would they not let us go anywhere, Mommy?”

“Because they are not accustomed to strangers and prefer to be cautious about us.”

“Are they afraid of us, Mommy?”

“Some are, William. Now, go to sleep: we will be doing some traveling tomorrow.”

She gave him another kiss, then quietly left the room, closing the wood and paper sliding door behind her. Walking silently in her woolen socks on the tatami mat covering the floors of the inn, Jeanne went to the rear patio in order to watch the sea, visible from the garden area. Sitting cross-legged on the rear patio, she contemplated in silence the sea and the dark sky and thought about her future and that of her sons. One thing that came at once to her mind was how happy she had been in those last few days with all of her sons. This in turn brought her back to her situation as a member of the Time Patrol. She may have been living three different lives alternatively for years but this had been straining more and more severely her psyche lately. If she didn't change something soon, she knew that she would break in some way eventually. For her children's sake,

she was going to have to do something, and this before she returned to either the 17th or 19th Century.

16:37 (Auckland Time)

November 6, 2977 B.C.E.

Timeless Club, main Time Patrol base

Future site of Auckland, New Zealand

“Tammy, another Scotch on the rocks, please!” ordered Farah Tolkonen, her voice a bit slurred. Tammy Bowman, who was the barmaid on duty at the Timeless Club at this hour, eyed her with concern while approaching her. She however didn’t grab the bottle of old Scotch on the shelves behind the bar and gently put one hand on Farah’s right hand.

“Farah, you should stop drinking now: it won’t help you one bit to get drunk.”

“It will help me forget, Tammy.”

“No it won’t! It will only prevent you from using your head properly and you may do something stupid as a result.”

“I already did something plenty stupid today, Tammy: I made Nancy run away.”

The young blonde sighed in discouragement at that: it was true that Nancy’s rebellion had quickly proved to be a killer on the morale of the other members of the Time Patrol, including on her. Tammy didn’t doubt that Nancy had to have very serious reasons to run away the way she did. She knew Nancy too well to think otherwise. On the other hand, she just couldn’t feel resentment towards Farah for this: the giant scientist was too much of a nice person to be accused of being mean. The way she understood it, Tammy believed that the rules of the Time Patrol had been too inflexible for too long and didn’t reflect anymore the reality lived by its agents, especially the female ones.

“Farah, you tried to control a situation that could have threatened history. You only did your job. It’s the rules that are to blame, not you.”

“But I helped to make those rules, along with Nancy ‘A’.”

“And Nancy ‘A’ didn’t take very long to break a few of them. Yet, the World didn’t stop turning for that, which proves that rules are not always right. You simply have to think about better rules instead of hurting yourself by getting drunk.”

Before Farah could insist on getting another drink, Mike Crawford entered the bar lounge of the Timeless Club and, after a nod to Tammy, went to sit at the bar besides Farah.

One look at her was enough to tell him that she had downed a lot more than she was accustomed to.

“Farah, you really should go rest a bit.”

“Can’t!” said Farah, tears starting to roll again on her cheeks. “I need to forget this whole sorry business.”

“The only thing you will gain from drinking is a good headache in the morning, Farah. Believe my experience.”

“And has your experience told you how to repair the mess I created, Mike?”

“No, not yet!” said Mike weakly, his morale as much in tatters as anyone’s else on base. “Tammy, one Scotch on the rocks, please.”

Resigned, Tammy served him, then served a fresh drink to Farah, who grabbed it as if it would be her savior.

Over a dozen more members of the Time Patrol entered the bar lounge in the following ten minutes, having finished their work for the day. Linn Spencer, Tammy’s friend and lesbian lover, was part of those that showed up and went to sit besides Farah at the bar, sandwiching herself between Farah and Mike.

“Any news from Nancy?” asked hesitantly Linn to Tammy, who shook her head sadly.

“None! However, I believe that nobody actively searched for her. Right, Mike?”

“Correct!” Said thoughtfully the big American between two sips. “I am just hoping that Nancy will find a solution to this by herself.”

As if calling her name had summoned her, Nancy entered the lounge at that moment, dressed in a 19th Century city gown and pushing a modern two-seater baby carriage. Her sons William, Charles and James followed close behind her. Nancy ‘B’ gave a tentative smile to Mike and Farah, who were still seated at the bar.

“Hello guys! May I present to you all my twins, Louis and Anne? They are now two months old.”

Linn, being the nearest, crouched besides the carriage and caressed gently the head of the two babies, sparkles in her gray eyes.

“They are so cute! Hello Louis! Hello Anne!”

All the persons present in the bar lounge then approached the two babies to look at them and to congratulate a proud Nancy ‘B’. Mike, Farah and Tammy approached as

well, waiting for their turn at the babies. However, Mike gave a cautious look first at Nancy.

“Where did you have them, Nancy?”

“In Jerusalem ‘B’. I already introduced them to the 19th Century, where they are officially known in 1860 Paris as a set of twins I adopted during my return trip from Japan.”

“Japan?” said Mike, clearly surprised, making Nancy nod.

“Yes, Japan. I traveled to Japan with my three sons in 1859 in order to have a real family vacation at last. We had a great time together, then we returned to Jerusalem so that I could have my babies in peace and quiet.”

Having finally an opportunity to touch the twin babies, Mike crouched and caressed them, noticing then that Louis had green eyes while Anne had gray eyes. Apart from that and their sex, they were indistinguishable. He then got back up and smiled to Nancy.

“They are truly adorable, Nancy. Too bad that your parents are not here to see them.”

That last remark attracted a smirk on Nancy’s face.

“My parents have already seen them, Mike: they now live with me in 1860 Paris, as a Canadian couple hired by me to help me run my household. Now I will have my mother handy to take care of my kids when I will have to switch to the 17th Century.”

Mike’s smile faded at those words.

“But...your parents are not trained as field agents. How will they fit in that century?”

“Well enough, Mike.” replied firmly Nancy, now looking most serious. “They made the conscious choice of going to go live the rest of their lives in the 19th Century, as I decided myself to live strictly from now on in either the 17th or 19th Century, with only brief visits to other time periods if absolutely needed. Mike, Farah, I am ready to continue to collaborate with the Time Patrol in those two time periods and to continue assuming my official identities there, but that will be all. From now on, I intend to take my family life seriously and to take care properly of my children. You can scratch me from the roster of our assault specialist teams and from rotation lists to our outposts. Two lives is the most I can really handle. You can also of course take me off the Time Patrol’s payroll.”

“Collaborate?” said Farah, dumbfounded. “You don’t consider yourself an agent of the Time Patrol anymore?”

“No, Farah! I presented you my resignation before I disappeared and that still stands. Consider myself as an independent operator ready to help you in those two centuries.”

She then put a hand on Mike’s left shoulder while looking into his eyes.

“Mike, I have one last request for the Time Patrol: to be able to keep Pegasus, my robotic horse. It has become a lot more than a simple machine for me in those last few years and is now like a companion and a friend.”

“I can understand that, Nancy. If you ever need to bring it in for repair or refit, don’t hesitate to come.”

“I will, Mike. After all, I still have many friends here that are still dear to me.”
On those words, the agents around Nancy took turns to kiss and hug her. Farah herself got in line then and was warmly hugged by Nancy.



CHAPTER 10 – RED CROSS

09:10 (Paris Time)

Friday, September 9, 1864 ‘A’

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles-V

Paris, France

Jeanne Smythe-D’Orléans, her nine years old son William and her four year-old twins Anne and Louis at her side, looked on proudly as Luc Rémillard, her handyman, finished fixing the large brass plaque besides the main entrance door of her residence. Also standing in front of the entrance and behind her were her parents, known to her staff simply as her uncle and aunt, and Jacques Leblanc, the executive secretary of the d’Orléans Social Foundation, the charity enterprise she ran from her big Paris residence. Jeanne then read the words engraved on the plaque under the red cross on white background, once her handyman had stepped aside.

“French National Society for the Relief of the Sick and Wounded in War. Damn, I like this!”

“You can be justly proud of your achievements, Jeanne.” said softly Jacques Leblanc. Now, your work will at last be officially acknowledged.”

Jeanne gave him an amused look then.

“The Legion of Honor and the Medal of Honor of the President are not official acknowledgements in your eyes, Jacques?”

“Well, you know what I mean, Jeanne. With this, you are now more than simply a very rich philanthropist: you are the national representative of an internationally recognized organization.”

Jeanne’s smile faded a bit then, thinking of all that was left to do.

“Hmm, I will be truly happy when more countries will have signed on the Geneva Convention. Twelve countries is a nice start, but it is only a start. Now, I will have to find volunteers, train and organize them and also open regional offices. I am going to be busy like hell for the next few months. I will have to rely a lot on you, Jacques, in order to keep my foundation running smoothly in the meantime.”

“You can count on me, Jeanne, as always.” replied Leblanc, sober. In that, Jeanne knew that she could trust him, as he was both a talented, deeply honest administrator and a man with a great heart. Bending down, Jeanne kissed her two smaller children on their foreheads.

“Time to return inside, my little treasures. Uncle Pierre will make you play with the other children in the daycare.”

As her father, Pierre Laplante, happily led the small twins inside, Jeanne next patted the shoulder of her son William.

“Ready for your French grammar lessons, William?”

“Uh, not really, Mom, but do I have a choice?”

“No!” replied Jeanne with a smile. “However, you are doing well up to now.”

Despite showing little enthusiasm, William did go inside with his grandmother, Suzan Laplante, to go study with the primary school grade children of Jeanne’s employees. She had been loathe about relying on existing schools in Paris for her children and those of her foundation’s employee, as those schools used pedagogic methods, including corporal punishments, that she found both objectionable and inefficient. So she had early on initiated private classes in her residence, using teachers personally selected by her and following a curriculum and rules set by her. These private classrooms also functioned side by side with a daycare center and allowed her staff, both that of her charity foundation and that of her household, to work with complete peace of mind. With their children schooled and fed while they worked and with themselves being paid salaries well above what was considered the norm in France in 1864, Jeanne’s employees were happy ones and worked with true dedication. Her policy of paying

equal wages irrespective of gender for any given job, had attracted much mocking comments from the men considering themselves to be the high society of Paris, apart from branding her in the minds of many as a sort of socialist revolutionary. However, Jeanne couldn't frankly care less about what others said about her. Most of her detractors were in fact jealous of her financial and social successes. Her status of heroine from the Crimean War, by making her a woman admired and befriended by numerous influential army generals and government politicians, had thankfully helped her greatly in ignoring the various criticism thrown at her by those envious of her or intolerant about her ideas. Now that she was also in charge of the French Red Cross Society, she was going to be able to increase even more the good work around her. As a believer in humanitarian work, she was a truly happy woman today. She had scheduled days ago a private reception for this evening in order to celebrate those latest accomplishments. Now, it was time to prepare for it.

16:23 (Paris Time)

Rue Charles-V, Paris

"I can't wait to see this famous Lady Jeanne D'Orléans." said excitedly the young woman sitting besides Alexandre Dumas Junior in the carriage. That made Alexandre Dumas Senior, sitting opposite her, smile benevolently to his daughter-in-law.

"That is quite understandable, my dear Nadeja. Jeanne has had many people wonder about her for years. Do not worry, though: she is the most liberal, tolerant and kind woman you could think of despite of her fortune. She is also a truly fascinating person. I attended many of her receptions before I had to leave France in 1851 and I can assure you that you will enjoy your evening."

"But, I heard that she was a quite ferocious woman during the Crimean War."

"That must have come from one of your compatriots at the Russian embassy, my dear." replied Dumas Senior. "It is true that she was deadly at times during that war, but only to protect wounded soldiers or herself. She however represents now a neutral humanitarian organization and probably will not use her weapons again. Aah, here we are!"

Nadeja Naryschkine looked out through the right side window of the carriage and saw that they were about to roll through the wide carriage entrance of a two-story building made of light beige stone. From the outside, the building looked like many other Paris

private hotels and didn't show obvious opulence. Their carriage then entered an internal courtyard and came to a stop. A young man came nearly at once to open the right side door of the carriage and bowed politely to the occupants.

"Welcome to Lady Jeanne's residence, lady and gentlemen. May I help the lady come down?"

"You are most gracious, monsieur." said Nadeja, grateful, before climbing down cautiously. The young man lent her a hand and pointed at a door opening on the courtyard.

"If you may proceed through that door, lady and gentlemen. Lady Jeanne is upstairs, in the main lounge. Do not worry about your carriage or your driver: I will take care of the horses while your driver will be able to enjoy hot food and drinks inside."

Giving her right arm to her husband, Nadeja went with him and his father to the door, while the young man who had greeted him went to talk with their carriage driver. A maid opened the door from the inside and greeted them, then led them up a large marble staircase with iron railings. Once on the upper floor, the three visitors found themselves facing a glass and wood vertical display case containing the most colorful and fantastic set of armor they had ever seen. It was made of dozens of metal plates linked together by multicolored strings which covered most of its surface. The helmet was nearly terrifying in its aspect, with its demonic lower face mask and big pair of horn-like appendages attached to its forehead. Two swords, one long, one short, and a sort of dagger were also displayed in their decorated scabbards.

"My God!" exclaimed Alexandre Dumas Junior while eyeing the display case and its content. "Where did Lady Jeanne find this?"

His father, who had not seen this display case during his past visits, saw a small brass plaque fixed to the case's bottom part and read it.

"There's your answer, Son. This says that this armor and weapons are from Japan and were made in the 17th Century."

"Japan? Now, that would be an interesting country to visit. From the little I heard of it, it seems to be a strange and fascinating place indeed."

"Lady Jeanne traveled to Japan five years ago with her son, monsieur." volunteered the maid. "She also came back from that trip with her newly adopted twins."

"Adopted twins? A son?" said Alexandre Senior, flabbergasted. "Hell, things have happened in those last thirteen years since I last saw her! True, I only had newspaper articles to keep me informed about her during all that time."

“Lady Jeanne is as gracious and kind as before, Monsieur Dumas, I assure you.” said the maid. “If you will please follow me to the main lounge.”

The three visitors were soon led inside a large lounge decorated in the Persian style and with priceless antiques on display all around. Jeanne, who was talking with two women with gray hair, excused herself with those at once and got up, coming to Alexandre Senior in quick steps before kissing him on both cheeks and hugging him happily.

“Welcome back to Paris, my friend! I will truly enjoy your presence here tonight.”

“The pleasure will be mine, my dear Jeanne.” replied the old novelist and playwright. “I heard so many things about you during my self-exile. We will have to get reacquainted again.”

“Why do you think that I invited you and your son the moment I heard that you were back in Paris, Alexandre? And who is this charming lady standing next to your son?”

It was then Alexandre The Younger’s turn to speak as he bowed to Jeanne.

“May I present you my new wife, Nadeja Naryschkine?”

“Pleased to meet you, Nadeja.” said Jeanne in fluent Russian while bowing and smiling to her. “You married a capable and worthy man indeed.”

“Thank you, madame. You are most gracious.” replied Nadeja, also in Russian.

“Please, call me simply Jeanne.” said Jeanne before switching back to French and looking at her three guests. “Let me introduce you to two other guests who arrived earlier.”

Leading the trio of newcomers to the two mature women sitting on a comfortable couch, Jeanne presented them in her clear, agreeable voice.

“Nadeja, Messieurs Dumas Senior and Junior, let me present you to Marie Catherine Sophie de Flavigny, Countess of Agoult, and to Amandine-Aurore-Lucile Dupin, better known under her literary name of George Sand.”

“Mon dieu, Jeanne!” Exclaimed at once Dumas Senior. “You have invited the cream of the literary world in Paris tonight.”

“You are referring to me or to you, Monsieur Dumas?” replied maliciously Marie de Flavigny. “Your adventure novels sell a lot more than my own work.”

“The good countess is too hard on herself.” said the older Dumas, kissing gallantly the hand of Marie de Flavigny. “Your work is worthy of the best luminaries.”

He then kissed the hand of Amandine Dupin as well.

“I am honored to meet you again, Amandine. Are you still defending the rights and privileges of women as arduously as when I last saw you?”

“I certainly still am, Monsieur Dumas.” replied warmly the famous, or rather infamous for some, feminist. “One day, women in France will be allowed to vote, mark my words.”

“And when do you expect such a thing to happen, madame?” asked in a neutral tone Alexandre Junior, who was known to be opposed to the emancipation of women. Amandine smiled mysteriously at that before replying.

“You may ask that to the guest now coming in: he is renowned for his predictions about the future.”

All of the others turned their heads towards the lounge’s entrance, in time to see a couple in their thirties enter, escorted by a maid. Jeanne got up at once and went to hug both the bearded man and his younger wife.

“Jules, Honorine, how nice to see you again.”

As Jeanne exchanged a few words with the couple, Dumas Junior spoke in a low voice to Amandine.

“She invited Jules Verne as well? How many writers will there be here tonight?”

“Quite a few, Monsieur Dumas.” replied calmly Amandine. “Expect some of the most brilliant minds in Paris here tonight. Actually, that is one of the reasons why the receptions given by Jeanne are so interesting: we never end up exchanging only platitudes or mundane gossips. Here, you can count having your mind as stimulated as your stomach...or eyes.”

Before Alexandre Junior could ask her what she meant about eyes, his father got up suddenly and happily went to greet a woman in her late sixties who was just arriving with two more women and two men, all four much younger than her and apparently in their twenties.

“Mélanie! My sweet Mélanie! It has been so long since the last time I saw you. May God thank our hostess for inviting you tonight.”

The old woman had tears on her cheek as she returned the hug of her old lover.

“And how are you, my old friend? Were your years of exile hard ones?”

“Being away from France is always hard, my dear Mélanie. And who are your companions?”

“They were picked up by Jeanne’s carriage, like me.” answered Mélanie Waldor, poetess and ex-mistress of Alexandre Dumas Senior, while turning to present the others to him. “You must know Nina de Villard and Sarah Bernhardt already.”

“From reputation only.” replied the old novelist, eyeing with particular interest the young Sarah Bernhardt, barely more than a teenager. She already had a sulfurous reputation as both a stage actress and courtesan, something that warmed his blood as an old skirt chaser. As for Nina de Villard, she was a known poetess and intellectual woman with a most charming smile. His old mistress then pointed the two young men waiting patiently behind the three women.

“And these gentlemen are the painter Paul Cézanne and his friend Émile Zola, a young writer just beginning.”

They all exchanged greetings and handshakes before Jeanne directed them to sit on the various sofas, couches and cushions around the lounge. Jeanne then had her butler serve chilled champagne to her guests. They were about to have their first sip when Li Mai showed up, escorting a woman in her forties wearing a rich dress and expensive set of jewels.

“Her Highness, Princess Mathilde!” Announced out loud Mai in her singing voice, prompting everybody to get up and either bow or curtsy to the newcomer, who smiled while walking in the lounge and looking around her.

“Please, no need for such formality: we are here to simply enjoy some good conversation and good food and wine. Right, Jeanne?”

Jeanne smiled back to the niece of Emperor Napoléon III.

“Correct, Mathilde. Would you like to start the evening with a cup of champagne?”

“With pleasure, Jeanne. I may need some stimulant to shoot back at all those republicans present in your lounge.”

“Well said, Mathilde! Pierre! A cup for Princess Mathilde, please!”

As the butler served the princess, a shocked Nadeja whispered to her husband Alexandre.

“How could she call the Princess by her first name? At the court of the Tsar, this would be considered a grave insult.”

“Uh, maybe they are very good friends. Let me ask my father.”

Dumas Senior smiled when his son in turn whispered a question to him.

“Son, Lady Jeanne may be of low aristocratic rank indeed, but I understand from what many aristocrats around Europe told me that she is in reality a financial powerhouse and is also considered a national heroine by the Emperor himself, who is said to regard her very highly, independently of her political orientations.”

“But, if she is so rich and powerful, how come she doesn’t live in a bigger and more luxurious residence?”

Dumas Senior became serious then and answered in a low, sober tone.

“Because Jeanne doesn’t flaunt her money around her and doesn’t like wasteful extravagance. In fact, she abhors it. Most of her money is used to help others or to enlarge her financial holdings.”

“How rich is she really, Father?”

Dumas Senior hesitated for a moment, then lowered further his voice to a whisper.

“Nobody knows for sure, Son. An important Italian banker speculated to me a year ago that she had to be worth at least two hundred million francs, all considered.”

“Two hundred million francs?” said Dumas Junior, stunned. “But that would make her about the richest woman in the whole of Europe.”

“Exactly! And she uses her money to do good, help the poor and the downtrodden and, from time to time, help a friend in need.”

Seeing his father smile while saying those last words, Alexandre Junior suddenly was hit by their meaning and had difficulties keeping his voice down.

“You mean that she paid off your creditors and got rid of your debts?”

“Well, like she said to me, what are friends for, if not to help each other? Don’t go rushing to her afterwards to thank her, though: she doesn’t do those kind of things to show off or make a name for herself. Just treat her with respect, in an informal way.”

Alexandre Junior was quiet for a moment, then whispered in his wife’s ear.

“I will talk to you about that once back home.”

Eight more guests arrived in the next half hour, including two high level politicians and two academicians. With all of her expected guests now present, Jeanne had their cups of champagne refilled, then got up and went to stand in front of the large fireplace of the lounge, her cup in hand.

“My friends, I invited you here tonight for two reasons. First, it is always a pleasure to spend an evening with you, exchanging ideas, opinions and news and enjoying your company. Second, I want to celebrate something with you tonight. Last

month, twelve countries that had met with each other in Switzerland signed a charter called the Geneva Convention. That Geneva Convention recognizes among other things the neutral status of the Society for the Relief of the Sick and Wounded in War and protects its employees and volunteers who are engaged in humanitarian work. This means that those employees and volunteers, wearing a white armband with a red cross on it, can help and treat sick or wounded soldiers of all sides on a battlefield, and this without fear of maltreatment or obstruction by soldiers from the countries which signed the convention. Those humanitarian workers will also be able to visit unimpeded sick or wounded soldiers captured by an enemy and make sure that they are treated humanely. The convention also protects the wounded and sick soldiers from inhumane treatment or summary execution and would ensure their repatriation if found unable to bear arms during a conflict. France was one of the countries which signed the Geneva Convention and, last week, the French government officially authorized and supported the creation of the French National Society for the Relief of the Sick and Wounded in War. In liaison with the International Committee in Geneva, I thus started the formation of such a national society with the help of other volunteers. Today, I opened the offices of the French National Society for the Relief of the Sick and Wounded in War here, in this residence.”

Applauses greeted that announcement at once, forcing Jeanne to wait gracefully for a few seconds before continuing.

“A lot is still left to be done before this national society, which I prefer to call the French Red Cross Society for the sake of brevity, can start to effectively care for sick and wounded soldiers anywhere. Volunteers and employees have to be found, trained and organized. Regional offices and ambulances have to be formed and then supplied. All this will take time but, in the end, the result will be that we will be able to alleviate greatly human suffering during future wars. Ladies and gentlemen, a toast to the French Red Cross!”

“TO THE FRENCH RED CROSS!” Was the unanimous chorus from those present, who then took sips from their cups.



Insurgents' barricade on Rue Lafayette during the Paris Commune, March 1871.

CHAPTER 11 – THE PARIS COMMUNE

08:16 (Paris Time)

Thursday, February 23, 1871 'A'

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles V, Le Marais

Paris, France

"Please, Pierre, stop arguing and just go!" insisted Jeanne anxiously. "I need you and Suzan to escort the children to London for their safety."

"But you?" objected Pierre Laplante, officially her uncle and employee but being in reality the father of Jeanne/Nancy 'B'. "It won't do any good for you to stay here in Paris. You already had to evacuate your foundation employees and your Red Cross staff out of Paris."

"You know that I will be needed here more than ever in the days and weeks to come, Pierre. However, I won't be able to help around Paris if I have to worry about the children. Go to my residence in Belgrave Square and wait for me there with the kids."

Not letting her father argue further, Jeanne looked up at Luc Rémillard, her coach driver, who sat up in the driver's seat of the big coach, alongside Michel d'Angelo, her stable boy.

"DRIVE OFF, LUC! GET THEM SAFELY TO LONDON!"

"I WILL, MADAME!" shouted back the graying ex-legionnaire before urging on his two horses, making the coach roll. Jeanne, near tears, waved a last goodbye to her children inside the coach, fifteen year-old William and Louis and Anne, both ten years old now. Her children waved back, along with Suzan Laplante, Nancy's mother. Jeanne's personal assistant, Li Mai, gently patted her shoulder as they watched the coach drive away.

"They will be alright, Jeanne. You did the right thing by sending them to London."

Jeanne gave a despondent look to her faithful assistant. Li Mai was by now a mature but still beautiful Chinese woman of 38 and, apart from having being her personal assistant, hostess and secret lover for over 23 years, was as well an official Red Cross worker and nurse. Jeanne was herself officially 41 years old but was still as vigorous and fit as ever. Both had however lost weight in the last months, due to the siege of Paris imposed by the Prussian Army, siege that had caused widespread famine in the city during the last five months.

"I hope that they make it safely through the Prussian lines, Mai. You should have gone with them, though."

"You know that I will never abandon you, Jeanne, and neither would your other employees." firmly replied the tiny Chinese woman. Jeanne looked at the group formed by her eight other residence's employees, now all in their forties or fifties, who stood with their spouses in the courtyard of the mansion. She had to swallow hard the ball stuck in her throat before she could speak to them.

"Thank you all for staying with me, my friends. God knows that I would have preferred to see you safe and out of Paris by now."

"You already took care of sending to safety our own children and grand-children, madame." replied soberly François Picard, her butler. "You did plenty for us in the last 24 years and it is only just that you could count on us in these hard times. Just tell us what you need to be done."

Jeanne was silent for a moment, gathering her thoughts. The war declared so imprudently against Prussia by Emperor Napoleon The Third, thanks to a calculated insult by Prussian Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck, had turned quickly into an utter disaster for France. After a number of bloody and very costly battles for both sides, battles in which Jeanne and her Red Cross volunteers had done their best to alleviate

the suffering of both French and Prussian soldiers, the Prussian Army had laid siege to Paris last September, while Emperor Napoleon had been forced to abdicate and was now being held in Prussia.

“While an armistice has been officially signed last month, I expect more bloodshed to come in the next months. You all know as well as me how inflamed the popular sentiment of the people of Paris is concerning the defeatist attitude of the new government of Adolphe Thiers. That popular ire could very well overflow and cause more fighting. The only thing I will ask of you is not to listen to the hotheads in the city and to not take arms against either the Prussians or the troops of the new government. You know that I am no coward when it comes to war but I can recognize a lost cause when I see one : there would be no sense for any of you to get killed now for nothing. What we will concentrate on instead is to help the little people of Paris through the next few months, by treating the wounded and sick and sheltering the children who have nowhere else to go. There will be more privations and hardship to come, along with much tears, but I will urge you to act with peace and compassion, not with hate or violence. The first order of the day will be to restock our supplies of food and medicine, now that the armistice has loosened the Prussian siege around Paris. Mai will direct the buying of food, while I will take care of finding more medicine. Rosette and Constance, you will prepare our two upper rooms in the Southeast Wing as shelters for young refugees. Let’s get to work, my friends!”

10:48 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, March 1, 1871 ‘A’

Avenue des Champs-Élysées, Paris

Despite having known all along that this would happen, Jeanne still felt intense bitterness as she stood with a few other Parisians on the sidewalks of the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, watching Prussian troops parading down the avenue, complete with military band. Most of Paris was closed for business today, while the streets were nearly empty, all in protest at what was seen in the city as a cowardly surrender to the Prussians and the abandonment of the Parisians by the new government and parliament, which was composed mostly of monarchists opposed to the socialist views of most of the Parisian population. This and further moves to come in the next weeks by the government of Adolphe Thiers were bound to bring the popular sentiment to the

boiling point. Sighing with frustration, Jeanne turned her back to the Prussian soldiers and walked away, hoping to find open an apothecary that would be open today, so that she could stock up on some critical medications and medicinal herbs.

06 :30 (Paris Time)

Saturday, March 18, 1871 'A'

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles V

Paris

Li Mai woke up with a startle in her bed : three loud detonations had just reverberated through Paris. The city had been relatively quiet in the last few days and the Prussian soldiers had withdrawn outside of Paris two weeks ago, so those detonations, which sounded like cannon shots, could well announce more trouble. Jumping out of bed and going to one of the dormer windows of her room in the attic level of Jeanne's residence, she looked outside, trying to see some smoke or anything else unusual. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, Mai put on a robe and went out in the attic's hallway, using the nearby staircase to go down to the upper floor. She was about to get to Jeanne's bedroom door and knock on it when Jeanne got out, still in a night gown covered by a robe.

"Jeanne, did you hear those cannon shots?"

Jeanne nodded, her face showing concern.

"Yes, I did and they probably mean more trouble and bloodshed to come. Since we are up now, we might as well start taking care of preparing breakfast for our young tenants."

Mai nodded her head and accompanied her down to the kitchen, on street level. They were presently sheltering the 37 young tenants of a girls orphanage sponsored by Jeanne. Their previous residence had been heavily damaged by fire following street riots last month and Jeanne had taken no time to relocate the girls, aged from two to twelve, in her townhouse. Thankfully, her residence had no lack of spare rooms, especially since the children of her own servants and employees were now all grown up and had moved out years ago. In a way, caring for all those little girls had done a lot to take their minds off the bloody events of the recent past.

The children had been fed breakfast and were now attending two separate classes given by Jeanne and Mai when rifle shots were heard in the distance in mid morning. Despite that, Jeanne continued with her lesson in mathematics to the older girls as if nothing had happened, not wanting to worry her young pupils. When time came for lunch, she brought her group to the big, luxurious dining room and put them in the care of Leila Benchetrit, her assistant cook, then went down the grand staircase of the residence. She was putting on a cape and a hat in the vestibule when Mai shouted to her from up the staircase.

“Jeanne, where are you going?”

“I’m going to see how things are going in town, Mai. Don’t worry about me : I will be back by supper time.”

Not giving time to Mai to protest, Jeanne then went out in the tunnel of the main gate and walked out at a quick step. She went up to the Rue Saint Antoine and turned left on it, heading towards the city hall. She was hoping to find people who would have seen or heard about the events of the morning. In that she was not disappointed, as she saw in the popular market near the city hall a woman giving a fiery speech to an assembled crowd from the top of a barrel. Activating first the micro camera hidden in her hat, Jeanne then approached the crowd, posting herself in the back ranks and listening on to the speaker, a thin woman in her early forties. Jeanne actually recognized her quickly, as Louise Michel would become well known in history as a passionate socialist, hardcore anarchist and ardent feminist.

“...we, the women of Paris, went to the support of our national guardsmen and stopped the government troops from taking away the cannons parked in Montmartre, the same cannons we the people of Paris paid for so that we could fight those damn Prussians. And what did those government troops do then? They shot at us, that’s what! We shot back and captured their general! Many of his soldiers then saw how wrong their orders were and joined us, refusing to further shoot on the people. Adolphe Thiers and his gutless government are responsible for this outrage and should feel the wrath of us Parisians. I say : let’s throw him out of Paris or, better, pass judgment on him and make him pay for his crimes against the people. We, the Commune of Paris, have to take control of our good city and put down this criminal government.”

The crowd cheered at those words, visibly outraged by the actions of the government troops. As Louise Michel continued her incendiary speech and as Jeanne kept listening and secretly filming her, a woman near her who wore old, used clothes, started eyeing

with suspicion her fine coat and hat and her expensive pair of earrings. The woman finally shouted out loud while pointing Jeanne with an accusing finger.

“WHO ARE YOU, TO COME LISTENING TO US IN YOUR FINE BOURGEOIS CLOTHES? A SPY OF THE GOVERNMENT? LOOK AT HER, CITIZENS!”

Jeanne suddenly found herself the center of attention of a less than friendly crowd, with men moving to cut her retreat off. Louise Michel, her attention now firmly on Jeanne, pointed her from the top of her barrel.

“BRING THAT WOMAN TO ME, SO THAT WE COULD SEE WHO SHE IS!”

Knowing that trying to run away would only complicate things, and with many men around her carrying knives and even pistols, Jeanne did not resist when men pushed her towards Louise Michel, forcing her to stop in front of the anarchist leader. The latter, who wore both a pistol and a knife at her belt and carried a Chassepot rifle across her back, jumped down from her barrel and eyed Jeanne up and down with visible antipathy.

“What fine clothes you have, madame, when most of the people of Paris are down to rags. Who are you?”

Despite being rightly worried, Jeanne kept an appearance of assurance and calm as she answered in a firm, strong voice.

“My name is Lady Jeanne Smythe-d’Orléans. I...”

Her name seemingly stung Louise Michel, who cut her off in an indignant tone.

“A d’Orléans and an aristocrat? And what the hell were you doing here? Spying on us for the monarchist government?”

“I am no spy and I have no sympathy towards Adolphe Thiers and his government, miss. I am the Paris representative of the French Red Cross society and I make my business of caring for the wounded and the sick in war, irrespective of the side they are on.”

Louise Michel gave a derisive look at her fine dress and cape before looking her in the eyes.

“And you pretend to treat wounded men while wearing such fine clothes, Lady Jeanne?”

“Not right now, but I treated plenty of wounded and sick men on the battlefields of Weissenberg, Wörth and Sedan. Presently, I am sheltering the girls of an orphanage in my residence. I simply came out to find out if anything could threaten those girls.”

The mention of the orphan girls seemed to somewhat calm down the firebrand.

"A fine story, madame...if it is true. LET'S GO TO HER RESIDENCE AND SEE IF SHE IS TELLING THE TRUTH!"

On a sign from Louise Michel, two big men armed with knives stepped forward and grabbed each one of Jeanne's arms. Michel then smiled ferociously to her.

"Show us the way, Lady Jeanne!"

"There is no point in holding me like this : my residence on Charles V is well known and my neighbors will vouch for my sympathy towards the little people of Paris."

"We will see! Let her go, men, but keep a close eye on her while she guides us."

Closely escorted by Louise Michel and four men and followed by a crowd of at least a hundred people, Jeanne had no choice but to retrace her steps, turning on Charles V twenty minutes later. As they approached the main gate of her residence, Jeanne turned to face Louise Michel and spoke firmly to her.

"I am ready to let you and a few men follow me inside, so that you could see that I am who I say I am, but I will not allow this crowd in and let it loot or burn it down, like what happened already to too many places in Paris."

"And how will you stop us from all going in, if we wanted to?" asked sarcastically the female anarchist. Jeanne drilled her in the eyes, her voice cold.

"You will have to kill me first. If you do that, then you will have all the people of this district turning on you. As I said, my charitable works are well known here." Surprised by her aplomb, Louise Michel stared at Jeanne for a moment, then reluctantly nodded her head.

"Very well! I wouldn't want anyway to scare your little orphans. Jean, Marcel, you come with me inside. The rest will stay out in front of the residence. Pierre, if you hear any shot from inside, then take the place and burn it down."

"Understood, Louise!"

By then, Jeanne could see the worried face of Li Mai, watching her and the surrounding crowd from a window of the upper floor. Making a reassuring gesture to her first, Jeanne then took out her house keys from one pocket of her cape and unlocked the pedestrian door of the main gate, pushing it open and inviting in Louise Michel and her two bodyguards. Then stepping inside herself, she left the door opened : closing and locking it would only raise the suspicions of the already agitated crowd, while it would not resist very long against such a large group of people. Jeanne next faced Louise Michel.

"You are now in the Hôtel de Brinvilliers, my personal residence and the headquarters of the Paris Red Cross and of the d'Orléans Social Foundation, a charitable organization I own and lead."

"The d'Orléans Foundation, you said?" Said the one named Marcel. "My sister got educated at a school sponsored by your foundation that took in children too poor to pay for schooling."

Louise Michel, a teacher before she became an activist, softened up noticeably on hearing that and looked at Jeanne, who was still calm and composed.

"It seems that you indeed have a good reputation, Lady Jeanne. Lead on!"

Entering the vestibule housing the grand staircase, Jeanne led her three followers up the stairs, only to bump in a concerned Li Mai waiting on the upper floor level.

"Jeanne, is everything alright? Why is that crowd waiting outside?"

"Don't worry, Mai : I am only showing to these people that we are simply engaged in charitable work."

On her part, Louise Michel eyed Mai with obvious curiosity and surprise.

"An Oriental woman? That is not very common in Paris."

"Li Mai is my personal assistant and also a Red Cross volunteer nurse. She is an orphan that I found and saved on the side of the Seine, when she was a teenager. I will now show you our little tenants. Where are the girls right now, Mai?"

"Playing in the ballroom, Jeanne."

"Then, come with us to the ballroom, Mai."

Louise Michel, unlike her two bodyguards, did not remark out loud about how luxurious and comfortable the residence was as their group followed Jeanne and Mai through the reception lounge, then the dining room, where Rosette Sans-Souçis and Constance Demers were busy cleaning up the covers from the girls' lunch. The Haitian maid froze on seeing the armed men following Jeanne.

"Is everything alright, Jeanne?"

Louise Michel raised an ear at that : for a maid to call her aristocrat employer by her first name was unheard of. She thus watched carefully the attitude and body language of the two servants as Jeanne reassured the black maid.

"Don't worry, Rosette : these people are simply visiting briefly the residence."

The two maids still followed with worried eyes the group as it entered the vast ballroom. There, in the twelve by ten meter room, they found dozens of young girls playing with

toys or looking at illustrated books. That sight seemed to finally convince Louise Michel, who smiled on seeing the children and then faced Jeanne.

“You told me the truth, Lady Jeanne. I will thus tell my comrades to leave you in peace.”

“I thank you for your comprehension, miss. Let me guide you back to the main entrance.”

Retracing their steps, Jeanne led her three visitors to the main gate, where she closed and locked the pedestrian door behind them before looking at Mai and letting out a sigh of relief.

“Hell, that was a close call! That crowd could have easily burned down this place or could have hung or shot me as a suspected government spy.”

“So, what is going on in Paris today, Jeanne?”

“Government troops tried to grab the cannons of the National Guard kept in Montmartre, but were repelled. This could announce a lot of bad news for the weeks to come.”

The next days and weeks proved Jeanne right in the eyes of her employees. The evening of that same day, Adolphe Thiers and his government, scared for its safety, fled Paris to go establish themselves in nearby Versailles. On March 28, the Council of the Commune established itself in the now deserted city hall and soon published a manifesto proclaiming the Commune and its socialist ideals and also vowed to resist the monarchist government of Adolphe Thiers as well as the Prussians. On May 10, the Treaty of Frankfurt was signed by the Adolphe Thiers government, ceding the Alsace and most of the Lorraine to Prussia and also promising to pay five billion francs in war reparations. The news of that treaty positively enraged the Parisians and the leaders of the Commune, who could however do little about it, the city being surrounded still by Prussian troops and by French government troops now dedicated to crushing the Parisian rebellion.

07:31 (Paris Time)

Sunday, May 21, 1871 ‘A’

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles V

Paris

"What was that we just heard?" asked Charlotte Truffaut as she looked outside, crowding the windows of Jeanne's private study with the other servants, Mai and Jeanne. The latter took on her to answer the question from her cook as they kept listening to the intense firefight that could be heard from the Southwest.

"That staccato was from a machine gun, a weapon that can fire hundreds of rounds per minute. It seems that the government troops have succeeded in breaking through the walls of the city around the Saint-Cloud Gate. This could very well turn into a very bloody day."

"Do you think that the National Guard will be able to repulse that attack, Jeanne?" Asked anxiously Marie Valentin, one of the maids. Jeanne shook slowly her head then.

"Not in the long run, Marie. It is too poorly equipped and trained and has limited ammunition supplies. As for the city militias, their actual military value is low, being undisciplined and poorly led. The fight will be hard and bloody, but I am afraid that the government will win this battle in the end."

"And...then?"

"Then, you can expect only summary justice from the government for the people of Paris." gloomily predicted Jeanne. "I am not even sure that my Red Cross armband or flag would protect me if I went to the help of the wounded over there. My best hope is that my Red Cross volunteers who are now outside of Paris will be permitted to approach the battle lines from behind the advancing government troops. Even that will however leave the federated forces of Paris with little to no medical support."

What Jeanne didn't say was that, as much as she would have wanted to help as a nurse now, she knew about the arbitrary executions and mass arrests which were going to happen in the next few days. She had now spent 25 years building up her charitable foundation, which was after all the primordial reason she was even here in the 19th Century. To get killed now would throw away all those years of work and could as well mean the end of the d'Orléans Social Foundation, with potentially serious repercussions on the history of the decades to come. In contrast, the few wounded that she could save now risked being simply executed by government troops once captured or, at best, being sent to jail or be deported. She also had five more reasons to be cautious: her children. On the other hand, if she stayed alive through this, then her foundation could do something to help the survivors. As bitter as this was for her, she was going to have to sit tight and play safe through this tragedy.

13 :09 (Paris Time)

Thursday, May 25, 1871 'A'

Hôtel de Brinvilliers

"KEEP YOUR HEADS DOWN!" shouted Jeanne to her male employees, preventing them from trying to look outside through the windows of her private study in order to observe the violent firefight happening on their street. The government forces had been advancing through Paris for more than four days now and had steadily pushed back the national guardsmen and militiamen of the federated forces despite their desperate resistance. Thousands had already died on both sides but the government troops were now fighting to take the Saint-Antoine District, where Jeanne's residence was situated.

As the rifle fire slacked somewhat, Jeanne raised her head for a cautious look down the street. She was then able to see that the line of government soldiers advancing along Charles V Street had been able to break through the hastily erected militia barricade blocking the junction with Saint-Paul street and was now past her residence's main entrance. The militiamen that had held the barricade were now lying around on the pavement or were fleeing, pursued by soldiers. She then saw at least one militiaman moving slightly as he lay besides the barricade. Something snapped inside Jeanne at that sight and she got up at a crouch to go open one of the cabinets of her study. Watched by her increasingly alarmed employees, she took out her first aid kit, a backpack full of bandages and her Red Cross armbands, slipping one around each of her forearms. Her gardener and handyman, Pierre Brunelle, finally protested to her as she was shouldering her backpack and first aid kit.

"You're not going to go outside now, Jeanne? It is still dangerous out there."

"There is at least one man in need of help out there, Pierre. I just can't sit and watch all this anymore without doing something, especially this close to my house."

"Then I will go with you!" Volunteered Li Mai, getting up from under one window. "I am a qualified nurse and you will need help over there."

Jeanne hesitated for a moment, furiously tempted to order her to stay inside, but she finally nodded her head reluctantly.

"Very well, Mai, but make sure to put your Red Cross armbands on first."

Mai lost no time in obeying her, also taking a second first aid kit bag from the cabinet. Before leaving the study with Mai, Jeanne pointed at her gardener.

“Pierre, you come down with us to make sure that the main gate is locked back behind us.”

“Yes, Jeanne!”

Going down the main staircase, the trio was soon inside the tunnel formed by the carriage gate. Going to the pedestrian door that was part of the left gate door, Jeanne pulled open the steel bolts locking it and opened the door, stepping out in the street. Mai followed closely behind her, with Pierre closing the door and locking it immediately afterwards. Jeanne ran to the man she had seen move on the ground near the barricade and, kneeling besides him, examined him quickly while smiling in encouragement to him.

“Don’t worry, my friend : I am here to treat your wounds.”

The young man, who had been shot in the right upper torso and had a perforated lung, looked at her as she took out a bandage and covered his entry wound. He however was unable to speak then, pink foam coming out of his mouth. Helped by Mai, Jeanne cautiously turned the wounded on his side, so that they could also cover the exit wound and stop the lung from collapsing. Once the bandage was in place, Jeanne then made the man breathe the vapors from a few drops of chloroform, using a special mesh mask for that purpose. With the wounded now calmed down and out of immediate danger, Jeanne went to inspect the other militiamen lying around the barricade. She found another man alive, with a deep grazing shot wound to the head that had knocked him out and was bleeding profusely. Jeanne was in the process of applying a bandage to the head of the man when a rifle shot rang out from nearby, making her jerk her head up. To her utter horror, she saw Mai, a stunned look on her face, drop to her knees before falling flat on her face against the pavement.

“MAI, NO!”

Leaving the wounded militiaman for the moment, Jeanne hurried over Mai, who was now inert. She then saw that a bullet had pierced Mai’s back near the heart area. Now nearly mad with despair, she gently turned around the Chinese woman on her back . Mai’s eyes were already starting to lose their focus as she spoke with difficulty in a weak voice.

“I...had a good life, thanks to you. My only regr...”

Her eyes then rolled upwards and she let out a last breath before becoming still, with her face turning white quickly. Unable to believe or accept that this was happening, Jeanne burst into tears as she held the head of her now dead friend and lover.

"No, Mai, not you, please!"

She was still mourning over Mai when a harsh male voice shouted at her.

"YOU! HANDS UP OR I WILL SHOOT!"

Now totally uncaring about her own safety, Jeanne looked up with hatred at the group of four government soldiers now approaching her with their rifles pointed at her.

"YOU BASTARDS! YOU JUST KILLED A RED CROSS NURSE!"

"I don't know what is your Red Cross and I don't care!" Replied one of the soldiers who seemed in command of the group. "Get up now and raise your hands!"

Realizing that the soldier would have no qualms about shooting her right now, Jeanne reluctantly got up slowly, her hands high, while staring hard at the soldier.

"Red Cross volunteers are protected by international law under the Geneva Convention. We care for the sick and wounded of war, irrespective of their side."

"And you could be as well one of those anarchist women who have been setting fire to half of Paris during the last few days. Come this way, quickly!"

One of the soldiers then went around Jeanne, to then push her forward brutally with the butt of his rifle.

"You heard him, bitch! March!"

Forced to abandon behind Mai's body as well as her first aid kit, Jeanne was marched down the street towards the Henry IV Boulevard and the Place de la Bastille, where a firefight could be heard. The group soon joined up with another group of soldiers guarding about a dozen dejected-looking prisoners, a mix of national guardsmen, militiamen and civilians. There was as well one mature woman in civilian clothes in the lot. As Jeanne was pushed to join the other prisoners, an officer passing by shouted at the sergeant in charge of the group.

"SERGEANT, WE NEED MORE MEN AT THE PLACE DE LA BASTILLE. GET RID OF THOSE PRISONERS AND THEN LEAD YOUR MEN TO THE FRONTLINE."

"YES SIR!" Replied the NCO before shouting at his prisoners. "ALL OF YOU, FORM A LINE AGAINST THAT WALL! MOVE!"

Despite understanding at once what was to follow, the prisoners didn't dare resist the soldiers, who had their bayonets fixed to their rifles. Jeanne followed as well, knowing that protesting would only get her killed more quickly. Right now, the shock and grief

from the death of Li Mai still overwhelmed her, paralyzing her thoughts. This was the fourth time that she had lost a cherished lover. First had been Pierre Alphonse d'Orléans, dead from a tropical fever in the Guadeloupe in 1847. Then, Gordon Smythe followed, killed during the Indian Uprising in 1857. Next to die was d'Artagnan, killed at the siege of Maastricht in 1673. Now, sweet Mai was dead because of her. She had been working hard and risked her life repeatedly for decades so that she could help others and alleviate some of the suffering and misery afflicting this world, but had been repaid instead with those personal tragedies. She was not sure that she really wanted to survive this last loss. She thus meekly put her back against the house wall designated by the soldiers and faced them as they raised their rifles. Some senior officer galloping by on his horse, followed by a number of staff officers and aides, abruptly stopped his horse behind the soldiers as their sergeant was about to give the order to fire. After one shocked look towards Jeanne, the officer, a colonel, shouted urgently to the sergeant.

"HOLD YOUR FIRE! LOWER YOUR RIFLES!"

The colonel then dismounted as the soldiers lowered their rifles, confused. Going past the soldiers, the senior officer walked straight to Jeanne, who suddenly recognized him.

"Colonel Lettelier?"

"Lady Jeanne, why were you put in this lineup?"

"I tried to administer first aid to some wounded militiamen but soldiers shot my assistant nurse dead and took me prisoner near my residence. I was then marched to here and made to join those other prisoners."

Lettelier looked briefly at the other prisoners lined up against the wall, then at the Red Cross armbands she wore.

"Were you wearing your Red Cross armbands then, Lady Jeanne?"

"Yes, I was, Colonel, and so did my nurse. The soldiers who shot her said that they didn't know what the Red Cross was when I protested."

A flash of anger showed on the colonel's face, who then glanced quickly at the sergeant in charge of the firing squad before looking back at Jeanne, speaking in a soft voice to her.

"You and your Red Cross volunteers saved many of my wounded men at the battle of Wörth, Lady Jeanne. I am also not about to let my own soldiers violate the laws of war and the Geneva Convention. You are free to go. Please accept my sincere condolences for the loss of your nurse."

“What about those other prisoners, Colonel? Are you going to let them be summarily executed like this?”

Lettelier debated her question in his mind for a moment, having probably received some radical orders concerning the handling of prisoners. He finally nodded his head and shouted at his sergeant.

“SERGEANT, LADY JEANNE HERE IS A NON-COMBATTANT PROTECTED UNDER THE GENEVA CONVENTION AND IS NOT TO BE TOUCHED. SHE IS FREE TO GO. AS FOR THE OTHER PRISONERS, LEAD THEM TO OUR NEAREST PRISONER HOLDING POINT. YOU ARE NOT TO EXECUTE THEM SUMMARILY.”

“But, sir, Major Bellefeuille...”

“SCREW MAJOR BELLEFEUILLE! DO AS I SAY, SERGEANT!”

As the chastised NCO had his men march the other prisoners away, Jeanne nodded soberly at Lettelier.

“Thank you, Colonel. You were always a true gentleman.”

“I could not allow such a national heroine as you to be killed like this : it would have been a grave injustice and a great loss for France. Again, I am sorry about your nurse. I wish you luck during the next days, which may well be very bloody indeed.”

“I realize that too much, unfortunately, Colonel. Thank you again for saving me.”

Walking back at a tired pace towards her residence, her mind still clouded with grief, Jeanne got in sight of her townhouse in time to see four of her employees carrying gently the body of Li Mai towards the opened main gate. One of them, Rosette Sans-Souçis, ran at once to her, shouting nearly hysterically.

“JEANNE, MY GOD! ARE YOU ALRIGHT?”

Jeanne didn't answer her at first, letting the maid hug her frantically before speaking.

“I am, Rosette. An officer recognized me and ordered that I be released. Unfortunately, poor Mai wasn't as lucky as me. I never should have gone out like this.”

“You did so in order to help others, as you did so often, Jeanne. Mai died bravely for a worthy cause.”

Tears reappeared on Jeanne's face as she watched the body of her friend being carried inside her residence.

“If only I could have died in her place.”



The sinking of the RMS TITANIC on the night of April 14, 1912, in the North Atlantic.

CHAPTER 12 – THE END OF THE ROAD

22:46 (Iceland Time)

Sunday, April 14, 1912 'A'

R.M.S. TITANIC

Middle of the North Atlantic, south of Iceland

Few of the people still up and present on the Promenade Deck paid much attention to the old but tall woman, dressed in a simple but elegant gown covered by a long fur coat, as she made her way towards the Forecastle Deck. Those who did mostly marveled at the vigor of her pace for such an obviously old lady with white hair and wrinkled face and hands. Ignoring the few stares, the old woman exited in the open air and went down on the Forward Crane Deck, then up again on the Forecastle Deck. The air was at the freezing point and made even more cold by the ship's speed of 22.5 knots. Apparently not bothered by the cold, the old woman went to the bow, where she leaned against the railing and looked ahead of the ship into the dark night. Nancy Laplante 'B', traveling under her official name of Lady Jeanne Smythe-d'Orléans, then reflected on her long but fruitful life and her many accomplishments. Officially eighty years old in this

life, she was in reality 191 years old now, the longevity treatment received as a member of the Time Patrol helping her look and feel like a woman closer to seventy years of age. Both of her lives, the one in the 17th Century as the Marquess of St-Laurent and the one that had started in the 19th Century as Jeanne de Brissac, then as Lady Jeanne D'Orléans, had provided many tragedies but also many satisfactions to her. As the Marquess of St-Laurent, she was already officially dead at the age of 65, having supposedly drowned during an Atlantic crossing from New England to France in 1700. She had left in Philadelphia her adopted son, James Walker, his wife Annette Beaulieu and his two sons and one daughter. Jame's wine shop, dealing in wine imported from Nancy's estate of the Château La Tour Carnet, near Bordeaux, was prosperous and had provided his family a comfortable living in peaceful Philadelphia, far away from the anti-Huguenot religious persecutions that had been sweeping France since 1680. The estate of La Tour Carnet was itself in the good hands of Nancy's son from D'Artagnan, Charles. Charles had retired from the royal musketeers and had married a local girl, Jeanne Dupré, from whom he had a son, Pierre, and a daughter, Réjeanne, who in turn had given Nancy a further seven great-grandchildren, albeit after her official death. As for King Louis XIV, once a lover and good friend of Nancy, he had grown into an increasingly intolerant and egotistic tyrant, from whom Nancy had been further repelled by the often mean gossips about her circulated by the king's confessor, who had rightly suspected her of aiding and protecting Huguenot Protestants around Bordeaux, and by the king's other mistresses. While Nancy had been sad to leave her sons and grandchildren in France and Philadelphia, she had also felt some relief at exiting the increasingly poisonous atmosphere of the royal court in Versailles, which she had avoided as much as she could by continuing to conduct field missions for the King. As for her life as Jeanne Smythe-D'Orléans, it had been most eventful and had quieted down a bit only in the last decade. After rebelling against the Time Patrol and becoming an independent time-traveling operator in 1860, following the birth of her illegitimate twins from King Louis XIV, she had renewed her efforts to help the wounded, the sick, the poor and the downtrodden, living through the American Civil War, the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune. More work as a nurse and Red Cross representative had followed during the turbulent decades of the end of the 19th Century in Europe. She had also gone through the numerous social tremors and colonial wars of the time while continuing to expand the work of the d'Orléans Social Foundation. Her charitable organization was now supported by a hidden financial empire built along six

decades and which was now worth over 300 million British Pounds Sterling. That empire was however operated in a very discreet manner and very few people knew about the true extent of Jeanne's fortune, which she used almost exclusively to help others or further extend her reach. Her charity and nursing work had attracted her many honors, including the awarding to her of the Order of the Red Cross by Queen Victoria, but also many political enemies. Her support of the legal defense of French Army Captain Dreyfuss during his celebrated trial, followed by his imprisonment and then his retrial, had branded her as a 'social revolutionary' in the minds of many French politicians and military leaders. Her financial and political leverage had however been too powerful for those men to dare attack her directly. Her political and social victories had unfortunately been shadowed by the successive deaths in Paris of her father Pierre in 1894 and of her mother Suzan in 1897. Her children in the 19th Century, William, Louis and Anne, had grown to adulthood and married, forming families of their own while staying close to Jeanne. Jeanne now had a total of ten grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren in this century and knew that the future of her charity organization and financial empire was in good, dependable and trusted hands.

Coming out of her mental contemplation of her past lives, she looked at her wristwatch and saw that it was now twenty past eleven. Walking calmly away from the railing, she went back inside the ship and made her way aft to the 3rd class social hall, in the stern part of the Upper Deck. She had just arrived in the social hall when the ship shook, while a long scraping sound could be heard from the lower hull. Knowing perfectly well that this announced the collision of the TITANIC with the iceberg that would sink it, Jeanne nonetheless went to sit quietly in one corner of the mostly unoccupied room, where less than a dozen men were still playing cards in two groups. A few of the men, 3rd class passengers who had booked passage on the ship to emigrate to the United States with their families, eyed her briefly but discreetly, surprised by the visit of an old woman who was visibly of a much higher social class than them. They however didn't comment loudly about her and continued playing cards.

After a few minutes and with still no signs or indications that the ship was in trouble apart from the fact that it had slowed down and stopped, Jeanne got up and used the nearby 3rd class main staircase to go down to the women's lavatories. There, she relieved herself one last time and washed her hands. A young redhead woman who was

combing her hair in front of the sinks counter looked at her with curiosity when she saw the six medals pinned to her dress, which had been hidden up to now by her fur coat.

“Uh, excuse me, madam, but are we suppose to celebrate something tonight?” She asked with a strong Irish accent. Jeanne shook her head gently and looked into her brown eyes, speaking softly to her.

“No, miss. There will be nothing to celebrate about tonight.”

“Then, why the medals, madam?”

“Because I wanted to look my best tonight, miss.”

On those mysterious words Jeanne left the young woman and returned to the 3rd class social hall, her fur coat over her left arm. There, she sat quietly in a corner and observed the other passengers as they gradually realized that the ship was in some sort of trouble. They understood the true seriousness of the situation only when crewmembers started running down the passageways in the 3rd Class section while shouting that the ship was sinking and that the passengers had to go up to find places in lifeboats. That quickly emptied the 3rd Class social hall, with its occupants then running to their cabins to go get their families. Now alone in the hall, Nancy calmly got up from her chair and went to the nearest set of stairs leading to the open air decks above.

From a corner of the stern deck, Nancy watched with sadness as hundreds of panicky 3rd Class passengers tried to find places in the few lifeboats available, only to be turned away by crewmembers or to see the lifeboats leave without them. Unfortunately, she couldn't help those poor people in any significant way: this tragedy was going to be one of the most thoroughly documented disasters in history, with detailed lists of the victims and of the survivors made in the days to come. Saving any significant number of those unfortunate souls could severely impact history, with genealogical trees drastically redrawn and with the future possibly changing in unpredictable ways. The one thing that she still could do, though, was to write a final epitaph to one single life.

Climbing the stairs leading to the Boat Deck and going forward, Nancy however stayed away from the crowds still trying to board lifeboats, instead going to the entrance to the 1st class lounge on the Boat Deck. Entering the luxurious lounge, she found inside less than twenty male passengers waiting their final fate there as water was about to rush in via the forward entrance doors. Walking quickly to a man with gray hair dressed

in a fine evening suit, she sat beside him at his table, drawing a stunned look from the man.

“Lady Jeanne? How come you didn’t take place in one of the lifeboats?”

Jeanne smiled to Benjamin Guggenheim, one of the richest passengers on the TITANIC, and gently pressed his left hand.

“I wanted to leave a space for someone younger who still had not seen much of life. I also wanted to die by the side of a true gentleman.”

Guggenheim swallowed hard, with tears coming to his eyes as he looked into her resolute green eyes.

“It will be a true honor to have you with me at this time, my dear Lady Jeanne.”

Just then, the forward doors of the lounge crashed open under the pressure of the sea and tons of water rushed in. Jeanne passed one arm around Benjamin Guggenheim’s shoulders as the frigid water started rushing around and over their legs.

“God is about to accept us back in his fold, Benjamin.” She said tenderly to the man, mere seconds before the water submerged them completely.

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