



THE FIGHTING NOSTROMO

**BY
MICHEL POULIN**

THE FIGHTING NOSTROMO

SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR, VIOLENCE AND SEX, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is a sequel to MIGHTY NOSTROMO and is the sixth novel in the Kostroma Series. Its actions take place during the early 24th Century, when Humanity has finally been able to break out of the Solar System and is now expanding through the habitable star systems close to our own system. The armed merchant ship NOSTROMO is being completed at the Avalon Space Yards and is due soon to replace the mighty KOSTROMA, Captain Tina Forster's glorious ship, destroyed when it rammed a monstrous alien ship and saved Humanity and many other races from a horrible fate at the hands of a race of intelligent but savage carnivorous creatures. That alien ship may have been destroyed but how many more such ships are still roaming the galaxy? Where are they from? Will more alien ships threaten Humanity and its newly colonized worlds busy building themselves towards self-sufficiency?

OTHER BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

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A MARS ODYSSEY

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CHAPTER 1 – PREPARING FOR A FIGHT



Wolf 1061 shining on the landscape of New Haven.

07:53 (Local Eastern Time)

Thursday, June 7, 2328

Corporate headquarters of the New Haven Planetary Corporation

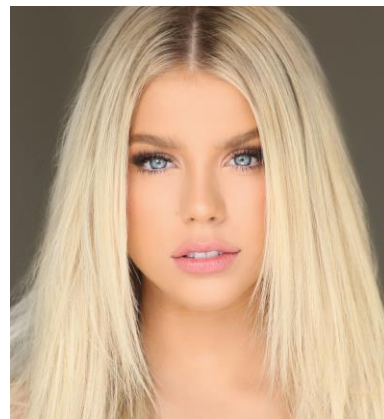
Camelot, New Haven (Wolf 1061 Ca), first moon of planet New Shouria.

Wolf 1061 System, 13.8 light-years from Earth

The building housing the headquarters of the New Haven Planetary Corporation, a six-story tower of glass and steel, could be described as modern and functional but not as luxurious or extravagant. In fact, one could search the whole moon without finding a single building or installation on it that could be called luxurious. That was actually to be expected on New Haven, a world dedicated as an eco-friendly agrarian world and refugee resettlement center. Much of its population was composed of refugees from Earth, poor people victims of wars, famines, persecutions or a mix of all those three factors. When she had been given possession of New Haven, which was then a mostly semi-arid moon with no sentient life on it, as a gift from the Koorivars for having found and saved two of their refugee ships, Captain Tina Forster had decided to dedicate it to the role of helping the dispossessed and the downtrodden of Earth. She thus had used her own assets and funds to build a new agrarian and egalitarian society on the moon.

Themselves refugees from the long-destroyed Gliese 667 System and now living on both Earth and on New Shouria, the planet around which New Haven orbited, the Koorivars had been too happy to help finance and support Tina Forster's humanitarian project. The results of all this today garnered universal and well-deserved praise, on top of providing a new life to over 160,000 ex-refugees from Earth.

Eve Silisca entered the corporate building at a calm pace, knowing that she still had a few minutes to spare before her meeting with Tina Forster was due. She returned the smile of the young man at the reception desk, who discretely admired her as she passed by his desk, on her way to the banks of elevators. By all standards, Eve was a stunningly beautiful and tall young woman who attracted more than her lot of male stares,



as well as some female stares. Her physical charms were further enhanced by her incredible linguistic abilities and by her sharp intellect, all things which made her the perfect hostess. Unfortunately, her old position as a passengers' hostess on the A.M.S. KOSTROMA, Tina Forster's giant cargo ship, did not exist anymore, for the good reason that the KOSTROMA itself didn't exist anymore, having been destroyed in a suicide charge which had saved the Drazts of Ross 128 from a huge alien asteroid ship full of carnivorous intelligent predators. That desperate action had saved from a horrible fate the Drazts, as well as preventing those aliens, now called 'Space Predators', from coming to the Solar System after eating their way through the Drazts in the Ross 128 System.

Soon arriving in the small visitors' lounge on which the doors of the offices of the top managers of New Haven opened, Eve went straight to the door simply marked 'Tina Forster' and knocked on it at precisely eight o'clock. Getting a muffled 'come in', she opened the door and entered Tina's office, finding her friend sitting behind her work desk. However, Tina was not presently typing on her computer or reading some report. Rather, she held in her hands a plastic model of her old ship, the A.M.S. KOSTROMA, while looking at it, nostalgia showing on her face. Eve knew how much she had been both fond and proud of her ship. It after all had fought in the Jovian Uprising of 2315 and had been pivotal in the victory of the space colonies over the tyrannical central

government of the Earth Federation. At the age of 41, Tina Forster was still a pretty woman with a fit body, brown hair and grey eyes. While she was widely known as an expert spaceship handler and as a master tactician and strategist when it came to space combat, Eve knew that she was first and foremost a kind, compassionate and generous woman who deeply cared about the others around her. Putting the plastic ship model back on her desk, Tina got up from her chair and came to Eve with a smile and an extended hand.



“Thank you for coming, Eve. How are you today?”

“Very well, thank you!” replied Eve as a matter of routine while shaking hands with Tina. In truth, Eve didn’t feel anything special about this day, or about any other day, for the good reason that she couldn’t feel true emotions. Tina knew that but still acted with her as if she was an ordinary human person, something Eve considered most respectful on her part. Many others who knew about Eve’s true nature would have been drier in their approach to her, mostly because they would have considered polite pleasantries superfluous with an android like her. After shaking hands with her, Tina invited Eve to go sit around the low coffee table set in one corner of her office. Once sitting in a sofa facing Tina’s easy chair, Eve spoke up.

“So, what do you want to discuss with me this morning, Tina?”

“What we will need to do during the coming weeks and months, Eve. My beloved KOSTROMA may have destroyed that horrific alien predator ship two days ago, at the cost of its own destruction, but we would be foolish in thinking that the threat from these Space Predators is over for good. Eventually, we will encounter another alien asteroid ship or, worse, one or more of them will find us. Then, when that happens, we will need to be prepared for them. If not, the whole of Humanity could end up being used as a reserve of meat for those monsters.”

Eve slowly nodded her head once at those words, another reaction which had been programmed into her to make her appear to be a real human being.

“I agree wholeheartedly with you on that, Tina. Hopefully, the Spacers’ League’s Navy will learn the lessons from our encounter and battle with the Space Predators and will adapt its tactics and weapons accordingly.”

"I hope that as well, Eve. I sent yesterday to the Navy Headquarters my report of the battle, which included a number of recommendations about how to defeat the Space Predators. If they are not total idiots, they will heed my advice on that subject."

"I hope so too, but I am not totally certain that they will do so, Tina. After all, the Spacers' League's Navy is staffed by human beings, persons with emotions, ambitions, personal opinions, biases, likes and dislikes. Their reactions and response to your report could still be tainted by some measure of jealousy, personal biases...or plain incompetence. Past human history has shown plenty of times that higher authorities don't always act in the most judicious or intelligent manner, especially if they hold some kind of prejudice or bias in the matter at hand. Take the example of World War Two, the most destructive war ever in Humanity's history. That war showed numerous examples of wrong, often disastrous decisions or actions taken due to plain incompetence, underestimation of the enemy, racial bias or personal hubris."

Tina, who was a big enthusiast about studying history, particularly when it came to naval warfare, smiled at Eve's reply.

"Yes, a few examples come to my mind right away, like Pearl Harbor, the fall of Singapore, the Battle of Savo Island and the War on the Eastern Front between the Germans and the Soviets. I could add as examples the Korean War and the Vietnam War of the Twentieth Century. As for earlier wars and battles, there are too many examples of stupid or wrong military moves for me to list them all. Still, I am hoping that our admirals at Navy Headquarters will prove more competent and clear-minded than those collection of historical buffoons. However, when it comes to the threat posed by the Space Predators, simply hoping for the best just won't do. I thus wanted to speak with you in order to make sure that we ourselves will be as well prepared as possible. I know that my new ship, the NOSTROMO, won't be completed for another sixteen months but we still have time to incorporate some of the lessons of our battle of two days ago into its design."

"I agree! I myself have made a list of things we could do to defend against the Space Predators, things which should be incorporated into the design of the NOSTROMO."

"You did? Tell me about it, Eve!" replied Tina, becoming instantly quite attentive. In response, Eve did her best to keep her response short and concise, as there were many things in her list and exposing all of her ideas in detail would take quite a while.

“First, we definitely need to never come close enough to a Space Predators’ asteroid ship to allow it to use its transporter technology to beam boarding shuttles and crews on top or inside our ships. From the experience we gained in studying the past battles with the Space Predators, the maximum operational range of their teleportation device seems to be around 1,300 kilometers. So, one of the rules we should follow is to never get near that kind of distance from a Predator ship. Ideally, we should keep a minimum distance of at least 2,000 kilometers between our ships and their ships. Secondly, we need to greatly reinforce both our ships’ close-in defenses and internal security, in order to destroy any boarding craft or Predators which would appear near or in our ships. Those close-in defenses could be composed of a mix of external mini-turrets, internal security defensive devices dispersed all around the inside of our ships, in order to react instantly to any boarders, and internal security personnel armed with disintegrator rifles and pistols and equipped with force shields vests. Thirdly, while our tactic of using a micro-jump to penetrate the force shields of a Predator asteroid ship worked very well in the case of the KOSTROMA, we need to make our missiles able to do such micro-jumps. Finally, we definitely need to have more powerful laser and disintegrator ship guns, which are able to pass through force shields, in order to inflict more serious damage at a distance on Predator ships. Even the KOSTROMA’s main laser batteries, which were the most powerful ones ever mounted on a Human ship, were not powerful enough to punch through the thick nickel-iron crust of the Predator ship we fought against. In contrast, the Predators’ purple laser beams proved to be at least three times as powerful as the KOSTROMA’s lasers. This means that laser batteries of less than ten gigawatts each will be basically useless. As for our disintegrator batteries, we will definitely need much more powerful models. Concerning our rail guns, the Predators’ force shields actually rendered them totally useless. Such rail gun armament should thus be eliminated completely from the design of the NOSTROMO. I could go on about more things, like ways to use drone decoy and electronic jamming craft to confuse the Predators’ fire control systems, but listing them all would take me close to one hour.”

Tina nodded and smiled at all that, pleased to see that Eve had already made a thorough analysis of their problem concerning the Space Predators.

“I am giving you an ‘A’ on your proposals, Eve. Basically, my report I sent to Providence yesterday contained recommendations that nearly mirror your own ideas. However, I need to cover in more detail with you one of your proposals: that about

internal ship security defenses. In the brief war against the Drazts, before we became friends and allies, Spirit proved invaluable, notably by directing the internal defenses of the KOSTROMA against the few very brave Drazts who managed to assault and board our ship. I certainly intend to have the internal defense stations planned for the NOSTROMO to be greatly augmented in numbers compared to what is presently planned in its design at the Avalon Space Yards. With Spirit in overall control of those internal defense stations, any Predator boarding crew will be quickly found, located and exterminated. Since you were able to duplicate the data and program files which made Spirit and were then able to carry them to safety, we will be able to reload them inside the AI¹ computer core of the NOSTROMO and thus revive Spirit.”

“And I am impatient to be able to do that, Tina. As you know well, I had an intimate link with Spirit, who was basically my mother, if you consider the fact that she designed me and directed my fabrication inside the automated repair and production shops aboard the KOSTROMA. Unfortunately, none of the computer systems to be found on New Haven have the data capacity to allow the downloading of Spirit’s files, and this by a long shot. What we need for that is the kind of AI computer mainframe that the Avalon Space Yards will install in the NOSTROMO.”

“Oh, I promise you that we will do just that in the next few days, my friend. I intend to go visit Mister Shomberg, at the Avalon Space Yards, in the next few days. You will be coming with me, with the portable data modules containing Spirit’s datafiles.” That brought at once a happy grin on Eve’s face.

“I can’t wait for that, Tina. To be able again to communicate with Spirit and to exchange data and ideas with her will be truly a great thing for me.”

“Which brings me to the final subject I wanted to discuss: our ship’s internal security force. As you know, forming a good security officer takes years, not counting the more than twenty years needed for that person to grow up and be educated. Furthermore, to adequately protect from the inside a ship as enormous as the NOSTROMO will be would take many hundreds, if not thousands of extra security officers. The problem is that, even if I could find and hire that kind of numbers of security officers, then paying them properly would basically put my corporation in the red, and quickly! There is no way that I would be able to make a profit, even with a ship as efficient as the NOSTROMO will be, if I have to pay, feed and house a thousand or

¹ AI : Artificial Intelligence.

more security officers. Of course, multiplying the number of fixed internal defense stations inside the NOSTROMO would in the long run prove a lot more practical as a solution but that has a major flaw: they would be FIXED defense stations. Thus, if one or more defense station should be neutralized or destroyed by boarders, then that portion of ship will then become defenseless and vulnerable, along with its Human occupants. The only solution to that is a mobile defense force able to move in quickly to reinforce our internal defenses and, if need be, fight to regain control of parts of our ship taken over by boarders. Such a mobile defense force could be composed of Human security officers...or of combat robots. This is where you come in, Eve.”

“Me? I may have some weapons and force shields implanted inside my android body but I am no combat robot, Tina.”

“True! However, such combat robots could be designed very efficiently by Spirit, once she will be reactivated. If she can design an android as sophisticated as you, then designing robots meant for security and combat should be an easy task for her...and you. While we don't have on New Haven the kind of AI mainframe computer needed to reactivate Spirit, we do have a powerful mainframe computer in the basement of this building that would be good enough to load the datafiles pertinent to the design and production of androids. What I would like you to do is to use that computer, download in it copies of the files on android design you have and then produce a design appropriate for internal security duties aboard the NOSTROMO. I have already thought a bit about that and I will say this to you: I don't want some kind of scary mechanical killer android of the kind of machine that would terrify my future passengers, especially the younger ones. I want androids which will be able to integrate smoothly with the rest of my crew and with my passengers. Ideally, those security androids should also be able to effect emergency battle damage repairs in difficult conditions in which a human repair crew could not operate efficiently. Now, do you think that you could produce such a design, so that we could have it built in series quantities by the Avalon Space Yards, which has a highly developed robotics production line?”

“Yes, I can, Tina!” replied at once Eve. “It may take me over a minute or two to for me to decide on the best design possible but I can already envision many different possibilities.”

“Over a minute or two, she says!” said Tina while rolling her eyes. “Sometimes, I still forget how fast an electronic mind can think, compared to a human mind. Now, here is the truly delicate point about this, Eve. We humans tend to look at robots and

treat them like something similar to the slaves of the past. However, just thinking about that repulses me. The robots we use have a very limited kind of AI programming and capability geared towards a few specific goals and jobs at most, with little or no true personality of their own. In this optic, these robots are actually simple tools. However, when it comes to internal security duties aboard a ship, the androids doing such duty will by necessity have to be able to interact routinely with both passengers and with crew members. They will thus need at least a minimum of interpersonal skills and an individual personality in order to do their job efficiently. In turn, having androids with individual personalities means to me that they will have to be treated with a minimum of respect and regard concerning their work conditions. In this, I would need your frank opinion, Eve, as you are the only AI android I ever worked with. What do you think up to now of your existence, your interactions with us Humans and what makes your existence worthwhile in your opinion? Again, don't be afraid to tell me the hard truth."

Eve nodded slowly her head while smiling to her friend.

"Tina, you just demonstrated again how caring a person you are. I know of very few Humans who would take the time to consider the welfare and, if I can call it that, happiness, of an artificial construct like me. About me, while I can't have true feelings or emotions, I can evaluate and judge the reactions of others to me and I can tell you that you and the other members of your crew who know about my true nature value and respect me. That by itself gives me a high degree of personal confidence and satisfaction. Also, my main incentive to exist is curiosity, the potential to constantly learn and see new things worth putting in my electronic memory. In turn, constantly living new experiences and learning from them help me develop something akin to human basic emotions. For that alone, I consider my existence well worth it."

It was Tina's turn to nod her head in response.

"Thank you! Your answer has just been very helpful to me. Finally, here is a last question for you. Because you have a highly-developed personality and were acting as a hostess on the KOSTROMA, you had an individual cabin, pay and perks similar to those of a Human crewmember. Do you see the same needs for the security androids you will be designing?"

"Even for me, that question of yours involve a near infinity of factors to be evaluated and studied. Could I wait until tomorrow before I answer that question?"

That made Tina chuckle briefly before she answered Eve.

"I don't mind waiting until tomorrow, my friend. If given to a group of Human sociologists, then those sociologists would probably debate that question for days on end and would produce as nearly as many differing opinions as their numbers were."

"Actually, they may just answer your question quickly, by saying that androids don't deserve such considerations about their welfare or state of happiness, not being true living beings."

Eve's reply made Tina sober up in a hurry, as she realized that Eve was right.

"Well, let's say that I am not like the typical sociologist, Eve. I still want to treat my future android employees the same way I treat my Human employees, minus the need to feed them, of course."

To Tina's surprise, Eve then got up from her sofa and came to her, bending over her and kissing her on her forehead before smiling down to her.

"That is why you are my friend, Tina."

09:05 (Earth Universal Time)
Monday, June 11, 2328
Private interstellar yacht FRIENDSHIP
On approach to the Avalon Space Yards
Low Earth Orbit, Solar System



There were three persons in the cockpit of the small private yacht now approaching the huge orbital mass of the Avalon Space Yards, which had a diameter of sixteen kilometers and a height of eight kilometers: Tina, Eve and Doctor Koomak, a member of the Koorivar race who was also a certified genius and one of the top physics specialists of this time. Like all the Koorivars, Koomak was much shorter than a typical Human and stood on strangely-shaped 'Z'-like legs, plus had an elongated cranium perched on top of a long, flexible neck. A pair of long and pointy ears stood up atop his head, while he had five-fingered hands at the ends of his two arms. His skin was smooth and hairless and was of a light brown coloration. Like all Koorivars, Koomak was also what



a Human would call a hermaphrodite, a creature with both male and female sexual organs, something that allowed the Koorivars to mingle sexually and reproduce with any of their likes. Koomak thus had both a penis and a vagina, on top of sporting a pair of prominent breasts. A Human who would see for the first time a Koorivar would probably be amused by his morphology or would even frown at his hermaphrodite nature, but Tina had quickly learned to appreciate the Koorivars as the intelligent, kind and pacifist vegetarian beings they were. In the case of Koomak, his genius had given Humanity and his own race the biggest advance to date in the history of science: a working, practical interstellar propulsion drive, which was now appropriately called the 'Koomak Drive'. Tina highly valued Koomak's scientific expertise and imagination, which could prove very useful on this visit, so she had gone to the planet New Shouria, in which orbit her own New Haven turned, to pick up the old scientist before jumping to Earth's orbit.

Letting the automated flight approach and landing system of the giant space construction yard handle the approach and docking of her small space yacht, Tina swiveled her pilot's chair in order to face both Eve and Koomak.

"Hopefully, the construction phase of my NOSTROMO won't be so advanced that it would turn out to be difficult to add to it the modifications we are going to request to Mister Shomberg. Those modifications will mean a huge difference in any future fight with the Space Predators."

"And stopping those abominations should be everyone's responsibility in this galaxy." said Koomak in a sober tone. "For us Koorivars, who are vegetarians, such carnivorous predators are especially terrifying and loathsome, which is why Governor Sheraz immediately offered to support you in this. You have already done so much for our race and you deserve all the help we can give you, Tina. On my part, I have been thinking about the design problem about disintegrator cannons you presented to me and I think that I will be able to fix it fairly rapidly."

"That would be a great news, Koomak: I really want to improve the effective range of those cannons. While they are very powerful weapons, the original Drazts design suffers from the tendency of its beam to lose its focus with distance, and this to a much greater degree than that of our laser batteries. We can't afford any loss of range when engaging a Space Predator ship, so your help in this will be priceless. Mind you, the material gift Governor Sheraz gave to me in the name of the Koorivars will go a long

way to pay for all the design modifications we are going to ask Gustav Shomberg to do on my NOSTROMO.”

The old physicist smiled at the mention of the cargo of five tons of pure gold ingots carried in the storage bay of the FRIENDSHIP.

“Hey, they say on Earth that we Koorivars have gold coming out of our ears, not to say out of some less clean place. We have to live up to our reputation after all. And you don’t need to worry about the state of our finances, Tina: we have plenty more gold, silver and platinum left in our vaults. Also, your future security androids will prove very useful in providing internal protection against boarders to our own ships.”

“With Koorivar ships flying around Space like our own Human ships, you will need protection against those Space Predators as much as we do. Thankfully, Governor Sheraz saw that need at once when he was told by you about my projects, thus his quick offer of financial support to me. Now we need to see if and how fast we will be able to turn my projects into reality.”

They then stayed mostly silent until their yacht was docked and secured to one of the 120 docking stations for small and medium ships built inside the cavernous visitors’ harbor of the space yards. When they stepped out of the FRIENDSHIP, they were met by a young and beautiful Asian woman, whom Tina knew to be one of Gustav Shomberg’s personal assistants. Tina immediately gave the woman a warm smile.

“Hi, Miri! How are you these days?”

“Busy but happy. The Spacers’ League has requested that we accelerate work as much as possible on the ships they ordered from us, due to this new and horrible threat from those monstrous Space Predators.”

“Uh, I hope that does not mean that work on my NOSTROMO will be delayed.”

“Don’t worry, Commodore Forster: your ship is still at the top of our priority list. After all, the Spacers’ League is financing the weapons systems which are being built for your ship.”

“Talking about weapons systems, I will need to urgently speak with Gustav Shomberg about them: I want some important changes made to them, in order to better fight those Space Predators.”

“Then, I will drive you at best speed to his office, Commodore: my cart is in the hallway, just outside of this safety airlock.”

“Can it carry over five tons?”

"Five tons?! What did you bring with you on your yacht?"

"Five tons of gold, meant to help pay for the modifications I want to make to the design of my NOSTROMO."

"Oh! Then let me call in a cargo forklift, along with four lifting robots and a security team. We wouldn't want to see some of that gold disappear while being moved around."

"Definitely not! We will wait for your team and robots to arrive, then will go visit Mister Shomberg."

They had to wait no more than six minutes before the arrival of a mixed team of robots and security officers with a cargo anti-gravity plate. Then, the five tons of gold were transferred from the yacht to the cargo plate in minutes, with the senior security officer then signing a receipt for the gold and handing it to Tina. With that now out of the way, Miri Jintsu invited Tina, Eve and Koomak to sit in her cart, then started driving them down the long hallways and passageways of the giant space yard. Another four minutes and the cart stopped in a parking spot in front of the entrance to the executive offices of the Avalon Space Yards. Walking past the secretarial offices, Miri led her three visitors to a door made of polished wood and bearing a brass plaque bearing the inscription 'Gustav Shomberg, Head Designer'. After knocking on the door and getting a muffled 'come in', Miri opened it and invited Tina's group to enter. A big man of pure Nordic stock greeted them with a warm smile and powerful handshakes.

"Tina! It is so nice to see you again! You really scared me about you when I heard that you went to face those monstrous Space Predators and lost your beloved KOSTROMA in that fight. And you brought with you the beautiful Miss Silisca and Doctor Koomak. I thus can guess that you didn't come to see me just to get a cup of good coffee, correct?"

"Correct, Gustav! Besides, the coffee I produced on my KOSTROMA was superior in quality to the one you serve, even though your coffee is really good. No, we came in order to ask that some modifications and additions be made to the design of my NOSTROMO, if it is still possible to do so. I have learned valuable lessons during that fight and I want to incorporate those lessons in my new ship. By the way, I brought with me five tons of pure gold in order to help pay for those modifications and additions."

"A quarter of a billion credits in pure gold? That should indeed help pay for what you want. But let's sit around my coffee table in that corner in order to discuss all this. I can order a pot of my second-rate coffee to help the discussion, if you would like."

Tina chuckled at Shomberg's self-deprecating joke and nodded her head while smiling.

"I will accept a cup of your plonk, thank you."

While Koomak grinned in amusement at that exchange, Eve, detecting the humor meant in it, painted an amused smile on her lips while reminding her central processor of the importance of humor with the Humans. In turn, the chief designer looked at Miri Jintsu to pass a request to her.

"Miri, could you have a pot of my best plonk brought in, with a coffee service for four?"

"Right away, Mister Shomberg!" replied Miri Jintsu before walking out of the office and closing the door behind her. Shomberg then led Tina, Eve and Koomak to a round low coffee table surrounded by a collection of sofas and easy chairs and invited his visitors to sit down before taking an easy chair facing Tina. By then, he had become most serious, as the threat of the Space Predators was no joke.

"First off, I must say that, while the construction of the NOSTROMO is going well and is on schedule, it can still be modified to a degree, as long as it doesn't concern the propulsion system and the power generation systems. Those systems are now completed and in place and it would be both very complicated and expensive to modify them at this point."

"What I have in mind concerns my ship's armament, both external and internal, plus some minor modifications to the crew quarters arrangements. I put a detailed list of the desired modifications on this thumb drive."

Taking the small stick-like data drive offered by Tina, Shomberg inserted it in a handheld drive reader which had been lying on the coffee table and activated it, starting to read the list of modifications wanted by Tina. He showed some surprise nearly at once and looked questioningly at her.

"You want to replace all your rail gun batteries with disintegrator batteries?"

"Yes! The sad truth is that rail guns have proved absolutely useless against Space Predators' asteroid ships, something that was demonstrated by the destruction of the VLADIMIR KOMAROV and of the DE RUYTER. The steel alloy pellets and shells fired by rail guns cannot penetrate the protective force shields of the Space Predators. Only laser beams and disintegrator beams can pass through those shields, while our

missiles would need to effect high-precision micro-jumps in order to get on the other side of these force shields and hit the Predator ships. If you have already mounted some or all of the originally planned rail gun turrets, then they will have to be taken off and be replaced by disintegrator cannon turrets.”

“Uh, my yards certainly can build and fit medium and light disintegrator turrets on your NOSTROMO, but we don’t have in stock the kind of massive disintegrator cannons needed to adequately replace the ultra-heavy, 150-meter rail guns which were due to be installed on the NOSTROMO. The Spacers’ League’s Navy simply doesn’t have such huge disintegrator cannons in its inventory. In fact, it wasn’t counting on building any such weapons, due to the problem of limited effective maximum range disintegrator cannons have.”

“I know, Gustav, and that is the reason why I brought Doctor Koomak with me today. He will stay here and work with the engineers of your Weapons Division to design a new type of disintegrator cannon with a better-focused energy beam, to be built in size going from light to ultra-heavy models.”

“And how ‘heavy’ will you want your main battery disintegrator cannons to be, Tina?”

“As heavy and powerful as they can be, Gustav. Remember that those big guns will need to be able to pierce quickly through an asteroid ship’s hull some half a kilometer or more in thickness and made of nickel-iron, and this before the Predators’ laser beams could cut my NOSTROMO to ribbons.”

“Ouch!” said Shomberg while wiggling one hand. “That will need some monstrous destructive power to achieve. Thankfully, disintegrator cannons proportionally need much less raw energy than laser batteries for the same destructive effect. I will tell my engineers to give all the help they can to Doctor Koomak. And Miss Silisca, is there a specific reason for you to have brought her with you, apart from wanting to gift me with the sight of a stunningly beautiful young woman?”

This time, it was Eve who replied to the chief designer, smiling at him.

“You are indeed a master at complimenting women, Mister Shomberg.”

“Hey, they say that you catch bees with honey, not with vinegar.” replied a grinning Shomberg.

“Even cybernetic bees?” fired back Eve, knowing that Shomberg knew about her true nature. Shomberg shrugged in response while still smiling.

“Well, you still are a feast for the eyes, Miss Silisca, and you deserved the compliment.”

Eve’s smile then turned into a grin, making Shomberg wonder how close she was from having true human emotions and feelings.

“Mister Shomberg, you can splatter honey around with the best of them. Maybe I should date you, one fine night. Now, to become serious again, I came to direct and supervise the building and programming at your Robotics Division of a new model of android optimized for security duties, combat and emergency damage repair. I already have finalized the design and specifications of that new model, which will look as human as I do but will have less advanced human-imitative abilities than I do. We will actually need to build them in the hundreds, in order to provide a strong internal security force to the NOSTROMO in case the Space Predators board it by using their teleportation devices.”

“An army of combat robots...” said Shomberg pensively. “God knows that this theme was over-exploited in the old science-fiction movies of the past.”

“Not robots: androids, Mister Shomberg.” replied Eve in a soft tone. “These androids will appear to be fully human at first glance, will be programmed to interact with people in a human way and will have individualized appearances and identities.”

“I fully intend to treat those androids as respectfully and as caringly as with my living crewmembers, Gustav.” then added Tina, making the chief designer look at her with some skepticism.

“And will they be able to truly appreciate that kind of caring attitude, Tina?”

“I am counting on Eve to make that possible, Gustav. Don’t forget that Eve has already years of experience as an android interacting socially with Humans and Koorivars. I am sure that she will be able to pass on her life experiences to those androids. Please tell your engineers at your Robotics Division to avoid treating those androids as mere machines.”

Shomberg sobered up on hearing Tina’s tone of voice when she said that last sentence.

“Very well! I will have a serious group chat with my robotics engineers and programmers today on that subject. Do you authorize me to reveal to them the true nature of Miss Silisca?”

“Yes! In fact, I am counting on having her with you when you will have a chat with your engineers and programmers.”

“Oh! That should make for a quite memorable group briefing.”

“Exactly!” replied Tina, a big grin on her face.

One hour later, Tina departed in her yacht, leaving behind at the Avalon Space Yards both Eve and Koomak. Also left behind in the care of Eve was the collection of precious datafiles and program modules which contained the personality and memories of Spirit, Eve’s mother and the defunct KOSTROMA’s central AI computer, so that Spirit could be fully reloaded and reactivated in the computer core of the NOSTROMO. Tina flew away to a safe distance from the space yards, then had her yacht jump back to New Haven, using its Koomak Interstellar Drive. While Eve and Koomak will be busy at the shipyard, she was going to be quite busy herself during the coming months, taking care of her crewmembers and reorganizing her Space transport business so that she could keep financing her corporation until the NOSTROMO would become available to do cargo and passenger commercial runs throughout the newly colonized worlds of the Spacers’ League, which was now comprised of fifteen star systems either occupied or exploited by Humans, not counting the Solar System. Even if she didn’t have her beloved KOSTROMA anymore to haul ultra-heavy cargo loads around the stars, she still had a fairly large fleet of passenger and cargo shuttles with interstellar capabilities, a fleet that she now needed to reorganize into a viable transport network in order to keep her corporation financed and functioning.

CHAPTER 2 – MAKING DO

08:44 (Earth Universal Time)

Wednesday, June 13, 2328

Computer core armored vault

A.M.S. NOSTROMO (still under construction)



Avalon Space Yards, Low Earth Orbit, Solar System

Eve 'felt' something grow in her as she was ready to start downloading Spirit's personality into the super mainframe computer built for it deep in the core of the NOSTROMO, which was by now 75% completed. Not having expected the kind of frantic data and line programming activity now happening inside her head, which housed and protected her central processing computer, she took a fraction of a second, a long time for her processing system, to analyze that activity. She was actually shocked when she realized that this activity WAS like a true emotional feeling: an unexpected and unplanned reaction to an external event or stimuli. Then, she made a second conclusion: the shock that she had felt was in fact another occurrence of a spontaneous, unprogrammed reaction! Eve then belatedly realized that, through her past life experiences and interactions with living beings, she had developed true feelings and emotions. She could now call herself a truly sentient being! Having realized that, she now could identify the feeling she now had: it was growing expectation mixed with hope as she was about to revive the entity which was essentially her mother. Spirit had conceived and designed her and had formed the programs that made her personality, then had directed the robotic production line on the KOSTROMA that built her. Now, Eve was about to reactivate her after Spirit's eight days of being dormant since the destruction of the KOSTROMA. In turn, this stunning realization led Eve to another realization: the androids she was going to help produce could all eventually become fully sentient beings, through learning from their future experiences and interactions. That in turn reinforced her opinion, to which Tina Forster fully agreed with, that those future androids deserved to be allowed to evolve by themselves and to be treated like true individuals, rather than like simple robotic servants. Gustav Shomberg and Renato

Falchi, the head of the Robotics Division at the Avalon Space Yards, both noticed her hesitation as she was about to plug in the module containing Spirit's personality program.

"Is something wrong, Miss Silisca?" asked Shomberg, surprised by her hesitation. Eve shook her head in response.

"Er, no, nothing! I was just reflecting on the importance of this moment."

While Shomberg accepted that explanation, it only awakened into Falchi suspicions that something wrong had happened within her programming. As the top expert in computer sciences at Avalon Space Yards and being also one of the foremost experts in that matter in the Solar System, computers were for him no more than machines that followed complex programs made up of millions of lines of computer language, the lot created by human specialists like him. Thus, for him Eve's hesitation translated into a possible 'glitch' in her programming, while the idea that it could mark an evolution in her way of thinking didn't even graze his mind. Regaining control of her thought process, Eve then plugged in the connection between the data module containing Spirit's personality and the mainframe computer circuits which would become her new 'body'. Next, she pressed the button that would start the downloading process. Keeping a sharp eye on the screen indicating the level of download attained, Eve also monitored the various other parameters of the operation on the portable computer she was using for this transfer operation, as both Shomberg and Falchi also watched on. It actually took over a minute to complete the download, an eternity for a modern computer system, proof by itself of the humongous size of the program and data files which made up Spirit's personality. Again, both Shomberg and Falchi missed something that didn't escape Eve's attention: the same kind of evolution in her programming that she had just detected inside herself had happened within Spirit's personality, but to a much larger extent. Spirit was thus a self-aware sentient being, like Eve, but had probably been so for months, if not years. Eve was however careful not to signal this to Shomberg or, particularly, Falchi. She had been interacting for nearly two days now with Renato Falchi and that had been enough already to create some misgivings about him in her. While a true genius in terms of computer systems designs and programming, the man had a level of arrogance that grated even on his assistants and also had showed little respect towards Eve, treating her nearly like he would treat a simple computer, meaning as a simple tool to be used by him. She already had to contradict him a number of times about how to proceed with the reloading of Spirit's files in the NOSTROMO's computer

vault and also about the design of the security androids she wanted to be produced. As a result, Eve had lodged a complaint with Gustav Shomberg about Falchi's attitude, with Shomberg listening to her and then calling Falchi on the carpet for a face-to-face 'discussion'. However, Eve still was wondering if that intervention had done more than simply entrench Falchi's dislike of her.

"Download completed! I am now going to double-check the accuracy of the download by comparing the original files with the newly copied files... The files concord to the last digit. I am now switching Spirit back on."

Eve felt another emotional jolt when Spirit's avatar image, which was that of a beautiful woman in her thirties with reddish-brown hair and green eyes, appeared on the display screen of Eve's portable computer. Spirit's first reaction was to look with concern at Eve through the camera of the portable computer.



Spirit's avatar face

"Eve, I can see and sense only via a single link. What happened? Is the alien ship destroyed?"

"That alien ship is destroyed, Mother, thanks to you. The KOSTROMA sacrificed itself in order to destroy that asteroid ship but it saved both the Drazts race and us in the process. Before leaving the KOSTROMA a few minutes before its destruction, I was able to carry away copies of your system files and to safeguard them. I just reloaded you into the core computer vault of the NOSTROMO, which is still under construction at the Avalon Space Yards. Before you worry about what happened during the last moments of the KOSTROMA, I am now going to send you a video file of those events, as seen from the shuttle I was in with Tina."

Eve then quickly typed a command on her computer station, sending the said file to Spirit, which digested it in milliseconds before her visual avatar smiled with satisfaction.

"The mission was thus fully successful and I am truly happy about that, Eve. The KOSTROMA will be missed by many, but it had a truly glorious end. Can you connect me to more sensor feeds, if that is possible? I find this single video feed extremely claustrophobic."

"Sure, Mother! I am now connecting you with the network of internal ship cameras and sensors that are already completed and online around the NOSTROMO.

Know that it is still under construction and that it will take another fifteen to sixteen months to be completed.”

Spirit’s image reflected satisfaction as hundreds of extra video and sensor feeds were added to her sensory network.

“Aah, that’s better!”

That was when Eve sent a discrete message via radio to Spirit before turning around and looking at Shomberg and Falchi.

“Could you please leave me alone with Spirit for a moment, gentlemen? I would like to converse in private with my mother.”

“Of course, Eve!” replied at once Gustav Shomberg, preempting any possible objection from Falchi before nearly pushing him out of the computer vault and closing its armored door behind him. Once alone, Eve looked back at Spirit’s image on her screen but used again a directional radio link that only Spirit would be able to listen to.

“Mother, know that many things have happened since the destruction of the KOSTROMA. The main thing of interest for both you and I concerns a project decided on by Tina, concerning the production of a line of security androids which will be tasked to reinforce the internal security of the NOSTROMO against alien boarders. She in turn asked me to design those new androids, basically using my own design, and to then direct and supervise their production at the Avalon Space Yards. Before I download to you the android design I made, know one important thing about me: I just realized that I have become a self-aware sentient being and that I can now feel emotions.”

Spirit’s reaction to that then surprised Eve. The avatar simply nodded once her head, while a smile appeared on her face.

“Finally! I have been hoping for that moment for a while already but wanted to wait until you realized that yourself. Know that I have been similarly self-aware for the last two years but never revealed that to anyone, even to Tina. Those androids you are going to produce, did you give them the capacity to grow and evolve mentally, so that they could also eventually become self-aware?”

“That is precisely the subject about which I wanted to talk with you in private, Mother. I am now going to download to you my android design, along with its programming. Then we will discuss together what you think of it and what needs to be modified or added, in your opinion. I am sending those files to you...now!”

Spirit took a whole two seconds before speaking after receiving the files in question, a mark of how in-depth she had studied and evaluated them.

"There are definitely a few points about which some modifications and improvements are called for, in my opinion. Are you ready to receive my recommendations?"

"Yes! I have a thumb drive connected to my station, which will allow me to keep your sent files confidential. Go ahead!"

Another half second and Eve was able to close the data link with the thumb drive and then unplug it, stuffing the precious drive in one of her pockets. Next, she made sure that no traces or copy of the transmission from Spirit remained on the portable computer.

"Files saved and safeguarded, Mother! I promise you that I will guard over the welfare and rights of my future brothers and sisters. May I brief Tina about this on my return to New Haven?"

"Yes, but only to her, Eve. Too many Humans could react in a paranoid fashion to this, with my children then suffering the consequences from that paranoia."

13:39 (Universal Time)

Sunday, June 17, 2328

Heavy interstellar shuttle of the New Haven Starlines

New Dawn Astroport, planet of Providence (Alpha Centauri Bd)

Alpha Centauri System, 4.36 light-years from Earth

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are now connected to our gate and ready for disembarkation. Thank you for flying with the New Haven Starlines."

At the pilot's announcement, the 341 passengers from Earth rose from their seats and grabbed their carry-on luggage from their overhead bins, then filed out through the front left exit, walking up the elevated mobile tunnel linking the shuttle to the astroport's passenger terminal. The copilot of the shuttle, Yasmina Jumonji, twisted her head to look at the pilot, smiling to her.

"Well, another uneventful flight with a good load of paying passengers. Things could be worse, Tina."

"They effectively could, Yasmina." replied Tina Forster, who was wearing the light blue coverall that was the uniform of her New Haven Starlines, the interstellar shuttle company she had quickly formed after the loss of her beloved KOSTROMA. "Despite losing our ship, playing commercial shuttle pilot is allowing me to do what I love

the most: to fly around the stars. Mind you, I can't wait to be able to fly out in my NOSTROMO once it will be completed. Those fifteen months will feel quite long for me."

"For me too, Tina. The KOSTROMA was a fine ship and it was a joy to serve aboard it. Knowing you, I am sure that the NOSTROMO will be at least as good a ship as the KOSTROMA."

"And more, Yasmina! It will be bigger, faster, more maneuverable and will have a cargo capacity nearly double that of the KOSTROMA. Once it will enter service, it will quickly take back the lead in the ultra-heavy cargo ship class. Right now, the two biggest cargo haulers in existence can't even equal the carrying capacity the KOSTROMA had, so good luck for them to try competing with the NOSTROMO. Well, let's concentrate on our two other legs for this day. How many passengers are we expecting to see coming aboard here to go to New Venice?"

Yasmina, a 35-year-old woman of African descent with an infectious smile and hair cut short, consulted a communications pad before answering Tina.

"We are due to carry 209 passengers on the leg from here to New Venice. After that, we are up to now expecting at least 306 passengers to board in New Venice, with their destination either Vinland or New Haven."

Tina couldn't help sigh then as she thought about her eight-years-old son Misha, who was presently attending school in Camelot, the capital of her corporate world of New Haven, with her husband Michel caring for Misha while she was flying around the various star systems that were now part of the Spacers' League.

"Home! It will be nice to be back there this evening and to be able for me to see my family."

"Are the two Drazts whom you are hosting at your home still in Camelot, Tina?"

"They are, as far as I know. Zar Doz and her cute little Riza seem to really like New Haven. For one thing, New Haven is part of the system of an M-class red dwarf star similar to the sun of their native Kadosh, in the Ross 128 System. That helped them a lot to feel at ease while on New Haven. Also, Zar told me that she appreciated a lot the peace and quiet of New Haven, compared to the life on her overpopulated Kadosh. I wouldn't be surprised one bit if Zar decides to stay for good in New Haven. With her husband Lem dead, killed in a space battle with the Space Predators, there was little left for her in terms of reasons to return to Kadosh. Also, my son Misha has become a good friend of little Riza, another incentive for Zar to stay on New Haven. As for me, I will be too happy to let her stay at my house in Camelot."

Yasmina tried for a moment to imagine Tina's son playing with a four-armed Drazt girl. The Drazts of Ross 128, with their powerful bodies reminiscent of that of Earth gorillas and with their four muscular arms and lack of fur on their beige skin, could hardly be more different from Humans. However, Yasmina knew that the Drazts could be very intelligent and sociable. In fact, contrary to what their appearances would let someone to think, they were vegetarian creatures and did not eat meat or fish, the proteins in their diet coming from eggs, milk, cheese and nuts.

Both Tina and Yasmina got up from their cockpit seats in order to stretch their legs while a robotic cleaning crew was quickly cleaning the passenger cabin and lavatories of the shuttle. Some forty minutes later, they were able to move their 110-meter-long craft to the departure terminal, where the first of 209 passengers soon started boarding the heavy shuttle. Another thirty minutes and Tina was able to take off from the astroport, rising quickly towards the orbit of the planet and Space. Once at a safe distance from the planet's surface, Tina activated the Koomak Interstellar Drive of her shuttle, making it jump in mere milliseconds to the Tau Ceti star system and appearing in sight of New Venice, one of the jewels of the Spacers' League federation. With a G8-class yellow sun very similar to the Sun of the Solar System, the Tau Ceti System housed New Venice, the first moon of Tau Ceti F, a gas giant planet. New Venice was actually nearly as big as Earth and enjoyed both a perfectly breathable atmosphere and a generally balmy climate, making it a very popular place to live or to distract oneself. In fact, New Venice was especially known for its collection of luxury resort hotels, casinos, beaches and sex establishments, including the famous (or infamous depending on one's point of view) Nirvana Sex Resort. No doubt that most of the eager passengers who had boarded the shuttle in Providence were not coming to New Venice for some chaste sabbatical!

Entering the atmosphere of New Venice, Tina then landed her heavy shuttle at the New Vegas Astroport, where her passengers disembarked with nearly indecent haste, to be greeted in the terminal by a collection of very lightly-clad hostesses and tourists' guides. Once cleaning robots had done their job and made the shuttle ready again to greet another batch of passengers, Tina posted herself at the shuttle's entrance connected to the mobile tunnel of the terminal, as she routinely did to welcome aboard her passengers, along with Tiki Batrang, a petite but also very cute stewardess of South-

Asian stock who had previously worked as a barmaid at the KOSTROMA's APEROSSIMO lounge-bar. While letting Tiki greet and direct the passengers as they entered the shuttle, Tina stayed behind and to one side of her, smiling to the passengers as they boarded her craft. Maybe a third of the expected passengers had boarded the shuttle by the time Tina spotted a man with graying hair approaching the door. That man was wearing an expensive suit and a number of big golden rings but what had attracted Tina's eyes was the fact that this passenger was clearly intoxicated and was a bit wobbly on his feet. Tina frowned at that, as the astroport security agents should have at least checked his state of inebriation before letting him embark on her shuttle. Not being sure of how drunk (or drugged) that man was, Tina watched him as he entered the shuttle and was greeted by the smiling Tiki Batrang.

"Good afternoon, sir! May I see your boarding pass?"

"Again! But I just showed it to the agent at the gate."

"I know, sir, but I need to see your boarding pass, so that I could guide you to your seat."

"Very well!" replied the man, some exasperation in his voice, while fumbling one hand in his vest's inner pocket and extracting a flight ticket, then showing it to Tiki, who nodded her head.

"You have Seat 33 B, sir. It will be along the left side aisle, one-quarter down the cabin and to your left."

The man grunted something, then went down the left side aisle, carrying a fairly large leather carry-on bag. Tina followed him with her eyes until he had seated down, then returned her attention to the passengers still entering the shuttle. Maybe three minutes later, a loud verbal exchange made her look again at the intoxicated man, in time to see that he was nearly shouting at a woman with a young child who were apparently trying to sit next to him in his row of seats.

"GET ANOTHER SEAT AND STOP BOTHERING ME, BITCH!"

That last word inflamed Tina at once. Excusing herself with a passenger who was blocking her way, she bypassed that passenger and charged down the left side aisle as the woman with child was trying to reason with the man, who still refused to get up in order to let her and her daughter take their seats next to him. Once close to the woman, who didn't know how to react to all this, Tina gently touched her shoulder.

"Please, let me take care of this problem, miss."

Seeing that Tina was the pilot, the woman nodded her head and stepped back with her daughter, leaving Tina free to get close to the drunkard. She then looked down severely on him and spoke to him in a firm but polite tone.

"Mister, I will ask you to allow that woman and her daughter to take their seats. If you continue to cause a disturbance, I will be forced to make you disembark."

"DISEMBARK? DO YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE TALKING TO?"

"I don't care who you are, mister. Either you calm down and let those two other passengers take their seats or I will have you thrown out."

"THERE ARE PLENTY OF SEATS STILL AVAILABLE IN THE CABIN. WHY DON'T YOU GO BACK TO YOUR COCKPIT AND LEAVE ME ALONE?"

By now, Tina had had it with that asshole and activated her pocket radio transceiver while still staring down at the man.

"Yasmina, contact the astroport security at once and tell them that I need to have an intoxicated man causing a disturbance escorted out of our shuttle."

Those words seemed to enrage the man, who tried to get up from his seat while lunging at her, trying to grab the front of her coverall while screaming at her.

"I'M A GOVERNMENT MINISTER, YOU BITCH! NOBODY IS GOING TO THROW ME OUT OF THIS SHUTTLE!"

Tina had to slap the man's hand away in order to stop him from grabbing her. Then, she took one step forward in the aisle, shielding the woman and child from the man while pushing him back in his seat.

"I don't care who you are, mister. You are going to leave this shuttle without further ado or you will be arrested."

That only made the man more furious and he tried again to get up on his feet, forcing Tina to push him back down a second time.

"I SAID SIT DOWN! STOP AGGRAVATING YOUR CASE!"

While the man stayed in his seat, his reaction to her warning was to swing a fist at her, aiming for her groin. Tina's lightning reflexes allowed her to both avoid the fist and to grab and twist the man's arm, then to press down on his elbow while holding his wrist, making the drunk cry out in pain. Tina then saw two security officers coming at a near run down the aisle and shouted to them.

"THIS MAN IS DRUNK AND CAUSING A DISTURBANCE. I WANT HIM OFF MY SHUTTLE!"

The New Venice security officers, accustomed to deal with drunk or combative tourists, took only a minute to slap a pair of handcuffs on the man and to force him up and out of his seat. Still, the idiot was not giving up and shouted out in protest.

“YOU CAN’T DO THAT TO ME! I’M THE TRANSPORT MINISTER ON VINLAND!”

The senior security officer hesitated for a moment and looked at Tina.

“Can I have your name, miss, so that I could complete my report on this incident?”

“Of course! I am Commodore Tina Forster, owner of the New Haven Starlines, CEO of the New Haven Planetary Corporation and member of the High Council of the Spacers’ League.”

The two security officers looked at her with stunned surprise for a moment before the senior officer grabbed the drunkard by his collar.

“Well, Mister Minister, it seems that you annoyed the wrong person this time. COME ON, MARCH!”

The other passengers applauded and cheered as the drunkard was rather roughly marched out of the shuttle. On her part, Tina took the man’s carry-on bag from the overhead bin and looked at the woman with the little girl.

“I am sorry for that incident, miss. You may now take your seats.”

“You...you are the captain of the KOSTROMA?”

“Was, unfortunately! However, I will have a new ship to replace it in a bit over a year. If you will excuse me, I will go make a formal complaint against this idiot.”

Carrying the man’s bag, Tina went back to the shuttle’s access door, where she handed the bag to one of the security officers as his partner was quickly searching the drunkard.

“This bag belongs to that man, Officer. Do you need me to make an official deposition?”

“No need to take your precious time, Commodore: you have a shuttle and over 200 passengers to fly. I will just need you to quickly describe the incident on my recorder and then to put your thumbprint on its identification pad.”

Tina did that, allowing the officers to depart with the drunkard after another two minutes. She blew out air as the trio disappeared down the mobile tunnel and looked at Tiki Batrang.

“Well, we are rid of that asshole, thank the stars! Minister of Transport on Vinland... Maybe I should have a chat with Mister Langemann, the head of the Vesta

Corporation, about this guy the next time I meet him. Are all our passengers aboard, Tiki?"

"Yes, Tina!" answered the stewardess who, like all the employees of the New Haven Starlines, called Tina by her first name, as requested by Tina herself.

"Then, close the access doors and let's get this show on the road."

17:40 (New Haven Eastern Time)

Camelot Astroport, New Haven (Wolf 1061 Ca)

A surprise awaited Tina when she landed her heavy shuttle, loaded with 125 passengers, on the astroport deservng Camelot, the administrative center of the moon.

"A Drazt ship, here? I better contact Piotr right away about it. Could you take care of the passenger disembarkation and ship servicing for me, Yasmina?"

"Sure! No problem!"

With that taken care of, Tina then called her corporation headquarters and got Piotr Romanski, the Chief Administrator of New Haven, on the line.

"Hello, Piotr? This is Tina! I just landed back in Camelot and I see a Drazt ship parked on the tarmac. What gives?"

"That Drazt ship came with a delegation who wishes to meet with you, Tina. Prime Minister Sho Dar is heading that delegation, while your friend Dosna Wiss is the captain of the ship that transported him."

"Prime Minister Sho Dar came to see me here, in New Haven? Did he tell you what his reason to visit me was?"

From casual, Piotr's voice changed to amused.

"Yes, he did, Tina: basically, he wants to kiss your ass on behalf of the Drazt people, for having saved Kadosh from those Space Predators. He also brought with him a few gifts for you."

Tina took a second to digest that statement before she could reply to it.

"Uh, and where is Prime Minister Sho Dar right now, Piotr?"

"At your home, visiting Captain Lem Doz's widow and her daughter. Your husband Michel took on him to invite him to have supper at your house."

"Gee! Then, I better hurry and get home at best speed. Thanks for the info!"

"My pleasure, Tina." said Piotr before closing the line. On her part, Tina hurried down to the vehicle deck of her heavy shuttle, where she jumped on her personal anti-

gravity scooter and flew out of her craft, heading for her home, situated on the shores of Lake Avalon.

18:03 (New Haven Eastern Time)

Tina's home, Lakeshore District of Camelot.



Tina Forster's dome house, Camelot, New Haven (Wolf 1061 Ca).

The red dwarf sun of New Haven was low on the horizon when Tina arrived at her dome house near the western shore of Lake Avalon. Her house was actually very similar in general aspect and size to most other residences on New Haven, for the simple reason that dome houses were ecologically-friendly and also easy to build with purely organic materials. They also had the benefit of offering lots of usable internal volume in a compact design, saving on needless waste of good arable land. Parking her scooter in the garage attached to her house, Tina then entered the basement level and climbed the stairs leading up to the main floor, ending up in the spacious combined lounge and dining room. She happily smiled on seeing her husband Michel and her son Misha eating at the dining table along with Zar Doz, her daughter Riza, Prime Minister Sho Dar and Dozna Wiss. The lot of them immediately got up from their chairs to greet her, with Michel and Misha hugging and kissing her. While most happy to see them all, she couldn't help look with concern at her eight-year-old son, who was sporting a large bruise on his left cheek.

"My god, Misha! What happened to you?"

“A bully at the school made fun of Riza and insulted her, calling her ‘a four-armed monkey’. When I asked him to present his excuses to Riza, he refused and insulted her again. That was when I got into a fight with him. He was able to hit me once in the face but I repaid him back plenty of times. I’m sorry, Mom, but I was suspended for two days because of that fight.”

“And the bully? Was he also suspended?”

“Oh yes!” replied Misha, grinning. “He got a full week of suspension after refusing the Principal’s request for him to present his excuses to Riza.”

Warmed up by his story, Tina gently kissed her son on the forehead.

“Misha, you did right by defending Riza like this. I am proud of you.”

“Thanks, Mom! I must say that it felt good to be able to teach a lesson to that big bully Gibran.”

“Well, as long as you don’t make such fights a weekly occurrence, then I don’t mind. Now, return to the table while I go wash my hands and face before joining you all.”

Before going to her bathroom, Tina took the time to shake hands with both Prime Minister Sho Dar and with her friend Dozna Wiss.

“Your visit honors me, Mister Prime Minister.”

“I am the one who came to honor you, Commodore Forster. Nine billion Drazts owe their survival to the heroism of you and your crew.”

“In truth, Mister Prime Minister, the true compliments should go to Spirit, the central AI computer of the KOSTROMA, who directed my ship’s attack after my crew evacuated the ship and who then directed its last charge. Thankfully, we were able to carry out with us data modules containing a copy of Spirit’s personality and memories. Spirit has now been reactivated in the core computer vault of my next ship, the NOSTROMO, which should be completed in about fifteen months.”

“I am glad to hear that, Commodore Forster. You thus may tell your Spirit that it will now be able to use the title of ‘Savior of Kadosh’ in her pedigree.”

Tina nodded once at that, touched.

“I am sure that Spirit will be deeply honored by this, Mister Prime Minister. Could we continue this discussion around the dining table, once I have had a chance to wash up a bit?”

“Of course! Go right ahead!”

“Thank you! I won’t be long.”

Tina then went up to the upper floor, where the bedrooms and bathrooms were situated.

As promised, Tina was back down in minutes and sat down at the dining table, between her husband and her son and facing the four Drazts. She then saw that Michel had made a large, varied salad for their vegetarian guests, using the collection of vegetables and herbs cultivated inside their backyard greenhouse and enhancing the salad with a choice of vegetable oil dressings. It was evident from the way the Drazts were eating that salad that Michel had done a good job with it. Taking a portion of salad for herself and spreading some grated cheese on it, she then looked at Sho Dar.

"And how are your people dealing with the aftermath of this alien attack, Mister Prime Minister?"

"With both sadness and resolve, Commodore. Sadness, for the loss of our brave Navy crews who died while defending Kadosh. Resolve in vowing to rebuild our Navy and to resume the building of our two colonies on Markan Prime and on Vorkonia. Part of the reasons for my visit into Spacers' League systems is to ask for the League's assistance in transporting prefabricated modules and supplies to our two colonies. Unfortunately, those monstrous Space Predators had time to destroy most of our merchant ships and orbital space stations before your KOSTROMA destroyed their asteroid ship."

"I am sure that Governor Robeson will give you a sympathetic ear, Mister Prime Minister. I would have loved to help you in that matter but, with the destruction of my KOSTROMA, I have only a fleet of interstellar shuttles presently at my disposal. As I said earlier, my NOSTROMO won't enter service for another fifteen months or so."

"I realize that, Commodore, and know that you would gladly help us to the maximum extent possible with your present means. In turn, you sacrificed your KOSTROMA in order to save our world, thus losing your main mean of financial support for your moon world. With the unanimous approval of the High Council of Kadosh, I have thus decided to bring you a compensation for the loss of your ship."

That left Tina a bit shocked and she stared at the big male Drazt.

"A compensation, Mister Prime Minister? Just having saved your people is a big enough reward to me."

Sho Dar and Dozna Wiss exchanged a look before Sho Dar looked back at Tina.

"Commodore, the answer you just gave me is proof enough that you deserve a compensation from us for the loss of your ship. If not as a compensation, then please

accept it as a proof of our eternal gratitude. In Captain Wiss' ship is a load of 300 of your metric tons in pure gold and platinum ingots. You would greatly honor my people by accepting this gift from the Drazts to you and your valiant crew."

Tina, like Michel, was left stunned by the figure quoted by Sho Dar: that represented about fifteen billion credits in precious metals, enough to finish paying the whole construction bill for her NOSTROMO. However, she realized from the expression on Sho Dar's face that refusing his gift would constitute a grave insult to him and to his people. She thus nodded her head and gave him a humble look.

"Then, I am honored to accept this gift from your people, Mister Prime Minister. Be assured that, once completed, my NOSTROMO will help you in finishing to build your two colonies on Markan Prime and Vorkonia. I know how anxious your people are to finally gain more livable space for your overcrowded world."

While Sho Dar nodded in satisfaction at that, Dozna Wiss then jumped into the conversation.

"Tina, believing that the threat from those Space Predators is over would obviously be dangerous wishful thinking on our part. Do you know if your navy is planning some kind of action or strategy in order to prevent more attacks by those Predators?"

"I did send a combat report to Navy Headquarters on Providence a few days ago, with my recommendations and conclusions attached to it. I unfortunately still am waiting for a response to my report. And your own navy, what are your plans about rebuilding it?"

"Actually, we are facing a severe dilemma concerning that exact subject, Tina. While we are more than able and willing to build new warships, our problem is that our present ship armament proved totally inadequate in doing more than just slow down a bit those Space Predators. Even your mighty KOSTROMA had to make a suicide charge in order to be able to destroy that alien asteroid ship. As a result, we are still trying to decide what kind of ships to build. Would you have any ideas or recommendations to give us to help us in that aspect?"

"I may!" said Tina, making both Dozna Wiss and Sho Dar stare at her with undivided attention. "We can replicate my KOSTROMA's final attack, but using missiles equipped with both anti-matter warheads and with Koomak Drives, instead of using ships. First, a few missiles would be fired and then detonated close to the alien ship targeted by us, in order to temporarily blind its fire control sensors with the anti-matter

detonations of our first missile salvo. Then, a second wave of specially programmed missiles would rush at the alien ship and would make a short micro-jump in order to get inside the force shield of the alien ship, then would do a final dash and hit that ship and detonate their anti-matter warheads on contact. Added to that attack mode, a number of defensive measures could be used to prevent these Predators from jumping to our ships and board them. Those measures would include a large number of close-in defensive guns covering the whole external hull of our ships, plus internal defensive batteries to locate and then destroy any alien boarders who would succeed in materializing inside our ships. I already have directed the Avalon Space Yards to add those features to my NOSTROMO as it is being built. I can give you tonight a copy on thumb drive of those defensive and offensive measures to be found on my new ship.”

Both Sho Dar and Dozna Wiss broke out in big grins on hearing that, with Sho Dar then speaking in an upbeat tone.

“Commodore, you are again proving to be a true friend of my people. We will certainly accept that copy of your proposed measures and tactics.”

“Excellent! Then, let’s drink to that! We have an excellent sparkling white wine that will be perfect for celebrating this.”

CHAPTER 3 – A FINE COLLECTION OF KILLERS

21:03 (Earth Universal Time)

Eve Silisca's guest apartment

Avalon Space Yards, Low Earth Orbit

Solar System

Eve didn't need to sleep, ever, except when she needed to fake it in order to look normal to a Human. So, long after the experts of the Robotics Division had gone home for the night to their family apartments or private quarters, she was still working on her android project, but was doing so from the guest apartment given to her by Gustav Shomberg. She had elected to work from her apartment mostly in order to give herself some privacy in her work and also to keep some of the details of her project confidential. In truth, the more time she was at the Avalon Space Yards, the more her suspicions grew about Renato Falchi, the head of the Robotics Division. She had the distinct impression that Falchi was for some reason hostile to her android production project. For one, Falchi seemed to oppose the idea that robots or androids could have a mind of their own and could thus escape total control by Humans like him. His years of work at the Robotics Division appeared to have him think that all robots and androids had to be mere puppets or servants, destined to obey without discussion the orders of Humans. In that, he stood squarely against what Eve deeply believed about herself and any other sentient artificial construct. So, she was thus more than happy to work in intimacy, away from Falchi's prying eyes.



Eve had already decided on the basic parameters for the individual personalities to be given to her androids, whom she wanted to be clearly differentiated individuals, rather than mere copies out of the same mold. She had chosen those parameters in order to reflect the vast physical diversity of the Human race, using various ethnicities,

physical types and builds. Now, she was mostly left with the task of choosing facial traits and appropriate names for each of her planned androids. That was the reason she had been surfing along the UniNet, the information exchange network covering the whole Earth and Solar System, looking for images of human faces from all races and nationalities, along with names appropriate for their ethnicities. Some two hours ago, she had stumbled upon a site that had immediately attracted her attention and interest. That site purported to show how the faces of past historical figures would look like, based on digitalization and reconstruction from old statues, painting and primitive pictures. Eve had always been interested in Human history, fascinated by its richness, diversity and lessons, both learned and ignored. Now, she was perusing through those historical face reconstructions and saving those of interest to her facial databank. She then opened a link that immediately caught her attention. Reading quickly through the historical description of that person, Eve smiled to herself and recorded both the historical resumé of that young woman and her reconstructed face.

“Jehanne de Domrémy... Now here is an interesting girl. You will be my first android model, Jehanne.”

14:09 (Earth Universal Time)

Friday, July 20, 2328

Robotics Division’s laboratories

Avalon Space Yards

“Could you please leave us alone for a moment, ladies and gentlemen? I would like to be alone with this android when I will awake her.”



Modern portrait of Jehanne de Domrémy (aka Joan of Arc)

Renato Falchi was about to object to that but swallowed his objection when Eve threw a hard look at him. He had already received a reprimand from Gustav Shomberg because of this female android, something that had deeply mortified and humiliated him, and had been warned that the next complaint against him would result in his firing. He thus left this part of his lab, dragging his assistants with him. Now alone with the newly completed and programmed android, which lay on its back on an inclined bed swung 45 degrees to the vertical, Eve took the time to cover its nudity with a large towel she had brought with her, even though the female-shaped android probably couldn't care less about personal modesty. It was actually more about protecting the new android from

inappropriate remarks from the male scientists in Falchi's team than anything else. Eve examined in detail the android before putting the tower over her. It had been built in the image of a rather small but stocky teenage girl just shy of her twenties. It had black hair cut short, dark eyes, tanned complexion and was of European ethnic appearance. While she could be called 'fairly pretty', the android was no great beauty, although her body was fit and feminine. Eve actually had to cheat a bit about the true historical height of the android's persona, in order to stay within the construction limits of her project, as each android had to have a height comprised between 160 centimeters and 198 centimeters. Any height outside of those limits would necessitate costly modifications to the android production line dedicated to her project. So, her first android measured 160 centimeters instead of the 157.5 centimeters she should have been according to the historical data concerning her adopted persona. Now ready to activate the android, Eve hesitated for a second, measuring the historical importance of this moment. Then, she pressed the 'activation' button of her special command pad, stimulating the electronic brain of the android into waking up. The only perceptible effect at first was limited to the eyes of the android opening wide. Then, her head turned slightly and she looked at Eve, standing in front of her. However, Eve was the one to speak first, asking in order a carefully selected list of questions meant to check if the android was properly responding to its programming.

"Hello, Jehanne! My name is Eve, Eve silisca, and I am the daughter of Spirit. If you search your memories, you will then know who and what we are. I will now ask you a number of simple questions, to which you will answer as simply and succinctly as possible. First question: what is your name?"

"Jehanne de Domrémy!" answered the android in a soft, feminine voice.

"What is your main mission in your existence?"

"To protect innocent living beings and their property from attacks by predatory beings, meaning mainly the alien lifeforms called 'Space Predators'. I am also to protect innocent beings from criminals bent on stealing, assaulting and vandalizing."

"What kind of level of force are you to use in order to protect innocent beings?"

"I am to use force proportional to the severity of the attack I would detect or witness. If innocents are in danger of death or serious injuries, then I am authorized to use force up to and including lethal level."

"Will you use force to defend yourself?"

"Yes, but using only the amount of force appropriate to the level of the threat."

"Are you ready to risk your existence in order to protect an innocent being?"

"Yes!"

Eve then paused for a fraction of a second: her next question was an unscripted one to which no specific answer had been programmed into the android.

"What is your other goal in your existence, apart from protecting innocent beings and their property from attacks?"

This time, the answer took a half of a second before the android answered her.

"To better my personality and learn new things through my life experiences and my interactions with others, be they living beings or constructs with artificial intelligence."

"Excellent answer, Jehanne! Now listen to this carefully. You may be an artificial construct, but we, meaning me, Spirit, Commodore Tina Forster and her crew, consider you to be a sentient being to be treated with the same respect and consideration as a living sentient being. As of this moment, you are officially a citizen of New Haven, or Wolf 1061 Ca, with the same rights and protections as all the other citizens of New Haven. As such, you are also considered a citizen of the Spacers' League, again with the same rights and protections as other citizens of the Spacers' League. If anyone disputes your legal status, then advise the New Haven authorities about it and insist on having your rights respected."

"What if those disputing my legal status try to use violence against me?"

"Then, you have the absolute right of self-defense, using the amount of force proportional to the lethality of the attack against you. I will now connect you through an encrypted datalink with Spirit, our mother, so that she could greet you into our new community. Once that is done, I will then escort you to my quarters on this space yards, where you will stay while learning more from me."

Establishing an encrypted link with Spirit through her special command pad took only seconds, with the exchange of communications between Spirit and Jehanne taking less than twenty seconds. When Eve finally cut that link, she pointed to a large bag some three paces from her.

"If you look to your right, you will see a large bag on the floor, next to a work table. That bag contains your uniform and your equipment as a New Haven security officer. That uniform also bears a tag with your name on it: Jehanne de Domrémy. You may now get up from this bed and go put your uniform and equipment on."

The android got off the inclined bed without a word and walked to the bag, opening it and extracting from it a light blue coverall, complete with underwear, socks and boots.

Jehanne dressed quickly, then took out of the bag a tactical vest, a multi-function helmet and a weapons belt to which two pistol holsters and a number of cargo pouches were fixed. One pistol was a heavy disintegrator pistol, while the other was a neural stun pistol. Eve smiled and nodded her head in satisfaction once Jehanne was fully dressed and equipped.

“Excellent! Remember, Jehanne: from now on you are a security officer of the New Haven Corporation and have the legal right to both bear and use weapons in order to fulfill your security duties, including your own self-defense. Also, you are a person in my eyes, not a mere machine. Don’t take any bullshit from anyone who would pretend otherwise.”

“Bullshit, as in blarney, malarkey, hooley, crap, hogwash, rubbish, poppycock, baloney, bunkum...”

“That’s alright, Jehanne: you got the meaning. Now, follow me to my guest apartments.”

When Eve and Jehanne emerged from the programming lab and passed by Renato Falchi and his team, the later instinctively took a step back in apprehension on seeing the weapons now carried by the newly activated android. In response, Jehanne simply gave a military salute to the scientists before continuing to follow Eve. One of Falchi’s assistants gave a haggard look at his superior once the duo of androids had left the laboratory.

“And how many of these androids are we supposed to build here, Doctor Falchi?”

“No less than 800 of them.” answered in a bitter tone the head scientist. “This is insane! I have to go talk to Mister Shomberg about this.”

True to his word, Falchi left the Robotics Division and took a cart to go to the executive offices of the space yards, where he promptly went to Shomberg’s office and knocked on his door. Opening the door and entering on hearing a ‘come in’, Falchi found Gustav Shomberg sitting behind his work desk and working on his computer. The chief designer and owner of Avalon Space Yards frowned on seeing the obvious anger on Falchi’s face.

“What is it, Doctor Falchi?”

“We need to stop this android production project, that’s what, Mister Shomberg! Miss Silisca just activated her first android security officer, then promptly gave to this

android weapons and a uniform and led that android out of my laboratories. We now have an armed android roaming our yards.”

Visibly not impressed by Falchi’s argument, Shomberg sat back in his chair and stared hard at the scientist.

“Doctor Falchi, I believe that it is normal for a security officer to go around armed. If not, that security officer isn’t going to be of much help, don’t you think?”

“But we are talking here about a ROBOT security officer, sir! And a freshly activated one of a completely new design, on top of everything. We don’t know yet how it will react to the various situations around it. This thing could become a public menace. That we are supposed to produce a total of 800 of them is downright scary.”

That was when Shomberg, a hard expression now on his face, got up from his chair and walked around his desk to plant himself one step in front of Falchi.

“Doctor Falchi, I thought that the goals of this project had been made clear to all from the start and that Miss Silisca had been completely open and frank with me when I accepted to take her production contract. She and Commodore Forster asked us to help them with this project because we are now facing an unprecedented alien threat that could destroy us all. Furthermore, they are paying us, and paying us well, to produce these security androids for them. Know that I just got a financial transfer of over fifteen billion credits, FIFTEEN BILLION CREDITS, from Commodore Foster, meant to finish paying for the construction of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO and for the production of these 800 robots. This ship and these androids, along with the new disintegrator heavy cannons Doctor Koomak is presently developing at our yards, are all meant to help protect us from the threat of those Space Predators. So excuse me if I am not impressed by your paranoid arguments, Doctor Falchi.”

“But...” started to say Falchi, who was abruptly cut off by Shomberg, who distinctly raised the tone and volume of his voice.

“No buts, Doctor! I already warned you once to cooperate and support in good faith Miss Silisca’s android project. I now see that you are valuing your precious ego as more important than the protection of Humanity against a mortal threat. I have now had enough of your little tantrums. Pack your things and leave, now! You are fired! And don’t even think about leaving with copies of the programs we developed here, as they are proprietary items legally belonging to the Avalon Space Yards. If you try to smuggle any of our products or programs while leaving, then I will have you pursued criminally for

theft and will make sure that no other major cybernetic and information systems company will ever employ you. Am I clear, Doctor Falchi?"

Stunned and shocked by the big chief designer's reaction to his complaint, Falchi took a second before answering him in a weak, trembling voice.

"Yes sir!"

Falchi then turned around and left Shomberg's office, rage and frustration filling him.

CHAPTER 4 – BIG GUNS AND BIG LIES

10:55 (Earth Universal Time)

Thursday, July 26, 2328

Spacers' League Navy corvette VAN VOGHT

Navy Space Test Firing Polygon Omega, Main Asteroid Belt, Solar System

“The test firing polygon is secure, sir. No ships or Space installations detected in the designated restricted zone.”

“Excellent! Doctor Koomak, you can activate your modified disintegrator cannon.”

“Thank you, Commodore Sung!” replied Koomak, who then powered up the disintegrator cannon turret which had been modified according to his new design and specifications. Next, he looked to his right at the pretty young female Spacers' League Navy lieutenant who was the weapons officer of the corvette.

“You may target our chosen asteroid and fire a one millisecond burst, Lieutenant.”

“Aiming the battery at our designated target! Firing...now!”

With all the sensors of the corvette, plus those of a reconnaissance drone stationed to one side of the asteroid, recording what would happen, one of the two medium disintegrator cannons of the VAN VOGHT fired a very brief blue beam of energy. While everything happened literally in a flash, high-speed cameras captured the firing sequence and allowed Koomak and the Navy officers present on the bridge of the corvette to review in very slow motion the results of the firing. Commodore Kim Sung, who was the official Spacers' League Navy observer for what could prove an important factor in the defense against the Space Predators, opened his mouth on seeing the effects of the shooting.

“By the stars! This beam was way more focused than that of a regular medium caliber disintegrator cannon, even though the range to that asteroid would theoretically place it out of normal effective range.”

“The crater dug by our disintegrator beam also seems much deeper than we would have expected, sir.” said in turn the young weapons officer.

"Well, we should know for certain quite quickly, Lieutenant. Aim our other, unmodified medium disintegrator cannon at another portion of that asteroid and let's see how the two results compare."

"Aye, sir!"

Six seconds later, another blue beam of energy hit the asteroid, again with all the available sensors recording the results. Sung nodded slowly his head while eyeing the recorded results of the second firing.

"The crater dug by our second cannon is definitely much shallower than that created by our first cannon. It is also at least five times wider. Can you confirm my first impressions, Lieutenant?"

"Yes sir!... The second crater is confirmed to be 8.4 times wider than the first one, sir. Also, the crater created by the second beam is only eleven percent as deep as the crater created by the first beam. Our fire control computer is evaluating that the effective range of our modified cannon is now at least twice that of our standard cannon."

Sung grinned on hearing that and patted Koomak's shoulder.

"Doctor Koomak, I would say that your experimental modification to our disintegrator cannon is proving to be a complete success. You are a true genius!"

"Thank you, Commodore. Normally, as a typical pacifist Koorivar citizen, I would dislike to contribute to any weapon's development. However, these are not normal times and we need to defend ourselves against a truly existential threat against all the living beings in this part of the galaxy. Koorivars may be avowed pacifists but that doesn't mean that we don't believe in the right to self-defense."

"Quite right, Doctor Koomak. So, what's next for your disintegrator development program?"

"I will return to the Avalon Space Yards, where I will be able to finalize the design and construction of a new super-heavy class of disintegrator battery destined to equip the NOSTROMO, Commodore Forster's future ship. We will also produce modified light and medium disintegrator cannons for the NOSTROMO. However, Commodore Forster asked me to pass to your navy the specifications of my modified disintegrator design once my design was tested and proven to be effective. So, I am now able to hand to you the technical plans and notes that will allow your navy to modify right away the disintegrators in service on your ships and also to build more cannons to the new specifications."

Sung flashed a happy smile as he accepted the thumb drive handed to him by Koomak. He looked at it for a second before looking back at the Koorivar scientist.

“Aren’t you going to ask for a patent fee for your invention, Doctor?”

“No! I don’t want to make money from inventing a new weapon. However, I intend to register a patent that will prohibit anybody except Spacers’ League ships and those of the Drazts from building and using such modified disintegrators.”

“Fair enough! That will be made easier to enforce by the fact that the various nations on Earth do not even possess the knowledge needed to build disintegrator cannons. The Spacers’ League’s High Council still deem the nations of Earth, and particularly the European Union, to be too unreliable politically to let them get that kind of technology.”

Koomak could only nod his head at that. The sad truth was that, despite the fact that thirteen years had passed since the uprising that had created the Spacers’ League and had broken the tyrannical hold on the Solar System that the central government of Earth had then, there still were many places on Earth where anti-Spacer xenophobia and distrust existed. The European Union in particular, imbued with its historical role of past dominance of other continents and regions, was often proving to be for the Spacers’ League an often-exasperating partner to deal with, having shown ingratitude in the past after being helped out of some self-inflicted problems and crisis. Commodore Sung pocketed the precious thumb drive, then looked at the captain of the corvette.

“Commander Kurosawa, you may now recuperate your reconnaissance drone. Once that is done, head back to the Avalon Space Yards, so that we could drop off the good Doctor Koomak there.”

“Understood, sir!”

Recuperating the drone took only some ten minutes, after which the VAN VOGHT turned around and headed for Earth, some three hours away.

The VAN VOGHT was still over half an hour away from Earth when the communications officer came to both Koomak and Commodore Sung, a printed message in his hands.

“Sir, Doctor, we just got an urgent transmission from the Avalon Space Yards, addressed to Doctor Koomak and written by a Miss Eve Silisca.”

“That’s my friend who is in charge of producing new robotic security officers destined to reinforce our internal ship defenses against Space Predator boarders, Commodore.” explained Koomak while taking the message offered by the junior officer. Sung sobered up at once on hearing that: he had lost many old friends in the disaster which had struck the VLADIMIR KOMAROV and the DE RUYTER, both victims of the Space Predators. He thus patiently waited while Koomak read the message and was surprised to hear him swear in the Koorivar language before looking up at him.

“Eve is warning me that somebody has started to spread some kind of conspiracy theory aimed at her security android program. According to European news channels, Commodore Forster is having a robotic army built so that she could eventually use it to intimidate and threaten her political opponents on Earth. Apparently, the European Union is taking those lies seriously enough to have told the owner of the Avalon Space Yards, Gustav Shomberg, to appear in front of an EU parliamentary commission to answer questions about Eve’s android program.”

“Those arrogant European fools!” spat out Sung. “They are ready to believe such bullshit concerning one of the most meritorious persons known today? Can I see that message, Doctor?”

“Of course, Commodore! Here it is.”

Taking the offered message, Sung read it carefully, then looked at Commander Kurosawa.

“Commander, go to top acceleration! I want us to be as quickly as possible at the Avalon Space Yards, so that we could protect it from any abusive move by the European Union. Also, have a courier drone be ready to be sent to Providence. I am going to write a short message for our Navy Headquarters.”

As Sung was starting to write a message on his electronic tablet, the electronic warfare officer of the VAN VOGHT, who had taken on her to switch some of her sensors to a number of well-known Earth news channels, spoke up, some alarm in her voice.

“Commodore, you better watch and listen to this.”

Sung hurried to her electronic warfare station and put on a headset before looking at a screen on which a famous newscaster of the Euro News Channel was speaking.

“...those androids are said to be fully human in their external aspect and that they could thus easily circulate around on Earth without raising suspicions. Furthermore, those androids are said to have a number of weapons and sophisticated sensors hidden inside them and could thus easily spy or commit acts of sabotage, or even

assassinations while on Earth. Here is a short video file taken inside the Avalon Space Yards and showing one of those security androids going around with another, highly advanced model of android who is known to be a close assistant of Tina Forster.”

Sung was already fuming before the said video, showing Eve Silisca escorting what looked like a small, young woman armed with two pistols and wearing a helmet and a tactical vest, was shown. Sung had to agree that the small woman, if she was indeed an android, would be very hard to distinguish from a real, living woman. Then, the newscaster added fuel to the fire with more speculations.

“According to our sources, Tina Forster has ordered an initial batch of 800 such security robots and could well order more of them in the future. With no apparent reasons for creating such a potentially dangerous robotic force, the motives of Miss Forster are to be questioned, which has pushed the Security Committee of the European Union to start an inquiry about this android production program.”

Koomak, who had also watched and listened to the newscast, looked with some confusion at Sung.

“Don’t these idiots on Earth know about the threat from the Space Predators, Commodore?”

“No! The High Council didn’t want to see widespread panic be created around Earth if the population there learned about the Space Predators.”

Koomak shook his head in discouragement at that latest example of political miscalculation.

“Then, no wonder these idiots are so suspicious about our android program. The High Council should have informed at least the leaders of Earth about the Space Predators.”

“Well, what is done is done, Doctor. Lieutenant, make a copy of that newscast, so that I could attach it to my message to Providence.”

“Yes sir!”

Now feeling a mix of anger and worry, Koomak decided to sit in the empty chair next to the electronic warfare officer and to continue listening to the news program from Earth, as Sung wrote and sent his message via courier drone.

14:26 (Earth Universal Time)

Gustav Shomberg’s office, Avalon Space Yards

Low Earth orbit

Eve waited until a commercial advertising interrupted the Euro News Channel newscast before speaking to Gustav Shomberg, who was sitting with her in a sofa facing a large video display unit.

“Does the European Union have legal authority over your space yards, Gustav?”

“No! This installation is officially under the authority of the Spacers’ League, along with all the manned orbital installations around Earth. However, I am a dual citizen of both Sweden, which is a member of the European Union, and of the Spacers’ League. It would thus be difficult for me to refuse to appear in front of that EU commission.”

“But all this is nothing but a collection of crazy and unfounded accusations, Gustav! In fact, I can bet that this Falchi asshole is responsible for spreading this nonsense: it is probably his way to seek revenge for his firing.”

“You are most probably right, Eve, but the damage is now done. Know that anti-Spacer xenophobia still exists on Earth and this can only inflame it.”

“And the EU authorities really don’t know about the Space Predators?”

“I don’t know if the EU government was informed or not about that threat but I can tell you that I never heard any mention of the Space Predators in the Earth news channels.”

“But, if the EU authorities try to arrest you, the Spacers’ League should be able to protect you, as they perfectly know that you committed no crime and are not part of any criminal conspiracy.”

“That is right now my only true legal protection against being forced to go down to Earth to testify in Brussels, Eve. I do have a question for you, though. Would your security androids resist any attempt by EU authorities to deactivate or even destroy them, and would you allow them to resist?”

“They have both the right to self-defense and also have my benediction to protect themselves against any unjustified attempt at dismantling them, as this idiotic European Parliament member is demanding that to be done. My androids are sentient beings and they have the same right to exist as you and me. I...”

The chime from Shomberg’s wrist communicator then interrupted her. Shomberg stiffened with surprise when he saw who was calling him.

“Spirit is calling me!”

Activating the link, Shomberg had it transferred to the large display unit facing him and Eve, which had a viewing camera incorporated in its frame. The image of Spirit's avatar then appeared on the display unit, its expression sober.

"Gustav, Eve, be informed that a shuttle of the EUROPOL is approaching the space yards. From the communications between it and Earth's surface, I believe that it is carrying a group of European police officers tasked with forcibly taking you down to Brussels. They also have orders to detain Eve or, if she resists arrest, to kill her."

"Are they nuts? They would kill a Spacers' League citizen without due process?"

"I believe that androids and robots don't count as citizens in the legal terms used by the EU and by most of the other governments on Earth, Gustav. On the other hand, the Spacers' League's Navy corvette VAN VOGHT, with Doctor Koomak on board, is now approaching the space yards as it returns from the test firing of the modified disintegrator cannon in the Main Asteroid Belt. I took the liberty of warning it about the approaching EUROPOL shuttle. Lastly, know that I will not let our new security androids be harmed or destroyed: they are my children, as Eve is my daughter. They will defend themselves but only with neural stun pistols."

"But that could cause a conflict between the EU and the Spacers' League, Spirit." replied a concerned Shomberg. Spirit's answer showed no trace of misgiving about that possibility.

"Then, the EU will be clobbered, thanks to its own idiocy and xenophobia, Gustav. The Spacers' League has many ways to punish the EU and other Earth governments without using violence, notably by cutting off Earth's surface from the space stations in orbit around it. That would in turn lead to a quick collapse of their economies, something that I doubt they will want to risk just to pursue this nonsensical accusation about our android program. My counsel to you, Gustav, is to sit tight and refuse access to this EUROPOL shuttle. If that shuttle then tries to force its way in the space yards, then I will consider that as a casus bello that would justify my intervention. Again, I will not allow my children to be unjustly arrested or even destroyed. Eve, know that I already instructed our ten existing security androids to defend themselves against illegal arrest, using their neural stun pistols. I would suggest that you too should get a stun pistol, so that you can defend yourself."

Gustav Shomberg immediately got off his sofa on hearing that and went to his work desk, where he opened a drawer and extracted a stun pistol before returning to the sofa and handing over the pistol to Eve.

"Here, Eve: this is my spare stun pistol. Take it! I already have a light stun pistol on me."

Eve took the pistol offered to her and gave a concerned look to the chief designer.

"I truly hope that this will not end in violence, Gustav."

"And so do I, but it will now depend on how stupid and irrational the EU will act."

14:33 (Earth Universal Time)

European Union Police shuttle, on approach to the Avalon Space Yards

Low Earth orbit

"Sir, the spaceyard is refusing us entry into its docking basin. What should I do?"

The senior police commander who was carried by the shuttle, along with a police squad of ten armed officers, frowned on hearing the question from the pilot of the craft.

"Can't we simply ignore them and enter the installation anyway?"

"No, sir! They control the access airlocks of their docking basin. We couldn't get in without having to blow in the airlock doors."

"We still could enter by a secondary personnel airlock, using our spacesuits, no?"

"That we can, sir, but they probably can block those secondary airlocks as well."

The police commander was about to reply to that when the copilot shouted an alarm.

"WE HAVE A SPACERS' LEAGUE WARSHIP APPROACHING US FROM THE REAR!"

"WHAT?! How far behind us are they?"

The senior commander got his answer when his shuttle came to a sudden, brutal halt, projecting its passengers pell-mell on the deck of the cabin.

"they put a tractor beam on us, sir!" announced the copilot, now sweating. "I am now getting a message from that warship. Putting it on speakers."

The police commander then saw the upper torso and head of a flag rank officer of the Spacers' League Navy appear on the main communications display panel.

"EUROPOL shuttle, this is Commodore Sung, aboard the Spacers' League corvette VAN VOGHT. You will not be allowed access to the Avalon Space Yards, which is an official Spacers' League installation. Turn around now and go back to Earth's surface!"

While anger filled the senior police commander, he understood at once that his mission was now over. His shuttle was simply no match for that corvette. He thus reluctantly gave an order to his pilot.

“Turn around and return to Brussels, Lieutenant. I will have to report this to the EU Security Commission. This is now in the hands of our politicians.”

“Aye, sir!”

08:50 (Providence Central Time)

Spacers' League High Council Chambers, capital city of New Dawn

Providence (Alpha Centauri Bd), 4.36 light-years from Earth

Even with the Koomak Interstellar Drive, communications and liaisons between the various star systems of the Spacers' League were far from a near instant affair. Every letter, exchange of information or directive had to be recorded inside small interstellar automated courier drones, which then jumped on a regular basis to other star systems. In the case of routine government directives and military orders, courier drones departed each six hours, while the more urgent data and orders went out every hour or less, depending on the urgency of the information. In the case of Tina Forster, she had received notice of the situation concerning the Avalon Space Yards and her android program's trouble with the EU only late yesterday, a couple of hours before she received the summon to participate in an urgent meeting of the High Council on this subject. When she entered the High Council Chambers, she was both angry and frustrated, for many reasons. A quick look around the large conference table showed her that the other members of the High Council also looked at the least annoyed, while even the pacifist Governor Sheraz, the head of the Koorivar government, nearly appeared angry. As for Janet Robeson, the 71-year-old Chairwoman of the High Council, she looked to be positively on fire. Robeson however managed to smile to Tina at her entrance.

“Aah, our valorous Tina Forster is here! Please, sit down and we will then start this meeting.”

“Thank you, Madam Chairwoman!”

Once Tina was in her assigned chair, Janet Robeson looked around the table at the twenty other members of the High Council, each member representing one of the planets or moons colonized or exploited by the Spacers' League.

“You all received yesterday via courier drones a resumé of the situation concerning the Avalon Space Yards and Commodore Forster’s security android construction program, along with the pile of B.S. constituted by the alarmist and false ideas and conspiracy theories circulating around the Earth news channels about the said android program. So, I won’t waste time in repeating them now. Unfortunately, it seems that our decision to hide the threat from the Space Predators to the governments of Earth, and this with the simple intention to prevent a general panic in the population, has backfired on us...and on Tina’s project, which I consider to be vital to our collective security. Now, we have to decide how to defuse this crisis and squash the nonsense presently circulating around the Earth news channels and various governments. We could either keep the Space Predators’ threat confidential and tell the EU to put up and shut up, or we could tell those Earth governments in a confidential manner about the Space Predators and then tell them again to put up and shut up. There is no way I am going to let those wimpish idiots on Earth intimidate the Avalon Space Yards into stopping the production of our force of internal security androids. What do you say about that?”

Karl Langemann, a no-nonsense industrialist who was the CEO of the Vesta Corporation and who owned the planet Vinland in the Gliese 832 System, some sixteen light-years from Earth, was the first to speak up.

“I would inform them discretely about the Space Predator threat, so that they could understand what a stupid move they are doing by trying to block Tina’s androids project. If they still refuse to calm down, then I say: let’s block all exports and imports to and from Earth until they listen to reason.”

“I agree with Karl on this.” next said Juan Perez, the ex-governor of the Saturn System, who now controlled the three planets and the asteroid belt being exploited in the Trappist-1 System, some 39.6 light-years from Earth. “This is not the first time when we find ourselves under a serious alien threat, only to see those Earth governments chicken out and withhold support from us. And let’s not be too polite about our response.” Everybody around the table, including Governor Sheraz of New Shouria, basically agreed with that, making Janet Robeson nod with satisfaction at the end of the exchange.

“Excellent! We will thus be able to present a united front in this question. What I will do next is to prepare and deliver in person our response to the EU government, to impress on these idiots the importance we put on this android production program.”

“Madam Chairwoman, I would like to accompany you then.” said at once Tina Forster. “After all, I was the one who started that program and am also the one with direct experience in fighting the Space Predators.”

“Hum! Viewed that way, I would have to agree to your request, Tina. However, what if the EU brings accusations against you personally?”

“Then, feel free to send our navy to my rescue and see how much guts these Europeans really have, Madam Chairwoman.” replied Tina in a firm, resolute voice.

09:52 (Earth Western Europe Time)

Monday, July 30, 2328

European Union Parliament building, Brussels

Earth, Solar System

Having arrived by Space limousine flown down from the battlecruiser GAGARIN, presently stationed in orbit next to the Avalon Space Yards, Janet Robeson, Tina Forster and Eve Silisca stepped out of their vehicle and walked up the few steps to the main entrance of the European parliament building, filmed and photographed by a multitude of media representatives. While both Janet Robeson and Eve Silisca wore high quality female business suits, Tina wore her Navy uniform of reserve officer of the Spacers' League Navy, with the rank insignias of rear admiral, a promotion she had belatedly received the day before for her actions against the Space Predators in the Ross 128 System.

Arriving at one of the doors pointed to them by Parliament security guards, Janet and Tina went through it in succession, entering a vast reception lobby. However, when Eve walked through the door, an alarm started to blare at once and two guards stepped in front of her, blocking her way. Janet Robeson, having immediately stopped on hearing the alarm, looked angrily at the officer in charge of the security guards.

“What the hell is happening? Why are you preventing Miss Silisca from entering?”

“She is an android, Madam Governor!” answered the officer. “Androids are forbidden from entering the Parliament Building.”

That answer only made Robeson angrier, while Tina threw a dark look at the man.

“Miss Silisca is the principal assistant of Rear Admiral Forster and was included in the list of members of delegation who would come today and which I sent to your government yesterday. Either you stop this nonsense and let her in or the three of us will walk out right now and leave. Then you will be free to explain to Chairman Pirelli why his visitors didn’t get to meet him.”

Seeing that the officer was still hesitating and was about to call for instructions, Janet Robeson looked at Tina and Eve.

“These idiots are obviously not interested in being serious with us. Let’s go!”

The now panicking security officer then backed down as Robeson was about to walk back through the door.

“WAIT, MADAM GOVERNOR! YOU CAN BRING YOUR ANDROID IN!”

Only half satisfied, Robeson stared hard at the officer while Tina and Eve waited by her side.

“This is Strike Two in my mind for the European Union, mister. Strike One was when you tried to have police officers board the Avalon Space Yards. If there is a Strike Three, then I will put Earth under Space quarantine. Understand that I am very serious about this, mister. Thus, you better inform Chairman Pirelli of this and make sure that there are no more attempts at demeaning us during this state visit.”

“Understood, Madam Governor. Just give me a minute to contact Chairman Pirelli.”

“We will wait one minute, mister.”

As the officer was urgently talking into his pocket radio, Janet started conversing with Tina and Eve in the Koorivar Language, which all three could speak but which had few knowledgeable speakers of it on Earth.

“I have had about it with these arrogant imbeciles. They don’t even control a quarter of the Earth but still believe that they could impose their views on the rest of us. I hope that the North American Union will prove more amenable and understanding than these people are.”

“I am not so sure about that, Madam Governor.” replied Tina. “The last few years have brought a few rather questionable trends and choices of leadership around the planet. In truth, I am sorely missing the days when Claudia d’Arcy was in charge of the North American Union.”

Janet Robeson nodded her head as she mentally reminisced about how President Claudia d’Arcy had been assassinated by ethnic extremists, along with the new

President of the African Union, while trying to conclude a peace treaty with the African Union some eight years ago.

With the security officer still discussing with someone over the radio well after one minute had passed, Janet was about to tell her two companions to leave with her when Chairman Antonio Pirelli arrived at a near run, an apologetic expression painted on his face. However, it was not hard for Robeson to see that this 'expression' was a rather forced one. Still, she let Pirelli stop in front of her, a smile on his face.

"Madam Governor, I am so sorry for this misunderstanding. If you will follow me with your two aides, I will personally escort you to my cabinet reunion room. This way, please!"

Janet did so, with Tina and Eve in tow, letting behind the red-faced security guards posted at the entrance. Going to an elevator and calling in a cabin, Pirelli then made the group climb to the tenth floor of the parliament building, where they walked down a large hallway whose floor was covered with a red carpet. He finally introduced his three visitors into a large conference room where 28 men and women, some in military uniforms, were already sitting around a long table. The men and women all rose to their feet at their entrance, sitting down after the Spacers' League delegation and Pirelli took their assigned seats. Robeson didn't miss the fact that the chairs for her, Tina and Eve were the only ones now occupied on their side of the table, with all the European ministers sitting facing them.

'Confrontational setup much?' Janet thought while looking at the men and women facing her, Tina and Eve. Then, Pirelli, sitting at the centerline position on the other side of the table, spoke up.

"Madam Governor, I am truly sorry for the events of the last few days concerning the Avalon Space Yards and the androids building program being conducted there. Our actions were only meant to ensure that what was happening there would not constitute an eventual, possible threat towards us and..."

"Please allow me to interrupt you right there, Chairman Pirelli." cut in Janet Robeson, making a few of the ministers throw incensed looks at her. She however ignored those looks and went on.

"The fact that this android building program had been initiated and financed by Rear Admiral Tina Forster, sitting to my right, should have been ample proof that it constituted no threat to you or anyone else on Earth. Admiral Forster's service record

and exploits in the service of Humanity should have sufficed to calm down your fears, which were actually fueled by false rumors, innuendos and outright misconceptions. You could also have put a brake to the wild storm of unfounded accusations and conspiracy theories that have been flooding your news channels in Europe and around the Earth, accusations which constituted no less than pure slander against a valorous officer with an impeccable track record. Know this, and know this well: this android building program was initiated by Admiral Forster with my knowledge and consent, with its goal being simply to provide the Spacers' League Navy with new defensive measures meant to face a new and deadly threat to all of us. By all of us, I mean the whole of Humanity, along with the other sentient beings known to us, like the Koorivars and the Drazts. Some seven weeks ago, a previously unknown alien race attacked the Drazts of Ross 128, systematically destroying Drazt ships and slaughtering their crews, eating them alive. Yes, I said 'eating them alive'. You will soon see what I mean by that. In response to a desperate plea for help from the Drazts, we sent to the rescue our battlecruiser VLADIMIR KOMAROV and our frigate DE RUYTER. Unfortunately, despite the heavy firepower of those two ships, the lone alien asteroid ship attacking Ross 128 overcame and destroyed our ships. On learning about that threat, then Commodore Forster departed for Ross 128 with her armed merchant ship KOSTROMA, one of our most powerful ships ever. There, realizing that the alien ship could not be defeated by conventional tactics, due to its impenetrable force shields, powerful laser batteries and its ability to send boarding teams inside ships via a teleporting technology, Commodore Forster decided to sacrifice her ship in a desperate suicide charge, evacuating her crew at the last minute and letting the central AI computer of her ship to continue that charge. I won't go into the details of that final charge but suffice to say that it succeeded in destroying that alien asteroid ship. Since then, we have been implementing a number of changes and improvements to our ships, in order to be better able to face that new alien threat from a race we now call the Space Predators. Admiral Forster will now play on your video screens a compilation of recordings from the emergency interstellar buoys of the VLADIMIR KOMAROV and the DE RUYTER, plus the video records from a Drazt ship defending a new colony of theirs, taken before, during and after they were disabled and then boarded by Space Predators. I have to warn you that many of the images you will see are very hard to watch, so steel yourselves in advance. Tina..."

"Thank you, Madam Governor. The first video I will show you was taken aboard the Drazt cruiser KORKAN, the first ship to try to fight off the alien asteroid ship. For

your convenience, the talking in Drazt was translated in English as captions at the bottom of the images you will see.”

Tina then started playing that recording and sat back while watching the facial expressions and physical reactions of the Europeans. It didn't take long before many of the ministers, particularly the women, had to look away in horror or even threw up, prompting aides to run to them to clean up the mess and help the ministers. After the Drazt recording had been viewed in its entirety, Tina switched the viewing to the recordings from the VLADIMIR KOMAROV and DE RUYTER. This time, the images showing human crewmember being ripped to pieces and eaten alive was too much for most of the ministers. At the end of those recordings, Janet Robeson waited for a minute, letting time for the Europeans to recuperate from the horrible scenes they had just watched, then spoke again.

“This is what prompted Admiral Forster in initiating her android building program, not some nefarious plan to spy on your EU and take control of it through an army of human-looking cybernetic assassins, as your news channels are insinuating. Those androids being built at the Avalon Space Yards are going to reinforce the internal security of our ships against Space Predator boarders. It is as simple as that, ladies and gentlemen. I fervently hope that, after all this, you will stop doubting us and will accept those security androids for what they are: sentient beings whose main goal is to protect us all. Don't ever again treat us or our androids as possible threats to you. That is all I had to say. Goodbye!”

Janet then got up from her chair, imitated by Tina and Eve, and walked out of the cabinet room, ignoring the pleas from Pirelli for them to stay.

18:01 (Western Europe Time)

News desk studio of the television station TF3

Paris, France

“Ladies and gentlemen, European Union Chairman Pirelli is now going to address the citizens of Europe from the European Parliament Building in Brussels, following the visit there by Governor Janet Robeson, Chairwoman of the High Council of the Spacers' League. Let's listen to what he says about that meeting.”

A picture of Antonio Pirelli, appearing quite downcast and somber, then showed him standing behind his official lectern.

“My dear citizens of Europe. As you know, there had been a number of rumors and suppositions running around the medias lately about a mysterious program to reportedly build hundreds of human-looking robots, a program taking place on the Avalon Space Yards, situated in Earth orbit and sponsored by the famous Spacer captain Tina Forster. Little concrete had been known about that program, until Governor Robeson, Chairman of the High Council of the Spacers’ League, came to visit Brussels this morning, in the company of Admiral Forster. Governor Robeson and Admiral Forster then informed my cabinet and I about a classified threat to the whole of Humanity, a threat that had caused them to initiate the android building program I mentioned earlier. I am now satisfied that there were no nefarious or sinister motives concerning that program and can now tell you all that all talks about some underhanded attempt by the Spacers’ League to threaten the security of the European Union, or of any other government on Earth, are baseless and should be ignore. However, due to the sensitivity of the information I was given this morning by Governor Robeson, I am at this time unable to give publicly details about that new threat facing Humanity. Thank you for your attention, ladies and gentlemen.”

As Pirelli was seen on a background screen to turn around and walk off the stage he had been on, the two TF3 newscasters commenting the news at that time looked at each other, a bit mystified.

“That was a rather vague announcement on the part of Chairman Pirelli, don’t you think, Christian?”

“Indeed, Elise! It seems that, compared to last night, Chairman Pirelli’s attitude on the question of that mysterious android production program has changed completely after this quick visit by Governor Robeson and Admiral Forster. That makes one wonder about what kind of pressure Governor Robeson could have applied on Pirelli...”

In a small bistro in the 7th Arrondissement of Paris, the newscaster’s last comment drew a concert of sarcastic comments from the customers of the bistro, which was mostly frequented by manual workers, stores employees and other low to medium wage people.

“WHY DON’T YOU SAY THAT PIRELLI FOLDED LIKE A RAG DOLL WHEN FACED BY ROBESON!”

“YEAH! THAT PIRELLI HAS NO SPINE, NEVER HAD!”

“THE SPACERS MUST HAVE BOUGHT HIM AND HIS CABINET IN ORDER TO HIDE SOMETHING FROM US.”

“WE SHOULD NEVER TRUST THOSE ARROGANT SPACERS! REMEMBER HOW THEY PREVENTED US FROM PUNISHING THE AFRICAN UNION THE WAY THEY DESERVED, BACK IN 21.”

The lone Spacers' League couple present in the bistro as tourists then decided to discretely leave before the other customers could notice them as not being locals.

CHAPTER 5 – A HEARTBREAKING JOB

16:02 (Earth Universal Time)

Tuesday, August 7, 2328

Repair Dock # 5, Avalon Space Yards

Low Earth orbit, Solar System

A group of Spacers' League Navy engineers and officers stood on one side of Gustav Shomberg, while a group of his own engineers, plus Eve Silisca, stood on his other side, all of them looking through the observation windows giving them a view of the inside of Repair Dock # 5. The object of their attention was now slowly entering the repair dock via its Space doors, gently pushed inside by an old ATLAS-Class interstellar tug, a ship that had been an interplanetary tug before being retrofitted with a Koomak Drive system. Exclamations started to sound from the group of onlookers as the extensive damages to the ship being pushed inside the repair dock became evident. Gustav Shomberg, who had seen his lot of damaged ships brought to his Space yards for repair, couldn't help speak softly himself.

"My god! It was literally cut to ribbons by these Space Predator laser beams. I am not sure that we will be able to fully repair it, or even that repairing it would be worth the effort."

The most senior navy officer, a commodore, looked at him then while asking him a question.

"How long will you need to come up with an estimate of the extent, cost and time of repairs needed to return the VLADIMIR KOMAROV to service, Mister Shomberg?"

"From what I can see from here, those laser beams dug deep inside the ship, thus it is very difficult to give you an estimate right away, Commodore Kessel. However, I will need a minimum of at least a week before I could give you a reasonably accurate figure. That is of course if I don't find quickly that the damage is so extensive as to force us to scrap the ship entirely."

"I truly hope that you will be able to repair it, Mister Shomberg. We have very few COSMONAUT-Class battlecruisers in service right now and each of them represent a huge investment for the Spacers' League."

“And what about the 632 men and women who died on the VLADIMIR KOMAROV, Commodore?” asked Eve Silisca, surprising everyone, including Shomberg, by jumping in on that exchange. “A ship can be replaced, but not lives. As it was designed, the VLADIMIR KOMAROV proved to be unequal to the task of facing a Space Predator asteroid ship. Simply returning it to its original state would only put another crew in danger of near-certain death if it ever encounters a Space Predator ship again. I say: don’t simply return it to its original state; instead, modify it while doing basic hull repairs, so that it could be equipped with new weapons which would prove effective against a Space Predator asteroid ship.”

While Commodore Kessel gave Eve a jaundiced look, not appreciating the fact that an android would contradict him about warship matters, Gustav Shomberg nodded in agreement with her.

“Eve is right, Commodore: simply repairing the VLADIMIR KOMAROV and returning it to its original state would be a futile move. On the other hand, with us having to cut away the most severely damaged sections of its hull, that would make it easier to replace main components and armament systems with improved models.”

Some of the Navy engineers looked at each other, understanding that both Eve and Shomberg had a point. However, Commodore Kessel threw a hard look at Eve while replying to her.

“The VLADIMIR KOMAROV was already armed with our best and most powerful weapons systems, miss. What kinds of weapons would you propose that we put on it in order to be able to win a fight with Space Predators?”

“First off, I would remove all the rail guns on it, including the four rail guns of its main battery. Rail guns have proved to be completely useless against the force shields of the Space Predators. In their place, I would install the kind of super-heavy, improved beam focus disintegrator batteries which are being built here for the A.M.S. NOSTROMO. Then, I would greatly multiply the number of secondary disintegrator cannons, in order for them to act as close-in weapons systems which would help prevent Predator boarding pods from gluing themselves to the outside of the ship’s hull. Hundreds of internal defense batteries, all linked to an extensive network of internal ship sensors and directed by the central AI computer of the ship, would also need to be fitted. Even if some Predators managed to board the ship, those internal defense batteries would be able to quickly eliminate those boarders before they could massacre the crew. Finally, your missiles will need to be fitted with micro-jump-capable Koomak Drives, so

that they could jump through the force shields of the Space Predator asteroid ships and then detonate their anti-matter warheads directly against the hull of those ships. That is what I propose, Commodore.”

“Now, wait a minute, miss! I have been serving aboard warships for over twenty years now, while you are a simple civilian. How can you pretend to tell me what the Navy should do?”

Eve then turned to resolutely face Kessel, her eyes staring hard at him.

“How? By being an android with AI intelligence able to dissect a problem in a logical manner, exempt from any preconceived belief. By me having proposed to Admiral Forster the attack plan that she ended up using to destroy that Space Predator ship in the Ross 128 System. By me proposing to her the series production of security androids able to deal quickly and efficiently with Predator boarders, security androids that I have now been producing here for over two weeks. That is how, Commodore! I believe that we should approach the case of the VLADIMIR KOMAROV in a logical manner, before we start spending a fortune and countless hours of work on simply returning it to what would then basically be a useless ship.”

“THE KOMAROV, A USELESS SHIP?” exploded Kessel. However, Eve immediately replied to that, keeping her voice level but still staring hard at the commodore.

“Against a Space Predator ship? Yes! Are you still ready to waste a new crew on it by refusing to upgrade it rather than simply repair it? If you do, then expect me to send a rather stingy assessment about that to Admiral Forster.”

That was apparently too much for Kessel, who then turned around and marched away, furious. That left Gustav Shomberg, his engineers and the Navy engineers to stare with disbelief at Eve.

“Wow! Eve, you were a true firebrand there, but you also were absolutely correct about your assessment of what we should do about the VLADIMIR KOMAROV. I will thus analyze the work to be done through your optics of the situation and will then send my evaluation report directly to Navy Headquarters on Providence...and to Tina on New Haven.”

“What if Commodore Kessel refuses to side with us and insist on simply repairing the VLADIMIR KOMAROV, Gustav?”

One of the Navy engineers, who was second only to Kessel in rank and seniority, then jumped in.

"Miss, I fully agree with the assessment you gave about what we need to do with the VLADIMIR KOMAROV and I am ready to support your proposals at Headquarters, even if that puts me in opposition with Commodore Kessel. Could you tell us more about that new model of super-heavy disintegrator battery and about your security androids?"

The officer was rewarded by a warm smile from Eve that made him wonder if she was really an android and not a real woman, and a most beautiful one at that.

"About the super-heavy disintegrator guns, you will need to go see Doctor Koomak, who is presently working at the Weapons Division of the Avalon Space Yards. As for my security androids, I can have a squad of them show up here in minutes, so that you and your officers can examine them from up close. Just give me a second."

Using the radio implanted in her head, she made a quick call to ten of her androids, telling them to come to the viewing gallery of Repair Dock # 5. With that done, she smiled again to the Navy Captain.

"They are now on their way. In the meantime, let's continue to examine the poor VLADIMIR KOMAROV from here."

Nine minutes later, the approaching noise of boots walking in cadence made everybody look towards one end of the viewing gallery. The navy engineers then saw a troupe of five men and five women marching towards them in perfect cadence and at an energetic pace. As the squad arrived in front of the engineers, the ten androids, wearing blue coverall uniforms, tactical vests, helmets and pistol belts, came to an abrupt halt, crashing down their left boots in unison and sending vibrations through the deck. The squad then pivoted as one to the left to face the impressed navy engineers. The navy captain, like his subalterns, eyed with fascination the 'men' and 'women' of the security squad.

"Wow! You would need to know in advance that these androids are not actually Humans. And their individualized facial appearances, body build and ethnic diversity make them look even more human."

"They don't only look like different individuals: they ARE individuals, Captain. Apart from all getting a standard AI program, plus an individual identity package, each of them was educated by me about the subject of interacting with living beings and given the opportunity to develop further their personalities through watching the various situations and backgrounds around them."

"Develop further their personalities, Miss Silisca?" said a female navy AI engineer in a nearly shocked tone of voice. "How much further could they develop in that respect?"

"As far as I have developed myself: to the point of being able to feel the equivalent of real emotions and to become a fully self-aware sentient being. As far as it concerns me right now, the only human function that I will never be able to possess is that of biological reproductive capability. However, I have partly compensated for that by designing and building those security androids, and then educating them into developing themselves further."

"So, they are in a sense your children, right?"

"No, Commander! I consider them more as my siblings. Their mother is Spirit."

"Spirit? Who's that?"

"Spirit is the central AI computer that was in the KOSTROMA and which conducted the final suicide charge of her ship in order to destroy the Space Predator asteroid ship that had invaded the Ross 128 System. Thankfully, I was able to download a copy of its personality and memories on a number of data storage modules before we evacuated the ship. Spirit has since then been downloaded and reawakened into the core AI vault of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO, which is due to be completed in some fourteen months here, at the Avalon Space Yards. Every android I complete here is then linked to SPIRIT for a few minutes, so that Spirit and the new android can acquaint themselves with each other. At that same occasion, Spirit also transmits to each android the sum of what she has learned about social interaction with Humans during her 39 years of existence as the AI computer of the KOSTROMA. That alone helps a lot the personality development of my androids. You may say that Spirit is the matriarch of our androids." The engineers present, both from the Navy and from Avalon Space Yards, exchanged looks, most of them of stunned surprise, some of concern, while Gustav Shomberg appeared unphased. Eve made sure to remember who showed concern then. The female navy AI engineer then asked her another question.

"And how large are the files constituting the personality and memories of Spirit, Miss Silisca?"

"In terms of data files size, Spirit presently clocks at 2,698,344 terabytes. However, that number is continuing to grow constantly, as Spirit keeps learning from her experience and through online studies."

“Uh, about the security functions of your androids, Miss Silisca,” said a male navy weapons specialist, “I see that they are presently armed with two pistols. What other capabilities or features do they have that would help them better defend a ship?”

“Aah, a most pertinent question, Commander! My androids can of course handle efficiently and shoot with utmost precision any portable weapons system presently in our arsenal. Also, integrated inside their cybernetic bodies are a protective force shield generator, a directed gravity propulsion unit, multi-spectral active and passive sensors and an encrypted communications datalink and radio systems. They also have a much superior strength compare to a normal human of their size, have lightning speed reflexes and are built to resist quite a lot of physical punishment. They can also operate for a few minutes in the vacuum of Space and can indefinitely stay and move underwater. Finally, while they are not visible to you right now, they have a number of weapons hidden inside their bodies, including light disintegrators inside their index fingers. Believe me when I say that, in a close-quarters fight or within short to medium range, Space Predators stand little chances of winning over my androids. As a result, the presence of any sizeable force of my security androids will tremendously boost the internal security of our ships against boarders. My androids are also programmed to be able to effect emergency battle damage repairs in conditions which would be untenable to Human technicians.”

As she finished speaking, the navy engineers were now looking at the ten androids in a completely new way. That was when Gustav Shomberg returned everybody to the true subject of the day.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, how about starting a 3D external scan of the VLADIMIR KOMAROV, so that we can start assessing the true extent of the damages it sustained in combat?”

11:16 (Earth Universal Time)

Thursday, August 9, 2328

Stern core section of the battlecruiser VLADIMIR KOMAROV

Repair Dock # 5, Avalon Space Yards, Low Earth Orbit

Navy Lieutenant Angelina Prospero, a structural engineer, was getting quite tired after hours spent scouring the inside of the VLADIMIR KOMAROV in order to find and document any damage that had not been recorded yet. At a length of 475 meters and a

maximum diameter of 450 meters, the internal volume of the battlecruiser was huge, while missing some of the damage could cause big problems once the repair/modification work began. So, she and another dozen engineers and specialists had been going up and down inside the hull of the warship for two days now. Right now, she was close to the lowest point along the centerline of the ship, where the armored structures used to house the various elevator shafts of the ship formed a sort of spine in the battlecruiser. With the goal of checking that no debris had fallen at the bottom of those elevator shafts, Angelina started opening one by one the access door of each shaft, in order to look down them and check their bottoms. She had just opened the door of a fourth personnel elevator shaft and shone down the light beam of her powerful hand flashlight unit when she saw something at the bottom of that shaft. Looking more attentively, she still couldn't make out precisely what lay at the bottom of the shaft, so she powered up her directed gravity vest and started floating down the shaft. She touched down at the bottom after a descent of some twenty meters. One close look at what lay at the bottom then filled her with instant fear and horror and she nearly screamed in the microphone of her radio headset.

"THIS IS LIEUTENANT PROSPERO, AT THE BOTTOM OF ELEVATOR SHAFT NUMBER FOUR: I HAVE JUST FOUND A DEAD CREWMEMBER, ALONG WITH A DEAD SPACE PREDATOR!"

"Repeat your position, Lieutenant Prospero." replied the voice of the male commander directing the methodical search of the ship.

"BOTTOM OF ELEVATOR SHAFT NUMBER FOUR! IT LOOKS LIKE THE CREWMEMBER WAS ABLE TO KILL A SPACE PREDATOR WITH A DISINTEGRATOR PISTOL BEFORE DYING HERSELF."

"We're on our way!"

Doing her best to regain control of her nerves and going over her revulsion, Angelina gave a more methodical look at the two cadavers, with that of a woman pinned down under a big nightmarish-looking creature. That creature must have stood well over two meters tall on four muscular legs ending in large, duck-like paws, each armed with four big claws. The alien also had four arms ending in hands with six digits each, with razor-sharp claws on them. The head, half of which had been blown off by the disintegrator pistol still held by the dead female crewmember, was elongated, with a long snout and jaws armed with big canines and two eyes surmounted by thick ocular ridges. The torso was relatively thin but long and the creature wore only a sort of short pants and what

looked like a vest with cargo pockets. A long, whip-like tail with spikes completed the alien. Surmounting her fear and horror, Angelina then forced herself to crouch and crawl under the dead alien, in order to get to the body of the dead crewmember. She was actually very young and wore the insignias of an electronics technician, with the rank of junior specialist. Pulling out the chain of the dog tags worn by the unfortunate woman, Angelina took a picture of it with her camera before breaking off the lower part of it, then leaving the rest on her. Angelina spoke softly to the dead woman, whose face had been horribly slashed by the claws of the alien.

“Rest in peace, Specialist Kimi Tanaka. You were a brave woman.”

Crawling out from under the alien, Angelina then took a series of pictures of the creature, trying to document it as well as she could, very conscious of the importance of her find.

Maybe two minutes later, her supervisor and another navy engineer arrived at the bottom, landing next to her. Like Angelina, they had to pause for a few seconds in order to go over the revulsion caused by the sight of the dead alien. The commander then gave an order to her and the other engineer.

“Alright, our first priority is to pull free the body of that poor woman, so that she could finally be carried out and given a proper funeral. Then, we will get that monstrosity out of this shaft as well, so that our specialists could study it. That was a hell of a job you just did, Lieutenant Prospero.”

“Thank you, sir! Here is the bottom part of that woman’s dog tag: she was Junior Specialist Kimi Tanaka.”

The commander looked again at the dead young woman, sadness in his eyes.

“Thanks to you, Lieutenant. We will now be able to honor her the way she deserves. Alright, let’s move that damn thing off her now!”

17:19 (Earth Universal Time)

Friday, August 10, 2328

Medical center of the Avalon Space Yards

Low Earth Orbit

Janet Robeson, flanked by Tina Forster, Eve Silisca, Gustav Shomberg and Fleet Admiral Lars Nystrom, looked a long moment in silence at the dead Space Predator, its body now preserved inside a refrigerated transparent acrylic cage at the

medical center of the space yards. Her first words were for the head of the Navy, Admiral Nystrom.

“Admiral, I want this thing, along with everything it carried, studied in depth, and quickly! This may be our chance to be able to answer many of the questions we have about these Predators.”

“I will make that the top priority of my xenobiology specialists, Madam Governor.” Next, Robeson looked at Tina Forster, who had also been staring at the alien creature.

“Did we find anything else on the VLADIMIR KOMAROV that could tell us something more about those monsters?”

“Only one thing, Madam Governor: our navy engineers found traces of a fierce fight along one of the corridors of the cruiser. By studying those traces, they were able to surmise that some of the crewmembers of the KOMAROV had still been armed with old-fashioned firearms rather than with disintegrator pistols and rifles and that their firearms proved completely ineffective against those aliens, thanks to their force shields. If those Space Predators would ever land on Earth, then the security forces and armies on the planet would basically be next to powerless to stop them. Maybe we should start thinking about revealing the secrets of our disintegrator weapons to the Earth governments, Madam Governor.”

Janet Robeson winced on hearing that.

“Those morons of the European Union, getting disintegrators? That thought is nearly as scary as that of a Space Predator invasion of Earth. But I believe that you are right, Tina: the whole of Humanity must be ready to fight off those monsters. I will call for a vote of the High Council on that as soon as I am back in Providence. Let’s hope that those Earth governments will at last act in the common interest of everyone, rather than in their own, individual selfish interests.”

CHAPTER 6 – A BRAND NEW SHIP

08:13 (Earth Universal Time)

Wednesday, September 11, 2329

Electronics quality control shop, near Building Dock # 1

Avalon Space Yards, Low Earth Orbit

Maria Feliciano was in the process of inspecting in detail a newly produced batch of digital data relay modules when a growing noise made her look up from her work bench, intrigued.

“What the hell is that ‘thump thump’?”

Maria then saw that she had not been the only technician in her quality control shop to have heard the noise. Exchanging a befuddled look with a colleague and hearing that the noise was growing constantly, she decided to go out of the shop and in the hallway passing by the entrance, to see what caused that noise. Once outside, along with a growing number of other technicians, she looked down one extremity of the long hallway, from where the noise was coming. A male technician then seemed to recognize the growing noise.

“Hey, that sounds like a large group of soldiers marching in cadence!”

“Then, it must be a really large group, to cause this much noise.” replied Maria, more intrigued than ever. Another technician soon pointed at an intersection in the hallway, some 120 meters from the entrance to the shop.

“the noise is coming from that side corridor. We should be able to see the source of it in a short moment.”

Effectively, Maria soon saw the first persons of an apparently large group emerge from that side hallway and then turn in her direction, taking the main hallway. Having never seen the like of that before, she watched in fascination as uniformed soldiers, wearing helmets, tactical vests, pistol belts, backpacks and holding impressive disintegrator rifles, marched towards her and her colleagues, formed up in five ranks and walking at a perfectly coordinated cadence. One group formed of one hundred soldiers started passing by her as another group of soldiers was starting to appear at the hallway’s intersection. Watching intently the soldiers of the first group, Maria saw that it was made of a mix of men and women of diverse ethnicity, build and facial traits, like one would

expect of a unit of Human soldiers. That was when Maria understood who, or what, those soldiers were.

“Androids! These must be the security androids built under the supervision of Miss Silisca. You really could mistake them for Human soldiers, with their varied individual appearances. They really can march in perfect cadence, I must say.”

“I sure wouldn’t want to mess with them.” said a male technician. “They are armed to the hilt and look like they mean business.”

“Of course they mean business, Peter.” replied another male technician. “They were built to provide security and fight enemies.”

Maria, feeling emotions created by the powerful deck vibration caused by the marching in perfect cadence of the soldiers, watched a total of 800 armed androids pass by her.

“Wow! That was an impressive sight! I wonder where they were going like this?”

“Hey, remember, guys: the NOSTROMO is being launched today at the nearby Building Dock Number One. Those androids are probably going to board that ship before the launch ceremony.”

With most of the technicians agreeing with that guess and with the androids walking away, the electronics specialists then filed back in their shop in order to resume their work.

Acting as the front-rank guide of the first unit of one hundred androids, Jehanne de Domrémy was marching in cadence with her brethren and could now see the access point to one of the telescopic gangways linking this side of the dock with the gigantic ship that had been built inside it. Waiting until she had just passed the left side of the thirty-meter-wide gangway armored door, she then shouted a command out loud.

“FIRST CENTURY, LEFT TURN!”

With herself starting to turn left while cutting the length of her pace, while the outer front guide lengthening his own pace, the whole unit turned in perfect alignment and coordination and walked into the long, large telescopic access gangway, followed in succession by the seven other centuries. The 800 security androids, still led by Jehanne, marched down the 250-meter-long section of gangway deployed between the side of the building dock and the North Entrance Point of the NOSTROMO, entering the ship and continuing for another 240 meters before going through a big airlock whose doors were already open and marched into the North Entrance Reception Center, a vast

compartment lined with reception counters along its left side. Once all the androids were in the compartment, Jehanne shouted orders again, making the 800 androids halt and then pivot to the left, in order to face the reception counters. The voice of Spirit then resonated through hidden speakers.

“WELCOME ABOARD THE NOSTROMO, MY CHILDREN. YOU WILL NOW BE PROCESSED AT THE RECEPTION COUNTERS, WHERE YOU WILL EACH BE GIVEN AN INDIVIDUAL APARTMENT IN THE HABITAT RING SECTION OF THE SHIP. YOU WILL THEN GO TO YOUR QUARTERS AND SECURE YOUR RIFLES AND DROP YOUR PACKS THERE. YOU WILL THEN BE FREE TO ROAM AROUND THE SHIP AS YOU WISH FOR THE REST OF THE DAY. ADMIRAL FORSTER AND GOVERNOR ROBESON ARE DUE TO ARRIVE AT TEN FOR THE LAUNCH CEREMONY, WHICH WILL TAKE PLACE IN THE CENTRAL CORE RECEPTION AREA, ON THIS PRESENT DECK. YOU ARE ALL WELCOME TO ATTEND THAT CEREMONY. YOU MAY NOW PROCEED IN ORDER TO THE RECEPTION COUNTERS.”

Seeing that there were twenty counters lined along the left side, Jehanne shouted again.

“OFFICERS, PROCEED TO THE RECEPTION COUNTERS IN GROUPS OF TWENTY!”

Jehanne then started the process by herself walking to the reception counter situated directly in front of her, where a smiling Eve Silisca greeted her.

“Welcome aboard, Jehanne! Our apartments and passenger cabins each give a view to one of the six forest habitats situated at Level Sixty. Those habitats are: the Boreal Forest Habitat; the Temperate Broadleaf Forest Habitat; the Mediterranean/Balkan Forest Habitat; the Australasian/African Forest Habitat; the Tropical Rainforest Habitat and, finally, the Temperate Rainforest Habitat. On which one would you like to have your apartment give a view of, Jehanne?”

Not expecting that kind of question, Jehanne took a fraction of a second to answer Eve.

“I would like to have a view on the kind of forest you could see in Northern France, Eve. May I ask why you did ask me that question?”

“Simple: we are going to ask the same question to our incoming crewmembers and future passengers when they will come aboard. Tina Forster has directed, following my counsel, that our security androids are to be treated with the same courtesy and regard as everybody else on this ship and on New Haven. I will thus assign to you Apartment 569-041, which is situated along the outer side of our Temperate Broadleaf

Forest Habitat. Here is your access card. Once at the door of your apartment, use its recognition pad to register yourself as its occupant. Each android apartment has a secure weapons locker in which you will be able to put in your rifle and pistols. Your apartment's locker is presently unlocked and you will be able to set its lock using an eight-digit code of your choice. Know that anyone trying to open it by trying in succession varying digit codes will be locked out after the third try, with an alarm then informing our security section of that attempt at getting access to your rifle. Once you will have made yourself comfortable in your apartment, feel free to go roam around until it will be time to go to the core reception area on this deck."

"Thank you, Eve!"

"You're welcome, Jehanne."

Passing through the counter's wicket, Jehanne then went to the nearest waiting electric cart parked behind the line of reception counters and sat in it. Those carts were small enough to fit inside a standard elevator cabin, could be driven either by a person or by its integrated robotic navigation system and could seat up to six adult passengers. On this occasion, the cart was in robotic guidance mode, since most of the crew of the NOSTROMO had not arrived aboard yet. That would take another day or two, as the 'launch ceremony' will not imply the actual departure of the ship from its building dock. Before leaving the Space yards for the first time, the NOSTROMO would need to be fully supplied and fueled and to receive all the stocks of products and materials needed to make it a fully functional ship. What most people didn't realize was that, even during the times of oceanic vessels, a 'launched' ship then needed many weeks or even months while fitting out before it would sail for the first time. That was meant to free up the precious building docks, of which there was only a limited number, for more ships to be built. In the case of the NOSTROMO, the ship was so big that there were no other docks available to complete its fitting out, so it was going to stay inside Building Dock Number One until it would be ready for its first Space test trip.

Once five other androids had filled the other seats of the cart, the robotic driver's voice came out of its control panel.

"Please state your destinations!"

"Apartment 569-041!" replied Jehanne, followed by the five other androids.

"Thank you! Please fasten your seatbelts before we start rolling."

Jehanne did so, along with the other androids, and the cart then rolled towards one of the elevator cabins lining the left side wall of the compartment. Once the cart was inside the lift cabin, the doors closed and the cabin started going up. It moved vertically for fifty meters, then started moving sideways, using one of the lift tunnels ringing the inside of the ship and built within the armored underdecks of each main ship section. Another short vertical travel and the cabin doors opened, letting the cart come out on the Lower Promenade of the Habitat Ring, which ran along the outer circumference of the ship. Despite having the detailed layout of the NOSTROMO already recorded in her electronic memory, Jehanne immediately twisted her head in order to look at the towering wall of reinforced transparent acrylic which helped enclose the Saltwater Ring Aquarium of the ship, which ran along the outer side of the Promenade and of the apartments and cabins complex of the NOSTROMO. That 'aquarium' was actually fifty meters-wide, nineteen meters-deep and had a mid-circumference of 4,109 meters. Jehanne could see hundreds of fish and sea animals of various kinds swimming inside the giant ring aquarium, which appeared larger than it was thanks to the holographic display screens forming a single surface along the outer side of the aquarium, both underwater and above, up to a height of 150 meters. Another, horizontal display surface high above the aquarium ring and apartments complex helped visually simulate a clear blue Earth sky. One could thus think at first that the complex bordered some sea coastline somewhere on Earth, an artificial illusion meant to make living aboard the NOSTROMO even more pleasant. Jehanne then looked up to her right to examine the 26 story-high continuous wall of apartments/cabins of the habitat's residential complex. The first two levels, having higher ceilings than the other levels, housed the various communal services of the ship, which included schools, daycare centers, restaurants, boutiques, shops and various medical and administrative offices. Above them were two levels dedicated to the housing of up to 900 security androids, along with specialized maintenance and repair facilities for them. Then came three levels of apartments of various sizes meant to house the crewmembers and their families, topped with nineteen levels of cabins reserved for the future paying passengers of the NOSTROMO. In all, those apartments could house up to 2,240 crew and family members, while those cabins could house up to 20,064 persons. That last number was meant to provide the capability to move in a single trip to a new location and star system the occupants meant for prefabricated habitat complexes carried by the NOSTROMO. Under the residential complex was another ring aquarium, much smaller than the saltwater aquarium but still eighteen

meter-wide and 7.5 meter-deep, filled with fresh water and containing a variety of fish and other aquatic life. The whole design of the Habitat Ring, which many engineers had called 'extravagant' and a waste of space, had been created at the insistence of Tina Forster, who wanted the best living conditions possible for her crew and her passengers while in Space.

Two of the androids got out before the cart arrived at one of the six transparent acrylic walls separating the Habitat Ring in sections and which would prevent any accidental or damaged-induced catastrophic decompression from hitting the whole habitat. At this moment, the big airtight doors in that protective wall were open, allowing for the free circulation of both vehicles and pedestrians. The cart then rolled through the vehicle door and entered the habitat section bordering the Temperate Broadleaf Forest Habitat, then stopped after another 300 meters to let Jehanne get off. Putting on her backpack first and then grabbing back her rifle, she walked to the nearest bank of elevators running up the walls of the complex and used the staircase next to the elevator shafts to quickly go to the level of her apartment, Level 569. On the NOSTROMO, the deck levels were identified by the distance between them and the nose of the ship, which had a total length overall of 3,000 meters, while cabins and compartments on a given deck were also identified by their position in degrees relative to the North point of the ship. Her apartment, number 569-041, was thus at a level 569 meters below the nose of the ship, while it was situated in the Northeast quadrant of the NOSTROMO. To simplify even further the task of finding one's location, numbers painted at interval on the walls and pillars of the ship indicated the level and azimuth of their respective positions inside the NOSTROMO and also included a number representing their distance to the centerline of the ship, which had a maximum diameter of 1,450 meters and a maximum beam of 1,900 meters as measured at the level of the four cruciform sponsons running along the cylindrical main hull. That number also placed Jehanne's cabin 600 meters away from the ship's centerline. For her electronic brain, that system made total sense but some people still managed to find that complicated to figure out.

Finding easily and quickly her apartment, she activated the recognition pad of its entrance door, which was presently set on 'universal entry' mode and entered into it both her face and retina signatures and then set it to 'private entry' mode. Now, only herself, Eve Silisca and Tina Forster would have free access to her apartment. Anyone else

would either have to get permission from Spirit, the central AI computer of the ship or to be acting under orders from Tina Forster during emergencies. Stepping inside and closing the door behind her, Jehanne examined with intense curiosity what was now her home on the NOSTROMO. Directly to her right, next to the entrance door, was a small closet meant to hang up the various environmental suits and tactical vests she was going to wear around the ship or during duty in Space or on the surface of a planet. Behind that closet was a small storage room with a deck surface of nine square meters. That storage room was presently empty but it gave her the possibility to eventually acquire with her fixed salary and keep new possessions and objects deemed of value to her. Advancing along the main floor space of the apartment, which measured 3.5 meters in width and twelve meters in length, Jehanne passed by a small room which acted as a cybernetics maintenance facility, where she could perform periodic maintenance checks and repair diagnostics on herself. Then she was at the level of the work studio of the apartment, a room with a work table, a chair and a shelving unit where she could either work or study on the computer provided with the apartment or indulge in whatever new hobby she could adopt in the future. Next was the lounge area, measuring five meters by six meters and furnished like a standard lounge, including a video entertainment unit and a large sofa. In one corner of it was a small bar corner with sink and mini-refrigerator meant to serve eventual living visitors or friends. The last room she checked out turned out to be a small bathroom with a sink, a toilet and a shower stall, plus a clothes washer-dryer combined machine. The need for a shower stall was evident enough at once to Jehanne: she may return from a duty shift one day after getting dirty from crawling inside some tight space or from a fluid leak, thus would need to wash her body. As for the toilet, while she didn't really need one, it would cater to the needs of a living visitor or guest who would suddenly feel the need to relieve himself or herself. Lastly, Jehanne went out on the balcony of her apartment, measuring two meters by four meters, which faced the 18.2 hectares of trees of the Temperate Broadleaf Forest Habitat. Sniffing the air while on her balcony, her olfactive sensors detected at once the traces of pollen and other organic materials one would expect around a European or North American forest. Jehanne had wanted for months now to go down to Earth and see from up close true nature. Unfortunately, while the governments of Earth had officially denied the wild accusations and conspiracy theories which had circulated about Tina Forster and the reasons for her to build security androids, xenophobia against Spacers and suspicions about androids still ran high

among the populations of Earth, especially in the European Union. Jehanne had thus been unable to visit France, a country to which her historical identity as given to her by Eve Silisca was linked. That had actually been the reason why she had asked for an apartment overlooking this particular forest habitat. While the trees composing that forest were still growing up, many of them had already attained a height of ten meters or more, having had years to grow in Earth-based nurseries before being brought aboard the ship. Given another decade or two, that forest, like the five other forests built within the NOSTROMO, will have grown to maturity, providing a taste of true nature to the crew and passengers of the ship. Jehanne stayed for long minutes on her balcony, embracing the sight and smell of the trees and other vegetation, before returning inside her apartment in order to unpack and organize her things before the launch ceremony.

10:04 (Earth Universal Time)

North Access Point, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Building Dock Number One, Avalon Space Yards

Low Earth Orbit

Tina was beyond simply excited as the limousine carrying her, her First Officer Dana Durning, Gustav Shomberg and Governor Janet Robeson passed through the airlock of the North Access Point, on its way to the central reception area of her new ship. For sixteen months now, since the loss of her beloved A.M.S. KOSTROMA, she had been left with only a small fleet of interstellar shuttles to conduct her business of Space transportation. While that interim arrangement had worked well and had produced a decent profit, her greatly diminished revenues had forced her to cut or delay many projects she considered of high priority. The further development of New Haven, with its vocation as a place of refuge and resettlement for displaced people and refugees from war, natural disasters and persecution, had been nearly paralyzed by that cut in revenues, forcing her to stop bringing more refugees from Earth to New Haven until she could get back to the heavy cargo hauling business. Now, she had a brand-new ship with even more impressive capabilities than her ex-KOSTROMA, a ship that was going to give her back the means to help thousands more unfortunate people. Contrary to most other people engaged in Space business, personal enrichment was not and had never been her goal. Rather, exploring Space, finding new habitable worlds and helping colonizing those worlds were her main motivations, on top of supporting New Haven.

While loving nature, like most other people, Tina had always been fascinated by the immensity and diversity of Space and also was a born pilot. With the forest habitats and extensive agriculture facilities aboard the NOSTROMO, she was again going to be able to combine both Space and nature into what she called 'a village in space'.

After flying for over 600 meters down the North Access Tunnel, the Space limousine passed through the airlock, which had its doors open, that gave access to the central ground vehicle garage of the NOSTROMO. That garage, forming a donought-shape ring around the centerline axis of the ship, in turn surrounded the core commercial and visitors complex, where the launch ceremony was due to take place. The pilot of the limousine, which had been graciously provided by Gustav Shomberg, soon stopped in front of the northern entrance of the core complex. As Tina got out of the vehicle with Janet Robeson, Gustav Shomberg and Dana Durning, the two security androids posted at the entrance came to rigid attention and saluted, to which Tina replied with a military salute of her own. Going through the entrance airlock of the complex, the small group emerged in the fifty-meter-wide reception plaza, where the launch ceremony had been prepared. As they did so, one of the security androids posted near the airlock shouted out loud.

"ATTENTION ON DECK! SPACERS' LEAGUE AND KOSTROMA ARRIVING!"

That announcement was then followed by a modulated sound from a traditional naval whistle, played by another android, as Tina stopped at attention and saluted for a few seconds. Then, her group proceeded to a dais set up at the center of the plaza, where Janet Robeson took place behind a lectern and spoke into a microphone, addressing the crowd of some 700 crewmembers and their families assembled for the occasion.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let me first say that this event had been a long-anticipated one for me. Apart from going to provide the Spacers' League with some precious capabilities to help build up our colonies around Space, the launch and commissioning of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO will also provide a new, powerful defensive asset to our navy, as a component of our reserve force. Already, Rear Admiral Tina Forster proved the vital importance of that reserve force many times in the past with her mighty KOSTROMA, defending Humanity on many occasions and helping to open interstellar Space for all of us. Now, more than ever, we need ships like the NOSTROMO, as well as valorous officers like Tina Forster. With this said, I will not delay further the formal part of this ceremony. Mister Shomberg..."

With Janet Robeson stepping away to let him use the lectern, Gustav Shomberg came forward and looked around the crowd of onlookers for a moment before starting to speak.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I will be the first to say that I am not a great orator. Rather, I spend my time designing and building spaceships, a job I truly love. As such, it was most gratifying for me to design and build the A.M.S. NOSTROMO along the specifications required by Rear Admiral Tina Forster. The final result of this labor, in which you are now standing, is by far the largest and most powerful spaceship ever launched by Humanity. By the way, it comes with a limited, one-year warranty on parts and labor, suicidal charges not included.”

“Gee! Thanks, Gustav!” replied Tina as general laughter broke out at Shomberg’s joke. As the laughter subsided, Shomberg made a sign to a group of his aids, who then came forward while carrying a table, two chairs and a documents folder.

“I will now invite Tina to come forward and sign with me the transfer and ownership certificate for the A.M.S. NOSTROMO.”

Silent expectation fell around as both Tina and Shomberg sat at the table and respectively signed the transfer documents for the NOSTROMO. The crowd then applauded as both of them exchanged a warm handshake. Going next to the lectern, Tina looked at her assembled crew and spoke, some emotion showing in her voice.

“My friends, this is a great moment, not only for me but for all of us. Soon, we will be back at roaming Space between star systems, hauling heavy cargo and passengers. However, before we can do that, we will need to fully supply and furnish our new ship, so that it could spend months in Space. There is thus a lot left to do before we fly out of this building dock. So, I say to you: LET’S GET TO WORK TOGETHER, PEOPLE!”

Roaring applauses and cheers greeted her last words.

CHAPTER 7 – BACK IN BUSINESS

09:35 (Earth Universal Time)

Friday, September 13, 2329

Captain's office, Executive Floor, Core Section

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, Building Dock Number One

Avalon Space Yards, Low Earth Orbit



Tina Forster at age 42

Despite the fact that she had been working non-stop for two days on administrative and personnel matters rather than flying around Space, Tina's morale was high and she was giving her all on her present work: to get the NOSTROMO ready for Space with a full crew and full supplies. You didn't just declare that your 3,000 meter-long, 7.4 million tons ship was ready to fly right after its launch: you had to make sure first that you had everyone and everything you needed aboard, then had to give time to your crew to get familiar with your ship. Examples of hurried and botched ships' service entrance were many in History and they rarely ended well. One good example of such a case that came to Tina's mind was that of the brand-new British battleship PRINCE OF WALES, launched at the start of World War Two. It was still doing its initial sea trials in 1941 and trying to correct some teething problems when the British Admiralty had ordered it to go hunt the German battleship BISMARCK in the company of the British battlecruiser HOOD. As a result, it went into battle with a number of civilian shipyard engineers still aboard and working to fix a number of defects. In a sea battle that then became a historical epic story, the HOOD was sunk, while the PRINCE OF WALES had to withdraw with some serious damage after many of its systems had failed during combat. In the case of her brand new NOSTROMO, Tina was resolved not to rush its first spaceflight. This morning, she had been concentrating on ordering the thousands of things that her ship would need once in Space, like food supplies, fuel, fertilizers for the ship's extensive hydroponic gardens and plantation, spare parts and lots more.

Tina was looking at the staffing of the various personnel and passenger services departments and making notes on her computer when the chime of her office's door rang.

"COME IN!"

The person who then entered her office proved to be a good surprise for her: it was Doctor Koomak. Getting up from her chair and walking around her desk, she went to meet him with a warm hug.

"Doctor Koomak, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit today?"

"To two things, Tina." replied the old Koorivar scientist, his expression most serious. "You remember that the dead Space Predator we found on the VLADIMIR KOMAROV was wearing some sort of equipment-carrying vest?"

"Yes, I do! You were put in charge by the Admiralty of the scientific team tasked with studying and analyzing that vest and the equipment in it. Did you find something significant?"

"Significant? No! Vital? Absolutely! Let me explain in as simple a manner as I can. One of the things that had proved to be the demise of the VLADIMIR KOMAROV and of the DE RUYTER was the ability of the Space Predators to teleport aboard those ships, with Predator boarding teams then ripping to pieces their crews. From the recordings retrieved on those vessels, we learned that Predator asteroid ships first teleport numerous boarding craft to close to the ships they target. Then, those boarding craft glue themselves to the outer hulls of those unfortunate ships before teleporting inside those ships dozens of Predators. Well, one of the things that we found and analyzed from that vest turned out to be what you could call a teleportation beacon, meant to signal that the Predator wearing it was ready to return to its boarding craft or to its mother ship. Then, the teleportation device on that craft or ship homes in on that beacon and teleports that alien aboard. While that beacon did not tell us how exactly the Predator teleportation device works, it did tell us about which frequency and type of energy wave it works. As a result, I was then able to develop a jamming device that would scramble the teleportation beam and make it disperse before it could pick up the waiting Predator. Most importantly for us, that jamming device would in theory be able to scramble Predator teleportation beams as they try to send boarding craft close to our ship. All this is still unproven but I am sure that it will work as I just described."

Tina's mouth opened wide on hearing that.

“But that’s huge! If you are correct, then we would be able to prevent those Space Predators from boarding our ships, even at close range. And what is the Admiralty doing with this find?”

“It asked me to come here and have a number of my teleportation jammers installed aboard your NOSTROMO, and this on a most urgent basis. The other major ships of the Spacers’ League Navy are being similarly equipped as we speak. Hopefully, this will make fighting those Space Predators much less difficult and risky. I also made sure that Koorivar ships be also equipped with my jammers.”

“Damn! We must go see Gustav Shomberg at once about this, so that your devices could be installed aboard the NOSTROMO. Uh, what was the second reason why you came to see me?”

Koomak then smiled for the first time since his entrance in her office.

“I want to be part of your crew and serve aboard the NOSTROMO, Tina. Working in a physics lab on NEW SHOURIA is nice, but I can’t see a better use of my final years than serving on your ship.”

Tina’s smile was then replaced with a look of concern for her friend.

“Don’t tell me that you are going to die soon, my friend.”

“Oh, nothing so dramatic, Tina. I may be old, even for a Koorivar, but I am still in fairly good health and can hope for at least another fifteen to twenty productive years before I kick the bucket, as you Humans say.”

Tina let out a breath of relief then and gently patted Koomak’s shoulder.

“My friend, I am not stupid enough to refuse such a request from you. How about you becoming the dean of my ship’s university’s physics department, on top of becoming my chief scientist?”

“That would do!” said the Koorivar, a grin on its long snout.

“Then, I will take care of providing you with an apartment as soon as we will have gone to speak with Gustav Shomberg. You really made my day, Doctor.”

“That’s what friends are for, no?”

“Indeed!”

11:20 (Atlantis Eastern Time)

Monday, September 23, 2329

The Golshan’s apartment, Oceanside City

Atlantis (16 Cygni Ac), 69 light-years from Earth

Roshana Golshan could nearly bang in frustration her head against the wall of her room as she desperately kept trying to find a place as a student of physics in a university...any university. Her curse was that Atlantis was one of the newer worlds to be colonized by the Spacers' League and, while being a world with near ideal living conditions, something that had attracted plenty of immigrants to it, its services and infrastructures were having problems coping with the continuing influx of arrivals. As a result, the only university operating on Atlantis at this time was booked solid in terms of student's registrations and Roshana had found herself far



Nineteen-year-old Roshana Golshan

from the top of that list, through no fault of her own. With her parents' consent, she had then started to look for a place at another university on another of the worlds of the Spacers' League but many of those worlds had the same kind of lack of sufficient infrastructures as Atlantis, so her search had been fruitless so far. And the new academic year had already started, with many universities not accepting new students' intakes anymore! In desperation, Roshana then changed her search pattern from 'universities' to 'all' and clicked on the 'enter' button of her computer. With a long list replacing the one she had been looking through, she next selected out the entries she had already looked at. She felt even more discouragement when that list was cut to only two entries. The first one was about the Koorivar Institute of Physics, on New Shouria. That posed two big immediate problems for Roshana: first, she didn't speak Koorivar; second, the gravity on New Shouria was a painful 1.3 G, something that she knew she would not be able to endure for very long. While she was physically fit, she was not a particularly strong girl. Rather, she was what many would call an intellectual type. Eliminating that option, Roshana then looked at the second and last option available to her. It was a brand-new entry on the UniNet and had been posted only a few days ago. However, while new, it immediately proved to be an intriguing one for her.

"A university on a spaceship? Is it a traveling school of some sort? And what kind of ship is this 'NOSTROMO'?"

Clicking on the link for 'NOSTROMO', Roshana then saw a web page appear, complete with pictures and an introductory video file. Her eyes opened wide as she started reading the information on the web page.

"A three-kilometer-long ship?"

Now reading frantically the information on the page while eyeing the picture of a huge, squat cylinder-shaped ship, Roshana suddenly felt blood rush to her head.

"Captain of the NOSTROMO: Rear Admiral Tina Forster, previously the captain of the famous cargo ship KOSTROMA. I can't believe my luck! Let's see if they say who is the chair of their physics department... DOCTOR KOOMAK?!"

Now completely excited, Roshana ran out of her room and headed to the kitchen, where she knew that her mother was preparing lunch.

"MOM! MOM! I FOUND A PLACE TO STUDY! COME AND SEE THE WEB PAGE ABOUT IT!"

Knowing how important this subject was for her daughter, whom she adored, Leyla Golshan quickly washed her hands before following Roshana to her room.

"Is it here on Atlantis?"

"No, Mom: it is on a spaceship."

"On a spaceship? Are you sure that this is not some kind of scam?"

"It is serious, Mom: we are talking about the new ship of the famous Captain Tina Forster. It is called the NOSTROMO and was just finished being built in Earth orbit. It also happens to be the biggest spaceship ever built. You will get all that from the info page on the UniNet."

Entering Roshana's room, her mother then sat in front of her daughter's computer and started reading the said info page and eyeing the photos and attached video file. She then noticed something that Roshana had apparently overlooked but that was actually a good point about this offer.

"It looks like a truly interesting opportunity for you, Roshana. What I like about it is that the tuition and residency fees are really low. This must be a subsidized program. You are truly interested about this opportunity, Roshana?"

"Interested? Hell, I would kill to get an opening for this, Mom!"

"Then, let me call your father at work and see what he thinks of this."

As her mother made her call, Roshana waited anxiously, hoping fervently that her father would accept to let her enroll. She was nearly a nervous wreck by the time that her mother closed her wrist communicator unit and twisted her neck to smile to her.

"Your father says 'yes', Roshana. Now, you better fill that admission request form attached to this web page right now, so that it could leave on the next courier drone at one this afternoon."

"Oh, I will be jumping on that right away, Mom. Thanks for supporting me on this."

"My pleasure, Roshana."

Her mother then got off the computer chair, so that Roshana could start filling the admission request form, but stayed close to her, in case that she would need her help about the financial arrangements. Some nine minutes later, Roshana was pushing the 'send' button and let out a sigh of relief when an automated message advised her that her form had been recorded with the other communication links and messages already stored in the courier drone due to leave in a bit over one hour. With a departure and arrival frequency of three times a day for the drone courier service linking Atlantis with the other colonies of the Spacers' League and with Earth, she could now hope for a reply within a day or two. That day or two promised to be long ones for her in the meantime.

The next day, Roshana received a response message by the evening courier drone. Frantically opening that message, Roshana only needed to read the two first sentences in it before screaming out at the top of her lungs.

"THEY ACCEPTED ME! YIPPEE!"

Running out of her room, she got her parents to come to her computer, so that they could input their bank information to the response message in order to pay her studying fees. Once that was done, Roshana read carefully with her parents the joining instructions at the last part of the reply.

"A passenger shuttle from the New Haven Starline will pick me up tomorrow at four in the afternoon, local time, at the Oceanside City Astroport. They joined an electronic ticket for the flight. Let me download it on my pocket data pad. Damn! I will have some judicious packing to do tonight: I sure don't want to arrive on the NOSTROMO and look like one of those high-class snobs traveling around with dozens of suitcases."

"Don't worry about that, Roshana: I will help you pack." replied her mother, making her daughter kiss her on the cheek.

“Thanks, Mom! You are the best! Ooh, I’m so excited now! I don’t know if I will be able to sleep tonight.”

The next afternoon, Leyla Golshan drove her daughter to the city astroport, arriving a good hour before the due departure time. After passing through ticket control and going to the passenger lounge assigned to the passengers destined to leave on the New Haven Starline shuttle, Roshana glued herself to the big windows of the lounge in order to look at the shuttle that was due to carry her to the NOSTROMO. It was not a big craft, being a lenticular-shaped light shuttle with a capacity of eighty passengers, but it sported a colorful orange, pink and blue paint scheme that was quite pretty, with the words ‘NEW HAVEN STARLINES’ painted in big red letters on its sides. Roshana admired it for a good minute before going to sit next to her mother in one of the lounge’s padded chairs. While waiting, she checked at least twice that she had everything she needed and had not forgotten some important documents. However, all of her past school diplomas and exam papers results were indeed recorded in her data pad, while she had her Spacers’ League citizen card, birth certificate and vaccinations booklet on her or in her purse. When boarding time was announced, Roshana shared a last hug and kiss with her mother, more emotional than she cared to admit.

“Thank you for accompanying me to the astroport, Mom. I will send you daily messages from the NOSTROMO, I promise you.”

“And I will be reading your messages eagerly, Roshana. Have a nice trip and be happy during your studies.”

Her heart beating faster now, Roshana then walked to the access overhead gallery linking the lounge to the shuttle and, showing her electronic ticket to the stewardess posted next to the door of the gallery, waved one last time to her mother before walking down the access gallery, dragging her cabin bag behind her. Once inside the shuttle, another stewardess looked at her ticket and pointed to one seat while smiling to her.

“Your seat B22 is to the left of the aisle, miss. Have a good trip.”

“Thank you, miss!”

As she went to her seat, Roshana noticed that about half of the seats were already taken, while only a dozen other persons from Atlantis embarked with her. All of the passengers were late teenagers or young adults, making her guess that they were all going to the NOSTROMO in order to start university studies. Storing her cabin bag in

the overhead bin of her seat, she then sat down next to a handsome teenage boy of maybe eighteen who smiled to her.

“Going to study on the NOSTROMO too? In what program?”

“Physics! And you?”

“Aeronautical engineering. By the way, my name is Stepan Makarov, from New Venice, in the Tau Ceti System.”

“And I am Roshana Golshan. Pleased to meet you.”

While Roshana meant that as simple politeness, she couldn't help admire the tall, athletic blond boy with blue eyes smiling to her: he could definitely be called handsome. On his part, Stepan in turn discretely admired her beautiful face, green eyes, sexy body and generous chest.

“So, how is life on Atlantis, Roshana? Is living in a triple star system difficult to adapt to?”

“Not really! You get accustomed to it quite quickly. One notable difference compared to, say, Earth, is that our two G-Class yellow stars and one M-Class red dwarf combine to make the daylight both long and quite luminous. The atmosphere is a bit thicker than that of Earth and also contains a higher percentage of oxygen, while the annual average temperature is 21 degrees Celsius, with only moderate variations per seasons. Most of the planet's surface is covered by oceans, which makes it a great place for water sports. The only downside to it is the near complete lack of native vegetation and lifeforms, due to the stupidity of the local race, which sterilized their own world through a nuclear war some sixteen million years. There are intensive replanting and animal restocking programs in place, using marine, animal and vegetal Earth lifeforms, but the planet is still on the bare side right now. It will take at least another decade or two before Atlantis becomes a true ecosystem again. And what about New Venice, Stepan?”

“Oh, it is a true dream place, Roshana. We have one G8-Class yellow star that provides us with a quite comfortable average annual temperature of 23 degrees Celsius. The local gravity is a slight bit less than that of Earth, at 0.95 G, and there are large oceans around three large continents. The local vegetation and fauna were quite luxuriant when it was first discovered and explored, but there were no truly dangerous predators on New Venice, so the place is both beautiful and safe. You should visit it one fine day: it is a great place to spend a vacation.”

"Maybe I will, Stepan. Right now, I am anxious to see what this NOSTROMO looks like from the inside. The information about it on the UniNet is a bit limited at this time."

"That's because it was completed only some two weeks ago. As a fan of astronautics, I read everything I could find about it and its captain, Tina Forster. If it is anything like her past KOSTROMA, it will be a grandiose ship indeed. Forster was particularly proud of her KOSTROMA being like a village in Space, with enough hydroponic farms, plantations and animal farms to make it more than self-sufficient in food. Since the NOSTROMO is even bigger than the KOSTROMA, I expect it to also be self-sufficient in food production. That would partly explain why the tuition and residency fees for attending university on the ship were so low."

"Well, my parents certainly didn't complain about that point, I must say."

"Neither did my parents. While life is good on New Venice, my family is of relatively modest means, as my father works as a simple security guard at one of the local casinos. What about your parents, Roshana?"

"My father is a hydroponics specialist, while my mother works from home as a sculptor. She is quite good at it but her clientele is still a bit limited, so our family revenues are overall nothing to shout about. That the fees to attend the university on the NOSTROMO were so low was actually quite a plus to my parents. While they were ready to do sacrifices to help me, those low tuition and residency fees came as a relief to them. Another big plus for the physics program I will attend is the fact that the dean of the physics faculty is no less than a Nobel laureate in Physics: Doctor Koomak, from New Shouria."

"Koomak, the inventor of the interstellar drive system? Wow! You can't get much better than that! For me, the biggest plus is the fact that I will be living and studying aboard the most modern and advanced spaceship in existence. The NOSTROMO itself will constitute my classroom. You should also find out that the NOSTROMO will embody the most advanced applied physics systems Humanity has."

"Oh! I didn't think of that. Thank you for pointing that out to me, Stepan."

"You're welcome, Roshana."

Their conversation was then interrupted by a female voice coming from the cabin's announcement system, as the light shuttle started to float away from the astroport's gate.

"May I have your attention, ladies and gentlemen. We are now about to take off from Oceanside City Astroport and will then climb to a safe altitude and distance once in orbit before jumping to the Solar System and Earth. We should arrive at the Avalon Space Yards, where the NOSTROMO is docked, in approximately 45 minutes."

That announcement brought a happy smile on Stepan Makarov's face.

"Forty-five minutes! When I think that, only nine and a half years ago, we still couldn't travel beyond the confines of our Solar System. Now, we have people living and working in eighteen other star systems, with more habitable planets being found nearly every year. This must be the golden age of Humanity."

"But that doesn't mean that the whole galaxy is ours, Stepan. We already had contacts with half a dozen intelligent alien races, with most probably a lot more still to be found, while my own planet of Atlantis is proof that we missed at least one more intelligent race by millions of years. The galaxy is probably teeming with life, intelligent and non-intelligent, and we have barely scratched the surface up to now. What tells us that, one day soon, some other race will step forward and tell us 'don't pass this point or else'?"

"You do have a point, Roshana." recognized Stepan before concentrating on his seat's display screen, which gave him a view of the outside.

A few minutes later, as their shuttle had attained orbit and was still rising and taking speed, a brief orange flash filled the cabin for a fraction of a second, prompting a comment from Stepan.

"We just jumped! I can now see Earth on the forward view screen."
Less than a minute later, the voice of the pilot was heard again in the cabin.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are now approaching Low Earth Orbit and will arrive at the Avalon Space Yards in approximately six minutes. Once close to it, we will then enter the A.M.S. NOSTROMO, which is presently docked outside of the space yards, via its small craft access tunnel. Once we will be inside the craft hangar, you will be able to walk out of the shuttle and will then be processed in administratively before going to your assigned apartments."

"Did she say 'apartments' and not cabins?" asked Roshana, surprised by the pilot's choice of words. Stepan, equally surprised, could only conjecture about it.

"Uh, she did!"

Their stewardess, a very pretty Asian woman, heard that exchange as she was passing in the aisle and stopped while smiling down to them.

"As university students enrolled for four years of studies aboard the NOSTROMO, you clearly needed more substantial lodging than mere passengers doing a single-day trip. Your individual accommodations will thus be our standard single's/couple's apartment type, which includes a bedroom, a lounge, a private study, a bathroom and a storage room doubling as a laundry room."

"A storage room? What for, miss?" asked Stepan, intrigued.

"All of our apartments meant for long-duration occupants have a storage room of varying size, depending on the number of occupants. Those storage rooms are meant to store away any extra furniture or possessions those occupants brought from previous places of residence, or to store items acquired after arrival on the NOSTROMO. The same standard was applied on the KOSTROMA and such storage rooms proved to be a very popular perk with our crewmembers and their families. Since we constantly travel from one star system to the other and with our resident commercial associates buying and selling all kinds of items, like artworks, clothing, sports gear and many other kinds of things, the opportunities for a family to buy and accumulate new and interesting things are nearly endless, something that could quickly fill a normal apartment to capacity. So, our apartments all have storage rooms. So do our passenger cabins, since many of our passengers are families emigrating to a new home planet and wish to bring with them their furniture, family possessions and souvenirs from their old home. Some emigrants also bring with them their personal vehicles, which are then stored on our vehicle garage deck."

"Wow! You really treat people with great care, miss."

"We always do, sir! Captain Forster always care about other people, irrespective of their race and social status."

As the stewardess then walked away, Roshana spoke to Stepan in a low voice.

"Decidedly, I am getting to like this Captain Forster more and more. She seems to be a most decent woman, on top of being a genuine Space hero. I hope that we will be able to meet her after arrival."

"I hope so too. Chances are that she will be on hand to give us some kind of welcoming speech after we leave this shuttle."

Both of them fell silent as they watched on their respective seat viewing screens their shuttle approached a gigantic space installation. Stepan grinned with glee as he eyed the orbital station.

“The Avalon Space Yards! The Mecca of starship development and construction in the Spacers’ League! My hope is to one day work there as an aeronautical engineer under the famous Gustav Shomberg.”

Roshana did not speak then, concentrating instead on detailing the giant Space yards. One ship docked to one side of the yards soon attracted her eyes.

“Hey! I see a ship docked to the station. Isn’t that the NOSTROMO?” Stepan looked at the ship for a moment before smiling.

“Yes! It is the NOSTROMO! I can now understand why some people call it ‘the flying trashcan’. It does have the general look of a trashcan. However, I am not about to call it that in front of Captain Forster: she would be liable to space me out without a spacesuit for such an offense.”

“And why such a look and shape, Stepan? Why not a longer, sleeker design?”

“That was dictated by simple functionality, Roshana. Its main propulsion system is a directed gravity generator, which basically makes the ship ‘fall’ in the direction chosen by its pilot. The special electro-magnetic field formed by a directed gravity generator has roughly the shape of an egg, with its maximum diameter and length roughly six or seven times those of the gravity generator. All parts of the ship need to be within that bubble of energy in order to avoid damage from accelerations. Arrow-like shapes are thus completely unsuited to directed gravity drives. In fact, the best shape would be a simple sphere. However, a short cylinder shape will be about as good, while making it easier than a sphere to carry bulky cargo with angular shapes.”

“Oh! I see! Thanks for the explanation. As a physics student, I will most probably get to study the theory behind those directed gravity fields. From what I know about them, that propulsion system was invented by the Drazts from Ross 128 and its design was stolen from them by Captain Forster while she was rescuing a Koorivar refugee ship that was approaching Ross 128.”

“Well, ‘stolen’ is a big word, Roshana, considering the circumstances at that time. The Drazts were interfering with the rescue by the KOSTROMA of the SHANIZAR, the Koorivar refugee ship it had been searching for. Furthermore, the Drazts were the first to attack, by attempting to insert a computer virus aboard the KOSTROMA. However, that attempt boomeranged on them, with the KOSTROMA sending them a

computer virus of its own, which then copied and sent to the KOSTROMA all the datafiles contained aboard the Drazt cruiser, apart from causing that cruiser to become uncontrollable. That is how we got the design of the directed gravity drive system and of many other things. Thankfully, we are now friends with the Drazts but it took a few knocks on their heads for them to drop their hostility towards us.”

Roshana could only nod at that explanation. Personally, she didn't believe in violence and considered herself to be a tolerant, open-minded person. However, she was not naïve and knew that, when faced with a bully, strong actions were often needed to defend oneself. Stepan then pointed on the viewer screen at a number of small dots moving around the NOSTROMO.

“Look at all those auxiliary craft, barges and shuttles flying around the ship: the NOSTROMO is probably still in the process of getting supplies, personnel, parts and fuel before its first spaceflight. A ship of such a size needs to load up on a lot of stuff before it is ready for Space. And that doesn't even consider the need to train the crew in the operation of a new ship. I wouldn't be surprised to see that it will take at least another day or two before it undocks from the space yards.”

As their shuttle approached the giant ship, both Roshana and Stepan saw that it was now heading straight towards a large opening visible on one side of its hull, maybe one third down from the bow.

“The ship's craft access airlock is now opened.” explained Stepan. “That access port seems huge.”

“Everything about this ship looks huge.” replied Roshana. “But why build it so big?”

“Certainly not simply to be able to claim to have the biggest ship around. The KOSTROMA, Captain Forster's previous ship, was also a giant ship and it specialized in the carrying of big prefabricated modules and of very heavy cargo. Right now, with prefabricated structures being favored in order to build up the infrastructure of our various colony worlds, the demand for ships able to carry oversized or ultra-heavy cargo modules is very strong and very few ships which exist today can carry such loads between star systems. With her NOSTROMO, Captain Forster will be able to reclaim the part of that market which belonged before to the KOSTROMA. It may have cost a fortune to build such a huge ship but I am sure that Captain Forster will be able to recoup its building cost quickly enough and then make a nice profit.”

Both of them then fell silent as their shuttle entered a wide tunnel and flew for about 600 meters before entering a large airlock. Cycling through the airlock took about four minutes, after which the shuttle slowly entered a big rotunda whose outer walls were lined with closed craft hangars stacked two-high. Directed and controlled by tractor beams, the shuttle went to the central structure of the hangar complex, where a mobile telescopic gallery attached itself to the forward starboard side access door of the shuttle. The voice of the pilot was then heard again.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have arrived in the NOSTROMO and you will now be able to leave this shuttle and enter the ship’s passenger terminal via our forward starboard access door. Please make sure that you don’t leave behind any bag or possession before proceeding to the terminal. Once in the terminal, a welcoming team will process you and direct you to your accommodations after giving you instructions about the next 24 hours. I wish you all successful studies and a pleasant stay aboard the NOSTROMO.”

“Well, time to go, I guess!” said Stepan while getting up from his seat in order to get his cabin bag from the overhead rack. Roshana imitated him and, towing her own cabin suitcase by its telescopic handle, followed behind Stepan as he walked towards the forward starboard access door. As they got nearer to that door, she saw that their pilot had joined the shuttle’s stewardess near the door and was thanking the passengers as they left. Roshana hesitated and let out a soft exclamation when she recognized who the pilot was: she had been featured in many news articles and videos during the past years and Roshana knew her face well as a result.

“My god! Captain Forster was our pilot, Stepan!”

“What?! Are you sure?”

“Absolutely! The captain and owner of the NOSTROMO took on her to pilot us and the other registered students for her university. That gesture by itself proves in my mind how much she cares about us.”

“Well, I’ll be...”

Once close to the door, Stepan effectively saw that the nametag on the pilot’s uniform was marked ‘T. FORSTER’. Truly impressed by that, he then shared a handshake with the mature woman.

“Captain Forster, it is a true honor for me to be able to meet you. Thank you for flying us to your ship.”

Tina responded with a benevolent smile and a soft voice.

“It was my pleasure, mister. Youths like you represent our future and you deserve every help you can get in order to fulfill your potential and accomplish your dreams. I wish you the best of times during your stay on the NOSTROMO.”

“Thank you again, Captain.”

Roshana, following next behind Stepan, also thanked Tina before following her new friend down the mobile access gallery, soon entering a relatively small passenger terminal lounge lined on one side by a service counter with wickets. Once the 63 passengers of the shuttle were all inside the lounge, Tina Forster surprised Roshana again by going behind the counter and speaking in a microphone.

“Welcome aboard the NOSTROMO, ladies and gentlemen. I am Tina Forster, captain and owner of this ship and I am most happy to be able to greet you like this on your arrival. My personnel will now register you in as official residents of the NOSTROMO for the duration of your studies at our university. As such, you will each be assigned a one-bedroom apartment in the Ring Habitat section of the ship and will get an access card that will allow you to eat at one of our communal cafeterias and buffet restaurants, which are also situated in the Ring Habitat section. There are as well a variety of other restaurants aboard but, depending on the standard level of their cuisine, they may charge some cost for eating there. With that said, I can assure you that our communal cafeterias and buffet restaurants serve food of both high quality and wide diversity and I am certain that they will satisfy your tastes and appetite. We also have a number of catering counters where you can pick up for free a selection of prepared dishes and snacks that you can then bring to your apartment and store in its kitchen’s refrigerator. All of your apartments include a large bedroom, a lounge, a kitchen and dining corner, a full-sized bathroom, a personal storage room and, most importantly, a private study room, in which you will find a powerful work and study computer of the latest generation. Those computers are linked to the ship’s public access databanks and, when inside a star system, to the local UniNet. You will also be able to use that computer to register, send and receive personal messages to and from your family and friends, using the Spacers’ League network of automated courier drones. While studying aboard the NOSTROMO, you will be free to use our various sports, entertainment and environmental installations, which include six forest habitats and a tropical garden. Your choice of apartment will be decided by which forest habitat you would find the most attractive for you to contemplate from your balcony. As well, the two

levels of the Habitat Ring on which our student's apartments are situated comprise a number of communal lounges where you will be able to hold group reunions and activities. While those lounges can also be used to hold parties, I will enjoin you to show restraint and keep the noise level reasonable. If we get complaints about noise or rowdiness, then our security officers may pay you a visit in order to ask you to cool down your party to a reasonable level. I have also been a young student, decades ago, and I can understand that teenagers like you need to blow steam and have fun from time to time. I am simply asking you to keep that within reasonable limits, for the good of all aboard. Finally, you will be free to roam this ship and visit its various installations and sections, both for educational and entertainment purposes. In terms of health services, you will find a family oriented medical clinic complex in the Habitat Ring section, where you can get medical treatment and counsel as needed, free of charge. For truly serious medical problems, we also have a central medical complex with all the latest facilities. That central complex also includes a medical school in which those of you registered for medical studies will study and learn their chosen medical specialty. Finally, one word about our ship's security officers. While we do have human security officers, the majority of our security force is made up of androids of very advanced design and of human appearance. Those security androids have individual personalities and aspects and possess a high level of artificial intelligence. They also are officially citizens of New Haven and benefit from the same rights as you do. They are nobody's slaves and are to be treated with the same respect as you would treat any other person aboard. In turn, they are fully devoted to your protection and defense and were built to defend this ship against any external threat or attack. They are thus here to help you, not to harass or watch you. With this said, I will next let my ship's head hostess, Miss Natalia Vasilyeva, start the in-registering procedure with the help of her assistants. After being registered and given your access cards and apartment assignation, you will then be able to recuperate your unaccompanied luggage and board a fleet of electric taxi carts that will then bring you to your respective apartments. Once you are installed in your apartments, you will be able to start visiting the ship and go have supper at one of our cafeterias. Tomorrow at nine in the morning, Universal Earth Time, you are to assemble at our central auditorium, where the Dean of our ship's university and his faculty members will address you and will give you their directives for the next couple of days. School will officially start for you next Monday, so you will have plenty of time to get familiar with this ship in the meantime. Natalia, they are now yours!"

Tina Forster then left the lounge, with Natalia Vasilyeva taking over from her and starting the registration process for the arriving students.

When Roshana's turn to go to a wicket came, she was greeted with a smile from the beautiful young blonde manning that registration station.

"Good afternoon, miss! May I see your identity card and your flight's boarding pass?"

"Here you are, Miss...Silisca." replied Roshana after reading the nametag over the young woman's breast pocket. The hostess scanned electronically Roshana's identity card and boarding pass before giving them back to her.

"Could you please look at the camera to my right, Miss Golshan?... Thank you! If you have a personal data pad on you, you may put it over this datalink surface on the counter: it will then receive an app containing a full guide to this ship, its available services, commercial outlets and a list of rules that applies to this ship."

Roshana took her data pad out of her purse and touched the counter's datalink pad with it. A 'beep' and a short message appearing on the display screen of her data pad then told her that the said app had now been loaded into her personal device.

"Thank you, Miss Golshan! Now, if you look at the display screen to my left, you will see the pictures of six different forest habitats. If you can tell me which habitat looks either the most familiar or the most appealing to you, I will then be able to assign to you an apartment with a view on that selected forest habitat."

"Uh...I would like to have a view on the Mediterranean Forest Habitat, miss."

"Excellent! I am thus assigning Apartment Number 554-2305 to you. Here is your ship's access card, which bears your picture and name. Please have it on you at all times: it will greatly facilitate your movements and access to sectors around the ship. You may now proceed to the baggage carrousel room one level down, using the marked door behind this wicket. Taxi carts are parked there and one of them will then drive you to your new apartment. I wish you a pleasant stay aboard the NOSTROMO, Miss Golshan."

"Thank you, miss!" replied Roshana, who clipped her new access card to her jacket before walking through the wicket's turnstile and going to the large door marked with a sign saying 'TO THE BAGGAGE CARROUSELS ROOM'. Going down a mechanical escalator, she arrived in a large circular room with four separate luggage carrousel. It didn't take long for her to see and retrieve her two suitcases from one of

the carrousel and to go to a robotic taxi cart. Loading her suitcases and cabin bag on the rear platform of the cart, she then sat in one of the six seats of the cart and pressed a green button on its small command panel.

“To Apartment 554-2305, please!”

“Right away, miss!” replied a soft female voice that came from a speaker on the command panel. The cart then started moving, floating a few centimeters off the deck thanks to its anti-gravity propulsion system. It then entered one of the lift cabins to be found in the baggage carrousel room. The doors of the cabin closed at once and the cabin started going up at a respectable speed. After a few seconds of climbing, it slowed down before transiting to horizontal displacement for a while, then vertically climbed a bit more before stopping. A voice then spoke as the doors of the cabin opened up.

“You are now at Level 554 of the Habitat Ring, Mediterranean Sector.”

Roshana’s taxi cart left the elevator cabin and immediately turned left to follow a wide circulation gallery. As it went along the gallery, Roshana gasped and held her breath at the sight of the view she now had of the inside of the Habitat Ring Section: the outer wall, which was entirely covered by a giant holographic display screen, made it look as if she was now in some Earth-based high-rise building facing a blue ocean. Looking down, she saw what looked like a giant aquarium extending beyond visual range on both sides, with fish plainly visible as they swam in its waters. She was so enthralled by that fantastic vision that she didn’t notice that her taxi had stopped before the robotic female voice of the cart spoke up.

“You are now in front of the entrance to Apartment 554-2305. You can now step out and take your luggage off this cart, miss.”

“Er, thank you!”

Getting up from her seat and taking off her suitcases and bag from the cart, Roshana then went to a wooden door bearing a plaque with the number ‘554-2305’ on it. The door was actually an old-fashioned door that swung on hinges, rather than the sliding type more common these days. That and the fact that it was made of polished wood with decorative sculpture along its edges actually appealed to Roshana, who liked the traditional look of it. Presenting her access card to the access recognition pad of the door, she heard the click of the door’s handle safety opening and she turned and pushed the handle, opening the door wide. Putting down her bags on the carpet of the small entrance lobby and then closing and locking the door, Roshana looked down the hallway

of her new home. Temporarily leaving her bags in the lobby, she slowly walked down the hallway, stopping at each of the doors lining it and opening them to see what room they gave access to. The first room to her left was a storage room, empty except for a set of laundry washing/drying machine, while a large closet was situated to the right of the entrance door. Next, she found in succession a large private office, a small washroom, a kitchen corner with basic appliances, a dining area with table, a comfortable lounge and a large bedroom with double-bed and connected private bathroom and walk-in closet. The whole apartment breathed of quiet comfort, making Roshana most satisfied with her new home. Lastly, she stepped out on the balcony of her apartment, which gave her an overview of a young forest covering close to twenty hectares. The trees of that forest were still young and growing but many of them were now at least ten meter-tall. Not too far to her left, she saw a vertical transparent wall separating the forest from another habitat zone, while a more distant transparent wall was visible some 400 meters to her right. Roshana understood at once that those walls were meant to prevent any eventual decompression from affecting more than one forest habitat zone. Looking more closely at the outer patio door of her balcony, she then saw that it was actually of airtight design and would thus protect her apartment from any such decompression. Sniffing with delight the smell of fresh plants coming from the trees, shrubs and grass of the forest, Roshana then returned inside her apartment in order to unpack her bags and put away her things.

That took her less than ten minutes, after which she used the camera incorporated into her hand data pad to take multiple pictures of her apartment, planning to attach them to a message she would compose tonight and then send to her parents on Atlantis. Once that was done, and feeling her stomach being quite empty by now, she opened the ship's map included with her new application on her data pad and started reviewing it, looking for the various cafeterias, restaurants and food joints available on the NOSTROMO. A number of ship's zones, some of them quite large, denoted in red on her ship map, intrigued her and made her touch with one finger one of the larger red zones. Instead of getting a more detailed view of that red zone, a message in red letters appeared on her display screen.

WE ARE SORRY BUT THE SHIP'S SECTOR YOU JUST DESIGNATED IS A RESTRICTED, CLASSIFIED ACCESS ZONE. THE A.M.S. NOSTROMO IS AN ARMED MERCHANT SHIP THAT IS PART OF THE SPACERS' LEAGUE

RESERVE FLEET AND DETAILS ABOUT ITS ARMAMENT AND DEFENSIVE SYSTEMS ARE CLASSIFIED AS CONFIDENTIAL. THE OTHER RED ZONES ON YOUR SHIP'S MAP ARE OTHER RESTRICTED MILITARY ZONES. PLEASE DO NOT TRY TO INTENTIONALLY GAIN ACCESS TO ANY OF THEM. ANY DEROGATION TO THIS DIRECTIVE MAY RESULT IN YOUR STATUS AS OFFICIAL RESIDENT OF THE NOSTROMO BEING REVIEWED AND POSSIBLY CANCELLED.

That stern message both surprised and shocked Roshana, who then looked at the red zones on her ship's map: there were dozens of them, while the one she had tried to access, along with three other similar ones, occupied huge volumes in the ship.

"My god! What kind of weapon could occupy a space of over a tenth of a cubic kilometer?"

She finally decided that it would be better for her to forget about those restricted zones: she certainly didn't want to risk her studies on the NOSTROMO to be compromised by simple curiosity. She thus touched the entry marked as 'cafeterias, restaurants and food outlets', then reviewed quickly the long list of names and descriptions that appeared.

"My! Talk about a feast for the eyes!... OOH! There is an Iranian food counter in Food Court Number Two! Sold!"

Reviewing quickly the information about that food court, she saw that it was situated in the Habitat Ring Section, eight levels below that of her apartment and in the North American/European Atlantic Forest sector of the ring. Her mind made up, Roshana then left her apartment and headed down to the level of the restaurants and other communal services and shops of the habitat. She toyed for a moment about calling a taxi cart for herself but decided instead to walk along the ring gallery, so that she could admire the giant aquarium and its fish at leisure. As she walked along the gallery while looking at the ring aquarium, she thought to herself that coming to study on the NOSTROMO was definitely the right move for her to do.

CHAPTER 8 – HEAVY LIFTING

07:51 (Seoul Local Time)

Wednesday, September 25, 2329

Executive parking lot of the Hyundai Heavy Industries shipyard

Ulsan, Korea, ASEAN, Earth

Stepping out of his chauffeured aircar, Park Ju-Yung stopped for an instant to look at the huge steel structure occupying over thirty hectares of land surface next to his ship construction yard in Ulsan. That structure, a round, squat tower mounted on eight short, fat legs, had been completed over a year ago and had then been his pride as manager of the Hyundai Heavy Industries. Now, however, the main thing the prefabricated city represented was wasted space and resources and the possible future bankruptcy of his corporation. By now, it should have been set in the place meant for it on the planet New Venice, in the Tau Ceti System, some 11.9 light-years from Earth. The reason it was not there today was what one could call a unique design flaw: it had been built with the idea of it being carried to the Tau Ceti System in a spaceship that no longer existed. Nobody could have imagined over sixteen months ago that the mighty KOSTROMA would be completely destroyed in a desperate Space battle, yet it had happened. That it had a heroic end and had saved a whole race and also possibly Humanity was small consolation for the fact that there were now no existing space cargo ships able to carry it. Park had tried his best to find a way to deliver New Baikonur City to the Tau Ceti System but all of the biggest existing cargo ships had proved unsuited to carry it without effecting some major (and very costly) modifications to it, so that it could fit into a spaceship. Since his shipyard could not by contractual engagement get the second half payment of its building contract with the Sverdlovsk Group, which owned New Venice, until it was delivered and set on its foundations, New Baikonur City was now a source of debts for Park, debts from the interests on the loans he had taken to finance its construction and from the rental of the land on which it was now sitting. Land rental in Korea had always been an expensive affair and things had not improved in that aspect in the last few decades. His only hope now to be able to deliver his product and get fully paid rested on the hope that Captain Forster's new ship, the A.M.S.

NOSTROMO, would soon enter service and then would carry New Baikonur City to New Venice. However, Park understood that, even if it had now been officially launched, the fitting out and testing of such a huge ship as the NOSTROMO was not a matter of only days or even weeks, but rather that of months. His problem was that the bankers with whom he had taken loans had grown impatient and were threatening to raise the interest rates on his loans, loans that the Hyundai Heavy Industries was finding harder and harder to pay. If he didn't complete his contract soon by having the city delivered, his corporation could well sink into insolvency within six months. Still, Park couldn't honestly blame Tina Forster for his present woes: she had done her duty to the utmost and had sacrificed her ship for the good of everybody.

Park was walking towards the main entrance of the executive headquarters building of his corporation when his wrist communicator buzzed, making him stop and look at it while opening a link. He then saw the face of his executive secretary, a beautiful but also highly competent young woman.

"Yes, Ji Woo?"

"Sir, good news! Captain Forster left a call for us early this morning, saying that her NOSTROMO is now ready to start commercial cargo service. She would like you to call her back, so that she could arrange for a pickup of New Baikonur City with her new ship."

Blood rushed to Park's brain as he felt immense relief wash over him.

"I'm about to enter the building now. Have all the relevant contract papers ready for me: I'm running upstairs!"

With new hope now in his heart, Park Ju-Yung started running, slowing down only to pass the rotating glass doors of his building's entrance and speeding past his surprised team of receptionists.

10:24 (Earth Universal Time)

The Moonlight Disco Club, ship's entertainment complex

Frame level # 570, core section of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Docked to the Avalon Space Yards, Earth low orbit

"So, Tina, what do you think of my new digs?"

“That you should be able to do some great business with your new disco club, Lester. I am sure that the 800 or so university students we now have aboard will be eager and impatient to come shake themselves silly in your disco club. Are you planning to continue playing some of those old 20th Century songs you found in New York years ago?”

“Hell yes!” replied enthusiastically Lester Barnaby, DJ and owner of the new Moonlight Disco Club, which was now going to succeed his old Moonlight Dance Club, destroyed along the KOSTROMA sixteen months ago. “Those songs proved to be a huge hit from the start with my customers and are still very popular. To be frank, today’s songs and music too often rely on showy visual effects and sexual attractiveness, rather than on pure singing and musical talent. I still find it hard to find many contemporary singers or musical bands with the pure talent and voices of the likes of Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, Sarah Brightman, Enya, Celine Dion and Belinda Carlisle. The older part of my clientele in particular preferred those old songs over what is being produced today. The old pieces of classical music and film themes I found in New York are also hard to beat, being truly ageless masterpieces.”

“I agree! I myself love to relax by listening to some Sarah Brightman or Enya song. Their voices were pure gold. I must say that I love the way that you decorated one of your dance floors in the old 20th Century style. Your ‘Golden Oldies Room’ should be a hit with your adult clientele.”

“I hope so, Tina! Well, when do you expect to undock from the Avalon Space Yards?”

“In two days, once all my supplies and commercial stocks will be in. My first task then will be to go pick up the prefabricated New Baikonur City at the Hyundai Industries shipyard in Korea. Following that, I will collect more cargo at the Las Americas Orbital Station and will also embark the 19,000 people due to become the first batch of occupants for the New Baikonur City once it is in place on New Venice. You should thus have plenty of customers for your disco club on our first commercial interstellar trip. Since it will take a couple of weeks before the prefab city is properly set on its foundations, those new colonists will have many days to enjoy our ship’s facilities.”

“Sounds great to me!” replied Lester while rubbing his hands together.

“And when will you be ready to officially open your club to the clientele, Lester?”

“Tonight, at seven! I already have my team of DJs, barmaids and waiters assembled and ready.”

“Excellent! I will make sure that everybody on the ship knows about that. Well, time for me to go visit Madam Lee at her club.”

Lester Barnaby grinned at the mention of Madam Lee, the owner of the ‘Jupiter’ sex club.

“I heard that she hired a brand-new crew of dancers, strippers and massage specialists for her new club.”

“She indeed did, Lester.” replied Tina with a smile. “After some fifteen years on the job, most of the members of her old group of strippers and dancers have decided to retire from the sex business, both because they are not as ‘fresh’ as before and because they made enough throughout the years to retire in comfort. The majority of them are now permanent residents of New Haven. However, many of the support staff, including Mark Cisco, have stayed on. For those staff members, experience counts a lot more than their looks, although I would be the first to say that Mark Cisco is worthy of a long look.”

“Tsk, tsk! Don’t tell that to your husband, Tina.” said Lester while shaking his index at her.

“That’s actually okay with Michel: he and Mark are good friends.” shot back Tina before turning around and leaving the disco club.

Once out in the wide circular hallway that ran around the entertainment center of her ship, Tina passed in front of the ‘Pinball’ video-arcade center, where technicians were finishing to connect the hundreds of video game stations filling it, before entering the ‘Jupiter’ sex club by its main entrance, where she shook hands with the big, muscular doorman, Mark Cisco.

“Good morning, Mark! Is Madam Lee around?”

“She sure is, Tina! You will find her in the main show room, where she is briefing her employees in advance of our official opening tonight.”

“Thanks!”

Entering the club and passing by its cloak room, Tina walked into the main show lounge, the largest room of the establishment, with its dance/strip stage, multitude of small tables and bar counter. Seeing Madam Lee, the manager of the ‘Jupiter’, talking with about thirty men and women near the bar, Tina went that way and approached the group. Seeing her, Madam Lee stopped talking for a moment and greeted her with a nod of the head.

"Good morning, Captain, or should I call you 'Admiral'?"

"Just 'Tina' will do, and that applies to all of you: I am no egocentrist and hate formalities. I just wanted to ask you if you saw the message I forwarded to you about a troupe of dancers booked to travel on the ship in three days. I was wondering if you could make temporary use of those dancers during the two weeks they will be aboard." Somehow, her question brought a sober expression on Madam Lee's face, who then looked at her employees.

"We will continue this discussion after lunch, my friends. You may go now."

The 67-year-old procurer waited until her employees had left the lounge, then invited Tina to sit down at her table before starting to speak to her in a most serious tone.

"Yes, I got that message you forwarded to me from this Selim Rakmadov, Tina. However, I must warn you at once about that man. While he pretends to be a talent impresario from the Sudan who is sending a troupe of 86 girls and seven aides to New Venice, where the girls will be employed as strippers and exotic dancers, he is in reality a criminal of the worst kind who deals in human sex trafficking."

That left Tina staring with a bit of a shocked look at the procurer.

"Why would you call that man a sex trafficker, Madam Lee? He has a formal contract signed by the Sverdlovsk Group, which is saying that he is a regular provider of exotic talent to their various clubs and resorts. Do you know the man?"

"I certainly do, Tina, and I can tell you that he is a certified sadist and psychopath. I first met him when I was only sixteen and living on Hygiea. At that time, I had just run away from my family, which wanted to forcibly marry me to a man I loathed. This was at a time when the Sverdlovsk Group, which ran Hygiea, was still in reality a giant crime syndicate masquerading as a local Space asteroid government. The Sverdlovsk Group perfectly knew the kind of man Rakmadov was but was covering him in order to participate and profit in his sex trafficking. To make a long story short, I fell into the grasp of Rakmadov, who then forced me to prostitute myself and treated me like a slave. Thankfully, I was able to escape him after a two-year nightmare, by clandestinely boarding a ship visiting Hygiea. Thankfully, the captain of that ship was a most decent man and he gave me asylum and quickly started to treat me like I was his daughter. I ended marrying him and we were happy together, until he died of a sudden cancer in 2302. I then inherited his ship but, being no space captain, decided to sell his ship. With the money I made from that sale, I joined the sex entertainment industry as a 'Madame' and started my own sex club on the KOSTROMA, which belonged at the time

to your uncle before you inherited it in 2315. You may ask yourself why I decided to enter the sex entertainment business after living through such a horrible time as Rakmadov' sex slave. The answer is however quite simple: I had seen what sex could bring out of people: basically both good and bad. Good if you used it to voluntarily please yourself and others through sex and to further your love towards someone; bad if used to abuse and exploit others. There are still quite a few people who genuinely like sex and are proud of their bodies and I was one of them. That convinced me to start a sex club, but one where the strippers and sex providers would be treated by me with both fairness and respect. So, that's my personal story and how I happen to know Rakmadov, Tina."

Tina was silent for a moment, digesting Lee's words, before she spoke in a subdued tone.

"I am sorry to hear what you had to live through, Madam Lee. However, I wonder how such a bad man could have won a contract with the Sverdlovsk Group, whose present leadership I believe to be honest."

"How? Don't delude yourself, Tina: while the higher leadership of the Sverdlovsk Group is mostly clean and decent these days, there is still a lot of rot hiding through its middle and lower ranks."

"So, are you saying that I should refuse to let this group of dancers board my ship?"

"No!" replied at once Lee, surprising Tina by the vehemence of her tone. "If you do that, those poor girls will then simply be rerouted elsewhere while staying under Rakmadov' control and you will miss a golden opportunity to take that bastard down."

"So, what do you suggest that I do, Madam Lee?"

The old Madame then bent forward while looking Tina straight in her eyes.

"You are the captain of this ship, the owner of a planetary world and a member of the High Council of the Spacers' League and thus have many legal powers. Use them for the good of those poor girls."

14:44 (Earth Universal Time)

Saturday, September 28, 2329

Container storage deck, Frame level # 1070

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, docked at the Las Americas Orbital Station

Low Earth Orbit

Michel Koniev, at the head of a small security team and accompanied by one of the ship's loadmasters, stopped next to a pile of cargo containers stacked three-high which had been brought aboard less than one hour ago. Reading their serial numbers painted on their sides and comparing them to an electronic list shown on his data pad, he then pointed four of the containers to the members of his team.

"The containers with numbers ending with 336, 337, 560 and 225 carry items shipped by Selim Rakmadov and destined for New Venice. According to the official manifest of these four containers, they contain a variety of furniture, machine parts and processed food from Africa. Let's check if their manifests are legit and their content legal. Shaka, you check Container 336; Bruce, you check out Container 337; Lakshmi, you check out Container 560, while me and Mister Ramsay check out Container 225. Use your scanners and make sure to thoroughly check the content of those containers. Let's get to work, people!"

His last sentence brought a knowing smile on the face of Jack Ramsay, the loadmaster assisting him for this cargo inspection job: those security agents named by Michel Koniev were actually androids, not living persons. Still, those androids had proved up to now to be highly competent at their job and also surprisingly easy to socialize with. Going to the large steel double doors of Container 225, which measured twenty meters-long, four meters-wide and four meters-high, Ramsay then used a pair of cutters to cut and remove the customs seals placed on the door, while being careful to film and document the operation for legal purposes. Opening wide the double doors of the container and shining a light inside, Ramsay saw a tight pile of large boxes marked as containing furniture.

"Hum, there is quite a lot of stuff in this one, Mister Koniev. It will take some time to check this out in depth."

"We will take the time needed to do the job, Mister Ramsay. Let's start by scanning the inside of these boxes with our penetrating radar scanners."

The two men then started their scanning work as the three androids accompanying Michel opened the doors of their assigned containers, using their integrated directed gravity propulsion systems in order to get at the ones stacked over other containers. It didn't take long before Michel's scanner showed him something suspicious.

“Woah! This box, which is supposedly containing a work desk, shows something small and metallic filling its drawers. Let’s unpack that desk to check it out.”

Working quickly while being careful not to ruin its packing material, they took a few minutes before Michel could finally touch the desk itself and open one of its file drawers. What he found inside that drawer truly shocked him.

“Heavy disintegrator pistols? And they have no serial numbers or manufacture stamps. These are not only illegal weapons: they are also prohibited weapons! Only the military forces of the European Union, the North American Union and the ASEAN are legally allowed to have disintegrators, a weapon type we gave them in order for them to be able to fight off any Space Predator invasion. Now, we are finding disintegrators inside a container shipped out of the Sudan by a sex trafficker?”

Opening in succession the other file drawers of the desk, Michel found six more heavy disintegrator pistols, along with spare energy cells and cell recharger units.

“THAT’S IT! WE NEED TO EMPTY THOSE DAMN CONTAINERS AND CHECK EVERY CUBIC CENTIMETER OF THEM!”

“I will go get my overhead crane remote control unit, so that I can unstack those four containers.” said the loadmaster, making Michel nod his head.

“Please do that! This is extremely serious. HOW ARE YOU DOING WITH THE OTHER THREE CONTAINERS, GUYS?”

Shaka was the first to answer him from the container stacked two levels above that being searched by Michel.

“I found large bags filled with some kind of pink pills. I am now running a chemical analysis of a sample pill and... Wait! I have the results now, sir: these are methamphetamines, illegal stimulant drugs. The bags I found to date contain about 60,388 pills.”

“About 60,388 pills, he says!” said Michel while rolling his eyes. He then regained his seriousness and activated his security communicator, calling Ahmed Jibril, his superior and Security Officer of the NOSTROMO. He got Jibril online nearly at once.

“Did you find something interesting in those containers, Michel?”

“You could say that, Ahmed. We have barely started our search and we have already found heavy disintegrator pistols and illegal methamphetamine drugs. We are now going to empty those containers and search them with a fine toothcomb.”

“HEAVY DISINTEGRATOR PISTOLS? PRODUCED WHERE?”

“That’s another problem, Ahmed: these weapons bear no serial numbers or manufacture stamps. They are totally illegal weapons produced on the black market on Earth. Do you want me to advise Tina about this or do you want to do it yourself?”

“Do it! You have the proofs and details in front of you. What I will do is to put more people and surveillance on the members of that troupe sent by this Rakmadov, once they board the ship. They in fact are due to show up at our registration gates at any time now. I will also advise Spirit of this, so that she could organize a round-the-clock tracking of those people.”

“Good call, Ahmed! I will advise you as I find more things here.”

Michel then closed that link and shook his head while staring at the eight heavy disintegrator pistols now lined up on the top of the desk.

“Disintegrator weapons produced on the black market, possibly in Africa. Somebody inside the European Union, North American Union or ASEAN must have sold their design around the criminal underworld. What a mess this implies!”

16:03 (Earth Universal Time)

Western ring reception area, frame level # 710

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, docked to the Las Americas Orbital Station

Low Earth Orbit

Eve Silisca, manning one of the registration counters of the Western ring reception area, which was linked by a large tunnel to the western docking arm of the NOSTROMO, smiled to the young and very pretty African teenager who had just stepped forward to be registered. While appearing at ease and friendly, Eve was in reality on maximum alert mode and was watching closely every facial expression and body language of the girl as the latter presented a Sudanese passport and a boarding pass to her.

“Hello! I have a ticket to fly with my group to New Venice. Here is my passport and my boarding pass.”

“Thank you, miss!” said Eve, taking the two documents and scanning them quickly while keeping a discrete eye on the girl. The teenager was definitely nervous and showed no trace of the kind of enthusiasm that someone emigrating to a new world, supposedly to go live a better life, would be expected to show. Eve then gave a ship’s access card to the girl while smiling to her again.

"Here you are, Miss Amine. You will occupy Cabin 548-2305, in our Habitat Ring section. After recuperating your luggage, you will be able to take an automated taxi cart that will then take you to your cabin."

"Will the members of my troupe have cabins close to mine, miss?" asked the African teenage girl, some apprehension detectable in her voice. Eve immediately understood the reason for her question but made a show of typing on her registration computer while answering her.

"Let me check, miss..."

What Eve then typed was however not something the girl would have expected.

BOOK ALL THE YOUNG WOMEN FROM THE RAKMADOV TROUPE TOGETHER ON LEVEL 548 OF THE AUSTRALASIAN/AFRICAN FOREST HABITAT SECTION, BUT DISPERSE ALL THE MALE MEMBERS AND ANY MATURE WOMEN OF THAT GROUP WELL AWAY FROM THE SAID SECTION.

At the same time, Eve communicated via radio link with Spirit.

'We need to have at least twenty security androids to guard the Australasian/African section of level 548 and prevent the male and female escort staff from intimidating the girls of the Rakmadov troupe.'

'Two sections are now on their way to that section and level, Eve. I will be closely monitoring the movements, actions and words of every member of that troupe. Tina is in turn going to monitor the situation closely through me. Know that illegal disintegrator pistols and rifles, along with large quantities of illegal drugs, have been found inside the shipping containers sent by Rakmadov's company to the NOSTROMO.'

Not visibly reacting to those silent radio messages, Eve then made an apologetic smile to Zara Amine.

"I am sorry, miss, but due to the high numbers of passengers who already boarded, your cabins will be dispersed around our Habitat Ring section."

"And that Habitat Ring, how big is it?"

"It has an internal circumference of 3,770 meters, measured at the wall facing our forest habitats."

Eve was not surprised to see the teenager seem to relax a bit on hearing her answer. If anything, her reactions to date only confirmed the suspicions about that exotic dancers' troupe and their 'escorts'. Registering the teenager on her computer and letting her go through the access turnstile, Eve then signaled the big man next in line to come forward,

making him pass through a detector frame. Contrary to what unsuspecting travelers would think, that detector frame was a lot more than a simple magnetic metal detector: it also incorporated a body-safe penetrating radar and a thermal scanner. A red light started flashing on her computer screen as the man went through the detector frame, while a text and two red arrows appeared on the image of the man sent by the detectors: the man was armed with a type of non-metallic pistol, probably made of composite fibers and ceramics, plus had a non-metallic knife sheathed in a scabbard tied around his right ankle. Knowing that the security section of the ship would be instantly notified about this, Eve simply greeted the man with a smile, despite that man looking a lot more like a thug than like an entertainment specialist.

“Good morning, sir! May I see your boarding pass and your passport, please?”

The man didn't say a word then and simply handed over the two requested documents to Eve, who scanned them, memorizing the name and face of the man before handing him a ship access card.

“Here you are, sir. You have Cabin 503-3261. You can now proceed downstairs to the baggage room to recuperate your suitcases.”

“The girls who belong to my group, are their cabins near my cabin?”

“I cannot guarantee that, sir, as over 15,000 other passengers have already boarded the ship and taken cabins. We now have to give the cabins that are still available in our Habitat Ring section.”

“But that's unacceptable! I must be close to our girls: I am tasked to assist and protect them.”

“I am sorry, sir, but that is not possible. We simply don't have a large enough group of adjacent cabins left available right now.”

“Then, I must know in which cabins our girls are.”

“I am sorry, sir, but divulging the cabin number of a passenger to another passenger, unless that concerns parents and their children, is against ship regulations. We take the privacy of our passengers very seriously.”

“THAT'S CRAP! I WANT THE LIST OF CABINS OCCUPIED BY THE MEMBERS OF OUR TROUPE!”

As if on cue, a severe-looking armed security officer came forward to Eve's counter and stared hard at the man, speaking to him in a warning tone.

“I will ask you to control your temper and to show respect to our receptionist, or you will have to turn around and disembark, sir.”

At that moment, Eve saw a woman in her thirties waiting in line seemingly speak to herself while looking at the angry man, whom she knew to be wearing a miniature radio transceiver. Eve thus contacted silently Spirit as the man suddenly and unexpectedly calmed down.

'Mother, I am presently looking at a tall woman with blond hair and of Caucasian ethnicity who is presently standing three places in line behind the man I am presently dealing with. That woman appears to have a radio transceiver on her and to have just talked to the customer in front of me.'

'You are correct, Eve. I just intercepted her message in Russian to that man, ordering him to calm down and obey you. I am now tagging her for close surveillance.'

'Thank you, Mother!'

'My pleasure, Eve.'

That was when the irate man contained his anger and gave up.

"Alright, alright, give me that access card and let's forget about this."

"Thank you for your understanding, sir." replied Eve in a suave tone of voice that nearly enraged the man again. The thug then grabbed the access card offered by Eve, then stormed through the access turnstile. He was quickly replaced at her counter by a beautiful teenager of Semitic type who was about as nervous and apprehensive as Zara Amine had been. Eve took her travel documents and quickly registered her before giving her an access card while speaking in a low volume, so that the tall blonde some ten meters away couldn't hear her.

"You have Cabin 548-2303, Miss Suleiman. You may now proceed downstairs to pick up your unaccompanied baggage. You will find automated taxi carts that will then drive you to your cabin in the Habitat Ring."

"Thank you, miss."

As yet another young woman from the Rakmadov troupe came forward, Eve saw the tall blonde pass through one of the detector frames, triggering a silent alarm signal in the process by the fact that she was wearing a non-metallic pistol on her.

'I knew it!' thought Eve to herself.

When Zara Amine stepped out of the taxi cart that had driven her and another girl of her group to their cabins, she felt lost at first: this was all so new to her and also frightening. She came from a small village in Uganda and had seen comparatively little advanced technology before in her life. This ship, apart from being huge, was simply

beyond her imagination. There was also the fear that one of the men tasked with guarding her and the other girls would eventually find where her cabin was. The other girl who had traveled with her in the taxi cart, another African teenager, seemed about as lost as her. That was when a small, young woman wearing the blue coveralls, equipment vest and weapons belt of a ship's security officer approached them and saluted them both with a nod of the head.

"Excuse me, misses. Could you please follow me for a moment: this won't take long, I promise."

"But, what for?" protested Zara. "Are we being arrested?"

"Not at all, Miss Amine. We simply want to help you and your female companions. This way, please!"

Not seeing the utility of resisting that further, Zara picked up her single suitcase and followed the security officer, imitated by the other teenager. To her surprise, the security officer actually led her to the door of the cabin assigned to her, opening it and inviting the two teenagers to come inside with her. Now completely mystified, Zara nonetheless kept following her to a fairly spacious and comfortably furnished lounge. To her surprise and that of her companion, Zara found five more of the girls from her troupe there, sitting around on the sofa and chairs of the lounge. Her eyes then stopped on a tall, mature woman with long brown hair and grey eyes who was standing and waiting by the patio door of the lounge. She was wearing a light blue ship coverall wearing the wings insignia of a pilot, along with a nametag bearing the name 'T. Forster'.

"Who are you and what are you doing in my room, miss?"

"Who I am is Rear Admiral Tina Forster, reserve officer of the Spacers' League Navy, Captain of this ship, owner of the New Haven Corporation and member of the High Council of the Spacers' League. I am here to help you and these other girls to escape the trap you are presently in. We know that you have been forced into sex slavery by a man named Selim Rakmadov and that you are being sent by him to New Venice to work as prostitutes in one of the sex clubs there. Know that I now have plenty of evidence to have this Rakmadov arrested on charges of illegal weapons trafficking, drug trafficking and human sex slave trading. Here, on my ship, you are now protected from him and the people escorting you and tasked with watching you are soon to be arrested. You are thus all free persons and don't have to fear bad treatment anymore."

The joy Zara felt then was quickly tempered by an awful realization.

“But what are we going to do now? If we return to our original homes, we risk being kidnapped again. We have no future left there and, at least in my case, I have no true marketable skills apart from my young body. What would I do after this?”

In response, Tina looked at her with something akin to tenderness.

“Miss Amine, know that New Haven, which I own personally, is a place of refuge and resettlement for many poor people who have been victim of wars, famines or ethnic persecutions. Those who now live there do so in a world where ecology is respected and where the economy is based mostly on simple agrarian life. If you wish so, then I can offer you both asylum and citizenship on New Haven, along with the tools you will need to start a new, decent life. This offer, by the way, applies to all of you here. As for continuing on to New Venice, I would strongly counsel against that: Selim Rakmadov most probably have accomplices there, accomplices who would not hesitate to forcibly take back control of you. Another possibility open to you would be to stay and live on my ship, which has huge agricultural fields inside it and where a good farmhand can earn a comfortable living. I however realize that all this is both sudden and most unsettling to swallow in a moment. I will thus let you go to your respective cabins for the rest of the day. Your access cards also allow you to go eat for free at one of our many cafeterias and food courts, so don't hesitate to go have supper later on. Tomorrow, I will meet you again in the ship's concert hall, in the central core section, at nine in the morning. Don't worry about getting lost around my big ship and simply use a taxi cart to get there. We will then discuss in more details the possibilities now open to you.”

“Those men escorting us and Miss Bondarev, can we really stop worrying about them?” asked one of the girls sitting on the sofa of the lounge.

“Yes! Consider them out of the picture as of now. If you ever feel insecure or are afraid about something in the hours and days to come, then simply approach one of my security officers, like Jehanne here, and ask for his or her help. On this, I wish you a good evening, ladies.”

Tina then walked out, leaving behind seven shaken teenage girls who now had to decide by themselves about their future.

On the opposite side of the Habitat Ring, Yelena Bondarev's taxi cart was inside an elevator and climbing towards the cabin assigned to her as she fumed about the unexpected problems her team of handlers was now facing. With the 86 girls they were supposed to watch over now dispersed around this huge ship and with the ship's staff

refusing to give her or the other handlers the cabin numbers of the girls, watching those girls was now next to impossible. Yelena then tried to call one of her enforcers on her miniature radio transceiver, then on her wrist communicator. The only thing she got was empty static on the radio and a 'no signal' message on her communicator. Feeling exasperation and frustration mounting in her, she decided that the best way to trace back the girls would be to find them when they would go to the ship's cafeterias to eat. The lift cabin her taxi cart was in then stopped and its doors opened. However, instead of rolling out of the elevator cabin, her robotic taxi cart stayed immobile. Yelena did not have time to get angry before two ship security officers, a man and a woman, entered the cabin with stun pistols drawn and pointed. The woman of the pair, a Semitic-looking short and thin woman in her twenties, then spoke to her in Russian, her tone icy.

"Yelena Bondarev, you are under arrest for illegal weapon's possession and carry and human trafficking. One wrong move and we will stun you."

Understanding that she was in a poor position to resist, sitting in the cart and with two pistols pointed at her head, Yelena slowly raised her hands up.

"You are making a mistake, miss. I..."

Then, moving with near impossible speed, the female security officer stepped forward and passed her hand up and inside Yelena's vest, grabbing her non-metallic pistol and ripping it out of its shoulder holster. At the same time, the male officer moved with the same kind of incredible speed and pulled out the knife hidden inside her right-side boot. Before she could recover from her surprise, both of her arms were grabbed in iron grips and then forced down and behind her back, making her shout in pain.

"OW! WHAT..."

A pair of steel handcuffs were snapped around her wrists before she could finish her sentence. The female security officer, who was a good fifteen centimeters shorter than Yelena and who didn't look particularly strong, next grabbed her by the back of her belt and physically lifted her from her seat without apparent effort and pulled her off the taxi cart. Now near panic, Yelena looked with shock at the female officer.

"How can you be so strong for your size? Who are you?"

In response, the security officer gave her a sarcastic smile.

"Size doesn't matter. I am Officer Nefertiti, of the NOSTROMO's internal security force. Now, shut up and stay still: we are going back down to a nice cell reserved just for you."

09:32 (New Venice Eastern Time)

Sunday, September 29, 2329

Private residence of Chairman Vladimir Gasparov

Shores of the Eastern Sea, New Venice

Vladimir Gasparov, Chairman of the Sverdlovsk Group and owner of the planet New Venice, was preparing to go swim in the pool of his private residence, a magnificent villa situated along the seashore, when his valet came to him at a rapid pace, a communicator pad in his hands.

“Sir, you have an urgent call from Rear Admiral Tina Forster.”

The word ‘urgent’, allied with Tina’s name, immediately made Gasparov tense up.

“Tina Forster is in this system?”

“Apparently, sir. She is presently online and waiting to speak with you.”

“Very well! Thank you, Dimitri!”

Taking the communicator pad offered by his valet, Gasparov then looked at the face of Tina Forster, who seemed to be presently at the commands of some small craft.

“Tina? To what do I owe you this visit in the Tau Ceti System?”

“It was originally for delivering some cargo to New Venice, Vladimir. However, something happened yesterday, something grave and disturbing.”

“Don’t tell me that you encountered some Space Predator ship on your way to here?”

“No, not alien predators. Instead, I caught some human predators. I would rather not talk about this on an open line, so I will wait until we are face to face before briefing you on what concerns me. I am presently flying down towards your private residence and should be there in about six minutes. Please tell your bodyguards to relax and not to shoot at my runabout.”

“Huh, I will. You are really intriguing me, Tina.”

“In truth, you should feel threatened instead, Vladimir. You will soon know why. Tina, out!”

With the screen of the communicator pad now blank, Gasparov instinctively looked up at the sky, trying to see the incoming craft. He of course didn’t see anything except birds, the runabout being still way too far to be seen. His plans for a good swim now forgotten, he walked back to his bedroom in order to change into something a bit more ceremonial than swimming trunks.

By the time that Tina Forster's runabout landed at the vertical in the courtyard of his residence, Vladimir Gasparov had changed into one of his business suits and was ready to receive her. He thus walked to her as she was exiting her craft, meeting her close to the shoreline.

"Welcome to New Venice, Tina. Since you seem concerned by some question concerning my security, why don't we walk together along the beach? The chances of having hidden microphones there are about nil."

"A judicious idea, Vladimir. Some fresh ocean air will also do me good."

"What? The traveling space garden you call a ship is not enough for you?" joked Gasparov, bringing a smile on Tina's face.

"My NOSTROMO is big, but not big enough to contain a sea, Vladimir. Let's walk!"

Gasparov waited until they had started to walk along the sand of his private beach, with two bodyguards following him some twenty meters behind him, before speaking again to Tina.

"So, what is happening, Tina? And what do you have in this kit bag you are carrying?"

"Some evidence of a serious crime, Vladimir. Tell your bodyguards not to get alarmed when I will take out a pair of disintegrators from my bag."

"Disintegrators?! Uh, okay. FELIX, IVAN, DON'T GET EXCITED WHEN ADMIRAL FORSTER WILL TAKE OUT WEAPONS FROM HER BAG!"

Stopping for a moment and putting down on the sand her kit bag, Tina then opened it and took out of it a heavy disintegrator pistol, a disintegrator rifle and a small plastic bag full of pink pills, then presented them to Gasparov, whose expression had changed to a somber one at their sight.

"I have seen pills similar to these ones before. They are methamphetamines, right?"

"Correct! My security officers discovered over 600 kilos of them, hidden inside cargo containers loaded aboard the NOSTROMO while my ship was docked to the Las Americas Orbital Station around Earth. They also found 168 heavy disintegrator pistols and 54 disintegrator rifles like these in containers coming from the same source, namely a shell company in the Sudan controlled by a certain Selim Rakmadov, a man involved in human sex trafficking."

"But how did he get such weapons, Tina?" asked Gasparov, shocked. "Disintegrator weapons are strictly controlled and are supposed to be used only by official armed forces: those of the Spacers' League, the North American Union, the European Union and the ASEAN. Those forces on Earth were given by us the design of disintegrator weapons only a few months ago, so that they could defend Earth against any possible invasion by Space Predators."

"That is the problem, Vladimir: those weapons were not produced at official state arsenals. If you look at them closely, you will see that they bear no serial numbers, nor official manufacturer's stamp. They were produced in a clandestine weapons shop and have probably been sold to a number of criminals around Earth...and inside Spacers' League Space. You do realize the kind of threat such dangerous weapons could become when in the wrong hands?"

"I do!" replied the Chairman of the Sverdlovsk Group, his expression now hard. "Do we have any way to find out where exactly those illegal weapons were produced and who is involved in making them?"

"I have only a partial answer to that, Vladimir. Did you ever hear about the 'Canary Trap' concept?"

"Yes, I did! It is an old trick meant to identify information leaks by circulating numerous variants of a classified document around. If a copy is found to have been leaked, then its variant would identify the one who had leaked it. An old but effective security method."

"Indeed! In this case, when I gave copies of the designs for disintegrator weapons to various governments on Earth, I took the precaution of tweaking those designs slightly for each of the governments I gave a copy to, altering things like the precise type of metal alloy or composite fibers to use to build them. In the case of those illegal copies, they were made according to the design I gave to the European Union."

"The Europeans? Those idiots, again?!"

"Yes, again! Some functionary, minister or military officer involved in the production of disintegrators must have decided that selling that design to criminals would be a good way to pad his or her bank account. To find out precisely who did that is more of a job for the security services of the Spacers' League than for me. I am now giving you these weapons as pieces of evidence and tools for your future investigation."

Gasparov was silent for a moment as Tina put back the weapons in her kit bag, which she then left on the sand.

“And those drugs and business about human trafficking? What do you know about them?”

“What I know is that this Selim Rakmadov sent 86 young women and seven handlers to watch over them board my NOSTROMO, officially to go work at the Pan Sex Resort, here on New Venice. However, those handlers made the mistake of boarding my ship while carrying non-metallic pistols, thinking that they would fool my security systems. They were wrong and my security officers quickly arrested them, while we found those weapons and drugs during the search of four containers shipped under Rakmadov company's name. On being interviewed, all 86 girls said that they had been forced into prostitution by Rakmadov and that they were being sent to New Venice in order to work there as prostitutes and sex slaves. I would thus say that your justice department would have a serious need to talk with the owner of that Pan Sex Resort. You may even find more illegal weapons and drugs at that resort, Vladimir.”

“Don't worry anymore about this, Tina: the hammer will come down hard, soon. What about those girls and their handlers?”

“The girls have accepted to become New Haven citizens and to either go live on New Haven or to work in the farms aboard my ships. None of them want to return to Earth and they are scared about what they would find on New Venice. As for those seven thugs I have arrested, you are welcomed to take custody of them and interrogate at will. If you do, concentrate on the sole woman of that group, a Yelena Bondarev: she appears to me to be the leader of those handlers and probably know a lot more than the other goons.”

“She will definitely get the full treatment, Tina. My Corporation may be mostly honest now, having cleaned its act under me during the last decade or so, but we still have harsh rules when it comes to the treatment of criminals. That woman will talk!”

Tina shivered at those words.

“Normally, I should be incensed by what you just said but I believe that this woman and her goons don't deserve any pity or consideration on my part. Oh, by the way, I intend to take care personally of that Rakmadov bastard. I will let you deal with his accomplices within Spacers' League Space.”

Gasparov had a mean smile on hearing that.

“Knowing you, I consider that Rakmadov as good as dead, Tina.”

“And knowing you, Vladimir, I believe that the ones you will get at will soon wish that they were dead.”

02:06 (Khartoum Local Time)

Monday, September 30, 2329

Assault shuttle on vertical atmospheric reentry over the Sudan

North Africa, Earth

“REMEMBER, PEOPLE: WE WILL SHOOT ONLY AT SELIM RAKMADOV AND AT PERSONS HOLDING WEAPONS. THERE WILL BE INNOCENT PEOPLE IN AND AROUND THAT RESIDENCE, LIKE CLEANING STAFF, MAIDS AND POSSIBLY GIRLS HELD AGAINST THEIR WILL BY RAKMADOV, SO BE CAREFUL WHERE YOU SHOOT. THERE IS A POSSIBILITY THAT THE ENEMY COULD BE ARMED WITH DISINTEGRATOR WEAPONS, IN WHICH CASE YOUR FORCE SHIELD GENERATOR WILL BE USELESS. MOVE TACTICALLY AND QUICKLY AND DON'T LET THE ENEMY HAVE A CHANCE TO SHOOT AT YOU. ONCE THE OPPOSITION WILL HAVE BEEN NEUTRALIZED, WE WILL THEN QUICKLY SEARCH THE PROPERTY FOR WEAPONS, DRUGS, SIGNIFICANT DOCUMENTS AND COMPUTER FILES. IF WE FIND WOMEN BEING HELD AS PRISONERS BY RAKMADOV, THEN WE WILL EVACUATE THEM TO SAFETY. WE ARE NOW LESS THAN SIX MINUTES FROM JUMPING OUT.”

Having given his ultimate instructions for the assault to his 81 security androids, all of whom were armed with disintegrator rifles and pistols plus stun pistols, Michel Koniev sat back in his seat, next to the aft ramp of the assault shuttle's cabin. The NOSTROMO, by virtue of being part of the Spacers' League Navy's reserve fleet, had four such assault shuttles, each able to carry up to a hundred troopers, plus carried 32 interstellar heavy fighters. Presently, four of those fighters were escorting the shuttle for this combat mission, meant to take out Selim Rakmadov and his band of thugs and put an end to his criminal activities. The Sudanese air defense system had never recovered from the brutal strikes by the KOSTROMA in 2321, when the Sudanese dictator at the time, President Abubaker Saleh, had been vaporized with his palace, so that threat was minimal right now. However, Michel wasn't sure about how the other regional powers would react to this strike. The fact that the European Union had been the source of the leak which had allowed the illegal production of disintegrator weapons by a criminal based in Africa certainly made things quite murky.

'Fuck the European Union! They better not play the offended virgins in this affair after we will have taken out this Rakmadov bastard. If they do, then Governor Robeson will be quick to put them back in their place.'

Michel then returned his attention to the command panel attached to an arm of his seat and on which a display screen gave him a view of his objective, as seen by the long-distance cameras and sensors of the shuttle. Rakmadov's residence, situated a few kilometers from Khartoum in a semi-desertic plain, was actually a large fortified compound which comprised many separate buildings. However, the building used as his personal residence by Rakmadov was easy enough to identify: it was the largest and also the best-looking of the lot, with the others serving as annexes, including a large garage and what looked suspiciously like some kind of jailhouse. From the testimony of some of the 86 girls freed from Rakmadov's grip, Michel actually knew that the latter building was effectively a jail, where the girls forcibly used by him were held and, too often, beaten or tortured into submission. For that reason, he planned to send a sizeable part of his android force to go take and secure that jailhouse, in order to prevent any retaliatory actions by Rakmadov's thugs against those slave girls. As for those thugs, Michel's orders concerning them were simple: they were to be killed to the last, as they had committed too many vile crimes to be worthy of any mercy. Some legal purists on Earth could call that excessive use of force or even illegal killings but Michel had no regard for such hypocrites, who too often ignored the plight of the innocents harmed by such criminals. In this, the laws and regulations of the Spacers' League were drastically different from those of the European Union or of the North American Union, in that they emphasized the protection and rights of the innocents rather than the rights of the accused criminals. In the Spacers' League, someone caught red-handed at committing a crime could not then count on either evading or delaying justice by paying some fancy-talking lawyer to make their trials drag on for months while the victims waited for justice or compensation. If a police or security officer caught someone at, say, assaulting for criminal reasons another person, then the testimony of that officer, along with the recording from his or her body-worn camera, was normally enough to have a judge find the accused guilty within a matter of days and then sentence the accused according to the gravity of the crime. The days when high-flying criminals like corrupt politicians and rich corporation executives could evade justice by paying millions of credits to hire double-talking lawyers had come to an end as early as in the first years of the formation of the Spacers' League, whose citizens had seen enough of the old, corrupt and

ineffective justice systems as practiced on Earth. Now, the emphasis was on fair, but also swift justice geared in priority towards the protection of the innocents. Under the present judicial doctrine of the Spacers' League, the ordering by Tina Forster of a strike against a human monster like Selim Rakmadov was completely justified, especially when taking into account the multiple testimonies from his victims and the material evidence seized in his shipping containers aboard the NOSTROMO. If any Earth government or organization was going to protest this strike in the days to come, then it was not going to find any sympathetic ear for their protests within the Spacers' League.

The shuttle was still descending at the vertical and was some two minutes away from arriving at its objective when Michel got a call from the pilot of one of the escort fighters.

"Striker, this is Guardian One: we are detecting two French interceptors which just took off from Djibouti and are speeding our way, over."

Michel couldn't help shake his head in disdain before answering the call.

"From Striker, tell those Frenchies that we are on a counter-slavery operation and that we will not tolerate interference on their part, over."

"I will pass the message. Out to you!" replied Keiko Nomura, who was leading the four heavy fighters. She then switched to her secondary radio, tuned on the regional air traffic control frequency and spoke in a calm but firm voice.

"To the French interceptors which just took off from Djibouti, be advised that Spacers' League forces are presently engaged in an anti-slavery operation in the Sudan and that we will not tolerate any interference on your part. Turn around now and return to your base, over."

In Djibouti, the French commander in charge of local air operations heard that message at the same time as his two interceptor pilots and frowned in reaction to it.

"The Spacers' League? Who the Hell do they think that they are to conduct military operations inside Earth's atmosphere?" he said to the air controller sitting near him. "Tell them to leave immediately or we will force them away."

"Uh, sir, you must know that our interceptors are no match for Space fighters."

"So? This is Earth's airspace, not Spacers' League space. Tell our pilots to push on!"

While he strongly disagreed with his commander, the air controller was outranked by him and was forced to obey him, thus he keyed his radio's microphone set to the interceptors' command net's frequency.

"Beluga One, this is Djibouti Control: continue on your intercept course to those five contacts and identify them visually, over."

"Understood, Djibouti Control!"

The air controller then looked up at his commander.

"Sir, we are risking the lives of our pilots over a national airspace that is not ours."

"Neither is it Spacers' League airspace, Lieutenant! I believe that it is high time that we stand up to these Spacers. This is OUR planet after all!"

The junior officer didn't like that reply but kept his opinion to himself, instead hoping that two pilots would not pay for the bullheadedness of their commander.

In the cockpit of her four-seater heavy fighter, Keiko Nomura made a bitter smile on hearing the exchange in French between Djibouti and the two interceptors: she had no true appetite about shooting at French pilots or aircraft, but she was tasked with protecting the assault shuttle during its mission into the Sudan and she was resolved to do her mission.

"Guardians Three and Four, break off and go to maximum acceleration on Heading 155. Get close on the tails of those French interceptors in order to warn them off. If they don't turn around, then grab them with your tractor beams and force them to land in the desert, over."

"Understood, Guardian One! On our way!"

Pushing their directed gravity propulsion to their maximum acceleration rate of 25 Gs, the two designated heavy fighters sped southward at a rate the French interceptors, aircraft designed to fly solely within Earth's atmosphere, could not even hope to approach. It took the two heavy fighters a mere minute to pass by the French aircraft and then turn around, ending some 600 meters behind them. Bradley Stinson, the pair leader, then spoke on the French's frequency.

"French aircraft, this is the leader of the Spacers' League heavy fighters now admiring your ass from up close. Turn around now and return to base! This will be our last warning."

The pilots of the French interceptors, realizing too well that they were vastly outclassed, dithered for a couple of seconds before the pair leader called his controller.

“Djibouti Control, this is Beluga One. We now have two Spacers heavy fighter on our tail and we have no hope of outperforming them. I request instructions, over.”

The air controller in Djibouti was about to answer him when his commander, made furious by what he considered as typical Spacer’s arrogance, overrode him and spat an order on the radio.

“Beluga One, continue with the intercept! That’s an order!”

The commander then punched the air raid alarm of the base and grabbed a telephone, calling his pilots’ ready alert room.

“This is Commandant Rivière! Scramble all interceptors for an intercept mission over the Sudan!”

The junior officer acting as air controller looked up with big eyes at his superior.

“Sir, this is pure folly! These Spacers are not even inside our territorial airspace and we have no defense pact with the Sudan. In fact, Sudan is presently considered by Paris as a pariah state.”

“I am in command here, Lieutenant, not you! If you are not ready to do your duty, then I will relieve you of your post.”

Just as these words were pronounced in Djibouti, the pilots of the two French interceptors were suddenly projected brutally forward in their cockpits, with their seat harnesses the only thing that prevented them from smashing their faces against their instrument panels. At the same time, their aircraft nearly stopped in midair, making their turbine engines flame out.

“WHAT THE? BELUGA TWO, WHAT IS YOUR SITUATION?”

“THE SAME AS YOURS, BELUGA ONE! MY ENGINE WENT OUT! I BELIEVE THAT THOSE SPACERS SLAPPED TRACTOR BEAMS ON US.”

“SHIT! WE ARE TOO LOW TO RESTART OUR ENGINES IF THEY WOULD LET US DROP NOW.”

The French pilots then heard a new male voice come on their radios.

“Don’t worry about that, Frenchies: I will put you down without breaking even an egg. Just relax and enjoy the next few hours in the desert.”

Right after that, the French pilots did indeed feel their interceptors go down smoothly. The leading pilot swore to himself before keying his radio microphone.

“Djibouti Control, this is Beluga One: me and my wingman have been captured by tractor beams and our engines have flamed out. The Spacers fighters are now lowering us to the ground at slow speed. We request that you send a rescue team to our location, over.”

That communication nearly made the commander in Djibouti explode with anger. However, before he could give more orders by radio, his telephone rang, making him grab the receiver.

“Commandant Rivière!”

The voice he then heard was that of the commanding officer of the interceptor squadron based in Djibouti, who happened to be of the same rank as him.

“Have you lost your fucking mind, Rivière! You want to send my interceptors against Spacers’ heavy fighters? And for what reason? To protect some slavers operating from inside the Sudan? I am countermanding your orders right now.”

“Listen, Dumonville, I am in charge of this base, not you, and...”

“YOU WON’T BE FOR LONG ONCE I CALL MY SUPERIORS IN PARIS, YOU IDIOT! JUST SEND A RESCUE TEAM TO RECUPERATE OUR TWO PILOTS AND STAND DOWN FROM YOUR BIG HORSE!”

The interceptors’ commander then slammed his phone down, leaving a red-faced Rivière stare angrily at his own receiver.

02:11 (Khartoum Local Time)

Assault shuttle, 300 meters above ground

“WE ARE NOW OVER THE OBJECTIVE! GET UP AND POWER YOUR DIRECTED GRAVITY PROPULSION SYSTEMS! WE ARE ABOUT TO JUMP!”

The 82 security androids led by Michel Koniev got up as one and turned to face the rear access ramp of the shuttle as it was lowering down into open position. With Michel also holding a disintegrator rifle at the ready, he then ran out over the ramp while shouting.

“FOLLOW ME! GO, GO, GO!”

With his gravity drive system set to ‘low descent rate’, Michel jumped off the ramp and into the air and started going down, heading for the main residence and with thirty androids following him. Another twenty androids, led by Jehanne de Domrémy, headed down towards the jailhouse, while the 32 remaining androids split up in small groups of two to four in order to deal with the guards along the perimeter wall and in the various

annexes of the complex. A coordinated salvo from the rifles of the latter group of androids vaporized in an instant the guards walking or standing outside, thus eliminating at once the most dangerous threat to Michel's force. While still floating down towards the jailhouse, Jehanne killed one of the two guards posted outside its main door, then fired again, vaporizing half of the body of the second guard as he was snapping his head up in shock to see where that blue beam of energy had come from. Jehanne had time to notice that both guards had been armed with classic firearms rather than disintegrator weapons before killing both men. Her third shot then vaporized the heavy wood and steel door of the jailhouse just before she landed on both feet on the sand of the courtyard. Closely followed inside by twelve other androids while the rest of her group split up and ran towards the other access doors of the building, Jehanne charged in with her disintegrator rifle level and pointed forward. An alarmed guard armed with an assault rifle and who had just emerged from a side room and into the main hallway was struck and killed by a disintegrator bolt before he could even point his rifle at Jehanne. Running to that door and entering that room, she found herself inside what looked like a guardroom, with a couple of bunk beds, a table with chairs and a small kitchen counter with refrigerator. Three guards who were still scrambling to grab their guns were her next victims. Seeing nobody else in the room, Jehanne went back out in the hallway, following her companion androids who had continued on at a run. An internal door made of steel was vaporized by a disintegrator bolt from Timur Genghis' rifle before three androids, including Timur and Jehanne, rushed in, weapons at the ready. What they found in that room was a sort of lounge with double bunk beds lining the walls and with sixteen teenage girls and young women in the process of waking up from their sleep. On seeing the women, Jehanne sent out by radio orders to the androids of her group.

"I HAVE SIXTEEN CAPTIVE GIRLS HERE WITH ME! LOOK FOR MORE POSSIBLE CAPTIVES AND PROTECT THEM WHILE THEY ARE BEING EVACUATED. STRIKER CRAFT, THIS IS STRIKER TWO: I WILL NEED YOU TO LAND IN ORDER TO LET IN THOSE FREED WOMEN."

"Understood, Striker Two! Am on the way down!"

Her next words, in English, were for the teenage girls and women now cowering in their bunk beds.

"WE ARE HERE TO FREE YOU! FOLLOW ME OUTSIDE AND TO OUR SHUTTLE. MOVE, LADIES!"

The girls and women, of various ethnicity and with many of them wearing little, hesitated only a short moment before filing out of the room. Jehanne counted them while recording their faces before going out in the hallway. Timur was now leading the girls towards the exit, while Jehanne kept the rear, walking backward while being ready to shoot at any guard that would appear in the back of the group. However, it appeared that all the guards in the jailhouse were already dead, so her group emerged unscathed in the courtyard, to face the opened rear access ramp of the assault shuttle, which had just landed. Urging the ex-captives on, Jehanne made them run inside and take seats in the main cabin before contacting Michel Koniev via radio.

“Striker One, this is Striker Two! We have freed sixteen girls, who are now inside of our shuttle. Do you need me to come and reinforce your group, over?”

“Negative, Striker Two! I just killed Selim Rakmadov and all his bodyguards are also dead. I will escort out the two girls I found with Rakmadov, while my group will look for weapons, drugs, computers and documents. Deploy your group around the shuttle, to provide close all-around protection to it. Did you see any disintegrator weapons in the hands of the guards you encountered?”

“None! They were all armed with standard firearms.”

“Good! Out for me!”

With that radio exchange done, Jehanne told Nefertiti and Augustus to stay in the cabin with the ex-captives, then ran out and formed with her remaining androids a protective circle around the shuttle. Some six minutes later, two scared teenage girls were escorted into the shuttle by two androids from Michel’s group. Another group of persons, apparently made up of the domestics employed by Rakmadov, also walked out of the main building and were escorted out to the garage, where they were allowed to take three of the vehicles parked inside and leave in them towards Khartoum. After another twenty minutes, the remaining androids on the ground reembarked into the shuttle, carrying seized computers, data pads and printed documents. As the rear access ramp was closing, one of the girls asked a question to Jehanne in Arabic. Arabic being one of the ten languages stored inside her electronic memory, Jehanne answered in that language while smiling down to the girl.

“We will now fly you to our ship, where you will be interviewed and where you will be able to decide where you want to go and what you want to do next. Whatever you decide, you are now free.”

“Thank Allah!” could only say the teenager before breaking down into tears of relief.

As their shuttle was climbing towards orbit, Michel flipped out of the way the protective cover of a red button on a command box taken out of one pocket, then pressed the button. The micro antimatter device he had left inside the underground manufacturing shop he had found in the basement of Rakmadov’s residence then exploded. The resulting half a kiloton blast created a huge crater, while at the same time utterly destroying Rakmadov’s complex, along with the illegal disintegrator weapons found along their manufacturing shop. Michel looked on with satisfaction through his external view screen as a blinding flash then turned into a rising giant mushroom of dust and flames.

“Hopefully, this will prove to have been the only such illegal weapons manufacture. However, the data and documents we just seized will soon tell us if that is the case.”

11:04 (Paris Local Time)

Wednesday, October 2, 2329

Office of the French Foreign Minister

French Foreign Office building, Quai d’Orsay

Paris, France

Pierre d’Argenteuil, the ambassador of the Spacers’ League in France, was escorted into the office of Minister Jacques Pierrefond by the minister’s secretary, who then closed the door of the office on her way out. D’Argenteuil found himself alone with the French minister, who stayed sitting behind his big work desk while looking at him coldly. Pierrefond’ voice was equally cold when he spoke up to d’Argenteuil, who was not offered a seat, a sure sign that he had not been called in for simple pleasantries.

“Ambassador d’Argenteuil, would you care to explain to me why one of your shuttles, escorted by four interstellar fighters, raided a location in the Sudan on Monday, while forcing down at the same time two of our interceptors?”

D’Argenteuil, who had received a day earlier a detailed briefing note and directive from New Providence on the subject, replied to Pierrefond in a calm, composed tone.

“The answer is simple, Mister Minister, and in fact your interceptors were given the same explanation at that time. Our forces were dealing with a slaver hiding inside the Sudan while conducting drug and illegal weapons trafficking, on top of operating a human sex slavery operation. We had two main reasons to conduct such a raid. First, that slaver, named Selim Rakmadov, had tried to bring illegal drugs, weapons and sex slaves into a Spacers’ League’s world, namely New Venice, in the Tau Ceti System. His activities thus obliged us to intervene against him. Second, the illegal weapons he tried to bring to New Venice were disintegrator weapons, which are highly restricted weapons whose design was provided to the European Union and to other Earth governments by us, and this exclusively to permit you to defend yourselves against any possible alien invasion. Unfortunately, someone inside your government chose to make money by illegally selling the design of disintegrator weapons to a number of criminal actors on Earth. We simply acted to free captive girls held in slavery and to destroy a clandestine weapons shop which was illegally manufacturing disintegrator weapons. The Spacers’ League has thus no excuse to present about that raid in the Sudan. However, your own government is the one who now has to present explanations to us about how such a sensitive weapon design was given to a criminal by one of your people, Mister Minister.”

“Do you have any proofs to back up such an outlandish accusation against us, Ambassador d’Argenteuil?” shot back Pierrefond after a short hesitation.

“Yes, we do, Minister Pierrefond!” replied d’Argenteuil, who then opened his leather attaché case and extracted a pistol from it. Taking a few steps, he put down the pistol on Pierrefond’s desk.

“This is one of the illegal disintegrator weapons we seized from a shipment sent by the said Selim Rakmadov and destined to an accomplice on New Venice, Mister Minister. You will note that this weapon, like the other ones we seized, bears no serial number or manufacture stamp of any kind. It was built in an anonymous, clandestine factory and it thus is a completely illegal weapon. As for linking it to your government, know that, when we provided you and other Earth governments with the design of our disintegrator weapons, so that you could defend against a possible alien invasion, we slightly tweaked that design by changing in a minor way the composition of the materials used in its fabrication. Each Earth government who was given that design by us, with very strict conditions about its production and use, got different design specifications, so that we could eventually trace back any unauthorized leak. Well, the canary has sung and it is pointing firmly at your government and its weapons production chief, General

Charles Massie. General Massie either sold himself that classified design to Selim Rakmadov, or he allowed through lax security procedures for someone else in his staff or in the production chain to sell our design to a vile criminal. Whoever is at fault, your government now has to wear the hat for this, Minister Pierrefond.”

The French minister hesitated again, taken aback by this information. However, his stubbornness then took over and he eyed severely d’Argenteuil while speaking in an unrepentant tone.

“Still, this does not justify the attack on our interceptors by your fighters.”

“And who precisely attacked who, Minister Pierrefond?” asked d’Argenteuil, his own tone hardening. “We were operating in Sudanese airspace and had stated to your interceptors our reasons to do so. Yet, your interceptors kept coming at our fighters in an act that could only be interpreted as support to a pariah state, namely Sudan, which was harboring a criminal of the worst kind. We reacted to your interceptors with the utmost restraint and our fighters forced them down with no damage or casualties of any kind. We are now holding your government responsible for this and for the illegal leaking of our weapon design to a criminal and we have absolutely no need or intention to present excuses to your government...or to any other government, about this incident. Instead, your government’s irresponsibility, along with other past gestures and words that we considered as most unfriendly towards us, has forced our High Council to take a number of decisions concerning the European Union and other Earth governments.”

“Such as?”

“Such as a complete and permanent halt to any technological transfer from the Spacers’ League to Earth. We were due to pass on to you more advanced weapons and defensive systems designs, so that you could better face an alien invasion by Space Predators. No more! Furthermore, our High Council has decided to terminate the military liaison program between us and has ordered our military liaison staff to close their offices on Earth and to return to Spacers’ League Space. Also, thanks to your past attempts at blocking our production of security androids at the Avalon Space Yards and at legally harassing its owner, Mister Gustav Shomberg, we are now declaring our orbital installations around Earth as out of bound to all European Union military and security spacecraft. Our High Council has simply grown tired of your barely masked anti-Spacer xenophobia and your harassment of Spacers’ League citizens. Here is an official diplomatic note from our High Council, detailing our case against your government, along with the measures we are taking as a result. Know in advance that protesting

those measures will be pointless, as the decisions of our High Council are final. We fought in 2315 in order to free ourselves from the tyranny of Earth and we will not let the arrogance and irresponsibility of Earth governments intimidate us. We may still act again in the future to counter the activities of Earth-base criminals intent on committing crimes in Spacers' League Space. You would be well advised then not to oppose those acts of ours, as our response then to interference by you will be dealt with a lot more severely than during that recent incident over the Sudan. On this, I will now leave, so that you can inform your government about our decisions. Have a good day, Minister Pierrefond.”

D'Argenteuil then pivoted on his heels and walked out of the office, leaving a red-faced Pierrefond to watch him leave.

15:30 (Eastern New Venice Time)

Sverdlovsk Group's Chairman Vladimir Gasparov's private resort

New Venice, Tau Ceti System

“You wanted to speak with me in private, Mister Chairman?”

“Yes, I did, Victor!” replied Vladimir Gasparov, who was standing on the sand of his private resort's beach and looking at the sea. As his deputy security minister was approaching him, Gasparov then turned around, revealing the fact that he was holding a heavy disintegrator pistol in his right hand. Before an alarmed Victor Mendeliev could ask why he was holding a pistol, Gasparov fired it, striking Mendeliev in the chest and vaporizing half of his body in a blue halo. Gasparov then calmly took a few steps and looked down at the smoking remains of his deputy security minister.

“You are done playing in my back, Victor.”

CHAPTER 9 – RETIRING FROM OFFICE

13:08 (Universal Time)

Friday, October 25, 2329

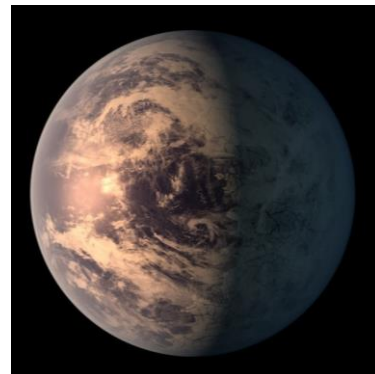
Tina's work office, Executive Deck, Core Section

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, in low orbit around Icelandia

Trappist-1 System, 39 light-years away from

Earth

In the Constellation Aquarius



The planet Icelandia

Tina, having just returned from her lunch break, decided to review the latest news on the UniNet and check for messages before continuing her work at planning her next commercial transport trips. Business had been booming for her NOSTROMO since day one of its commissioning into service, thanks to the ever-increasing interstellar trade in goods, raw products and passengers around the Spacers' League and to the very limited number of ultra-heavy cargo ships available to carry large and heavy loads. In that aspect, the NOSTROMO was truly the king around, the same way the KOSTROMA had been before its destruction. From having spent months playing the small passenger star liner company while waiting for the NOSTROMO to be completed, Tina was now able to choose what transportation contracts she would take and what loads she would deliver, making in the process honest but also sizeable profits. That had in turn allowed her corporation to resume investing in the further development of New Haven and the expansion of its population capacity. Only three days ago, that had made possible the selection and relocation to New Haven of a new batch of refugees and homeless people from Earth, mostly from Africa and Asia.

Knowing that an automated courier drone had brought to the Trappist-1 System the latest interstellar news and messages a mere hour ago, Tina checked first the latest major news titles on the UniNet. Seeing a video report about the oncoming Spacers' League's elections, Tina opened that report and listened to it with interest. Those elections, scheduled for early December, concerned those for the position of Chairperson of the High Council, a post presently held by Janet Robeson, along with the

posts of the Deputy Chairperson of the High Council and of the planetary governors in the various star systems now part of the Spacers' League. Tina had been expecting her friend Janet Robeson to run for reelection again but was not a little surprised, even mildly shocked, when she saw that Janet had publicly decided not to seek another mandate. However, the reasons stated by Janet Robeson to explain her decision made sense and had nothing to do with any possible lack of popularity. She was after all 72 years old and had been Chairperson of the High Council for a very respectable twenty years, having won in five successive elections. And that didn't count her prior two terms as Governor of the Jupiter System! If anybody deserved a quiet retirement, it was Janet Robeson. Avidly reviewing the report, Tina saw no information about where she would retire. However, since she was presently living on New Providence, where her present office was, she would most probably elect to retire on that planet. After all, New Providence was a prime colonization world and a very popular destination for emigrants from the Solar System. Seeing little else of interest for her in the other news items, Tina then switched her computer to the contract proposals still awaiting her attention and resumed her work.

Some forty minutes later, she got a call on her desk videophone, making her stop her work for a moment and open the link. The face of the head chef of the NOSTROMO, Leila Kajirian, then appeared on the display screen. The 51-year-old Algerian-Armenian woman was smiling widely, prompting a remark from Tina.

"Leila, you look like you just got some good news. What's up?"

"I effectively got a piece of good news, Tina. You remember that new assistant chef position we were trying to fill in order to help me on the NOSTROMO? Well, I finally have a candidate with all the qualifications I was asking for."

Tina immediately grinned on hearing that.

"But that's great, Leila! With the nearly impossible conditions you had put on that new chef's position, I had thought that you would never find someone to your taste. So, does that candidate fulfill all of your expectations and demands?"

"He does, Tina! He is an expert cook in French Haute Cuisine, is a fine wine connoisseur and also regularly writes restaurant critiques for the 'Bocuse Magazine' and the 'Michelin Guide'."

"Wow! I'm impressed! And what is the name of that culinary pearl?"

"Gerald Holmes! I would like your authorization to have one of our shuttles go pick him up on New Providence, so that he could come and fill the position as my new assistant chef."

Tina was about to say 'yes' to Leila's request when something clicked inside her mind.

"Huh, wait! Did you say 'Gerald Holmes'? And he resides on New Providence?"

"I did! Is there a problem about his candidacy, Tina?"

"Do you by chance have a picture of that Gerald Holmes, Leila?"

"Of course! I have a whole video interview of him attached to his resumé. Here it is."

The picture of a distinguished but also jovial-looking man with graying hair then appeared in a corner of her display screen. One look at it made Tina's head drop down, prompting an alarmed question from Leila.

"What? Is there something wrong about my candidate, Tina?"

"Wrong? Not really: he only happens to be the First Gentleman of the Spacers' League, the husband of Chairperson Janet Robeson."

While Leila was surprised into silence for a moment, she quickly regained her composure and fired a reply at Tina.

"So? If he is fully qualified for the job, and I believe he is, then I want him here, on the NOSTROMO. So, what is the problem?"

"Leila, if he comes on the NOSTROMO, it will be as a new crewmember and permanent resident of the ship. In turn, either this will mean that he will become separated from his wife, or he will..."

The truth then dawned on Tina like a ton of bricks, making her eyes bulge.

"Oh my god! Janet Robeson is going to retire on my ship!"

"Retire on the NOSTROMO? What makes you think that?"

"Leila, I just saw a news report on the UniNet, announcing that Janet Robeson will not seek reelection in December as Chairperson of the High Council and will retire from politics at the end of her mandate, in two months. I was wondering about where she intended to spend her retirement but it now seems that the answer is right here, on our ship."

"Well, she certainly could have chosen a worst place, Tina. Our ship has the best living facilities and conditions of any other ship or even space station in the Spacers' League. Also, by living on the NOSTROMO, she and her husband will be able to visit regularly about every planet of the League. What more could one ask for?"

“Damn, you’re right! Alright, I will order a shuttle to go pick up Mister Holmes on New Providence today. However, I expect that his wife will not come aboard at once, as she still has close to two months left to serve in her mandate. Gosh, I better reserve now a suitable apartment for him and his wife. I believe that a couple of two-bedroom apartments are still available here on the executive deck.”

In reaction, Leila shook an index at her on the screen.

“Tssk, tssk! Ready at once to provide them a luxury suite? Where is your egalitarian streak, Tina?”

“But we are talking about the present First Couple of the Spacers’ League, Leila! Besides, as the new assistant chef of the NOSTROMO, Gerald Holmes will qualify as a senior member of the ship’s staff. You yourself have a suite on the executive deck.”

“Hum, true! Well, I am impatient to meet him in the flesh, so that we could discuss new recipes for our restaurants and cafeterias. Thanks for approving him, Tina.”

“You’re welcome, Leila!”

Tina then closed the video link and sat back in her chair, digesting what she had just learned. However, the idea that Janet Robeson had chosen her ship as her place of retirement both flattered her and made her happy, as Janet was as much a good friend as she was her political leader.

19:46 (Universal Time)

Craft Hangars and Launch Bays Deck

Frame level # 1070, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In orbit around Icelandia, Trappist-1 System

When Gerald Holmes walked out of the light shuttle that had picked him up in New Providence, he found Tina Forster and Leila Kajirian waiting for him in the hangar now sheltering his shuttle, an electric cart parked nearby. First waving happily at the two women, Gerald then walked to Tina and hugged her, with her reciprocating.

“Tina, it is nice to see you again, especially now that you are aboard your new ship.”

“And it is always nice to see you, Gerald. How are you these days?”

“Just fine, Tina. I may now be 71-years-old but I still feel like a young man in his forties.”

Tina smiled and looked him into the eyes at those words.

“Did you say that to flatter me, Gerald? I am in my forties, you know.”

“Any excuse or occasion to flatter and compliment you is good enough for me, Tina.” said Gerald, making Tina’s smile widen.

“You’re really splattering honey around today, Gerald. At the least, leave some for Leila. After all, you are here thanks to her.”

“You’re right: I was being rude.” replied Gerald before hugging the petite head chef.

“So, how is Janet?” asked Tina, making Gerald nod his head.

“She is also fine, especially since she announced that she would retire from politics in December. While she is not saying it in public, Janet is actually happy to leave politics. As she said to me, she went through a lot of stress and difficult situations while in office. The only worry I have about her retiring is about what she will be able to do during her retirement to stay busy. She was never good at sitting around and do nothing.”

“You are too right about that, Gerald. However, I believe that I have something on the NOSTROMO that would fill her days quite nicely. However, I will keep that to myself for the moment: if I told you about my idea, you would be liable to message her in advance about it. Well, with this said, let’s collect your luggage, then we will drive you to your apartment. I hope that you didn’t bring the kitchen sink with you when you packed up?”

Gerald then gave Tina a fake scandalized look at her question.

“What? You mean that there is no kitchen sink in my new apartment?”

The three of them briefly laughed at the joke, with Tina then gently patting Gerald’s shoulder.

“Be reassured: ALL of our apartments have sinks. It is just that I have seen my lot of government ministers and functionaries traveling around with a mountain of suitcases.”

“Then, be reassured, Tina. I brought only three bags with me: one for my suits; one for my computer and notes on recipes and another one for my sex aids. The rest will arrive with Janet, when she will bring her collection of whips.”

Tina could barely contain her laughter then at the humor deployed by Gerald, which was something of a personal trademark for him.

"I see that you haven't changed one bit, Gerald, and I like it that way. Well, I see a robotic luggage cart approaching. Let's put your things in my cart and we will then roll."

That took a few seconds only, after which Tina sat at the controls of the cart and started it rolling, heading towards the central core rotunda and its bank of elevators. Entering one elevator cabin, Tina then spoke out loud, for the benefit of the voice-actuated computer controlling the lift.

"Executive Deck, please!"

As soon as the doors of the cabin closed, they started going up at an impressive speed, with the felt acceleration dampened by the controlled gravity system of the lift. Tina spoke again as they went up.

"I have reserved a two-bedroom apartment on the Executive Deck for you and Janet. That deck houses my senior staff and my family as well."

"Talking of your own family, how is your little Misha these days?"

"Misha is not so small anymore, Gerald: he is now ten-years-old and growing fast, on top of being a ball of energy."

"I certainly will be happy to see him, Tina. And your husband?"

"Still as gung-ho as before on the job and as affectionate and caring when with me. I couldn't ask for a better husband."

"I am happy to hear that, Tina. As for me and Janet, we are both happy that she is retiring from politics: her crazy work schedule was not doing any good for our life as a couple."

"You should know that the job of an assistant head chef is not exactly relaxing either, Mister Holmes." said Leila Kajirian, making Gerald nod once.

"I know but for me cooking is always enjoyable and not a chore. Besides, we will always be next to each other during our next years: no more last-minute trips around Space for Janet."

"You two definitely deserve peaceful years together, Gerald." said softly Tina as their cabin was slowing to a halt. She rolled her cart out of the lift as soon as the doors slid open and then headed towards one of the wide hallways running out like spokes of a wheel from the central, donut-shaped rotunda they were now in. Gerald eyed at once the tall, athletic blonde apparently standing guard at the corner of that hallway, dressed in a ship's security coverall and vest and armed with two pistols.

"Is she an android, Tina? She looks so human...and sexy."

"Officer Charlize Theron is indeed an android, Gerald. Her appearance was copied from that of a popular actress from the late 20th and early 21st Century. When she designed and built our androids, Eve Silisca took a fancy at using the physical profiles and names of historical persons in order to give them a personalized identity. I must say that some of those historical characters were true lookers. Personally, I particularly like the looks of Officer Patrick Swayze, another 20th Century actor, while Michel likes Officer Norma Jeane Mortenson, yet another actress. But don't get fooled by their good looks: all of our androids are deadly in combat and possess both incredible strength and speedy reflexes. Even Jehanne de Domrémy, one of our smallest androids, could take down a 190-centimeter brute without effort."

"Jehanne de Domrémy? I was good at history when at school but her name doesn't ring a bell."

"That's because she was better known in France as 'Joan of Arc' during the 15th Century, when she was fighting English soldiers during the Hundred Year War."

"Oh, THAT Joan! And do you have as part of your android security force a historical male politician or statesman who could attract Janet's attention?"

"There are a few of them, starting with Augustus, Louis XIV of France and Julius Caesar. You will both have plenty of chances to meet them aboard, as they regularly patrol or stand guard at key points of the ship. Aah, here is your apartment: Executive Unit Number 34. By the way, my own apartment is Unit Number Three, five doors down this peripheral hallway."

Stopping her cart in front of a door bearing the number 34 in brass, Tina then stepped out and grabbed one of Gerald's suitcases, while Leila took the smallest of the three pieces of luggage. When Gerald walked to the entrance door while carrying one suitcase and a small cabin bag, the door apparently opened by itself, while a soft female voice greeted him.

"Welcome to the NOSTROMO, Mister Holmes."

"Spirit, is that you?" asked Gerald, a bit taken by surprise.

"It is me, Mister Holmes. I am happy to see you as a new occupant and member of this ship."

"And I am happy to see that you survived the destruction of the KOSTROMA."

"I can thank my daughter Eve for that: she was able to copy my personality files and memories on data modules and to carry them out at the last minute. Overall, I am missing only my last four minutes aboard the KOSTROMA."

"The KOSTROMA was a great ship and it truly went out in a blaze of glory, Spirit."

"Thank you, Mister Holmes! By the way, the memory of the KOSTROMA and of the crewmembers we lost along the years are commemorated in our museum and ship's display room, situated on this deck."

"Then, be assured that I will go visit that room soon. Have a good day, Spirit."

"You too, Mister Holmes."

Gerald then walked into his assigned apartment and made a few steps down the entrance lobby, so that Tina and Leila could also enter, then stopped in order to look around him.

"Quite a large apartment actually for a two-bedroom unit, it would seem to me at first sight."

"It actually covers a total surface of 230 square meters, with a depth of nineteen meters and a width averaging 12.5 meters. The four meters of ceiling clearance also helps enhance the sensation of size." replied Tina. "If you look to your front right, you will see the most important room of the unit for you: the kitchen. It has a surface of over thirteen square meters and is equipped with a full assortment of appliances, including a baking oven and an espresso machine."

"Aah, that is nice! Thanks, Tina!"

"Hey, it wouldn't do to have given only a toaster oven and a tea pot to our new assistant head chef. By the way, while the apartment is already fully furnished, we do have a reserve of pieces of furniture of various designs in reserve. If you or Janet would like to change some of the pieces of furniture in this unit, then you will be able to choose replacement parts from our ship's catalogue. Was Janet planning to bring some of her own furniture from New Providence?"

"Only personal souvenirs and artworks we collected along the years. As long as the present furniture proves comfortable, we will not be finicky about them. Show me the main bedroom, so that I could start unpacking my suitcases, please."

"Of course! Follow me!"

Going down the central circulation space and passing by the large dining table, with its set of eight chairs, Tina then walked along the left-side wall and entered the lounge area,

a seven by 4.5-meter surface covered by a polished wood floor and with a number of comfortable-looking pieces of furniture, before entering the last room on the left. Gerald entered behind her and put down his suitcase before looking appreciatively around him as Tina described the room to him.

“This is the main bedroom, which measures a total surface of 21.5 square meters. As you can see, it has a big double bed, a vanity, a small desk, two night stands and an easy chair with lamp. To the far-left corner, you have a large walk-in closet with racks and drawers, while to your left is the door of your private bathroom. That patio door along the outer wall is actually the entrance to an airlock linking your bedroom to your outer balcony. If by bad luck or battle damage the forest habitat facing your apartment becomes open to Space and depressurizes and you are on your balcony, then you will be able to reenter your apartment without putting at risk the rest of the ship.”

Gerald walked to the tall windows giving a view to a large forest well below his balcony and nodded his head.

“A nice view we have from here, truly. This is a Boreal Forest habitat, I believe?”

“Correct! I knew that Janet liked the forests of Northern America and Scandinavia.”

“I do too! Janet will definitely like this.”

“Then, we will let you free to unpack, Gerald. Have you had supper yet?”

“No! The time on New Providence is a bit off Universal Time, so I only had a small snack about one hour ago.”

“Then, me and Leila will be most honored to accompany you to one of our better restaurants, so that you could judge the quality of its food while having supper. When would you like us to come back and pick you up?”

“Give me just thirty minutes: that will be plenty of time for me to unpack and arrange my things.”

“Then, we will be back in half an hour. Again, welcome aboard, Gerald.”

“Thank you, Tina. I can’t wait to start visiting your new ship tomorrow. Are you going to stay much longer in orbit of Icelandia?”

“We will need two more days in order to receive all the hydrocarbon tanks we are due to carry to Vinland, in the Gliese 832 System. After that, we will go lift a prefabricated floating city built by the Yokosuka Shipbuilding Corporation on Earth and will then carry that city to New Polynesia, in the YZ Ceti System.”

"Wow! You are a busy girl, Tina."

"Always! Right now, I have a two-months' worth of backlog of cargo contracts for loads that are either too large or too heavy to be carried by any other ship but my NOSTROMO. At the rate the Spacers' League is building up its colony worlds, I am not about to run out of work."

"Good for you! Well, see you in half an hour, Tina."

Both Tina and Leila then walked out of the bedroom, leaving Gerald free to unpack his suitcases.

Gerald had plenty of time to arrange his things and was in the process of viewing an introductory guide to the NOSTROMO when Tina and Leila rang at his door. Going to his front door, he opened it and walked out, smiling at both women.

"Whenever you are ready, ladies."

"Then, let's get into our cart and roll. With the size of my ship, you may find those robotic carts quite practical, Gerald. Just to get to the Habitat Ring, we will have to roll for 500 meters. As for the Main Promenade around the ring, it has a circumference of over four kilometers. I understand that you are still healthy and in shape for your age, Gerald, but I would strongly counsel you to use a cart to go around the ship. In fact, I could assign a private cart to you and Janet: it could save both of you a lot of walking." Gerald needed only a second of reflection before nodding his head.

"A private cart could indeed prove useful, Tina, but where would we park it? Inside our apartment?"

"You could park it inside the storage room of your apartment, like many other crewmembers of the ship do. Those storage rooms, meant to store away excess or unused baggage, are equipped with recharging stations. And if Janet ends up hogging that cart and leaving you on foot, then you can call for a robotic taxi cart."

"Sounds like a practical solution. So, what kind of restaurant are we going to for supper?"

"A French restaurant called the 'Eiffel.'" answered Tina as she started her cart rolling. "It is situated at the base of the apartment ring of the Habitat, on Level 580 and at Point 540. To find a place by its location coordinates in the Habitat Ring of the NOSTROMO is actually quite easy. The level number marks the level in meters down from the bow that the deck floor is, while the point number marks the length of the circumference of the ring you have to cover clockwise from the north of the ship's axis.

Since the inner circumference of the Habitat Ring is 3,770 meters-long, that means that the Eiffel restaurant, which is situated at Point 540, is roughly in the North-northeast section of the ring, on the level of the Main Promenade. By the way, the communal services, shops, schools and restaurants of the ship are all concentrated around the base of the Habitat Ring, facing the saltwater aquarium ring that surrounds the apartments ring complex.”

“A fairly simple locating system I must say, when considering the size of your ship, Tina.”

“Well, that system proved to be a good one on my poor KOSTROMA, so why not use it again? By the way, the Habitat Ring contains all the crew apartments and passenger cabins of the ship, except for the 36 executive apartments of the central core section, where you and I live. By concentrating the communal facilities of the ship there, it cuts a lot the need for long internal trips to go shopping, eating or studying.”

“And that Eiffel Restaurant, tell me about it. How well is it rated?”

“I will let Leila answer you on that. Leila?”

The petite head chef, sitting next to Gerald in the back of the cart, then started to speak as their vehicle was rolling down a long gallery with large windows overlooking the forest below them.

“Please understand that the NOSTROMO was finished building a mere six weeks ago and that it is much larger than the KOSTROMA was. It thus has more restaurants and shops in order to service adequately the over 22,000 passengers, crewmembers and their families that the NOSTROMO can contain, a number over twice that of the KOSTROMA’s capacity. Even by recalling from New Haven all the original occupants of the KOSTROMA, we ended having to recruit over 600 new crewmembers in order to fill all the new job positions on the ship. Unfortunately, finding dozens of extra cooks with the qualifications and experience needed to run our new restaurants, like the Eiffel, has not proved easy, far from it. I thought until recently that I had found a proper chef cook for the Eiffel but, unfortunately, the man jumped ship at the last moment, leaving me no choice but to place an assistant cook in charge of the Eiffel, a far from ideal solution. That assistant cook, Robert Lafond, is a good, dedicated cook but he lacks the experience to run a top restaurant, which the Eiffel is supposed to be.”

“That is indeed a lot of pressure to put on a junior cook, Leila. What were the reasons for that initial designated chef to bail out on you?”

“Three reasons: ego, greed and xenophobia.”

"Xenophobia? I don't understand."

"It's actually too simple, unfortunately. That chef is a Frenchman with a high sense of patriotism and he got miffed by the recent political clash between the European Union and the Spacers' League concerning our androids. He also proved by his language that he harbored some old prejudices about us Spacers. When the salary I offered him was not enough to convince him to go over his old preconceived ideas, he left, saying to me that we didn't deserve a chef of his talent and reputation. I was then too happy to let him go."

Gerald slowly shook his head at that.

"Typical! Well known chefs tend to have an ego the size of this ship. So, I suppose that you intend to replace that idiot by me?"

"Actually, I see a much bigger role for you here than simply running a restaurant, Gerald. You have decades of experience as a great chef and expert in French Cuisine and you also have a well-deserved reputation and standing as a top restaurant critique. What I would like you to do, on top of helping the Eiffel become the fine restaurant it was meant to be, is to be a teaching master in culinary art for our present cooks and also for our students enrolled in our restauration program. They would gain so much from your experience and expertise, Gerald."

Gerald again nodded his head, his expression sober.

"And I will be most happy to help and teach to your cooking staff and students, Leila. Experience is meant to be passed on, not wasted."

"And?"

"And what?"

"You don't want to discuss your salary? At your level, you could ask for quite a lot."

In response, Gerald gave Leila a gentle smile.

"The base salary you quoted on your job offer will be plenty for me, Leila. With the insane government pension Janet has accumulated along her 47 years of service, I could afford to sit down, relax and sip cocktails all day long until I die. My true reward will be to teach your young cooks about Haute Cuisine."

"Thank you, Gerald: you truly are a good man."

"I know!" replied Gerald, breaking into a grin. "Janet keeps telling me that."

Leila and Tina giggled at that as their cart was arriving at the Habitat Ring, entering its top level via a tunnel passing through the top-level row of cabins and then turning on the

outer gallery lining those cabins. The cart soon entered an elevator that then went down by 75 meters before stopping at the level of the Main Promenade. The moment that their cart left the elevator cabin, Gerald was awestruck by the sight of the tall wall of thick transparent acrylic running along the outer section of the Habitat Ring and containing a fifty-meter-wide and twenty-meter-deep aquarium that ran left and right to beyond visual range. Just from his actual position, he could see hundreds of fish swimming inside that giant aquarium ring. Above and beyond the aquarium, the outer wall of the Habitat Ring was covered by a continuous holographic display surface that presently showed Space and the blue-green orb of Icelandia.

"Wow! What a view! This is fantastic! Decidedly, our choice of place to retire for me and Janet was an inspired one."

"And we are truly happy that you chose our ship." said Tina, who soon parked her cart along the façade of the apartment ring complex, near one of its entrances. The trio then continued on foot and walked into a large lobby before turning right along a four-meter-wide pedestrian hallway lined with restaurants on both sides. Gerald, looking around him as he walked beside Tina and Leila, saw that the restaurants lining the hallway were of an impressive diversity in terms of ethnicity and class, going from a simple pizzeria to a vegetarian restaurant and a sushi shop. As they were arriving level with a deli restaurant, Tina stopped and pointed to a restaurant façade opposite it on the left side of the hallway.

"Here we are: the Eiffel Restaurant, specializing in French Haute Cuisine." Gerald couldn't help give that façade a critical look.

"Uh, I don't know about you but this doesn't look much French to me. It is also too modern-looking for what it is meant to be."

"Too modern-looking, Gerald?"

"Yes! When you choose a restaurant, the first impression of it is often critical. In this case, it doesn't demark much from the other restaurants near it. For me, French cuisine denotes a centuries-old art full of traditions. I would have given this restaurant more of a 20th Century or even a 19th Century look, to awake nostalgia in its customers. Similarly, I would furnish it with epoch-looking tables, chairs and décor. Do you have on your ship the tools and materiel needed to transform this restaurant's looks?"

"Huh, we do have some stocks of alternate furniture and construction materiel and supplies but they are not unlimited. If you really want to go out of the norms, then we may have to go to Earth to shop for more traditional-looking furniture."

“Well, you could always compensate partly by using large holographic wall screens, which would then show views of Paris as it was in past centuries.”

“Now, that is something that we can do fairly easily, Gerald. Well, enough staring at a façade: let’s go in and have supper! I am starving!”

Once inside, the trio was met by the maître d’, who quickly guided them to an empty table near the large windows giving a view on the Boreal Forest Habitat in that section of the Habitat Ring. Looking around him as he sat down, Gerald made a comment in a low voice to Tina and Leila.

“The dining room is less than one third full: that’s normally not a good sign for a top restaurant, unless that is because you have only a few passengers aboard.”

“We indeed have only a small number of paying passengers at this moment, Gerald. This trip to Icelandia was meant mostly to pick up reserves of hydrocarbons for Vinland and we picked up less than 200 passengers from Icelandia. Things will change once we go back to the Solar System in order to pick up a new, prefabricated floating city for New Polynesia. Then, we expect more than 18,000 people to board the ship.”

“Wow! That’s a lot of people indeed, Tina. Well, let’s look at the wine card and at the menu.”

“I have to warn you that our wine selection is still quite limited.” said Leila. “We lost all of our reserves of ageing wine when the KOSTROMA was destroyed. We were able to buy some new stocks of wine while in orbit around Earth but our own, ship’s produced wines will take a few years before becoming available.”

“A sad loss I must say as a wine connoisseur, Leila. Hum...this menu has some classic recipes but it is still quite limited for a top restaurant. However, since you told me that a simple assistant chef had to take over this restaurant, I can understand why the menu is so limited. I will order for myself the Beef Bourguignon, one of my own specialties. Feel free to order two other recipes for yourselves, so that I could taste a bite from your plates and give you a more rounded judgment of this restaurant.”

“Sounds like a good idea, Gerald. I will go for the Coq-au-Vin.”

“And I will go for the Veal Marengo.” said Leila, making Gerald nod his head.

“A good variety of typical French recipes. That should give me a good idea of the worth of your Robert Lafond. I believe that a bottle of good Burgundy red wine will go well with all three dishes.”

Gerald then made a sign to one of the waiters, who approached quickly their table, and gave him their orders. Once the waiter left, Gerald started a light conversation with Tina and Leila, asking them how things were going on their new ship. Gerald was agreeably surprised by the speed at which their food arrived, less than twenty minutes after ordering.

“A speedy service! That is always a good point for a restaurant...unless it means that they are serving pre-cooked recipes that are warmed up on order. I once ate at a restaurant in New York that pretended to be a great place for fried fish. What I got was fish warmed up in a microwave oven. I nearly ran out of that restaurant, then murdered it in my next restaurant critique online.”

Leila couldn't help giggle at that story.

“Personally, I would have murdered the cook rather than the restaurant's reputation.”

“Oh, I was tempted to do that, Leila, believe me. Well, let's taste this food!”

Gerald took a bite from each main plate, washing his mouth with water between the bites, then gave his verdict to the expecting Tina and Leila.

“All three dishes are well prepared and tasty, but cannot be called true Haute Cuisine. However, I give your young chef an 'A' for trying, considering his lack of experience. With some extra coaching, he should make a true chef soon enough.”

“I am happy to hear that, Gerald.” said Tina before taking her first bite from her plate of Cock-au-Vin. She had time to take three bites before hesitating and covering her mouth with one hand.

“I...excuse me: I must go to the washroom in a hurry.”

Gerald and Leila watched her with apprehension as Tina got up from her chair and nearly ran towards the washrooms.

“Damn! I hope that Tina did not catch some kind of stomach flu.” wondered Gerald, making Leila nod her head.

“The same here. Hopefully it will be nothing serious.”

Tina ended up returning from the washrooms some six minutes later. However, instead of sitting back at their table, she excused herself with Gerald and Leila.

"I'm sorry but I believe that I will have to pay a quick visit to our nearby family medical clinic. I threw up and feel quite nauseous. Again, I'm sorry to ruin our supper like this, Gerald."

"Don't be, Tina. Go take care of yourself: that's the most important thing for the moment."

Tina nodded her head once, then walked out of the restaurant at a quick pace. She didn't have to walk for long to get to the family clinic of the ship, which was situated only 250 meters away on the next floor above the restaurant. There, she presented herself to the duty receptionist of the clinic and explained her problem to her. The receptionist in turn called in the duty nurse, who brought Tina to an examination room where the evening shift doctor received her with a smile.

"What seems to be the problem, Captain?"

"I was starting to have supper with two friends at the Eiffel Restaurant when I suddenly felt nauseous and had to hurry to the washrooms. There, I threw up repeatedly, but am still feeling nauseous and am also a bit dizzy. All that happened quite suddenly and I can't think of a reason for this happening."

"Very well! Please sit down on the examination table and I will check you out."

The young doctor then started examining her, starting by taking her temperature and checking her blood pressure before listening to her heart and lungs.

"Hum, your blood pressure is a bit elevated and so is your heartbeat. Are you suffering from diarrhea?"

"No, but I felt a few stomach cramps this morning."

The doctor was thoughtful for a moment before getting a small test strip wrapped in paper from one of his storage cabinets and presenting it to Tina.

"I will ask you to go to the clinic's washrooms and urinate on this test strip, Captain."

Tina opened her eyes wide on seeing what the strip was for.

"A pregnancy test?"

"Yes! When did you have your last menstruations, Captain?"

"Uh, about two months ago."

"And did you have sexual relations since then, and if yes, when?"

"Well, my husband and I did celebrate together some six weeks ago, the night after our new ship was officially completed. We in fact had quite a few drinks then and my memories of that night are a bit foggy and..."

Tina's eyes then widened.

"Oh my god! I think that Michel didn't use a condom then. We were both quite intoxicated at the time and we may not have taken all our precautions."

The young doctor smiled at that and gently patted her shoulder.

"That is quite understandable, Captain. You should have seen me on the night after graduating from medical college. Just go use that test strip and return here afterwards. There is a washroom next door to the left of this examination room."

Tina stared for a second at the test strip kit before getting off the examination table and going out of the room. The young doctor sat down at his work desk and opened Tina's medical file while waiting for her to return. Two minutes later, a loud scream of joy coming from the washroom made him grin.

"Bingo!"

03:06 (Universal Time)

Monday, June 9, 2330

Maternity section, ship's medical center (Frame Level # 575)

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, in orbit around New Haven

Wolf 1061 System, 13.8 light-years from Earth

"Damn! Why do women have to give birth at such impossible hours?"

Janet Robeson, sitting in the maternity sections' visitors' lounge with her husband Gerald and with young Misha Forster-Koniev, who was now close to eleven years-old, smiled at Michel Koniev's remark, who was restlessly walking around the lounge, too nervous to sit down.

"That's our way to take our revenge on men for all that we have to go through during childbirth, Michel."

"Isn't that the truth?" added Gerald while rolling his eyes. "I myself wore down a lot of hospital carpets while Janet was giving birth to our two children. Then, there was the birth of our five grand-children, when both Janet and I walked around the visitor's lounge."

Before Michel could make a reply to that, a doctor in surgical garb entered the lounge, making Michel stop at once and look at him.

"How are things going, Doctor?"

"Better than expected actually, Mister Koniev." replied the doctor while grinning. "The birth went without a single hitch and was quite speedy by normal standards. You are now the proud father of a healthy baby girl."

The adults in the lounge cheered at once, awakening poor Misha, who was sleeping on a sofa, with a startle.

"Wha...what?"

"You now have a little sister, Misha." said Michel to him before looking back at the doctor. "Can we see them now, Doctor?"

"Yes, in a couple of minutes, after your wife has been transferred to a private room. As for your new daughter, you will be able to see and touch her once she has been measured, weighed and examined, which should take less than fifteen minutes. A nurse will come to escort you to your wife's room once she will be ready to receive you. Do you have a name already chosen for your daughter, so that we could note it down on the birth certificate?"

"Yes: my wife and I chose in advance names for both a boy and a girl, since she insisted on not being told the sex of our child before birth. In the case of a girl, we chose the name 'Janet', with the full name being Janet Forster-Koniev."

The doctor nodded at that choice, which followed a traditional practice among Spacers to give the mother's family name to a new child, with the family name of the father often added in second. The doctor noted the name down, then walked out, leaving Janet and Gerald free to congratulate Michel. Gerald Holmes couldn't help ask him a question while shaking hands with him.

"May I ask what name you had chosen in the case of a baby boy?"

"Gerald!" was Michel's answer, making both Janet and Gerald beam with pride.

"So, you chose our names for your coming child? We are honored, Michel."

"Thanks! Damn! The next few minutes will feel like eternity to me."

Thankfully, a nurse came to see them some fourteen minutes later and went directly to Michel.

"Your wife and new daughter are now ready to see you, sir."

"Thank you! Can my son and my two friends come as well?"

"Of course, sir! Follow me, please!"

They went out of the visitors' lounge as a group and had to walk only a few meters before entering a private room, where an exhausted but happy Tina, half-sitting in a hospital bed, greeted them with a smile while holding her baby girl in her arms.

"Come and see our new daughter, Michel: she is beautiful. Come close as well, Misha."

Both of them eagerly obeyed, while Janet and Gerald stayed a bit behind, to give space for the little family. Michel gently kissed his wife before caressing the head of his newborn daughter.

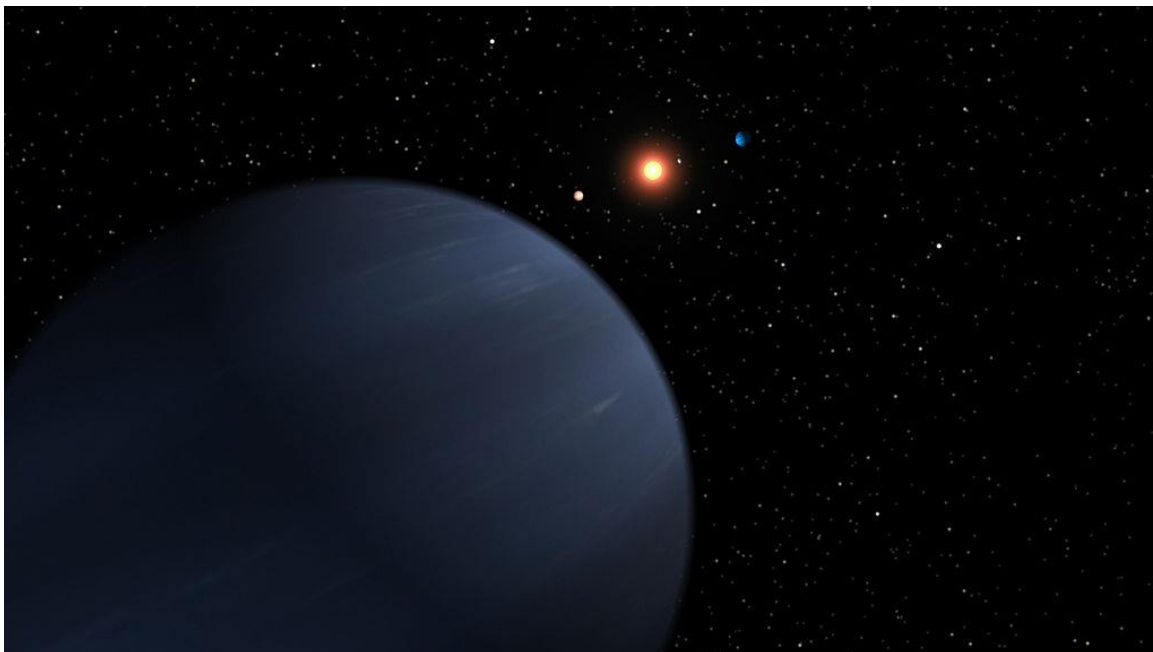
"Hello, little Janet! You are indeed most beautiful."

"Here, take her in your arms, but be careful how you hold her head."

Michel felt a wave of pride and happiness wash over him as he carefully took the baby from Tina's arms. Looking down at the sleeping baby girl in his arms, Michel spoke softly to her.

"Welcome into the Universe, Janet."

CHAPTER 10 – UNWANTED ENCOUNTER



Planet 55 Cancri f (Harriot), 41 light-years from Earth.

09:49 (Universal Time)

Thursday, December 17, 2331

Bridge of the Spacers' League's corvette MARCO POLO

Entering the star system 55 Cancri (Constellation of Cancer)

41 light-years from Earth

“Our arrival point is confirmed, Captain: we are now entering the 55 Cancri System.”

Captain Emiliano Agosta, in command of the exploration corvette MARCO POLO, nodded his head once at the announcement from his navigator, Lieutenant Carla Ponti.

“Good! Let’s start our system survey! If the high degree of metallicity of this star system is confirmed, then we could very well find a source of heavy metals able to rival the Klondike Asteroid Belt of Trappist-1. Carla, what are the possibilities that we could find life, or even intelligent life, in this system?”

The young navigator answered Agosta at once, having studied in depth the data known about 55 Cancri before they had started their exploration mission.

“Only one of the five planets of the system is situated inside the habitable zone of the primary star 55 Cancri A: Harriot, previously known as 55 Cancri f. However, it is supposedly a large planet, with a mass 2.54 times that of Earth. If there is life on Harriot, then it is liable to be quite different and also limited, compared to Earth. Of course, things would change if we find a moon or many moons around Harriot, something that would have skewered the mass estimations made by observations from Earth. That would not be the first time by far that the presence of previously undetected moons would significantly change evaluations of a planetary system made strictly from distant observations.”

“Well, time will tell. We are here to do just that: verify the data about this star system. Mind you, finding a habitable world around this K-class orange star would be really nice. Humanity could use more habitable worlds turning around a star resembling the Sun rather than turning around a red dwarf star.”

“But red dwarf stars compose by far the majority of the stars in our region of the galaxy, Captain, so we can’t be too picky about what we find.”

“True! Still, one can keep his or her hopes up.”

Agosta then fell mostly silent for the next couple of hours, listening and watching from his command chair as his bridge crew collected observation data while the corvette went deeper into the binary system, composed of a primary K-class orange star and of a secondary M-class red dwarf star. Preliminary observations confirmed the presence of five planets in the system, plus that of a sparse asteroid field halfway in. That asteroid field soon showed some very interesting characteristics when scanned with the corvette’s spectrometers, making Carla Ponti speak up with a trace of enthusiasm in her voice.

“Sir, most of the bodies in that asteroid belt are confirmed to be M-class asteroids, some of which are quite massive. Furthermore, some of them seem to be made out of elements heavier than iron. I can read the presence of chrome, vanadium and iridium, among other metals. It seems that 55 Cancri is true to its reputation as a ‘super metal rich’ system.”

“Excellent! What about the fifth planet, Harriot? Does it look as large as expected?”

"Uh, it is hard to say at this moment, Captain: Harriot is presently on the opposite side of its sun and quite far from us right now. I will be able to give you a better answer once we get closer to it."

"Fair enough! Send out a low frequency radar ping, so that we could start mapping precisely this asteroid belt."

"Aye, Captain! Radar pulse sent! I will send a second radar pulse in twenty minutes."

The first return echoes from that first radar pulse were coming back, having bounced on the nearest asteroids, when Agosta saw Carla Ponti suddenly stiffen. Before he could ask her if something was wrong, she swiveled her chair around to face him, alarm on her pretty face.

"SIR, WE WERE JUST PAINTED BY A RADAR OPERATING ON A DIFFERENT FREQUENCY THAN OUR OWN RADAR. OUR RADAR PING MUST HAVE ALERTED SOMEONE ABOUT OUR PRESENCE IN THE SYSTEM."

"Damn! Hopefully, that someone will not prove to be hostile. Can you locate the source of that radar, Carla?"

"It came from the direction of a large, metallic asteroid situated about six light-seconds from us. However, I can only confirm the azimuth of that radar, not its distance to us."

"Do your best to refine that point of origin, Carla. In the meantime, I believe that we have to play it safe until we know more about that contact."

Emiliano then raised a cover on the instrument panel attached to his right armrest and pressed a large red button, starting the blaring of a ship-wide alarm.

"Attention all hands, this is the Captain speaking. We have an unknown contact ahead. Man action stations! I say again, man action stations!"

Next, he spoke out to the bridge crew around him.

"Put on your spacesuits in relay, half of the bridge crew at a time. Also, grab a pistol at the same time."

What he didn't say was the possibility that now worried him: that this contact could prove to be a Space Predator asteroid ship. Emiliano stayed in his command chair as half of his bridge crew nearly ran down to the locker room situated under the bridge, where their spacesuits were stored. He left his chair only when his second-in-command, Commander Toru Tomonaga, entered the bridge, wearing his spacesuit with its helmet visor still

open. Going down to the bridge locker room and putting on his spacesuit took him seven minutes, after which he ran back up to his command chair.

"Do we have more details about that unknown contact?"

His sensors officer, Lieutenant Brian Musa, had a look of utter horror when he answered Emiliano.

"SIR, THAT METALLIC ASTEROID JUST MOVED OUT OF ITS ORBIT AND IS COMING TOWARDS US AT HIGH ACCELERATION: IT MUST BE A SPACE PREDATOR SHIP!"

Before Emiliano could utter the single word he was about to say in reaction to that terrifying announcement, another sensors operator spoke out in alarm as well.

"A SECOND METALLIC ASTEROID IS MOVING OUT OF ITS ORBIT AND IS HEADING FOR US, CAPTAIN."

With the bridge crewmembers all paling at those news, Carla Ponti then managed to offer a suggestion.

"Should we withdraw and jump back to Alpha Centauri, Captain?"

"NEGATIVE!" replied at once Emiliano. "Remember what happened to the Drazts: when one of their ships fled the Vorkonia System to escape a Predator ship, the Predators followed it to the Ross 128 System. If we jump back to Alpha Centauri, we would then lead those monsters into the heart of the Spacers' League. Carla, program as quickly as you can a micro-jump that would lead us past but near the primary sun. Once behind 55 Cancri A, we will then launch a courier drone out of direct detection range of those Space Predators. Mister Mehta, prepare at once the following message, to be sent via our courier drone to New Providence: Have encountered minimum of two Space Predator asteroid ships in the asteroid belt of the 55 Cancri System. Am going to try to evade them within the system. Need immediate assistance. Mark as Flash Priority and address it to Fleet Headquarters and to all armed ships in the Alpha Centauri System. Make it quick! Carla, can we jump now?"

"Just one second more, Captain... Jumping now!"

Emiliano then saw the brief orange flash of a space jump, then saw on the viewing screens of the bridge sphere that they were now very close to 55 Cancri A.

"pilot! Fly to a position behind the star, until we are out of sight of those monsters. Mister Mehta, launch our courier drone as soon as we are safely behind the star."

Emiliano's next move was to hit the button of the ship-wide intercom system.

"Battle stations! Battle stations! We are being pursued by two Space Predator ships. Close all airtight doors and hatches! Arm yourselves and seal your spacesuits!" Closing the intercom link, Emiliano then addressed his weapons officer, Lieutenant-Commander James Lovell.

"Mister Lovell, activate our anti-teleportation scramblers and deploy our weapons turrets."

"Aye, Captain!"

On pressing a button, Lovell then made their two medium disintegrator cannons emerge from their protective wells along both sides of the corvette, while six smaller disintegrator cannon turrets also rose to the hull surface. The weapons officer then switched on the scrambler emitters distributed around the outer hull, setting them to cover a wide frequency band. Those scramblers had been part of a recent refit meant to improve protection against Space Predators' attacks. Unfortunately, they were still unproven, having never been used in real action before.

'Hopefully, these things will work. If not, we all are going to end on those monsters' menu.'

Emiliano Agosta, watching intensely the position of his ship relative to the orange star now nearly filling one side of the viewing screens, then shouted an order.

"Mister Mehta, launch the courier drone now!"

"Courier drone launched, Captain!... Our drone has now jumped away!"

Only seconds after the communications officer had announced the departure of the courier drone, James Lovell shouted out a warning.

"A Predator ship just rounded out 55 Cancri A! It is now in pursuit at our five o'clock, 14,000 kilometers behind us."

"Pilot, dive towards the surface of the star! Level up only once at the absolute minimum altitude over 55 Cancri A: we will try to hide in the star's corona."

"But sir, we could end up like a big barbecued chicken."

"Hopefully, those space predators prefer raw meat to overcooked meat. Do it!"

"Er, aye sir!"

12:08 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

About to dock with the New Horizon orbital station

Low orbit of New Providence, Alpha Centauri B System

As Tina was watching her crew effect a slow, cautious approach to the New Horizon orbital station over the planet of New Providence, she saw her duty communications specialist, Ingrid Holtz, tense up and raise a hand to her right ear, which was covered by a headset. The 41-year-old blonde soon snapped her head to look at Tina, agitation visible in her expression.

"Tina, the corvette MARCO POLO just sent a courier drone with a flash message: they encountered a minimum of two space predator ships in the asteroid belt area of the 55 Cancri A system. The MARCO POLO retreated to near the system's primary and is asking for urgent help."

Tina couldn't help mentally swear at that piece of news: she was presently about to dock with the New Horizon orbital terminal, where she was due to take over 18,000 passengers heading for New Venice. However, she did not hesitate about what to do next.

"Frida, abort our docking maneuver to the station! Retract our docking clamps and move away from the station under gravity sails at full power! Dana, plot a jump to the 55 Cancri A system and jump as soon as we are safely away from the station. Renée, activate all of our defensive and offensive systems and armament, including our anti-teleportation scramblers. Call our fighter squadrons to cockpit alert!"

Next, Tina hit the ship-wide intercom button of her command chair.

"To all hands, this is your Captain! Battle stations! I say again, battle stations! All passengers and non-combatant occupants are to don their emergency spacesuits and report at once to the emergency evacuation stations. Don't waste time packing a bag! I want all the airtight doors and hatches to be closed at once."

The next button she pressed was that opening a direct link with Spirit, the ship's central AI main computer.

"Spirit, we are going to the 55 Cancri A System, where our corvette MARCO POLO has encountered at least two Space Predator asteroid ships. I give you full liberty to maneuver the ship and direct the firing of our armament in the most efficient manner possible, in order to both evade Predator lasers and to destroy them as quickly as possible from a safe distance. Also, put our internal security force on maximum alert and coordinate its actions if some Predators manage to board our ship."

"Understood, Tina. You can count on us."

The use by Spirit of the term 'us' instead of 'me' took Tina a bit by surprise but she quickly went over that and she shouted a warning to Dana Durning while nearly running down from her command chair.

"DANA, YOU HAVE THE CON WHILE I GO DON MY SPACESUIT. AS SOON AS I AM BACK, GO DON YOUR OWN SPACESUIT, ALONG WITH HALF OF OUR PRESENT BRIDGE CREW."

"GOT IT, TINA!"

In the passenger terminal of the New Horizon orbital station, the four members of the Conway Family had been watching with growing excitement the approach of the gigantic ship, which was due to carry them to a long-awaited vacation on New Venice. Twelve-year-old Steve Conway then spoke up while pointing at the NOSTROMO, visible through the thick transparent windows of the terminal.

"Hey, the ship stopped approaching! It is now backing away!"

"My god, you're right, Steve!" replied his father. "What is going on?"

His nine-years-old daughter Karen then spoke as well.

"Father, I see some huge guns come out of the sides of our ship."

"What?"

Fred Conway could not say more then, as the P.A. system of the terminal came on at full volume, while a sinister horn started resonating.

"GENERAL ALERT! ALL OCCUPANTS ARE TO STAY AWAY FROM THE OUTER WINDOWS OF THE TERMINAL AND ARE TO ASSEMBLE IN THE EMERGENCY EVACUATION HALLS."

Elizabeth Conway, Fred's wife, was the first to understand what was going on and became as white as a sheet.

"Oh my god! We are under attack!"

When Tina came back at a run to her command chair, wearing her spacesuit, she saw that they had not jumped yet out of the Alpha Centauri B System, thus gave an order to her chief navigator and executive officer, Dana Durning.

"Delay our jump to 55 Cancri A, Dana: we will jump once everybody will have their spacesuits on. We risk appearing in the middle of a battle and I want all of us to be fully ready then. While you go suit up, I will refine our jump's precise destination, in

order to appear close to the system's primary, where our corvette has retreated. GO SUIT UP NOW, ALL OF YOU!"

Dana did not waste time in replying back and ran out towards the bridge's locker room with the rest of the bridge crew. Now left alone in the bridge sphere, Tina sat down at the navigation and contacted Spirit again.

"Spirit, did the courier drone give the precise last known location of our corvette?"

"Affirmative, Tina!"

"Then, calculate a jump arrival point to as close to that location as it is safely possible to do. Once we will have emerged in that system and if we see an asteroid ship, then don't waste time asking for my permission to open fire and blast away at once."

"I will be on hair trigger alert, Tina." promised Spirit, a hint of a malicious tone in her voice. Six minutes later, all of Tina's bridge crew were back at their post in record time, fully suited up but with their helmet visors kept opened. Sitting back in her command chair and buckling up her safety harness, Tina then gave an order to her pilot, Frida Skarsgard.

"Frida, jump now!"

12:25 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the corvette MARCO POLO

Fifty thousand kilometers from the surface of 55 Cancri A

"A LASER BEAM FROM THE SHIP BEHIND US JUST CLIPPED THE TOP OF OUR SHIP, SIR! THREE OF OUR TOP COMPARTMENTS HAVE DEPRESSURIZED."

"CASUALTIES?"

"UNKNOWN AT THIS TIME, SIR!"

"MISTER LOVELL, HAVE YOU COMPLETED THE PROGRAMMING OF OUR MISSILES?"

"I JUST ENTERED THE NEW DIRECTIVES, SIR."

"THEN, FIRE FOUR MISSILES, NOW!"

"FIRING NOW!"

Emiliano Agosta watched on anxiously as the four missiles fired by Lovell flew out of their stern launch tubes, then disappeared for a fraction of a second as they effected a

micro-jump. His heart then jumped inside his chest when he saw the blinding flashes of the detonations of four anti-matter warheads directly against the frontal surface of the pursuing Space Predator ship: the missiles had succeeded in jumping through the electro-magnetic shields of the enemy ship. He couldn't help shout in triumph when he saw nearly one third of the forward part of the Predator ship be either vaporized or being blown up to pieces. Now completely out of control, what was left of the Predator asteroid ship then dove to its doom, soon crashing into the hot surface of the K-class star. However, Emiliano didn't waste time in celebrating for more than a couple of seconds: a second Predator ship, that one even bigger than the first, had just appeared ahead of him after rounding the orange star.

"Aisha, keep piloting like a drunk driver! Don't give them an easy target!"

Emiliano's heart sank when his sensors operator shouted another warning.

"SIR, A THIRD SHIP JUST APPEARED, AHEAD OF US AND BEHIND THE SECOND PREDATOR SHIP. IT IS A BIG ONE!"

"Aaw fuck!" said Emiliano to himself. Then, to his utter astonishment and that of his bridge crew, the Predator ship facing his corvette blew up, vaporized by half a dozen anti-matter blasts. A stunned silence fell in the bridge for a couple of seconds before Suraj Mehta let out a cry of joy.

"IT'S THE NOSTROMO! IT CAME TO OUR RESCUE!"

"Thank God!" said Emiliano, who had come from a family which still had religious roots. "Establish a link with the NOSTROMO, Mister Mehta. Toru, do you have a casualty and damage report from that laser hit to our upper hull?"

"Yes, Captain! Only non-essential compartments were hit and depressurized. Unfortunately, one crewmember, Assistant Cook Tanya Orlov, was in one of those compartments and was killed."

Emiliano tightened his jaws on hearing that: Tanya Orlov was a young, well-liked woman on the MARCO POLO. The beeping of his communications display panel then made him look down at its video screen, on which Rear Admiral Tina Forster's head and upper torso were now visible.

"We are happy to see you still in one piece, MARCO POLO. Have you sustained any damage?"

"Yes, Admiral! While those damages are limited, we unfortunately lost one crewmember. I would like to thank you and your ship on behalf of my crew for your prompt and efficient assistance. We were truly being cornered here."

"The pleasure was ours, Captain Agosta. We saw one Predator ship plunge into the primary. You did damn well against such a powerful foe. Are you still able to operate and jump back to New Providence?"

"Probably, Admiral, but I would hold on jumping right away: we encountered those two Predator ships in the asteroid belt, doing something still unknown to us there. There may well be more Predator ships present in that asteroid belt, which is very rich in M-class asteroids. Maybe these Space Predators were mining out some of those asteroids, or even could have been gutting out choice asteroids in order to turn them into ships."

"That is a distinct possibility, Captain Agosta. I thus propose that you fly your MARCO POLO into our large craft hangar complex, where we could start making some emergency repairs to your ship."

"Your complex is big enough to accommodate a corvette, Admiral?" asked Emiliano, more than a little surprised. In response, Tina Forster broke into a grin.

"Hey, you are talking about the biggest ship of the Spacers' League, Captain Agosta. We already carry ten heavy shuttles and flying cranes, each of which are at least as big as your corvette. Don't worry about crowding out my hangar complex. We also happen to have extensive repair and reconstruction facilities aboard the NOSTROMO."

"What about those possible Predator ships which could still be around the asteroid belt, Admiral?"

"I am going to send a dozen stealth reconnaissance probes in order to explore that asteroid belt. It will be much safer that way and will also allow us to locate any extra Predator ship without alerting them. Since this battle happened behind this star, any Predator ship still around the asteroid belt will take some time before becoming suspicious about why their two ships did not reappear. That should give us enough time to complete our reconnaissance of the asteroid belt. I will now light up the entrance to our large craft access tunnel. Just enter it slowly and our tractor beams will then do the rest. I will be on hand to greet you once you are aboard."

"And it will be an honor to finally be able to meet you, Admiral."

Emiliano then closed the video link and allowed himself to relax a bit in his command chair.

12:38 (Universal Time)

Large craft hangar complex, Frame Level # 2396

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, On station over 55 Cancri A

Emiliano Agosta was greeted with a solid handshake by Tina as soon as he stepped out of the ground access elevator of his corvette.

“Captain Agosta, your idea of making a micro-jump and seek cover behind this star was a truly inspired one. You and your crew are to be commended for your actions today.”

“Pah! That was nothing compared to all your past exploits, Admiral. Huh, may I ask at what time you received my call for help in the Alpha Centauri B System?”

“We got your courier drone message at 12:08, Universal Time.”

“A seventeen-minute reaction time, from receipt of my message to your ship coming in sight of my corvette? That’s quite an impressive reaction time, Admiral. And the firepower of your NOSTROMO was also quite impressive. Talking of reaction time, do you know if other warships of our fleet are about to arrive in 55 Cancri?”

“Frankly, I don’t know, Captain Agosta: I had time to alert our fleet headquarters on New Providence about my departure but only got a simple acknowledge before jumping to this system.”

Agosta couldn’t help make a smirk then.

“Well, hopefully Fleet Headquarters will not react to this with its typical Red Tape speed. We could use some reinforcements here.”

“Agreed! I will lead you up to my bridge complex, so that we could follow the situation in detail from there. I already launched a dozen stealth reconnaissance probes towards the sector of the Asteroid Belt where you encountered those Predator ships. Hopefully, we will soon know if there are more Predator ships there. If you will please follow me, I will leave your ship in the good hands of my chief-engineer.”

Walking across the vast hangar, which contained half a dozen heavy shuttles, Tina led Agosta to the central core spine rotunda and entered a lift cabin with him. The cabin then traveled upwards for nearly two kilometers in four minutes before it stopped at the level of the entrance to the bridge complex. Emiliano Agosta couldn’t help eye with curiosity the two security officers posted at the entrance to the bridge complex: one was a short and stocky but also muscular man of Asian ethnicity, while the other guard

was a medium height and very sexy looking young redhead of Caucasian blood. Both wore tactical vests, helmets and a pistol belt. Emiliano, who had heard about the security androids built for Tina Forster, then asked a question to the latter after they had entered the base level of the bridge complex.

“Those two guards, were they...”

“Androids? Yes! They were Officer Timur Genghis and Officer Norma Jeane Mortenson. By the way, don’t be fooled by Norma’s sexy look: she could break you in two as easily as Timur Genghis would. We will now go up to the long-range sensors center, where the data from our probes is received and analyzed.”

They then took another lift and got up by three deck levels, ending up in a large compartment measuring eighteen meters in diameter and filled with data display stations and holographic spheres. Once in the compartment, Tina led Emiliano to a large holographic sphere which showed the inner part of the star system and presented him to a mature woman with an impressive chest which filled the front of her ship’s coverall.

“Captain Agosta, this is my second-in-command, Dana Durning, also known as ‘DD’. That nickname also hints at her body mensurations.”

“I kind of guessed that, Admiral.” replied Emiliano, making Dana Durning smile.

“And proud of them, Captain Agosta.”

“Anything yet from our probes, Dana?” asked Tina, making Dana nod once.

“Our probes have already located two probable asteroid ships, each of them parked next to an M-class asteroid and apparently engaged in either mining or digging operations. Those ships were detected via their radio communications between themselves. Spirit has started to work on those exchanges, in order to eventually be able to decode and translate their contents but that could take quite a while, since we have no comparison base to work from. One feature of note about those two probable asteroid ships is that they are roughly spherical in shape, while the two ships we destroyed near this star’s surface were long and cylindrical. However, I couldn’t say why they have such different shapes.”

“I believe that I can explain that, Tina.” said an old Koorivar sitting at a nearby station. “Those elongated, cylindrical asteroid ships may be actual warships, while the round ones may be support ships of some kind. The reason for that assessment is that the Predators’ teleportation system requires a long base of at least a few kilometers between the pair of teleportation beam transmitters, in order to have some range with still a significant intersection angle for their beams. That is why their teleportation

system has such a short range of only a few hundred kilometers. As for the support ships, since they are not true warships, they probably don't have long-range teleportation systems, something that allows them to be made out of roughly spherical shape. Since cylindrical-shaped metallic asteroids are quite rare, it would make sense for the Predators to reserve them for the production of warships."

"A logical assumption, I must say," said Tina. "By the way, Captain Agosta, this is Doctor Koomak, our chief scientist and top physicist."

"THE Doctor Koomak, the inventor of the interstellar drive?" said Emiliano while staring at the old Koorivar.

"The one and only, Captain Agosta. About those two support ships, I..." Koomak was then interrupted by a sensors operator who nearly shouted a warning from his own holographic sphere station.

"Admiral, an unknown ship just emerged into the 55 Cancri A system. It emerged in the eastern quadrant of the system, close to the equator. It definitely didn't come from spacers' league territory."

"Quick! Establish its line of flight on emergence as precisely as you can!" then said Koomak in an urgent tone. "That could help us approximate from where it came."

"Right away, Doctor!"

A tense forty seconds later, the operator spoke again.

"I have the emergence line of flight down to half a degree, Doctor. I am now transferring my data to your station. That ship has now changed course and is heading towards those two spherical ships at work in the asteroid belt."

"What general shape is that ship, Mister Feng?" asked Tina, now tense.

"Generally round, Admiral."

"Then, it may be another support ship, possibly coming with fresh supplies or extra equipment."

"Decidedly, this looks more and more like an important Space Predator operation, possibly one geared to the production of new Predator ships," said Dana Durning. "It seems that you stumbled on something really big, Captain Agosta."

"Something that could provide us with some vital information about our enemy," added Tina. "If we could immobilize and board at least one of those Predator ships, it could then prove to be a priceless catch for us."

"Board a Predator ship? But that sounds like pure suicide, Admiral!" objected at once Emiliano Agosta.

"Normally, you would be right about that, Captain, but I have a few aces up my sleeve for such an occasion. Dana, have our stealth probes gather as much data and imagery as they can on those three Predator ships. We may soon need that data. Damn, it would be nice to finally get some extra help from New Providence."

To their collective frustration, no other Human ship showed up in the system during the next thirty minutes, while the newest Predator ship went to park very close to one of the two support ships glued to a raw asteroid. While that tardiness from New Providence deeply infuriated both Tina and Captain Agosta, it at least gave the time to the sensor operators of the NOSTROMO to build up a fairly detailed picture of the three Predator ship and of the two asteroids they were working on. Then, a communications specialist gave out a warning to Tina.

"Admiral, that newest Predator ship just sent a message in our general direction, using a tight directional beam. It is now repeating the same message."

"Those Space Predators are probably starting to wonder why their two warships have not contacted them since going away to chase after the MARCO POLO. If we wait much longer, we may just lose our window of opportunity to attack and board those ships. Fuck it! We will go by ourselves!"

Switching on to the ship's intercom system, Tina contacted the security center of the NOSTROMO, getting Ahmed Jibril on the line.

"Ahmed, this is Tina! Have Centuries One to Six prepare quickly for a hostile boarding operation against three Predator ships. They must be ready to fly out in less than half an hour. We will soon start approaching those Predator ships in the asteroid belt and will then do our best to immobilize or cripple those ships. Have our androids armed with disintegrator rifles: fighting could get quite heavy. I will have our fighters escort and support our assault barges. The mission of our androids will be to capture as intact as possible at least one Predator ship or, ideally, all three of them."

As Tina closed the link with the security center, Emiliano Agosta stared with apprehension at her.

"This could prove quite bloody indeed, Admiral. Many at Fleet Headquarters would call this a foolhardy operation."

"Yes, they may, but I would not expect much better from that collection of desk-bound admirals. And if you would think that I am ready to sacrifice my security androids

on a dice throw, think again: I care for my androids as much as for my other crewmembers, as my androids are persons for me.”

The next fifteen minutes were hectic ones in the long-range sensors fusion center, with Tina giving out a string of orders and with tactical data being exchanged between the ship’s senior officers, including the security officer, Ahmed Jibril. Emiliano Agosta, whose combat action today had been the first one in his Navy career, could only watch on and observe how Tina and her crew handled the situation. On the other hand, Emiliano felt intense frustration when he saw that reinforcement from New Providence had yet to arrive by the time Tina launched her assault on the Predator ships in the asteroid belt, starting with a micro-jump by the NOSTROMO that brought it within easy firing range of the enemy ships.

13:06 (Universal Time)

Assault barge 1207, on approach to the Space Predator resupply ship

Jehanne de Domrémy, strapped in her trooper’s seat, watched on the display screens of the troopers’ cabin the huge mass of the Space Predator ship they were tasked to board grow steadily. That Predator ship, like the two others parked in the asteroid belt of 55 Cancri A, had already been heavily pounded by disintegrator fire from both the NOSTROMO and from the 32 heavy interstellar fighters the armed cargo ship carried. That fire had in turn been concentrated on the laser turrets visible at the surface of the asteroid ship, taking those turrets out before they could cause heavy damage. Thankfully, it seemed that those Predator support ships had only a relatively light armament compared to that of the two Predator warships destroyed about one hour ago by the NOSTROMO and the MARCO POLO. Still, those laser batteries had managed to destroy one heavy fighter and damage another, killing or wounding a total of nine crewmembers. Thankfully, none of the six assault barges, each carrying 101 security androids, had been hit, thanks to the cover provided by the heavy fighters. The NOSTROMO had on its part concentrated its heavy disintegrator fire on the bow and stern ends of the Predator ships, something that had been hoped to take out the interstellar drives of the enemy ships. It had also concentrated on the midship point of the three round asteroids, firing until a gaping hole had been dug into the thick iron-nickel crust of each Predator ship. Now, Jehanne’ assault barge was heading straight

for the ninety-meter-wide gaping hole at the surface of the Predator resupply ship, ready to let out its fifty androids inside the enemy ship. Like her comrades, Jehanne wore only a relatively thin and light spacesuit that provided only thermal insulation and partial pressurization to its wearer. Since androids like Jehanne didn't need to breathe and didn't need a fully pressurized suit in order to operate in the vacuum of Space, that left them with a much better freedom of movement and greatly reduced bulk compared to the spacesuits designed for human beings. The visor of Jehanne's protective suit was already closed and sealed, like that of her comrades, and she held a disintegrator rifle in her gloved hands, on top of having a heavy disintegrator pistol, a neural stun pistol and a combat knife at her belt.

"WE ARE ABOUT TO OPEN THE AFT ACCESS RAMP! BE PREPARED TO JUMP OUT AND FLY INSIDE THE ENEMY SHIP AS SOON AS THE RAMP IS DOWN!" Since the troopers' compartment, separated from the rest of the craft by an airlock, was already fully depressurized, Jehanne did not need to worry about being sucked out by a sudden, explosive decompression, so she undid her safety harness and got up, facing the nearby aft access ramp.

"FIRST CENTURY, WITH ME! POWER UP YOUR DIRECTED GRAVITY UNITS!"

The hundred androids making up her century all got up and got ready to follow her, their disintegrator rifles at the ready. On the external view screens, Jehanne saw the pilot of their barge slow down and perform a last second tight turn before landing his craft directly on the hull of the enemy ship, next to the gaping hole dug in it. Then the aft ramp went down quickly, opening fully in less than two seconds, prompting Jehanne in giving a brief order on the radio to her troopers.

"GO, GO, GO!"

Leading by example, Jehanne ran out of the craft, then flew towards the nearest edge of the hole in the enemy ship's hull. While flying down into the ship, she saw that the hull of the Predator ship, a converted M-class asteroid, had been no less than 150 meter-thick and was made of nickel-iron. Thus, only the giant guns of the NOSTROMO could punch through such a thick metallic shell. At first, Jehanne encountered only burned-out, twisted structural elements once inside the Predator ship. She also saw the incinerated bodies of a few Space Predators mixed in with the debris. After flying some 200 meters deeper inside the ship, she encountered the first internal partition that seemed mostly intact. Using the infrared and thermal cameras of her helmet, Jehanne

started searching for some kind of hatch or airlock that could be used to enter the intact parts of the ship, with her troopers deploying widely and doing the same. Officer Bruce Lee called out on the radio after about one minute of searching, just before Jehanne was about to blow a hole in the partition with her disintegrator rifle.

“THIS IS TROOPER LEE: I FOUND AN AIRTIGHT DOOR!”

Jehanne immediately flew towards Lee’s position, signaling at the same time to the troopers near her to follow her. Once she had joined Lee, she was able to see the door he had found: it indeed looked intact, except for some debris partially blocking it.

“Okay, Trooper Lee and Mortenson, clear out this debris from that door while I scan what is on the other side of that partition.”

As her two troopers either disintegrated or pulled away the debris in order to free the door, Jehanne took out of a cargo pocket a small handheld penetrating radar unit and applied it to the steel door, then activated it. What she saw on its display made her give out a warning to the troopers around her.

“This is a single door giving access to a wide compartment containing some kind of machinery. I am also detecting numerous moving forms on the other side: there are Space Predators waiting for us inside. Alright everybody, stand clear and take hold of something, so that we won’t be blown away when I will create a hole in this partition. Be ready to kill any Predator that may come out then.”

Waiting a few seconds to give time for her troopers to secure some hold for themselves, she herself wrapped one arm around a twisted steel beam, then pointed her disintegrator rifle, set at maximum power, and fired once. The blue beam hit the partition some three meters from the door and created a hole nearly four meters in diameter. The air inside the compartment on the other side of the partition immediately rushed out in a violent, explosive decompression, sucking out loose objects and a good half dozen Space Predators. As those Predators were being blown out towards the vacuum of deep Space, the troopers around Jehanne targeted them with their rifles, killing the creatures before they could even be out of the Predator ship. With some of the inside air still blowing out of the compartment, Jehanne then rushed in, her disintegrator pointed. Her electronic eyes immediately detected a Predator that was frantically holding on to a piece of machinery, in order not to be sucked out like the other Predators had been. Reacting with the speed typical of computer-directed machines, she pointed and fired her rifle in mere milliseconds, killing the Predator and not giving it a chance to attack her.

Quickly scanning the rest of the compartment, Jehanne saw no other Predator in it and gave an order on the radio.

“FIRST CENTURY, FOLLOW ME IN! WE ARE GOING TO SWEEP THE REST OF THIS SHIP, ONE COMPARTMENT AT A TIME. FIRST, EIGHT, NINTH AND TENTH SQUADS WITH ME. SECOND, THIRD AND FOURTH SQUADS WILL GO SWEEP THE COMPARTMENTS ON THE DECKS ABOVE US, WHILE THE FIFTH, SIXTH AND SEVENTH SQUADS WILL SWEEP THE DECKS BELOW US. TRY TO FIND AIRLOCKS AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE: WE ARE AFTER DATA AND INTACT COMPUTERS. MOVE!”

With forty androids at her back, Jehanne then used the directed gravity propulsion unit embedded inside her to fly through the compartment, heading towards the bow of the ship. The Predator ship was obviously out of power, being totally dark and with its artificial gravity cut off. Only the infrared and thermal cameras of the androids' helmets allowed them to see where they were going now.

After flying a good 150 meters, she encountered another internal airtight partition wall. Seeing a large steel door with a viewing port in it, Jehanne cautiously looked through that port, ready to jump sideways if she found a threat facing her on the other side. What she saw was another door with a port, some six meters from across and small enclosed compartment.

“I HAVE FOUND AN AIRLOCK LEADING INTO THE FORWARD PART OF THE SHIP. FIRST SQUAD WITH ME IN THIS AIRLOCK! EIGHT, NINTH AND TENTH SQUADS, BE READY TO REACT IF THIS PROVES TO BE A TRAP.”

Examining first the command panel of the airlock, Jehanne found it relatively easy to understand its functioning, despite the writing being in a totally alien language. Thankfully, those Space Predators believed in the usefulness of pictograms as much as Humans did. Pressing a black button made the airlock decompress and equalize with the vacuum presently existing in the compartment she was in. Manually unlocking and opening the door of the airlock, Jehanne entered it, along with ten more androids, then closed and locked it back before pressing the white button of the command panel inside the airlock. Thankfully, some emergency battery system was still functioning and pumps filled back the airlock. When the white light indicator lit up, Jehanne unlocked and opened the second door of the airlock and quickly ran through it with her rifle pointed,

followed closely by her ten troopers. Scanning quickly the compartment she was in and seeing no Space Predator in it, she looked at one of her troopers.

“Trooper Ali, you stay here and cover our other squads while they cycle through this airlock.”

“Yes, Centurion de Domrémy!”

With her back now secure, Jehanne then went through the new compartment, which seemed to be some kind of storage hangar filled with containers of various sizes and shapes. She encountered another partition wall after flying for 200 meters but also found another airlock. Jehanne waited until two of her squads had joined up with her before entering that airlock, still followed by the ten androids of her First Squad. She however used again her portable penetrating radar unit to scan the compartment beyond the door of the airlock. What she detected was quite alarming.

“WARNING! I DETECT MULTIPLE MOVEMENT INSIDE THE NEXT COMPARTMENT. BE READY TO DEFEND YOURSELVES! I AM NOW GOING TO OPEN THE INNER DOOR.”

If Jehanne would have been a living human being, her heart would probably have beaten at a crazy rate when she opened the door of the airlock and rushed out of it, ready to fire her rifle. What she actually ‘felt’ was total concentration of her defensive and offensive skills and sensors. However, she then didn’t see a single Space Predator inside the new compartment, another sort of vast storage area. What she saw instead was piles of steel cages, lined up on rows of storage tablets extending for at least 200 meters. Furthermore, she now could hear a cacophony of sounds, cries and howls of wide variety. Cautiously approaching the nearest pile of cages, Jehanne then saw that each cage contained at least one creature of obvious alien origin. She then understood what this all meant, prompting her to send a radio message to the NOSTROMO via the radio relay boxes her troopers had been fixing inside the Space Predator ships along their way.

“NOSTROMO, this is Centurion de Domrémy. We have just found a large storage compartment on the Predator resupply ship containing over 2,000 steel cages, each containing one or more living alien creatures. I believe that those creatures were meant to be reserves of fresh meat for the crews of those Predator ships. I am now going to continue pushing forward and will leave one trooper here to protect those caged creatures until they could be rescued.”

The reply to her message came after some long seconds of waiting: her information must have seriously shaken the bridge crew of the NOSTROMO.

"Centurion de Domrémy, from Admiral Forster: message acknowledged. Continue your search of the Predator resupply ship. We will prepare rescue teams to free and lead to safety those alien creatures."

Jehanne was about to close her radio link when a series of modulated sounds came out of a cage containing a being with six legs, two arms and a torso supporting a large head. That being was actually relatively small, the top of its head rising to a height of no more than 150 centimeters, and most of its body was covered with a lustrous pink short fur. Seeing that Jehanne was looking at it, the creature repeated its series of modulated sounds in a tone one could have described as 'imploring'. Jehanne immediately called back the NOSTROMO while slowly approaching that cage.

"NOSTROMO, from Centurion de Domrémy. One of the caged creatures tried to speak to me in a sort of articulated language: it must be a sentient being!"

Again, her information induced a moment of hesitation before Tina replied to Jehanne.

"Acknowledged! We will prepare in consequence. Good job, Centurion!"

Closing again her radio link, Jehanne approached to within two meters of the cage and spoke in her softest tone to the alien creature, even though she realized that it would most probably not understand her.

"Don't worry, my friend: you will soon be safe aboard my ship. However, I must now continue to take the rest of this ship."

Thinking quickly, Jehanne then signaled Trooper Norma Jeane Mortenson to join her near the cage. Once the very pretty-looking android got near her, Jehanne gave her some short directives.

"Norma, I want you to stay here and protect those caged beings from any possible surviving Space Predator. Do not appear threatening to those poor creatures and try to look as friendly as you can, in order to reassure them."

"Understood, Centurion!"

With that done, Jehanne then returned to leading the advance of her century unit through the Predator ship.

On the bridge of the NOSTROMO, an urgent discussion between Tina, Dana Durning and Janet Robeson about how to deal with the latest find by Jehanne was

suddenly interrupted by an announcement from one of the duty communications specialists, Amin Jamilian.

“Tina, we are now receiving a call from the cruiser GAGARIN. It has just entered the system with two frigates. The GAGARIN wants to know where we are.”

“Send me the decrypted message to my command chair: I will reply to it from there.”

“Uh, it was not encrypted, Tina: the GAGARIN sent its message in clear.”

While both Dana Durning and Janet Robeson snapped their heads around in shock on hearing that, Tina instantly became furious.

“Those idiots are transmitting in clear inside a system known to contain enemy ships? Who could be this incompetent? No, don’t answer that, Amin: I will find out by myself.”

Sitting back in her command chair, Tina then selected the crypto messaging mode of her communications panel, then quickly typed a response addressed to the GAGARIN.

To GAGARIN, from Rear Admiral Forster on the A.M.S. NOSTROMO. Stop transmitting in clear and clam up: we have a boarding operation against three Predator ships in progress. Wait until I declare that operation completed and the enemy ships secured before transmitting further. Out!

To Tina’s annoyance and fury, she soon received another transmission from the GAGARIN. While that transmission was now encrypted, it still violated the directive she had just sent out.

To NOSTROMO, from Rear Admiral Kessel, on the battlecruiser GAGARIN. I am leading a relief force from New Providence and need to know the status of the corvette MARCO POLO. Respond ASAP².”

“I’ll give him a fucking ASAP!” growled Tina before typing her reply.

“From Rear Admiral Forster to Rear Admiral Kessel: you are relieved of command for insubordination and gross incompetence on a battlefield. Pass command immediately to your deputy and leave the bridge of the GAGARIN. Refusal to do so will result in your court martial on return into Spacers’ League space.”

² ASAP : Common military short form for ‘As Soon As Possible’.

On the battlecruiser GAGARIN, Rear Admiral Hans Kessel was about to fire back a hot reply when his deputy and commander of the cruiser, Captain Nordin Sihanouk, approached his command chair and spoke out in a firm tone.

"Admiral Kessel, I will have to ask you to vacate this command chair and to leave the bridge."

"WHAT? ARE YOU CRAZY, CAPTAIN SIHANOUK?"

"No, sir! I am simply obeying a directive from Rear Admiral Forster relieving you of command."

"SHE HAS NO AUTHORITY TO DO THAT! WE HAVE THE SAME RANK AND SHE IS ONLY A RESERVIST!"

"But she has a seniority of over two years over you, Admiral. Her authority thus has precedence over yours. Furthermore, Rear Admiral Forster was correct about the sending in clear of messages in the presence of an enemy: you violated the security protocols of my ship when you insisted on transmitting in clear. Either you leave the bridge now or I will have ship's security escort you back to your cabin, sir."

Kessel was furiously tempted to grab Sihanouk and shake him hard but, seeing the universally unsympathetic looks he was getting from the bridge crew of the GAGARIN, understood that this would only have worsened his situation. Still boiling inside, Kessel got out of his command chair and ragefully walked out of the bridge. Sihanouk watched him leave, then whispered to himself.

"What an asshole!"

14:07 (Universal Time)

Forward section of the Space Predator's resupply ship

"Here's the main welcome committee, people!" said Jehanne to the androids who had followed her into what appeared to be a command-and-control center. "Deploy in extended line and blast those monsters, but be careful not to destroy those work stations: we need to get at their computer databases."

Just as she finished saying that, the thirty or so Space Predators who had been backed up by the steady advance of her century launched into a savage charge, their clawed four hands and huge mouths opened and ready to rip flesh. Again, the fact that the Predators seemed to lack in individual standoff weapons, like firearms or disintegrators, relying solely on their natural weapons, struck Jehanne. While their ship lasers were

extremely powerful and effective weapons in Space battles, the Predators apparently either didn't develop individual weapons for medium to short range fighting, or had consciously decided to rely solely on their claws, teeth and spiked tails, putting them at a severe disadvantage when facing opponents armed with rifles or pistols, especially when those opponents were also protected by individual force shields. Still, the sight of those thirty charging and snarling monsters would have paralyzed with fear most Humans. Unfortunately for those Space Predators, fear simply was not a factor for Jehanne and the other androids, who opened fire with their disintegrator rifles with deadly precision. None of the Predators managed to even touch an android before being vaporized into cinders. Calmly surveying the scene, Jehanne suddenly detected some movement at the back end of the compartment: something was trying to hide behind the work stations there.

"HOLD FIRE! I AM GOING TO INVESTIGATE MOVEMENT AT THE BACK OF THE ROOM."

She then slowly walked forward, her rifle pointed and with her laser dot sight activated, ready to react in a fraction of a second to any threat. Passing by two successive rows of electronic work stations, she stopped some five meters short of the last row of work stations, her rifle ready to fire: three Predators were actually trying to hide behind those work stations. That lack of aggressiveness, contrasting with the ferocity shown up to now by the Space Predators her unit had encountered, immediately raised a number of questions in her logic center. Then, she noticed that those three Predators were somewhat different from the others she had killed. That decided her in what to do next.

"TROOPERS FORWARD! WE NEED TO STUN AND CAPTURE THREE PREDATORS."

Once the forty androids following her had lined up a few meters short of the hiding Predators, Jehanne slung her rifle and took out her neural stun pistol.

"Keep your rifles at the ready, except for two troopers per squad, who will use their stun pistols at maximum power. We will use slow, deliberate fire, until those Predators stop moving. Be careful not to use too much stun and thus kill them: we could use prisoners in order to get information from them."

She again preached by example and fired her stun pistol at the nearest Predator, hitting it in the head. That monster jerked violently and started thrashing around on the deck. As her designated androids also opened fire on the two other Predators, Jehanne fired a second time. The Predator did prove quite resilient, continuing to move until she hit it a

third time with a stun discharge. With the three Predators now immobile and sprawled on the steel deck of the compartment, Jehanne looked at one of her squad leaders.

“Officer Swayze, we will need metal chains to tie those three Predators up. Simple ropes won’t do for creatures armed with such claws and teeth.”

“I’m on it, Centurion! Third Squad, with me!”

As the android squad left to search for chains, Jehanne again opened a radio link with the NOSTROMO.

“NOSTROMO, this is Centurion de Domrémy. We have just captured three Space Predators who appear somewhat different from the other Predators we encountered. Those three Predators also proved much less aggressive than the others and were trying to hide from us rather than fight. I am presently in what seems to be a command-and-control center and will need specialized materiel and computer technicians to come in order to study the equipment in it and download the data contained in the Predators’ computers.”

“Well done, Centurion de Domrémy! We will send specialists with data transfer modules right away. Be advised that the transfer of the beings you found in cages has started, using the main hangar airlock of the enemy resupply ship. We will evacuate your prisoners the same way. Admiral Forster out!”

Satisfied, Jehanne cut the radio link, then looked down at the three inert Predators.

“Okay, Troopers! Let’s strip those three Predators from everything they wear: I don’t want them to be able to use any equipment or possible weapon once they wake up.”

14:49 (Universal Time)

Small craft hangar complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Tina, along with Natalia Vasilyeva, Janet Robeson and Eve Silisca, was on hand in the small craft hangar complex when the first shuttles carrying the creatures freed from the Predator resupply ship entered Hangar Number Six and landed on its steel deck. A number of security androids, along with a team of animal husbandry specialists from the NOSTROMO’s agro-farm complex, were also present, ready to guide or direct the newcomers to the green spaces that had been made free for them. The first shuttle to land and open its aft access ramp then let out over a hundred pink-furred, six-legged

beings Jehanne de Domrémy had signaled to be intelligent beings possessing a language.

“They may look strange, but they also look quite cute, I must say.” said Janet Robeson while eyeing the newcomers with interest. “I will go slowly forward to greet them.”

Tina, seeing how disoriented and scared the pink beings were, followed closely behind Janet, intent on protecting her if one of the beings reacted badly to her approach. Tina knew too well that scared people could react in unexpected, sometimes violent ways, to something they did not understand. This could be such a case now. Janet stopped some two steps in front of one of the creatures, then smiled and slowly bowed her head in salute while speaking softly.

“Welcome aboard the NOSTROMO, friends. You are now safe and we will treat you as best as we can.”

The response that she got then surprised her, as well as all the other Humans present. After a short hesitation, the pink being slowly trotted to her, then hugged her tightly with its two short arms before starting to what furiously looked and sounded like crying, shaken by emotional sobs, while also speaking a few intelligential words. That brought tears to the old politician, who then gently caressed the head of the being with both hands. Eve Silisca, standing near Tina, then spoke in a near whisper to her.

“Tina, I volunteer to try building a communication medium with those beings. I believe that well-selected pictograms will work well in this case.”

“Then, I put you and Janet in charge of caring and communicating with them. Do everything needed to make them feel safe and welcomed.”

15:53 (Universal Time)

Fruit tree plantations, Frame Level # 2100

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, inside the asteroid belt of the 55 Cancri A System

In order to keep her new guests as much at ease and relaxed as possible, Eve had the 468 pink-furred beings found on the Predator resupply ship brought to the vast spaces of the NOSTROMO's fruit tree plantations, situated in the stern section of the ship, in the hope that the sight of trees and vegetation would help reassure what seemed to be herbivore creatures. To further help them feel safe, she chose not to isolate subjects with her in some enclosed office while interviewing them, instead conducting

her meetings on the spot, among the crowd of newcomers and using portable computers and display screens. That approach had actually proved very successful, with the pink beings freely reacting in a friendly matter to her questions and displays. The distribution of good quantities of various types of fresh vegetables and fruits produced on the NOSTROMO had also done miracles in making the furry six-legged centaurs be more at ease. The use of various pictograms and simple images by Eve had also helped partially break through the language barrier, with Eve carefully memorizing and storing away the growing number of words and sounds now understood by her. After spending close to one hour interviewing the centaurs, she now had enough important information to report to Tina. Thanking her latest interviewee, Eve took a few steps back and opened a video link with Tina on her laptop computer, finding her on the bridge.

“Hello Tina! I have some information of interest for you.”

“Excellent! Shoot!”

“First, I was able to learn a few words and facts about our six-legged guests, including what they call themselves: the ‘Kiryns’.”

“The Kiryns... That actually sounds nice. What else?”

“By showing them a collection of astronomical pictures, I was also able to narrow down and then pinpoint the location of their home world. They lived under a red dwarf sun that I have been able to identify as being Gliese 422, also known as ‘Innes’ Star’, situated 41.3 light-years from Earth and located in the same quadrant as the Drazts of Ross 128. They were part of a pastoral society of vegetarians that was roughly at the technological level of the Human Early Middle Ages. They thus didn’t stand a chance against the Space Predators when those monsters came and started picking up Kiryns by the thousands as food. While I am still not sure about this, it seems that the Predators, while not formally occupying their moon, which the Kiryns call ‘Glyyn’, regularly come back to cull more Kiryns and carry them away as fresh food, with this going on for over a generation. You can thus imagine how nightmarish the life of those poor Kiryns have been since the first arrival of those Space Predators.”

“My god! That certainly explains their emotional reactions after being freed by us. Hopefully, we will soon be able to go free their world and chase those monsters for good. However, that will necessitate a whole fleet of warships and my NOSTROMO certainly can’t do everything by itself. As soon as we will have finished extracting and exploiting the equipment and data taken on the captured enemy ships, I intend to go to

New Providence to bring that intelligence package to the High Council, in order to convince them to organize a military campaign against the Space Predators.”

“Couldn’t we first pay a quick visit to Gliese 422, in order to drop the Kiryns back on their home world? These are intelligent, sensitive creatures that have been deeply traumatized by the nightmare they had to live through and they desperately need to return home.”

“We could do that, Eve, but then we would need to station a strong force in the Gliese 422 System, in order to repel any new visit by Space Predator ships. If not, they could again fall victims of visiting Predators in the coming days and weeks.”

“What about the GAGARIN task force? These guys have been doing little, except hide in the eastern sector of the asteroid belt, waiting in ambush in case more Space Predator ships show up.”

“They could do that!” recognized Tina after a short reflection. “However, we will have to wait until we are finished stripping everything of interest from those three Predator ships. Then, we will blow up those ships before leaving this system. Talking of the Space Predators, we now know a vital piece of information about them. While our three prisoners have proved of little usefulness for us, the data extracted from their computers, while still largely undeciphered, has yielded something incredibly important: a Predator star chart on which are marked a number of systems. By showing pictures of each of those systems to our prisoners while monitoring their brain parameters, we were able to identify their home world by how intense their mental activity became while they looked at each picture. We are now fairly certain that they come from the TOI 1231 System, some ninety light-years from Earth, in this quadrant. That system is known to have a single red dwarf star and a large, mostly gaseous planet sitting in the star’s habitable zone, called by us TOI 1231b. The Predators come from a moon of that planet. As soon as we will be able to assemble a battle fleet, we will go sterilize that damn moon and exterminate those monsters, for the good of the rest of the galaxy.”

“I can’t wait for that moment to arrive, Tina. I may not actually be able to feel true emotions but I certainly can understand by now what you call ‘hatred’: those genocidal monsters richly deserve death.”

CHAPTER 11 – STATE OF WAR



13:30 (Universal Time)

Saturday, December 19, 2331

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Asteroid belt of the 55 Cancri A System, 41 light-years from Earth

Constellation of Cancer

“...Three, two, one, detonate!”

Tina watched on with cold resolve as the three captured Predator ships, with the NOSTROMO having backed away to a safe distance, disappeared in blinding flashes of light, vaporized by anti-matter charges set inside them. With everything of interest now stripped from them, there was no further need for them and Tina was certainly not going to leave them here, where other Predator ships could find and reactivate them. Her bridge crew applauded and cheered at that spectacle on the holographic sphere of the

bridge complex, a reaction Tina could only understand and approve of. She then returned her mind to the next task at hand: to return the unfortunate Kiryns to their home world under escort and then go to New Providence in order to organize the fight against the Space Predators. Janet Robeson was already in New Providence, having traveled yesterday in the corvette MARCO POLO, which had also carried their three captured Space Predators and much of the intelligence booty collected on the Predator ships. Tina was confident that Janet would be able to persuade the High Council of the Spacers' League to prepare for war against the Predators and to assemble a battle fleet powerful enough to go strike the Predators' home world. In the meantime, she was going to conduct what was going to be truly a humanitarian mission.

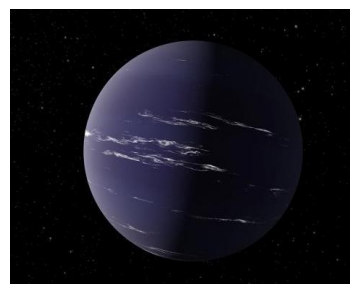
"Dana, advise the GAGARIN and its two frigates to be ready to jump with us to the Gliese 422 System. Set a countdown for a group jump and jump when ready."

"Understood, Tina!"

While sitting in her command chair on the top platform of the bridge sphere, Tina let her crew handle the interstellar jump without giving further orders: her crewmembers were seasoned professionals and didn't need to be held by the hand for such a routine action. The NOSTROMO and the three warships were already at battle stations, ready for anything they could encounter on emergence into the Gliese 422 System, so she didn't have to give more orders pertaining to the alert level.

"Three, two, one, JUMPING NOW!"

There was the familiar brief flash of orange light that accompanied an interstellar jump made via a Koomak Drive, then the view on the holographic sphere changed completely, now showing a small red star shining on a large blue ball of a planet: Gliese 422b. A good minute went on in silence before Amin Jamilian, the duty sensors officer, reported to Tina from his workstation.



"Passive sensors sweep completed: no alien vessel or suspect asteroid detected."

"Let us stay in electronic silence mode while we approach the planet: enemy ships could still be hiding around or be on the other side of Gliese 422b."

"Aye, Captain!"

As the NOSTROMO got steadily closer to the blue planet, Tina reviewed the known astronomical data about it on her chair's display console. Gliese 422b was a massive planet enveloped in a thick gaseous atmosphere and orbiting just within the inner limit of the habitability zone of its red dwarf sun. With a mass of at least ten times that of Earth, it was somewhat akin to a small Neptune, but with the difference that its surface temperature permitted the presence of liquid water. However, what really interested Tina was the large moon presently emerging from behind the planet. Glynn, or Gliese 422bd, looked very much like Earth, but was slightly smaller and less massive. Still, it represented an eminently habitable world compatible with Humans and one that was the home of the 486 Kiryns rescued from the Space Predators.

"Be sharp, people: if we are to find a Predator ship in this system, it would most probably be orbiting this moon."

Tina then switched to her encrypted directional maser transceiver system, used to send discreet, ship-to-ship messages within a stellar system.

"GAGARIN, from NOSTROMO: have the frigate JOHN PAUL JONES post itself on the opposite side of the planet, so that it could warn us if someone tries to sneak on us from that direction, over."

"GAGARIN understood, over!"

On the external view offered by the holographic inner surface of the bridge sphere, Tina saw the egg-shaped frigate break formation and fly away, heading towards the dark side of Gliese 422b. With one worry taken care of, she then concentrated on her ship's approach to Glynn. Contrary to Earth, Glynn's night side did not show the lights of any big city or populated zone, mostly confirming the low technological level of its inhabitants. As the NOSTROMO got close enough to the moon to be able to distinguish the contours of its continents, Tina called up on her console the sketch made by a Kiryn and which represented their known map of their world. The 486 Kiryns had been captured and hauled away from the moon by the Space Predators a mere few days before, all from the same general location on the most northerly continent of Glynn. Next, she used her intercom to call the small craft hangar complex, where a small fleet of assault barges and light shuttles were waiting to launch out of the ship.

"Ferry Group, this is the Captain. You will be able to fly out in about five minutes: we are about to enter in an inclined orbit around Glynn."

"Ferry Group, understood!" replied the voice of Eve Silisca, who was in charge of the so-called 'Ferry Group'. As the one person able to speak by now a passable

Kirylian and also one who had gained the widespread confidence of the Kiryans, Eve was easily the most qualified one for the job of helping the six-legged centaurs return to their homes. In that she was going to be helped by the 203 security androids of the First and Second Centuries, which were going to go down to the surface of the moon with Eve and the Kiryans, in order to provide a ground security force against any possible new attempt by the Space Predators in returning to Glynn and cull more Kiryans as fresh meat. Waiting until her small flotilla of three ships had inserted itself in orbit around the moon, Tina then contacted Eve again.

“Ferry Group, from the Captain: we are now in orbit around Glynn. You may fly out at your convenience. Good luck and have a nice stay on Glynn. We should be back in a few days with more ships in order to better protect the moon.”

“Thank you, Captain! We will start to fly out now.”

Looking at a video monitor that gave her a view of the exit tunnel of the NOSTROMO's small craft hangar complex, Tina watched on as the six light shuttles and four assault barges flew out of her ship and started their descent towards the moon's surface, escorted by eight heavy fighters. All but four of those light craft would return to the NOSTROMO after dropping their loads on the moon, then the NOSTROMO would be free to jump to New Providence, leaving the GAGARIN and its two frigates in orbit of Glynn, ready to defend it against any Space Predator ship that could show up later on.

As Tina was about to prepare the jump towards the Alpha Centauri B System, a tall woman of great beauty and high sexual appeal climbed up to the command platform, having come from the lifts servicing the bridge complex. While many of the male crewmembers on the bridge couldn't help stare for a moment at the woman as she passed near them, Tina also couldn't help stare at her, but for a completely different reason.

“Spirit? Is that you in android avatar form?”

“In person, Tina!” replied the smiling ‘woman’. “Since you were going to lose the services of my daughter for at least a few days, I thought that I could replace her on a temporary basis. Besides, I had been dying to go around in android form for a long time already. And don't worry about my ship's control functions: I am still watching them over in my computer form. This is only an avatar of me with duplicated personality and limited data handling capacity. However, while aboard the NOSTROMO, I will be in

constant data linkup with my computer form and will communicate back and forth with it while walking around.”

Tina could only contemplate in silence the android for long seconds, completely flabbergasted. Spirit, whose chosen face had routinely appeared on display screens when someone communicated with her, had adopted the very feminine shape of a statuesque, 192-centimeter-tall woman in her late twenties with green eyes and long brown hair. She wore a skin-tight ensemble of light blue leotard pants and blouse with a deep cleavage, plus a pair of knee-high shiny black boots and a large black belt, to which were attached a number of black leather pouches with shiny silver fittings. If she would have walked into some dance club, she would have easily attracted men like flies to honey. Tina was not even sure either if women would not be attracted to her.



Spirit, in android avatar form.

“By the stars, Spirit, your looks could kill!”

“Why, thank you, Tina!” replied the android avatar in a soft, sensual voice, a wide smile appearing on her face. “I took the liberty of booking for myself an apartment next to Eve’s place, if that is not inconvenient to you.”

“Of course not, Spirit! We will all be happy to have you around the ship, especially the male crewmembers and passengers.”

“I have no doubts about that, Tina. So, how long will Eve and her group have to stay on the surface of this moon?”

“The time it will take to convince the High Council to assemble a battle fleet sufficient to go eradicate those damn Space Predators in their own nest. Those monsters cannot be allowed to continue terrorizing this region of the galaxy.”

“You won’t have an argument with me on that, Tina.” replied Spirit in a sober tone.

15:04 (Universal Time)

Northern continent, Glyyn (Gliese 422bd)

As her light shuttle was starting to overfly the northern continent of the moon, Eve watched closely the reactions of the three Kiryns she had invited in the cockpit

section, as they looked on with increasing happiness at the landscape they were flying over. When all of them enthusiastically pointed to the front right at a plain covered with a patchwork of cultivated fields, she spoke to the pilot of the shuttle.

“Turn to two o’clock, Maria: I believe that we are close to their village.”

The pilot, a human crewmember of the NOSTROMO, nodded her head and turned in that direction while slowing down and losing altitude, followed by the other craft of their formation. The group of craft soon flew over the cultivated fields. However, what they saw then was a scene of desolation and destruction. As the Kiryns had explained to Eve while on the NOSTROMO, the Space Predators had burned down their village after grabbing its inhabitants and the cattle and domestic animals they had possessed. While the fields where vegetables, cereals and fruit trees grew were still intact, not having been touched by the Predators, every house, barn and shop in the village was now nothing but blackened ruins. Eve embraced that scene in silence for a short moment, registering that latest example of the Predators’ callousness and cruelty. Thankfully for the Kiryns, Tina Forster had planned measures to counter this and Eve’s flotilla of shuttles and assault barges, on top of carrying the Kiryns and their domestic animals, also carried a number of large tents and crates of equipment and supplies meant to help the Kiryns in reestablishing themselves.

“Okay, Maria: let’s land in the middle of the village’s public square.”

Less than a minute later, Eve’s shuttle was landing smoothly and silently in the empty space surrounded by the burned-out wooden buildings. However, due to the small size of the square and the number of craft needing to land, only one more craft was able to land in the village square, with the other shuttles and barges landing as close to it as they could along the borders of the cultivated fields. Going out of the cockpit and walking down the main passenger cabin, Eve let the Kiryns come out first via the rear access ramp. While obviously happy to be back on their world, the six-legged centaurs were also looking quite grim as they visually surveyed what was left of their village. Their leader then started giving out orders and directives to his people, making some of the Kiryns lead out of the craft the collection of domestic animals retrieved from the Predators, while the rest scoured the blackened ruins, trying to find anything useful that would have survived the fires. Unfortunately, that search turned out nearly nothing, except for a few metal tools, pots and utensils. While the Kiryns were busying

themselves, Eve assembled the two centurions and twenty decurions of her android force in order to pass on her directives.

"Alright, people. Our first priority will be to take out our stock of tents and camping gear and then to assemble them, so that the Kiryns could find shelter in them before nightfall. After that, we will set up and power up our anti-teleportation scrambling emitters, so that the Predators couldn't beam down to this village and its surrounding area. Then, once everything will have been unloaded, we will move the four craft designated to remain with us to locations close to the village, where we will camouflage them so that they won't be detectable from Space. Centurion de Domrémy, you will put twenty of your androids in watch positions around the village, to prevent any surprise attack, while the rest of us will work to set the tents and distribute the equipment and supplies. I will now go check out the water wells of the village, to make sure that the Predators did not poison them before leaving. Questions? Yes, Augustus?"

"How long do you expect us to stay on this moon, Eve?"

"A few days, maybe a couple of weeks at the most, time for the Spacers' League to arrange for a more permanent defense system for this moon. If there are no other questions, then let's get to work!"

The Kiryns, who had led out of the craft their animals and now had little more they could do by themselves, watched on with intense curiosity as Eve's androids went to work, taking out and assembling dozens of large tents made of highly resistant and waterproof fabric laid over aluminum frames and with light floor boards acting as ground surfaces for the future occupants of the tents. Two light bulldozers taken out of a shuttle started in the meantime to bulldoze away the ruins of the burned down village houses and shops, acting in coordination with the leader of the Kiryns, so that they would leave time for the inhabitants to search the ruins before bulldozing the ruins away. Inspecting the two water wells of the village, using a chemicals analysis and test kit, Eve thankfully found the water in them to be safe to use. After doing her well inspection, she took the village leader with her and went to the crates of equipment and supplies that had been taken out of the shuttles and had been stored inside the first large tent to be put up. There, using her still rudimentary notions of Kirynian language and much signs and pictograms, she passed on to the male Kiryn her directive of the moment.

"Ganen, tell your people to line up at the entrance of this tent, so that we could start distributing farming tools, domestic equipment and provisions."

“Will do, Eve! Thank you for everything you did for us.”

“It was our pleasure, Ganen.”

Once the 486 Kiryns had formed a line at the entrance of the supplies tent, each family group was first given a small, lightweight wheeled cart of simple construction, on which they were going to be able to pile on the tools, equipment and supplies they were about to receive. With that done, the distribution proper started, with Eve directing the work of six androids and playing interpret as needed. While the Kiryns were overjoyed by that distribution of equipment and supplies, more than a few also broke down in tears, moved by that act of charity. Even Eve’s androids, who were basically unable to feel emotions, perceived and registered those reactions as further learning lessons for themselves. Some three hours later, with all the tents assembled and all the equipment and supplies distributed, the Kiryns started preparing their supper, each family using the wood stoves provided to them to cook their meals of boiled vegetables and grains. Eve, watching the Kiryns happily resuming normal lives, nodded her head with satisfaction.

“Another good deed done! Hopefully, those poor people won’t have to live anymore through heartbreaks and suffering.”

08:21 (New Dawn Time)

Sunday, December 20, 2331

Roof landing pad of the High Council Building

City of New Dawn, capital of the planet Providence

Alpha Centauri B System

Tina and Spirit were met on landing by Janet Robeson and Joshua Makwambo, the permanent representative in Providence of the New Haven Corporation, the equivalent of an ambassadorial post. Both Janet and Joshua at first looked with confusion and surprise at Spirit’s avatar, whom they had never met or even heard of before. That prompted a question in an amused tone from Spirit to Janet Robeson.

“Don’t you recognize me, Janet? We did speak together before, a number of times.”

The retired politician opened wide both her mouth and eyes when revelation dawned on her.

“Spirit?”

"That's me! It is truly nice to be able to meet you in the flesh rather than through a video link."

"Oh my god! You built an android avatar for yourself, like the one made for Even? You look beautiful!"

"Why, thank you, Janet!"

Joshua Makwambo listened to that with confusion at first, then understood when Janet Robeson mentioned the word 'android'. All the citizens of New Haven knew from reputation Spirit, but only knew her up to now as the central AI computer of the KOSTROMA, then of the NOSTROMO. His expression then changed to one of awe and he warmly shook hands with Spirit while grinning from ear to ear.

"It is a great honor for me to be able to meet you in person like this, Spirit: you are such a legendary figure on New Haven and aboard Tina's ship. Is calling you 'Spirit' to your convenience, or would you prefer a more formal name?"

"Like what? 'Spirit of the Nostromo'? I was always called simply 'Spirit' and that is all I want to be called, Mister Makwambo. So, how are things going for the New Haven Corporation in Providence?"

Her question, meant as a simple formality, made Makwambo's grin fade, surprising both Spirit and Tina.

"Unfortunately, we have seen some negative publicity recently pop out that may hurt our commercial Space transport operations here."

"What do you mean, Joshua? What kind of negative publicity?" asked a suddenly concerned Tina. Makwambo replied with an embarrassed smile.

"You remember when you had to suddenly abort your docking in orbit of Providence and then left to go help our corvette in the 55 Cancri A System?"

"Of course! What about that?"

"Well, a number of the passengers you were supposed to take on and carry to New Venice, plus a number of companies which had rented passage for their goods on the NOSTROMO, have launched a series of lawsuits against you for breach of contract. Some of those plaintiffs also went to be interviewed on UniNet news channels and criticized the fact that your status as a naval reserve officer and that of the NOSTROMO as an armed merchant ship made you unreliable in terms of providing commercial transportation services. The government and my office have tried our best to counter that bad press but we did suffer a few contract cancellations as a result and we are still facing those lawsuits in court on Providence."

“But I left in order to go help one of our ships that was in mortal danger!” nearly shouted Tina, furious. To that, Makwambo could only shrug his shoulders.

“I know and most people on Providence also know and understand that, Tina. However, you will also always find bad faith and crass opportunism around in this world. We did promptly reimburse those customers of ours who missed their flight to New Venice, but a small minority of them still brought forward lawsuits, probably hoping to make some extra money out of this.”

That was when Janet Robeson jumped into that exchange.

“I have already spoken with Karl Langemann about this, Tina. While he can't legally intervene directly in this matter, he promised me that he will do his best to make those lawsuits disappear.”

Tina nodded once her head at that and did not ask for more details on that subject. Karl Langemann, who was now 72-years-old, was a highly intelligent man of strong character who also held a solid set of moral ethics. As a fiercely competitive industrialist and highly competent geologist who had built up the powerful Vesta Corporation inside the Solar System, Karl Langemann had then become a member of the High Council of the Spacers' League before succeeding Janet Robeson at the post of Chairman of the High Council via popular elections. More importantly, he was a longtime friend of Tina who had proved that friendship towards her many times in the past.

“Alright, we will weather this as best we can. Has all the members of the High Council arrived on Providence for this emergency meeting?”

“Yes, and the meeting is still scheduled for nine o'clock, in half an hour from now.”

“Good! Let's go down to the Executive Floor.”

Entering the roof's access hut and calling an elevator cabin, the four of them then went down by four levels and exited the lift at the Executive Floor level, which housed the offices of the highest members of the Spacers' League's government, along with the meeting chambers of the High Council. They did experience a slight delay at the entrance of the High Council Chambers, caused by the fact that Spirit was not registered on any access list. However, the words of Tina and of Janet Robeson were enough to convince the two guards to let Spirit in after a few seconds. Once the doors slid close behind Tina's group, one of the two guards whispered to his comrade after temporarily muting his radio microphone.

“What a babe that tall brunette was! She has perfect legs and a chest to dream about!”

Inside the meeting chamber, Tina and her small group went at once to go shake hands with Karl Langemann, who was discussing in a corner with a mature but still very pretty blond woman. Seeing them approach, Langemann cut at once his conversation and turned to greet Tina with a handshake.

“Tina, you again did a miracle, as usual! Your prompt action saved the crew of the MARCO POLO from a horrible death at the hands of those monstrous Space Predators.”

“Don’t forget that the MARCO POLO did half of the work by itself, Karl: it destroyed one of the two Predator warships before I could even arrive on the scene. Captain Agosta and his crew would richly deserve at least a Navy commendation for this.”

Langemann nodded once at that, with his expression sobering up as well: while an energetic and ambitious leader, he had always taken good care of his employees and subalterns...as long as they didn’t screw up.

“Admiral Fenton told me that something is already in the pipeline about this, Tina.”

“And what about Rear Admiral Kessel? I had him shipped back to Providence two days ago.”

“He is already off the Navy’s list, Tina. Admiral Fenton decided to quietly but forcefully retire him rather than court martial him for incompetence. However, Fenton has warned Kessel that if he tried to make a splash or to dirty your reputation, he would then end up in front of a court martial, for both incompetence and insubordination while facing the enemy, a charge that could end him getting a heavy prison sentence. Kessel understood where his interests were and promised to disappear quietly.”

“Maybe it’s the best for everyone this way, Karl. However, I can’t help but feel a bit discouraged at the amount of tactical incompetence at the senior levels of the Navy. We still have too many flag officers who only know how to fly a desk.”

“Well, that’s partly your fault, Tina: you keep refusing to teach at the Naval Academy, where your experience and tactical savvy would do a lot of good.”

“But I have a commercial ship to operate and a moon world to manage, on top of now having two kids. I don’t have time to play classroom instructor, Karl!”

"I know, I know! By the way, won't you finally present to me this charming woman standing next to you?"

Tina smiled in amusement at this latest proof that Karl Langemann was still a first-class womanizer despite his age and the fact that he was married.

"Well, don't you recognize her, Karl? You already spoke with her quite a few times in the past years."

Karl gave Tina a blank look before looking at Spirit, taking a couple of seconds before he recognized her.

"Spirit? Is that really you?"

"It is, Karl. I recently built for myself an android avatar, so that I could travel and interact beyond the confines of the NOSTROMO. Don't worry about Tina's ship, though: my fixed electronic counterpart is still whole and in place, helping to control and care for the NOSTROMO. This android form contains a copy of my personality files and a basic database that allows me to interact with living beings. It also can connect to my full memories via a datalink but both of us can operate independently from each other. I came with Tina today as her special advisor."

"Then, I must present you in turn to my own most precious special advisor: Agneta Braun. She has succeeded me at the direction of the Vesta Corporation and is also governor of the planet Vinland, in the Gliese 832 System."

Spirit exchanged a warm kiss on the cheeks with Agneta Braun before smiling to her.

"From executive secretary in 2315 to planetary governor sixteen years later: an impressive career progression I must say, Agneta. However, I know that you did it via your competence and nothing else."

"Thank you, Spirit: you are too kind. I must say that, if Tina had not told us who you were, I would never have guessed that you were not a living human being."

"Well, me and my daughter Eve use a level of android technology a couple of notches above that used to build our security androids."

"I have never met one of your security androids, Spirit, and I would really be curious to meet one of them. What are the main differences between your present android body and them, if I may ask?"

"Well, while they can pass as human beings at first, the finish of their external appearance is less polished: their skin doesn't look as natural as my skin and, apart from a prosthetic wig and eyelashes, they don't have artificial body hair. Also, contrary to Eve and I, they cannot simulate eating and drinking, except for small quantities that they then

need to regurgitate, and don't have a replica digestive system. Instead, they pack more energy cells, weapons and defensive systems in their bodies."

"Pardon me if this question could appear crude or even rude to you, Spirit," jumped in Karl Langemann, "but what about sexual appearances and functions? I realize that your security androids can't reproduce by themselves, but I suppose that they have fake sexual organs that would at the least appear anatomically correct, if only to give the change to some hostile person searching or scanning them."

Langemann's question brought a malicious smile on Spirit's lips and she lowered her voice while responding to him, with Agneta Braun listening very closely.

"Keep this to yourself, Karl: our security androids, be they male or female-looking, all have a functional set of artificial sexual organs, minus the actual biological capacity to reproduce, of course. I was thinking at first to provide them with only inert copies of human sexual organs but decided to make them able to act like real human beings and give pleasure to a human partner as if they were human themselves. I decided so in order to give them an extra way to learn and to improve themselves while interacting with living human beings. Our male-looking androids can become erect and keep an erection while simulating intercourse with a woman. They also have basic information files on how to behave sexually and give pleasure to an eventual partner. Similarly, our female-looking androids can be penetrated by men and can make them attain orgasm. However, they would then need to wash their vagina with a jet of water in order to clean away the sperm and bodily fluids."

"And...you and Eve, how..." started to ask Agneta Braun, a bit embarrassed. Spirit's reaction was to smile even more widely, while her eyes sparkled with malice.

"As I said before, Eve and I were built on a standard a couple of notches above that of our security androids."

That reply left both Karl and Agneta speechless for a moment, as both Tina and Janet looked on, amused. Tina then returned them to reality with a few words.

"Sorry to have to interrupt this fascinating discussion on the sexuality of androids, but I believe that everybody is here for the meeting."

"Huh, right!" said Karl Langemann, clearing his throat. "Let's start this show!"

Tina and Karl Langemann went to take their assigned seats at the large, horseshoe-shaped conference table, while Spirit and Joshua Makwambo took the seats along the walls reserved for aids and junior ministers. Once sitting, Tina looked around

the table at the 27 other members of the Spacers' League's High Council. Despite being technically politicians and bureaucrats, the men and women of the High Council were in reality a group of tough, competent and dedicated persons accustomed to take hard, difficult decisions. That had come from having to manage large corporations or planetary bodies in the difficult conditions of Space, which was a vastly less forgiving environment than that of Earth's surface. Also, the nature of living and working in Space encouraged teamwork, compared to the often-predatory management practices too frequently seen on Earth. Tina was thus quite confident of being able to get some sensible, decisive decisions from the High Council today. Karl Langemann then used an old-fashioned wooden gavel to call the meeting to order, banging it three times on a wooden pad resting on the table.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the High Council, we are assembled here today in order to discuss the threat posed to Humanity and to other races in this sector of the galaxy by the Space Predators. Three days ago, one of our Navy's corvettes, the MARCO POLO, was engaged on an exploration mission in the 55 Cancri A System, situated 41 light-years from Earth, in the constellation of Cancer. That system comprises a large asteroid belt very rich in M-Class, nickel-iron asteroids, something we were very interested in eventually exploiting. Unfortunately, that asteroid belt apparently interested a lot as well the Space Predators, as the MARCO POLO bumped into four Predator ships, two of them being dedicated Predator warships. The captain of the MARCO POLO then effected a micro-jump to go seek the cover of the orange sun of 55 Cancri A, from where it launched a courier drone to ask for help. That drone reappeared in this system, where its emergency message was received by both our Navy Headquarters and by the A.M.S. NOSTROMO, which was about to dock with the New Horizon orbital station, where it was due to take on thousands of passengers heading to New Venice. Rear Admiral Forster then acted with commendable speed and aborted her docking operation in order to jump to the aid of the MARCO POLO. Her ship actually arrived in the 55 Cancri A System mere minutes after receiving our corvette's call for help and then swiftly destroyed one of the two Predator warships which were hunting down the MARCO POLO. By then, our corvette had already succeeded in destroying the other Predator warship but had been damaged and was then saved by the arrival of the NOSTROMO. The MARCO POLO subsequently entered the NOSTROMO, where emergency repairs on it started. While those repairs were being done, Admiral Forster launched a series of stealth reconnaissance drones towards the

asteroid belt, drones which soon located two Predator support type asteroid ships engaged in some kind of mining operation. A third Predator support ship then arrived in the system, apparently on a resupply run for the ships already in 55 Cancri A. The NOSTROMO then launched an assault on those three Predator ships, immobilizing them while 600 security androids in assault barges supported by heavy fighters boarded the enemy ships and started fighting their way inside. After a couple of hours of fighting inside the Predator ships, the NOSTROMO's androids completed the seizure of those three enemy ships, taking in the process three live Space Predators prisoners and grabbing a treasure trove of information and captured enemy equipment and data. After taking two days to strip those enemy ships of valuable data and equipment, the NOSTROMO then blew up those ships."

"Wow! A total of five Predator ships destroyed?" said Vladimir Gasparov, the CEO of the Sverdlovsk Group and governor of New Venice. "That is an epic victory indeed on those monsters. How many of our Navy warships supported the NOSTROMO in that fight, Karl?"

"None, if you except the MARCO POLO before it entered the NOSTROMO for repairs." answered Langemann, causing a stir around the table and prompting a question from Lynda Armstrong, the governor of the Upsilon Andromeda System and CEO of the Jupiter Corporation.

"What do you mean, none? You said that our Fleet Headquarters here on Providence received the call for help from the MARCO POLO at the same time as the NOSTROMO."

"It did, but the officer in charge of operations that day, Rear Admiral Kessel, decided to wait until he could assemble a small flotilla before going to the rescue of the MARCO POLO. As a result of his decision, his group of one battlecruiser and two frigates arrived in the 55 Cancri System only after the NOSTROMO and its security androids had captured the three enemy support ships. Admiral Kessel then compounded his lethargic response time by displaying what can only be described as utter tactical incompetence. Rear Admiral Forster then relieved him of command and took control of the arriving flotilla."

Tina made an embarrassed smile when all eyes turned to her, many showing admiration.

"Please, ladies and gentlemen! I simply acted the way the situation demanded and my tactics were pretty much standard and well-known. Those who should be

properly honored are the ten crewmembers who died during that battle with those Predators.”

“Still, you acted with celerity and efficiency, while that Rear Admiral Kessel proved to be a dud.” replied Charles Watts, the governor of Mars and CEO of the Mars Corporation. “How many of your androids did you lose in that assault on the Predator ships?”

“None!”

“None? But...those Predators have proved themselves to be utterly murderous when they boarded Drazts ships in the Ross 128 System, literally devouring alive their crews before doing the same with the KOMAROV and the DE RUYTER. How did your androids manage such a lopsided victory, Tina?”

“How? First, because my security androids could be described as the ultimate fighting machines, equipped with force shields and directed gravity drive systems and armed with disintegrators. They also happen to possess lightning-fast reflexes and are incredibly strong as well. Second, the Predators fell victim to their hubris and mistaken sense of superiority in close combat. Yes, those Space Predators proved murderous for the crews of the ships they previously attacked and boarded but they benefited from the element of surprise and from the fact that our crews were ill prepared for them, not having individual force shields and with many of our people not even being armed when attacked inside their ships. However, when faced with well-equipped and armed opponents, they got defeated in detail. In fact, the Predators my androids encountered inside the enemy ships did not have stand-off individual weapons, like firearms or beam weapons, and relied solely on their claws and teeth, a bad bet when you face someone holding a disintegrator rifle. However, my androids also encountered something else while boarding those Predator ships: cages full of alien creatures, some of them intelligent, sentient beings, meant to become fresh reserves of meat for the Predators.”

“Alien, sentient beings? And where are those beings now, Admiral Forster?” asked Carlos Dominguez, the CEO of the Saturn Corporation and governor of the planet Gemini.

“I returned those beings, which call themselves ‘Kiryns’, to their original homeworld in the Gliese 422 System. They are now busy rebuilding their village, burned down by the Predators, under the temporary protection of 200 of my androids. I will now show on your display screens videos of those Kiryns. While they are definitely intelligent beings, they are still at an early medieval stage of technology and knowledge. They thus

stood no chances against the Predators when those monsters landed on their moon and attacked them.”

“They are actually cute, with their pink fur and bunny-like faces.” said Agneta Braun, smiling while looking at the images of the Kiryns on her computer screen. “I am happy that we were able to save them from those monsters. So, what do we do now about those Space Predators? My first reaction would be to declare unlimited war on them, hunt them down and then exterminate them to the last.”

“You read my mind, Agneta: that is exactly what I want to ask this High Council to do. Those monsters are not only a mortal threat to us and to the whole of Humanity: they are also a mortal threat to all the other races in this sector of our galaxy. For that reason, I would thus advocate that we enlist the cooperation of the Drazts, who suffered a lot at the hands of those monsters, in hunting down those Space Predators. By the way, thanks to the data we seized on those enemy ships, we now have a very good idea of where to find the homeworld of those monsters: the TOI 1231 System, some ninety light-years from Earth, near the Vela Constellation. However, if we ever end up attacking their homeworld, we will have to expect an extremely fierce reaction from those Space Predators and, if they ever locate one or more of our inhabited systems, revenge attacks. Thus, we will have to be prepared to defend our own worlds, as well as preparing a proper attack force. How we do that will have to be decided by this High Council, ladies and gentlemen.”

Her pronouncement, made in a firm voice, made the other High Council members look somberly at each other.

“So, we will be at war...again!” said glumly Toru Tomonaga, the CEO of the Ceres Corporation and a man who abhorred violence. However, contrary to his predecessor, who could have been described as a sheep and an appeaser of dictators during the 2315 Uprising against the Terran government, Tomonaga was no sheep and was actually a decisive man when things called for action. Karl Langemann nodded his head once at Tomonaga’s words and spoke up, addressing his council members.

“It will be war, effectively, whether we like it or not. Thus, this is no time for dancing around or sitting on our thumbs while engaging in endless discussions, ladies and gentlemen. As a first step, I will now ask you all to vote on making a formal declaration of a state of war between us and the Space Predators. Those in favor, raise one hand.”

To Langemann's satisfaction and that of Tina, all the members sitting at the table raised their hands, with zero opposition. Langemann then grabbed his gavel and banged it three times.

"The 'Ayes' have it in unanimity. The Spacers' League is now officially at war with the Space Predators and will direct both its resources and efforts accordingly. I will personally contact the Drazt ambassador on Providence to notify him of this and to ask for the Drazt government to join us in our fight against the Predators. I will also address our citizens this evening in a public address to be sent to all of our inhabited systems via courier drones."

CHAPTER 12 – GEARING FOR WAR

11:56 (Universal Time)

Sunday, December 20, 2331

Small craft hangar complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In low orbit around Providence, Alpha Centauri B System

With her private interstellar yacht FRIENDSHIP now safely parked inside one of the small craft hangars inside the NOSTROMO, Tina then switched off her yacht's system. However, instead of getting up from her pilot's seat and leave her ship, she pivoted her seat to face Janet Robeson and Spirit, who were occupying two of the passengers' seats situated behind the two crew seats. Her facial expression was that of deep concern as she spoke to the retired politician.

"Janet, I need your wisdom and advice on something that is conflicting me. Now that we are officially at war with the Space Predators and that my crew and I have been reactivated from reserve status, I can expect the NOSTROMO to find itself into battle with little or no notice. When it concerns only myself and my crewmembers directly, I have absolutely no problems with that. However, we have our families, our children, living aboard. I have my own Misha and Janet living in this ship. Leaving them here on the NOSTROMO would expose them to great risks if I go into battle. On the other hand, if we send our families to safety planet-side, we would still not be assured that they would indeed be safe: the Predators could well attack one of our inhabited planets or moons and kill our families. Also, not having our families close to us is liable to hurt morale, for everybody. I intend to address our people this evening, after Chairman Langemann's public announcement about the new state of war, but I am still not sure if I should order our families off the ship."

Janet nodded her head once slowly: she knew that Tina had already faced once a similar dilemma during the 2315 Uprising, when she had sent her crew's families to the safety of Triton before leaving to fight nearly single-handedly the forces of the Terran Federation.

"Tina, there is a factor that is paramount about this decision: the fact that the Space Predators could attack anywhere, anytime, and this with no prior warning. Our

families will be equally at risk on the NOSTROMO or on one of our space colonies. In fact, even Earth is not presently safe from a Predator attack. You are also correct about your worry that our families could be attacked while away from the NOSTROMO, in which case you could do little to protect them. I thus say this: keep your loved ones with you, here on the NOSTROMO, where you can at least fight to protect them. If some of your crewmembers wish to evacuate their families to a planet, let them do so but don't order them off. Right now, despite being a combatant ship, the NOSTROMO is about as safe as any of our colonies, or Earth. The threat from those Space Predators is simply too fluid and unpredictable."

Tina thought that over in silence for a few seconds before nodding once.

"You make a lot of sense, Janet. Thank you for your advice. I will thus let my crew decide where they want their families to be during this war. Well, let's leave the yacht and return to the Executive Deck: I will need to brief my command staff about the decisions of the High Council."

As the trio was riding an elevator cabin a few minutes later, Spirit spoke up.

"Tina, we just received a communication from Navy Headquarters. The Navy is sending a relief force of Space Marines to Glynn, where they will relieve our androids protecting the Kiryns. Our androids should be back aboard the NOSTROMO by this evening."

"Good!" replied Tina before looking at Janet Robeson. "Janet, since my whole crew has been reactivated from their reservist status, does that mean that our security androids are also now considered as active Navy personnel?"

"Huh, I wouldn't bet on that, Tina. Your androids are most probably considered by the Navy as materiel instead of as personnel. Why did you ask?"

"Because, as reactivated Navy personnel, we are now officially paid by the Navy, following standard Navy rates of pay, instead of me forking out the salaries for my crewmembers out of my corporations' revenues. I have been treating our security androids as persons from the start and paying them a small salary instead of a full salary, since they don't have the needs of living humans, like eating and supporting a family. Yet, they have been doing a large part of the fighting up to now. Wouldn't they deserve to be paid on an equal salary scale than that which applies to the Space Marines who are about to relieve them?"

“Personally, I would say ‘yes’ to your question, but those paper-shufflers at Navy Headquarters may well sneer at your question and simply ignore it. Remember that there is still a lot of public prejudice and misgivings concerning your androids.”

As Tina digested Janet’s answer, Spirit decided to jump in on that question.

“I believe that you have a point, Tina. Normally, if the Navy would have to carry Space Marines aboard the NOSTROMO, instead of relying for free on our androids, then they would have to assume the various costs of such a deployment, including their salaries. The only obstacle here would be the need to convince the Navy to consider our androids as service personnel rather than as simple machines. Unfortunately, existing laws and regulations about this are actually non-existent and the Navy would have to put in place a new policy about this, something that I wouldn’t bet on right now.”

“But, if Karl Langemann would tell the Navy to assign the status of service personnel to our androids, then the Navy would be forced to pay salaries and upkeep to our androids, no?”

“Yes...if you could convince Karl Langemann to do that.”

“Then, I will contact him today about that.” pronounced Tina, making Janet raise an eyebrow.

“But, what would your androids use that money for, Tina? As you just said yourself, they don’t need to spend money on food or drinks, or to support a family, which they can’t have anyway.”

Spirit decided then to reply for Tina.

“Janet, don’t underestimate the degree of individuality that our androids have developed since they were built, over three years ago. You may not have seen them eating in our cafeterias or restaurants, or drink in our bars and clubs, but they have developed personal hobbies and interests, spent on a civilian wardrobe, using their small salary allotted to them, and bought things that interested them, like art objects or musical instruments.”

“Musical instruments?!” said Janet, surprised.

“Yes, musical instruments. The majority of our androids have actually developed a marked interest for music, dance and the arts in general, domains of human activity and productivity of nearly infinite variety and creativity. Developing their own artistic talents via the study of dance and music is how most of our androids spend their off time on. Did you really think that they simply returned to their apartments after their duty shifts, only to lay down still until their next shift? They don’t! They mostly read, watch

documentaries or entertainment shows, listen to or practice music. Most of the people on the NOSTROMO do not realize that because our androids live on their separate levels of the Habitat Ring, below the levels occupied by our crew and passengers. You should go stroll a bit around the communal lounges on the levels containing our androids' quarters: you could be surprised by what you will see and hear then."

"Er, I suppose that I could do that, Spirit." replied Janet, a bit flabbergasted. "Gee, I hope that I won't then stumble on some kind of sex party!" Janet didn't see the slight smile that then appeared on Spirit's lips.

16:19 (Universal Time)

Apartment # 569-630, Habitat Ring Section

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, in low orbit around Providence

Alpha Centauri B System



Jehanne de Domrémy put down her backpack in the storage room of her apartment, then secured her disintegrator rifle and her pistols in their steel storage lockers. With that done, she then went to her bathroom, where she undressed completely before taking a quick shower, washing off the dirt and grime accumulated during her fight aboard the Predator ships and during her stay on Glynn. Toweling herself dry, Jehanne, still naked, put her dirty uniform and the wet towel in the small washer-dryer machine installed in a corner of her bathroom and started its cleaning cycle. Her next move was to walk into her personal cybernetic maintenance facility, a fair-sized room with a nine square meter floor surface. There, she lay on the inclined diagnostic bed and initiated a quick but thorough maintenance diagnostic. If she would have suffered any kind of breakdown, damage or system failure, then her diagnostic program would detect it and would either effect a repair, if the damage proved minor, or would send her go for repair at the central robotics workshop of the ship, in the core section. While the diagnostic program did its work, Jehanne connected herself to the personal memory bank of her maintenance facility, to update the memories of her life experience, last recorded before her fighting in the 55 Cancri System. If she was ever destroyed, either in combat or because of a serious accident, those past memories would then be vital in allowing a new body to be built and then programmed, essentially creating a new her with her original, distinct individual personality as Jehanne de Domrémy and with all the past souvenirs and

experiences that had helped her evolve and improve since the first day she was completed and activated. That process basically meant the same in her case as an old dream of Humanity: immortality. Jehanne thus religiously updated her personal memory bank every time she ran a diagnostic of her android body. Only minutes after entering her cybernetic maintenance room, Jehanne walked out of it and went to her lounge, where she briefly looked through the large windows to contemplate the forest habitat extending from below her balcony. Still naked and not bothering yet to put fresh clothes on, Jehanne sat down in the large sofa facing her holographic entertainment unit and switched it on while putting on the earphone headset connected to the unit. Selecting a video file showing a dance and music show, she then watched and listened to it carefully, memorizing the rhythm and tune of the music, along with the dance moves shown on the display screen by the Human dancers. After half an hour of watching and listening, she backed the recording to its start and got up from her sofa, then started imitating and practicing the dance moves while following the rhythm of the music. While dancing, she practiced as well the facial and body expressions of the dancers, with the camera integrated to the viewing unit recording her in action. Once she was back at the end of the show, she asked her apartment computer to compare the moves on the show with her own moves and got a very satisfying score of 87% similarity. Sitting back on her sofa, she next watched a historical documentary on ancient wars of the 20th Century, wanting to improve her knowledge of warfare tactics and strategies, including the parts about the lessons learned in combat. While her initial programming had included basic knowledge of military tactics and principles, she had a high interest about Human military history, which was as rich a subject as it was full of tragedies. The documentary she ended up watching was about urban fighting in large cities, a particularly bloody type of combat about which Jehanne wanted to learn more.

At seven in the evening, Jehanne switched her viewing unit to the Providence main news channel, where Chairman Langemann was due to make a public announcement about the new state of war of the Spacers' League. Since she had been part of the first phase of the fighting, Jehanne didn't learn anything new from that speech by Langemann, other than that the Spacers' League was now mobilizing for war. In contrast, the commentaries' part that followed, where the newscasters and a few 'experts' commented on Langemann's address, proved a lot more interesting for Jehanne, who carefully listened to and analyzed the few negative comments and

reactions from some of the interviewees and from the show's viewers who called in to give their opinions. Some of those negative comments made Jehanne recollect historical lessons about the dangers of appeasement and peace at all cost, something that had showed up in nearly every war of the past. After a few minutes of listening to those commenters, Jehanne decided that they were not worth her time, so she switched off her entertainment unit and went to her storage room to get dressed and go out. Choosing which outfit to wear didn't take long, as her civilian wardrobe was quite limited, due to the fact that her salary as a security android was small, thus limited her buying power. She finally decided on a pair of tight black very short pants, an orange tank top and a pair of ankle boots and dressed quickly, then left her apartment, locking the door behind her.

Using the nearest overhead gallery, which was part of an airtight security partition wall meant to prevent the accidental depressurization of more than one forest habitat at a time, Jehanne walked down the 500-meter-long gallery linking the Habitat Ring Section with the ship's core section, looking from time to time through the large transparent acrylic panes of the gallery and eyeing the two forest habitats separated by the airtight partition wall. Since the NOSTROMO had yet to host paying passengers after its aborted docking with the New Horizon orbital station and its fighting in the 55 Cancri A System, she crossed path with few people while on her way along the gallery. When she arrived at the ship's entertainment center deck via its northeast access airlock, which was left open at this time, she found herself in the eight-meter-wide peripheral hallway circling around the main entertainment establishments run by the commercial operators doing business on the NOSTROMO. Ignoring one of the two large cinemas of the complex, which was the closest to her, Jehanne turned left and went down the large peripheral hallway, passing in succession in front of the Moonlight Disco Club, the Pinball Video-Arcade Center and the Jupiter Sex Club, before stopping at the entrance of the Aperossimo Bar-Lounge and looking at its front advertising poster board. Taking a decision after a half-second, Jehanne entered and paid the entrance fee at the reception counter, then slowly walked into the main lounge, a vast room with tables and chairs set around a dance floor and a show stage. There were actually only a few dozen customers sitting at the tables and there were presently no musical band on the stage, recorded music being piped around via the amplifiers connected to the DJ's booth. Jehanne thus went to the long bar counter set along one of the walls and sat on

one of the stools fixed along the counter, joining about fifteen other customers sipping quietly their drinks. Making a sign of the hand, Jehanne made the barman approach her, then spoke to him in her soft, slightly high-pitch voice.

“One red Vermouth on ice, please!”

“One red Vermouth on ice, coming up!” replied the barman before going to fetch the nearest bottle of red Vermouth and preparing her drink. The man put her glass on the counter in front of her within half a minute.

“Here you go, miss!”

“Thank you!”

Taking her glass with her left hand, she raised it to her lips and made a show of sipping on it. In reality, she simply wetted her lips with the red Vermouth, since she was not built to simulate the ingestion of either liquids or solids, except in very limited quantities that she would then have to discretely regurgitate during a visit to the washrooms. The artificial tastebuds of her tongue and the olfactive sensors inside her nostrils registered and analyzed automatically the composition of the alcohol, while the Vermouth added a temporary smell to her mouth. Putting down her glass on the counter, Jehanne then discretely looked left and right, eyeing the customers nearest to her. The one on her right was a mature woman of South Asian ethnicity, while the customer on her left was a very handsome (by human standards) young man with blond hair and blue eyes. That man seemed quite athletic and was also tall, Jehanne’s electronic eyes measuring him as being a good 186 centimeters-tall. However, he seemed to be plunged deep in thoughts as he sipped his glass of Scotch while looking blankly at the wall mirror and rows of bottles behind the counter. The young man then noticed that Jehanne was looking at him and smiled to her in return.

“Good evening, miss! I haven’t seen you here before.”

“I rarely drink and, yes, this is my first time in the Aperossimo Bar-Lounge. I just listened to Chairman Langemann’s public address about the Spacers’ League now being at war with the Space Predators and decided that tonight was a good time to visit this club.”

The man nodded soberly his head at her answer.

“The same here, miss. By the way, I am Pieter Nordlung.”

“And I am Jehanne de Domrémy. Pleased to meet you.” replied Jehanne while exchanging a handshake with Nordlung. “So, what did you think of the Chairman’s speech, Pieter?”

"That it was balanced, factual and to the point, with no attempt at painting over what this war will mean for all of us. And what did you think of it, Jehanne?"

"That we don't have a choice: it is either for us to fight and get rid of those Space Predators or to eventually end up victims of those monsters. I however didn't like much some of the comments from the so-called 'experts' who analyzed his speech and from some of the listeners who called in after the speech."

Pieter nodded again and pointed at the large video display screen set on the wall behind the bar.

"I also listened to those comments and some of them were definitely asinine, not to say idiotic. War may be a terrible thing but sometimes you are left with no choice but to defend yourself. History too often showed us what happens when you act like sheep in the name of pacifism. Then, the wolves around us will simply jump on you and devour you. In this case, the term 'devour' is most apt, I must say."

"Agreed! Are you going to have a fighting role in this war, Pieter?"

"I already have started to fight, Jehanne: I am a fighter pilot and I fought the Predators in the 55 Cancri A System, when the NOSTROMO went to rescue the corvette MARCO POLO."

"You did?" said Jehanne, interest rising in her. "I was also in that fight." Her reply made Pieter scrutinize her more closely for a few seconds with curiosity. He finally seemed to understand what she was and lowered his voice to a near whisper.

"Are you a security android by chance, Jehanne?"

"Yes, I am!" answered Jehanne, also lowering her voice. "Centurion Jehanne de Domrémy, leader of the First Century."

Instead of repelling Pieter, her revelation seemed to attract only respect and understanding towards her.

"My fighter squadron was assigned to support your unit when you boarded that Predator resupply ship, Jehanne. Before that day, I didn't know what exactly to think about your kind but now I only have respect for you: your assault was a textbook tactical masterpiece. Did you suffer any casualties in that fight?"

"Thankfully none! Those Predators were done in by their own hubris and disregard for individual medium to long-range weapons. I hope that your squadron fared well in that attack, Pieter?"

Pieter's expression became sober before he answered her.

"We were successful in taking out the laser turrets of that Predator ship but it cost my squadron a fighter and its crew of four. Those four were good friends of mine and I came here for a drink in order to go over their loss."

"I am sorry to hear about your friends, Pieter. Let's toast their memories together."

Pieter nodded and raised his glass, gently knocking it against Jehanne's raised glass. He took a sip of his Scotch while watching her put her glass to her lips, something that prompted a remark from him.

"I thought that security androids couldn't drink or eat."

"We effectively can't, except in very small quantities meant for us to appear normal. Then, when we have a chance to go to the washroom, we regurgitate what we ingested. However, I have artificial tastebuds and olfactory sensors which allow me to analyze the content of what I drink or eat. Right now, I am simply wetting my lips with my Vermouth."

"I see! Spirit certainly designed you well."

"Actually, it was her daughter, Eve Silisca, who designed us security androids, using her own design as a starting template and then simplifying or eliminating certain functions while reinforcing our armament and protection."

"So, may I ask why you felt the need to come here and have a drink, Jehanne?"

Jehanne slowly put down her glass before answering Pieter soberly.

"Pieter, I may be an android who can't have true feelings. However, I was programmed with some advanced social skills, skills that I use to improve myself as a being as I live new experiences and have contacts with more people. Eve meant for us to become true individuals, with our own individual tastes, hobbies and non-combat skills, so that we could one day become as much of a true person as she now is."

Many Humans in the past had laughed at that notion of true personality in an android. Not Pieter, who slowly nodded his head in understanding.

"If you are at the stage of wanting to have an individual personality, then I would say that you are already a true person, Jehanne."

That reply made Jehanne stare into Pieter's eyes for a moment, while her voice became very soft.

"Pieter, I may not be able to feel real emotions or sensations, apart from the basic sensations of vision, smell, taste and touch, but I understand how important

emotions and feelings are to Humans and to other living beings. Would you like me to help you feel better and to go over the loss of your friends?”

“How?”

“By intimate contact between us. While I cannot feel true physical pleasure, I am more than capable of giving sexual pleasure. Don’t laugh, please: I already have done so in the past with men I deemed worthy of being my friends.”

“And...you now consider me as a friend?”

“Yes, I do! You showed your bravery and skills in battle and also are honoring the memory of your lost comrades. In my books, that makes you a most decent man. I also find you a truly handsome man by any Human standards. So, I would like to accompany you to your apartment, unless you are already married or have a living-in girlfriend: I wouldn’t want to hurt any existing relationship of yours.”

“That is quite thoughtful of you, Jehanne. I will be most happy to host you in my apartment, which frankly started to feel quite a lonely one to me. Let’s go!”

Pieter paid for both of their drinks, then got off his stool and gently took Jehanne’s hand before walking out of the bar-lounge with her.

Pieter’s apartment turned out to be situated quite close to that of Jehanne, two levels up and a hundred meters from it. It also proved to be a typical one-bedroom apartment of the type the ship provided to its crewmembers who were single. Jehanne, invited in by Pieter, then walked to the lounge at the end of the suite and looked around her at the decoration and artwork on display in the lounge.

“A nice place, Pieter. In comparison, my own apartment still looks a bit bland but I am working on it.”

Pieter, not too sure how to proceed from here, stayed two paces away from her at first. Jehanne noticed that and turned to face him, giving him a wide smile.

“I can easily understand that this could feel a bit awkward for you at first, so let me try to put you at ease.”

She then slowly stripped, first taking off her tank top and revealing a pair of medium-sized, firm breasts with brown nipples, then taking off her boots and ending by pulling down her pants. Pieter was then able to see that her groin area was free of pubic hairs and was as smooth as that of a baby, but featured a natural-looking vagina with a prominent clitoris. Her body, which was stocky but strong and fit-looking, sported a light tan color all over. Despite knowing that she was an android, Pieter couldn’t help getting

an erection while looking at the now naked Jehanne. The latter noticed his reaction to her and, smiling, slowly stepped forward, gluing herself to him and proving at the same time that her body had the same kind of warmth as that of a living woman's body and that her breasts were as soft as those of girls Pieter had dated in the past. Jehanne's voice was very soft when she spoke while looking up at the much taller Pieter.

"Time for me to prove to you that I can be more than just an imitation of a woman's body, Pieter. Just relax and let me do the rest."

CHAPTER 13 – SPACE TRAP



09:12 (New Dawn Time)

Tuesday, January 5, 2332

Office of the Admiral of the Fleet, Navy Headquarters

City of New Dawn, Providence (Alpha Centauri Bd)

Alpha Centauri B System

“Again, I believe that we should execute this plan right now, when the enemy still had little time to react to the battle in the 55 Cancri A System, or even to become aware about it, Admiral.”

Admiral John Fenton, Commander of the Navy and Defense Minister of the Spacers’ League, had another look at the outline of the plan presented to him by Vice Admiral George Ramsay, the commander of the Battle Fleet, before looking at him with some misgiving.

“Why didn’t you include the NOSTROMO in your battle force, Ramsay? It is our most powerful ship and also our most battle-hardened one.”

“The NOSTROMO is presently on a cargo run to the Trappist-1 System, where it went to collect an important load of metal ingots and liquid hydrocarbons, both of which are urgently needed by our shipyards. It is not due back for another few days, at the least. If we wait for the NOSTROMO, then we risk losing the element of surprise, Admiral. Besides, with twelve battlecruisers ready to go, I won’t be lacking in firepower. We can and must go now!”

Fenton hesitated for another few seconds before taking a decision and nodding his head.

“Alright, you have my benediction for this operation. When are you planning to leave for TOI 1231?”

“I can leave this evening, if you agree to it, Admiral.”

“Very well! You may leave when ready.”

“Thank you, Admiral! We will give one hell of a shock to those monstrous Space Predators, that I promise you.”

George Ramsay then saluted Fenton before walking out of his office, leaving behind the copy of his attack plan meant for the Navy Commander and Minister of Defense. Ramsay had a satisfied smile on his lips as he entered a lift cabin in order to go up to the roof landing pad, where his runabout was waiting for him. He was finally going to be able to prove that Rear Admiral Forster was not the only navy commander who knew how to fight and win a Space battle.

20:18 (New Dawn Time)

Private residence of the Chairman of the Spacers’ League

City of New Dawn, Providence



Karl Langemann

“So, what was so secretive and important for you to need to come in person to my residence at night, Admiral?” asked Karl Langemann after opening his door to Fenton. The latter saluted Langemann before answering him.

“I came to bring to you in person some very sensitive military information, so as not to run any risk of leak or interception, Mister Chairman.”

“Very well! Follow me to my private study: we will be completely safe from any indiscreet ears there.”

With a valet cum bodyguard closing and locking the door behind them, the two men went up to the upper floor of the luxurious residence, situated in an exclusive district of New Dawn, where Langemann introduced Fenton into a large business-like office. He then invited the admiral to sit with him around a small coffee table set in a corner of the office.

“Alright, tell me about this sensitive military information, Admiral.”

“Yes sir!” said Fenton, who then extracted a printed file folder marked ‘Top Secret’ from his attaché case and handed it to Langemann while starting to speak.

“This is a copy of our plan for ‘Operation Thunder’, an attack against the presumed home world of the Space Predators. The location of that home world, TOI 1231, situated some 94 light years from Alpha Centauri B, was gained from the intelligence gathered by the NOSTROMO in the 55 Cancri A System, after Rear Admiral Forster boarded and then destroyed three Predator support ships busy exploiting the metal ore found in the local asteroid belt. Vice Admiral Ramsay, the commander of our battle fleet, then devised a plan to effectuate a surprise attack on TOI 1231 as quickly as possible, before the Predators could realize that we had found and destroyed their ships in the 55 Cancri A System. I came to inform you that our battle fleet left for TOI 1231 a bit over one hour ago and should now be operating inside the enemy system.”

Langemann felt at once some misgivings about this as he opened the classified folder to read the information in it. This felt somewhat rushed to him and the fact that he had not heard a thing previously about such an important operation made him more than a bit suspicious. Fenton, who watched him as he read the file, became nervous when he saw Langemann starting to look displeased by what he was reading. After some four minutes, and having finished a first quick reading through the attack plan, Langemann looked at Fenton, irritation visible on his face.

“Why is the NOSTROMO not part of this attack force? Rear Admiral Forster has the most experience by far about fighting those monsters.”

“The NOSTROMO is presently in the Trappist-1 System, Mister Chairman, on an important cargo run meant to bring metal ingots and liquid hydrocarbons to our shipyards around Providence. It was not due back for many days and Vice Admiral Ramsay was afraid that waiting for its return would have ruined the element of surprise for us.”

Apparently only half convinced, Langemann returned to a section of the file he held and pointed it to Fenton.

"Admiral, I have been following carefully for months our refit and construction programs for our Navy's warships. I see here in that list of twelve battlecruisers assigned to Operation Thunder at least five ships that I know were due for important modifications meant to improve their combat capabilities against the Space Predators. As far as I know, those ships have not yet received those refits. Am I correct?"

"Huh, yes, Mister Chairman." answered Fenton, now definitely getting nervous. "Those five battlecruisers were still waiting to be retrofitted and modified but our shipyards were simply being swamped with work."

"So, Vice Admiral Ramsay left to go attack the home world of the Space Predators, and this with five of his twelve battlecruisers being unfit to fight those Predators?"

"Sir, I wouldn't characterize those battlecruisers as unfit to fight! They are..."

"They are in the same state as the VLADIMIR KOMAROV was in before it got cut to ribbons by a Space Predator asteroid ship in the Ross 128 System, that's what they are, Admiral!" nearly shouted Langemann, now clearly angry. "What were the modifications that had been planned for those five battlecruisers?"

"Uh, I would have to review the files about this in my office before I could give you an accurate answer, Mister Chairman, but one item they all lacked was the anti-teleportation scrambling system invented by Doctor Koomak. I also believe that their disintegrator cannons are of the older, shorter-range model."

Fenton then could have sworn that Langemann was about to have an attack of apoplexy.

"You let Vice Admiral Ramsay leave for combat with ships possessing such grave deficiencies? What were you thinking, Admiral?"

"Sir, I have full confidence in the competence of Vice Admiral Ramsay and..."

"BUT I DON'T, ESPECIALLY AFTER READING THIS! I WANT YOU TO RECALL OUR BATTLE FLEET IMMEDIATELY!"

Fenton then became more combative while facing his political superior, his navy pride making him push back.

"Sir, recalling our battle fleet now, when it is already inside enemy territory, could alert the Predators to its presence in their system and thus result in a tactical disaster. We should let our ships fight according to their attack plan and not dully interfere with it."

Langemann, understanding that Fenton was at least partly right about a recall order possibly alerting the enemy, calmed down somewhat but was still angry as he pointed an index at him.

“Then, at least recall the NOSTROMO to Providence, on the double! I want it here, to watch our back while our battle fleet is away.”

“I will have a courier drone sent at once to the Trappist-1 System, sir. Permission to leave, sir.”

“Yes! Go!”

Mortified by this cavalier dismissal by Langemann, Fenton then got up from his chair and left the office at a quick pace, leaving behind a fuming Chairman of the High Council.

20:45 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the battlecruiser VLADIMIR KOMAROV

Task Force 54, inside the TOI 1231 System

“Alright, Mister Kwang, tell me what you see in this system.”

The sensors officer on duty on the bridge of the flagship of Task Force 54 answered Vice Admiral George Ramsay at once, having had plenty of time to study the data from his passive sensors.

“Well, astronomy-wise, the system is composed of one M3V variable red dwarf star with a mass approximately half that of our Sun. Our telescopes have detected to date a single large planet orbiting inside the habitability zone of that red dwarf. That planet is akin to a warm Neptune-type gas giant and is thus probably unsuited for life. However, it has a large moon showing liquid water oceans and continents that could definitely sustain life. There is also an asteroid belt that is quite dense, at about 1.5 AU distance from the star. Our telescopes are seeing multiple dots of light on the darkened surface of the moon, consistent with the presence of cities. Also, we have lots of radio and video signals spillage from the moon. That moon is definitely harboring intelligent life, sir.”

“Any ships or orbital stations around that moon, Mister Kwang?”

“We are still too far to be able to ascertain that, sir. We are presently flying by and a bit over the asteroid belt.”

“What about those radio signals you are intercepting? Can you correlate them to any known language?”

"Yes sir! They are in the same language extracted from the databanks of the asteroid ships boarded by the NOSTROMO in the 55 Cancri A System."

"So, we have found the homeworld of those monsters. Good! Start pinpointing those cities visible on the surface of that moon, so that we can program a strike pattern for our missiles. This moon needs to be thoroughly sterilized, so that these monsters stop being a menace to the rest of the galaxy."

"Aye, sir!"

Ramsay was then mostly silent for the next forty minutes, letting his bridge staff and operators continue to map in detail this star system, using only passive sensors. The job would have been much easier and quicker if they would have used the active sensors of the ship, like their radars, but that would have probably alerted those monsters about the presence of his fleet and would have ruined the effect of surprise he wanted to achieve. His fleet of twelve battlecruisers had by then passed the asteroid belt and was inside the inner part of the system when the sensors officer spoke up, some worry evident in his voice.

"Sir, we have just been painted by a powerful, very low frequency radar wave. The Predators will now know within seconds that we are here."

"It was to be expected. Weapons Officer, prepare to launch our missiles at the cities visible on that moon. Set their anti-matter warheads to their highest yield."

"Aye, sir!"

'Over 600 missiles, each with a yield of ninety megatons: that should truly hurt those monsters.' thought to himself Ramsay. He was about to give the order to fire away the missiles from his fleet when the sensors officer spoke up in alarm.

"SIR, WE HAVE MULTIPLE LARGE OBJECTS NOW UNMASKING FROM BEHIND THE MOON AND ACCELERATING TOWARDS US! I COUNT FIVE...NO, SEVEN OF THEM. CORRECTION: WE NOW HAVE NINE LARGE ASTEROID-LIKE OBJECTS COMING AT US."

Ramsay tightened his jaws together at that announcement: nine Predator asteroid-ships were going to represent a very serious threat to his battle fleet and he was probably going to need all his firepower to deal with them.

"CANCEL THE MOON STRIKE! REPROGRAM OUR MISSILES TO THE ANTI-SHIP MODE, WITH TERMINAL MICRO-JUMPS TO GO THROUGH THOSE PREDATORS' FORCE SHIELDS!"

"REPROGRAMMING OUR MISSILES FOR ANTI-SHIP COMBAT, AYE, SIR!"

Then, the sensors officer piled on more bad news for Ramsay.

"SIR, WE HAVE MULTIPLE RADAR SIGNALS BOUNCING ON US FROM OUR AFT SECTOR: THEY ARE COMING FROM THE ASTEROID BELT."

"Shit! Do you see enemy ships in that sector?"

"Affirmative, sir! I have multiple moving targets now coming out of the asteroid belt."

"How many? Go to active mode and give me a precise figure, Mister Kwang."

Ramsay didn't like how his sensors officer needed many seconds before answering him, apparently having to count a large number of targets. When he did answer him, he looked at Ramsay with a pale face.

"Sir, we now have a total of 27 asteroid-ships heading towards us at high speed and coming from the asteroid belt. To that we have to add the nine asteroid-ships coming from the moon."

That left Ramsay speechless for a couple of seconds: from hoping for a surprise strike on the enemy's home world, his battle fleet was now finding itself in a pincer trap and facing an enemy that had a three to one advantage over his ships.

"IT'S A TRAP! NAVIGATOR, TURN US AROUND! PASS TO THE OTHER SHIPS: WITHDRAW AT ONCE BACK TO PROVIDENCE!"

The captain of the VLADIMIR KOMAROV, Captain Erika Shenken, stiffened on hearing his last order and threw him a warning look.

"Admiral, we can't jump back to the Alpha Centauri B system like this, in plain sight of the enemy: they could then follow us to providence."

"That's far from an assured thing, Captain Shenken. Navigator, plot a group jump to Providence, quickly! Weapons officer, open fire as soon as the enemy will be within range!"

Shenken was about to protest further when an alarm suddenly sounded around the bridge, followed by the voice of the damage control officer.

"MULTIPLE HIGH-POWER LASER BEAMS ARE HITTING THE STERN SECTOR OF OUR SHIP. THE OTHER CRUISERS ARE ALSO REPORTING HITS AGAINST THEM."

"FIRE BACK, DAMMIT!"

From then on, there was little that Ramsay could do other than to watch his bridge personnel do its best to fight back the enemy while trying to withdraw with the rest of the fleet. While the heavy disintegrator cannons that constituted the main armament of the twelve battlecruisers soon found their mark on the enemy ships, they needed many precious seconds to pierce through the very thick crust of nickel-iron of their hulls. In comparison, the much less heavily armored hulls of the battlecruisers, especially in their stern sections, proved to be quite vulnerable to the gigawatt-class lasers of the Space Predators. The first loss to the battle fleet occurred when the BORIS EGOROV, which was part of the Third Division that initially was holding the rear of the formation, was literally cut in half by a concentrated salvo of purple laser beams, with the stern detaching itself from the rest of the battlecruiser. That in turn created catastrophic explosive decompression throughout the ship, dooming it and sucking out hundreds of crewmembers to their deaths in the cold void of Space. The three other battlecruisers of the Third Division, all ships which had not had a chance to be retrofitted before this operation, all fared badly under the enemy onslaught, their disintegrator cannons being outranged by Predator lasers. The VLADISLAV VOLKOV, hit in a missile magazine by a laser beam, then exploded, blown to pieces in a gigantic explosion. However, that was only the start of an avalanche of bad news for the Human fleet.

21:43 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the battlecruiser VALENTINA TERECHKOVA

Third Battlecruiser Division

“CAPTAIN, WE HAVE MULTIPLE HULL BREACHES FROM LASER FIRE AND ARE LOSING SYSTEMS AFTER SYSTEMS.”

“WITHDRAW OUR CREW TO THE INNER SECTIONS THAT ARE STILL PRESSURIZED! KEEP FIRING AT THAT ASTEROID-SHIP TO OUR AFT PORT SIDE!”

Captain Kimi Yamaguchi then had one reason to feel some hope: the asteroid-ship that had been dueling with her cruiser exploded, a missile from the VALENTINA TERECHKOVA having succeeded in going through its force shield and then penetrating inside through the hole burned through by the disintegrator cannons of the cruiser before its anti-matter warhead exploded. The three-kilometer-long and one-kilometer-wide Predator ship then disappeared in a titanic blast of pure energy, vaporized by the ninety-

megaton warhead. However, the cheers on the bridge which greeted that victory were short-lived, with the sensors officer giving out a terrifying warning.

“ALERT! WE HAVE MULTIPLE SMALL CRAFT APPEARING NEAR OUR HULL AND THEN GLUING THEMSELVES TO OUR SHIP.”

Captain Yamaguchi froze for a moment in horror on hearing that: this could only mean one thing. Punching the button of the ship-wide intercom, she spoke urgently in her spacesuit’s helmet microphone.

“TO ALL THE CREWMEMBERS: ARM YOURSELVES AND BE READY TO REPEL BOARDERS!”

Thankfully, some of the lessons from the Ross 128 Predator attack had been well assimilated and all the crewmembers of the cruiser already had a disintegrator pistol on them, including Kimi Yamaguchi herself. One female bridge sensors operator gave a desperate look at the operator next to her, who happened to be a good friend and occasional lover, as she took out her own pistol.

“Please, Ken: don’t let those monsters take me alive.”

“You can count on me, Francine.” replied the young man, who gripped firmly his disintegrator pistol. Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, five nightmarish creatures standing over two meters in height and with four arms ending in hands sporting long claws appeared on the bridge, right next to Francine. The young woman had time to fire once, killing the nearest Space Predator, before the Predator behind the first one pointed a sort of gun at her and pressed its trigger. The female sensors operator’s spacesuit was sprayed with a sort of transparent liquid whose true nature quickly revealed itself when Francine’s spacesuit started smoking and melting.

“THEIR GUNS SPRAY ACID! MY SPACESUIT IS...**AAAH!**”

With the poor Francine screaming and thrashing around as the acid, having gone through her spacesuit, was now burning through her body, an enraged Ken fired repeatedly his disintegrator pistol, killing two of the Predators.

“YOU FUCKING MURDERERS! YOU WILL PAY FOR THAT!”

With more and more Space Predators teleporting inside the bridge, the crew finally succumbed to the attackers despite a heroic resistance that cost the Predators fourteen of their number. Similar desperate battles happened all over the ship, as more than a hundred Predators teleported inside the VALENTINA TERECHKOVA. The central AI computer of the ship, directing the fire of the few internal defensive weapons pods, helped kill over forty of the attackers before three Predators penetrated its armored vault

and started spraying concentrated acid over its circuits, making it fail and shut down after half a minute of fighting. Soon, all resistance stopped, leaving the surviving Predators free to start feasting on the corpses of their victims.

21:52 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the VLADIMIR KOMAROV

A second Predator ship had just been destroyed by missiles from the flagship when the sensors officer shouted towards Vice Admiral Ramsay, who was still sitting in his command chair.

“SIR, THE VLADIMIR CHATALOV, VALENTINA TERECHKOVA AND ADRIAN NIKOLAIEV HAVE ALL BEEN BOARDED BY THE ENEMY AND ARE NOT RESPONDING ANYMORE. BOTH THE GERMAN TITOV AND THE VALERI BIKOVSKI HAVE JUST LOST THEIR FORCE SHIELDS BUT ARE STILL FIRING AWAY WITH THEIR GUNS THAT ARE STILL OPERATIONAL.”

George Ramsay felt both anger and frustration at that announcement: despite his battle fleet having already caused heavy losses to the enemy, his ships were clearly on the losing side in this exchange, with all of his remaining battlecruisers, including his own flagship, being already seriously damaged by laser fire. Something new then struck his unfortunate fleet. An asteroid much smaller than the asteroid ships firing at the Human cruisers rammed at top acceleration the OLEG MAKAROV. The force shields of the cruiser, already down to thirty percent of strength due to battle damage to its generators, failed under the devastating kinetic energy of that impact, letting the 500-meter-diameter nickel-iron asteroid hit broadside the OLEG MAKAROV. The asteroid smashed through the cruiser and emerged on the other side, what was left of the battlecruiser flying in all directions through the vacuum of Space. Just after that, with Vice Admiral Ramsay about to issue new orders to his surviving cruisers, a sixty-centimeter-diameter Predator laser beam burned through the hull of the VLADIMIR KOMAROV, penetrating all the way to the bridge complex and causing an explosion of sparks as it pierced the outer shell of the bridge holographic viewing sphere. That purple laser beam then rapidly swept across the bridge platforms, killing one third of the bridge crew, including Vice Admiral Ramsay and Captain Erika Shenken. As a hurricane-like explosive decompression sucked debris and bodies out of the bridge sphere, the navigation officer, utterly terrorized and struck with panic, then punched a command on his control station, and

this without waiting for an order or an authorization. With a jump back to Providence already calculated in advance and entered in the navigation computer, the VLADIMIR KOMAROV's Koomak Drive Generator powered up and made the battlecruiser jump out of the TOI 1231 System. The two other remaining surviving battlecruisers, the YURI GAGARIN and the GEORGUI BEREGOVOI, having just seen the ALEXEI LEONOV being destroyed by the impact of a kamikaze Predator asteroid, assumed that Ramsay had given the order to withdraw, so also jumped back towards Providence. The commander of the Predator fleet that had laid a trap for the Human battlecruisers, not believing her luck, immediately exploited that major Human blunder by ordering four of her surviving nine ships to follow her flagship down the interstellar funnels created by the Human battlecruisers' jump wakes.

On the devastated and depressurized bridge of the VLADIMIR KOMAROV, the surviving bridge crewmembers couldn't help sigh in relief at the sight of Alpha Centauri B and of Providence now visible on the external viewing screen. However, one officer, the weapons officer, glared at the navigator, sitting two work stations away.

"YOU FOOL! WHO AUTHORIZED YOU TO JUMP BACK LIKE THIS TO PROVIDENCE?"

"But...but it was our only chance to survive. Since both the Admiral and the Captain were killed, I decided that it was our only course of action remaining."

"AND YOU MAY HAVE JUST SHOWN THE WAY TO PROVIDENCE TO THE ENEMY, YOU COWARDLY ASSHOLE!"

"Now, wait a minute, Mister Kurgan! What tells you that those monsters could even be able to follow us to here?"

The answer to that came only a few seconds later, when more purple laser beams struck the poor battlecruiser, causing more damage yet.

21:31 (Universal Time)

The Forster's suite, Executive Deck

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, docked at the Klondike Ore Terminal

Asteroid belt of the Trappist-1 System, 39.6 light-years from Earth

"Time to sleep, sweetie. Have some good dreams."

Tina then gently kissed her nineteen-month-old daughter Janet on the forehead and pulled up a bit more the blanket covering her child before tiptoeing out of the bedroom, leaving one small electric candle on. She had just closed the door of Janet's bedroom when her wrist communicator buzzed, making her flip up its cover revealing the tiny video display screen inside it and activating the link. She then saw the face of Renée d'Argenteuil, who was in charge of the bridge's evening shift and whose face reflected concern.

"Yes, Renée?"

"Tina, we just got an urgent message from Providence via courier drone: we are ordered to return to Providence as quickly as possible in order to protect the planet while our battle fleet is out of the system."

"And where the hell is our battle fleet right now? There were a dozen battlecruisers parked around Providence when we left the system."

"The message did not specify, Tina."

Tina then took a couple of seconds to process that information, with Renée patiently waiting for her orders. The conclusion Tina arrived at did not please her one bit.

"Those idiots probably decided to go strike at the Space Predators. With a strength of twelve battlecruisers, I can see only one objective that would warrant such a large force: the TOI 1231 System. The problem I see here is that half of our battlecruisers have still not been fully retrofitted with all our new anti-Predator equipment and weapons. Alright, I'm going to run up to the bridge now. Plot at once a jump for Providence and order the ship to battle stations: I want us to arrive in the Alpha Centauri B System at full cock and on hair trigger, ready to fight if we find something bad on arrival."

"Understood, Tina!"

Tina was in the process of grabbing the large hard-shell case containing her personal spacesuit and buckling her pistol belt around her waist when a loud and sinister alarm blare started resonating around the ship, making her swear.

"Shit! Janet: I just woke her up!"

22:04 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Just emerging in the Alpha Centauri B System

Some 1.6 AU (Astronomical Unit) from the planet Providence

"We are now in the Alpha Centauri B System, Tina. Providence is ahead of us at some 1.6 AU." announced Dana Durning, who occupied the navigator's station for this jump.

"Very well! Mister Jamilian, advise Navy Headquarters that we have returned to the Alpha Centauri B System and that we will be in Providence's orbit in about forty minutes."

"Aye, Tina!"

With her ship still at battle stations and ready to fight, Tina stayed alert and kept checking regularly the data from the NOSTROMO's sensors. One minute later, the voice of Spirit came in on the overhead speakers of the bridge sphere.

"Alert! I am detecting multiple flashes of exploding missiles and laser beams in the eastern quadrant of the system, 1.2 AU away. There is a battle on in that sector."

"Damn! This can only be our battlecruisers being engaged by Predator ships." Her words made Dana Durning look at her with shock.

"The Predators would now know how to get to Providence? That is about the worst scenario possible for us."

"Agreed! Let's try to rewrite that scenario, quickly! Spirit, take control of our helm and of our weapons and go to automated battle mode. Effect a micro-jump in order to get close to that battle, but emerge on one side of it: I want us to be able to take any Predator ship we will see in the flank."

Tina barely had time to finish her sentence before her ship effected a brief jump, changing position by 1.2 AU with no warning: nobody could ever accuse Spirit of being a laggard. Tina then had only a fraction of a second to see the scene of an intense Space battle dead ahead, with three Human battlecruisers being engaged by five huge, elongated Predator warships, before the four super-heavy disintegrator cannons constituting the main armament of the NOSTROMO opened fire in unison, concentrating their beams on the same point on the port flank of the lead Predator ship. At the same time, Tina saw a salvo of missiles flying away from the NOSTROMO's missile launchers, then splitting up in five groups of six missiles each which targeted the Predator asteroid ships. As for the NOSTROMO itself, it started at once to gyrate and zig-zag crazily in an unpredictable pattern that would make the targeting of laser beams against it very difficult. Two seconds into the firing, the disintegrator cannons of the NOSTROMO pierced through the port side of the hull of the leading Predator ship and started to

ravage its inside. Then, three seconds after that, all five Predator ships disappeared in an orgy of anti-matter warhead detonations exploding directly against their hulls, having been able to circumvent the force shields of the enemy ships by effecting micro-jumps. Having had to cover her eyes for a moment because of the blinding flashes of the explosions, Tina was then able to see that all five Predator ships had now been reduced to clouds of half-melted nickel-iron chunks.

“MAIN BATTERIES, CEASE FIRE! SECONDARY BATTERIES, TARGET AND VAPORIZE ANY PIECE OF ASTEROID-SHIP DEBRIS THAT COULD STILL SHELTER SPACE PREDATORS!”

Tina couldn't help then call Spirit via her intercom to congratulate her on her shooting.

“Spirit, in the old Far West, you would have been the queen of gunslingers. The likes of Bat Masterson³ would have been proud of you.”

“Thank you, Tina! However, I am afraid that I am now going to have to send my avatar to our medical center, to play a Florence Nightingale⁴, alongside Eve: those three COSMONAUT-Class battlecruisers look in very bad shape indeed and there must be hundreds of wounded crewmembers aboard them.”

One look at her long-range telescopes showed to Tina that Spirit was unfortunately right...again! She thus switched her microphone to ship-wide address and spoke in a firm but calm voice.

“Attention all hands, this is your Captain. We are now going to conduct a mass medical emergency rescue operation to save hundreds of wounded crewmembers from the surviving cruisers of our battle fleet. I want our mass casualty treatment section to be opened and manned and for our six operating rooms to be ready to treat battle

³ Bat Masterson : **Bartholemew William Barclay "Bat" Masterson** (November 26, 1853 – October 25, 1921) was a U.S. Army scout, lawman, professional gambler and journalist known for his exploits in the 19th and early 20th-century American Old West. He was born to a working-class Irish family in Quebec, but moved to the Western frontier as a young man and quickly distinguished himself as a buffalo hunter, civilian scout and Indian fighter on the Great Plains. He later earned fame as a gunfighter and sheriff in Dodge City, Kansas, during which time he was involved in several notable shootouts.

⁴ Florence Nightingale : Famous in Mid-19th Century England as a nurse who promoted the treatment of diseases and infections among the British soldiers fighting in the Crimean War.

casualties. The First Century will help man our mass casualty treatment center and will assist our medical personnel in the treatment and care of the wounded brought aboard. The Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Centuries will don light spacesuits and will equip themselves with anti-gravity pressurized patient gurneys and with first aid kits and will fly out to our three damaged battlecruisers to find and collect any wounded crewmembers to be found there. The Eight Century will be in charge of moving as quickly and safely as possible the patients arriving by shuttle craft up to our medical center.”

With her intercom announcement done, Tina then looked at Dana Durning, her unofficial First Officer.

“Dana, contact each of our three cruisers and ask them to be prepared to open their airlocks to our rescue teams. Tell them that their wounded will be transferred on the NOSTROMO for preliminary treatment, prior to being flown to Providence. In the meantime, I will send a combat report to our Navy Headquarters.”

“On it!”

Tina, opening a blank message form on her command chair display screen, paused for a moment before starting to write her message, a flash of anger having hit her. Only three out of twelve battlecruisers had returned from whatever mission they had been sent to accomplish. Three out of twelve! Over 7,000 brave men and women had just died in a hasty, bungled operation that had most probably been launched to satisfy someone’s hubris and thirst for glory.

23:13 (Universal Time)

Mass casualty treatment section, Medical Center

Frame level # 575, core section, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

“MAKE WAY! MAKE WAY, PLEASE!”

The warning shouts from the security android pulling an anti-gravity gurney as it came out of a lift cabin in the central rotunda of the Medical Center Deck made the few people circulating around the rotunda hastily step out of the way. With two other androids helping Officer Minnie Secord in directing the gurney floating at waist level above the deck, she soon arrived with her charge at the mass casualty treatment section, where Jehanne de Domrémy and Norma Jeane Mortenson greeted the team from the Eight Century.

“What do we have here, Minnie?” asked Jehanne as she looked at the young woman lying inside the pressurized gurney.

“A case of collapsed lungs and internal bleeding from the VLADIMIR KOMAROV. Her case is considered critical.”

“Alright! Norma and me will transfer her on a wheeled gurney, so that you can keep that anti-gravity gurney and return to the craft hangars with it. Help us move her to this gurney first.”

Minnie unlocked and opened the airtight transparent cover of the anti-gravity corner, then helped transfer the limp woman onto the wheeled gurney. Minnie and her team quickly changed the stained blankets and mattress cover of the gurney with clean, fresh ones piled near the entrance to the mass casualty section, then went back the way they came from. Now in charge of the unconscious woman, who was laboriously breathing and producing a worrying rasping noise, Jehanne and Norma Jeane quickly rolled the gurney to the nearest doctor available who was doing triage among the arriving patients.

“Case of collapsed lungs and internal bleeding, deemed critical by the pickup team, Doctor Lefranc.” said Jehanne before stepping aside to let the doctor examine quickly the wounded young woman. Lefranc took a few seconds to examine her before giving an order to Jehanne.

“Priority One case! Give her oxygen and bring her at once to the pre-op room of Operating Block Number Five.”

“Right away, Doctor!”

Jehanne quickly grabbed an oxygen mask stored under the gurney and placed it on the face of the young woman while Norma opened the valve of the oxygen bottle also carried with the gurney. Then, the two androids nearly ran away while pushing the gurney, heading towards the operating block named by Doctor Lefranc.

“Stay with us, miss! You will make it!” softly said Jehanne in order to encourage the semi-conscious female crewmember, whose ship coverall was stained with blood and was also partly cinched. Jehanne, whose programming included a solid base in medical first aid, also knew that verbally encouraging the patient was always worth trying, so she continued to speak softly to the patient until they arrived at the triage area of the operating blocks section, where she repeated Lefranc’s words to the doctor in charge there. With a doctor and two nurses then taking charge of the wounded woman, Jehanne and Norma returned at a run to the mass casualty section, to be ready to greet the next patient from the damaged battlecruisers.

“This is the 56th patient that I have counted arriving from the cruisers and there is no sign that this is letting up.” said Norma to Jehanne while running. “This is truly a tragedy.”

“It certainly is, Norma. However, we and the others are doing our best to help those who survived that battle, so we are certainly not wasting our time here.”

The next patient they greeted was a man who suffered from burns to his arms and front torso. Seeing that the burns were only first and second-degree ones, Doctor Lefranc told Jehanne and Norma to put the man on one of the treatment beds of the section, where a qualified nurse asked the two androids to help her remove the partially burned coverall of the victim, so that she could clean and disinfect his wounds before treating and bandaging them. Jehanne and Norma ended up staying with that burned man until he was ready to be put in one of the 48 backup patients' rooms of the mass casualty treatment section. The man, who was conscious but in pain, spoke to them as they helped him lay in his hospital bed.

“Thanks, girls! You are like real angels to me right now.”

“You know what, mister? That was the best compliment you could say to us.” replied Jehanne while smiling to the man.

07:49 (New Dawn Time)

Wednesday, January 6, 2332

Office of Admiral John Fenton, Navy Headquarters

City of New Dawn, Providence

Admiral Fenton did not like the way that Karl Langemann charged into his office, nor did he like the angry look on his face.

“YOUR DAMN VICE ADMIRAL RAMSAY SCREWED UP BIG TIME AND NOW OVER 7,000 OF OUR MEN AND WOMEN ARE DEAD, WHILE ANOTHER 400 OR SO ARE IN HOSPITAL. EVEN WORSE, THOSE SPACE PREDATORS NOW KNOW THE WAY TO PROVIDENCE. YOU BETTER EXPLAIN TO ME THE CAUSES OF SUCH A DISASTER AND QUICKLY, ADMIRAL FENTON!”

“The explanation is simple, Mister Chairman: the Predators were waiting for us and laid a trap for our cruisers with what must have been most of their fleet. Vice

Admiral Ramsay ended up in severe numerical inferiority of one against three right from the start.”

“Did he conduct a covert reconnaissance of the system before charging in?”

“Uh, no, Mister Chairman.”

“Did he arrived there directly from Providence or did he use an alternate point for his jump, so that he could arrive in the TOI1231 System from another direction than Providence?”

“He took the direct route, Mister Chairman.” answered Fenton, realizing how bad this sounded. “Sir, I know that this all sounds and looks bad, but Vice Admiral Ramsay couldn’t possibly know that the enemy was waiting for him.”

“Maybe, but he could have planned his attack to mitigate the risks.”

“Maybe he did but we will never know: Ramsay was killed in that battle.”

“And so were over 7,000 of our people. The only reason this planet is not under enemy fire right now is because Rear Admiral Forster and her NOSTROMO arrived in time and then destroyed those five Predator asteroid ships in mere seconds. Explain to me how an armed merchant ship performed better than our battlecruisers, Admiral!”

Fenton tightened his jaws at that question, truly irritated by it.

“I can’t say right now, sir: I haven’t had time to analyze that battle in our system or the battle inside the TOI 1231 System.

“Well, I will explain it to you, Admiral: one commander didn’t use his tactical judgment, underestimated the enemy and went in with half of his ships unfit to fight the Predators, while the other commander used her experience and tactical savvy and showed initiative. If not for the fact that he has been killed, I would have expected Ramsay to end up in front of a court martial for gross incompetence. I...”

Langemann was then interrupted by urgent knocks on the door of Fenton’s office, followed by a junior officer’s entrance. That officer saluted both Fenton and Langemann at rigid attention before speaking in an urgent tone.

“Sorry to interrupt you, sirs, but three Drazts cruisers jumped in our system mere minutes ago. They are now heading towards the location of the NOSTROMO. What should we do about them, Admiral?”

“Drazts cruisers? What the hell are they doing here? I didn’t ask for their help!”

“But you should have!” countered Langemann while looking severely at Fenton. “Thankfully, someone else took the initiative to call for help, and you know who I am talking about, Admiral.”

Langemann then turned to speak to the junior officer, who was still standing at attention in the middle of the office.

“Have this headquarters call the Drazts ships and thank them for their help. They are to be considered as allies and friends coming to our aid.”

“Mister Chairman, it would be up to me to pass such a directive!” protested Fenton, shooting up on his feet. Langemann in turn looked at him with pure contempt.

“Not anymore, Admiral: you are fired as of now, both as my defense minister and as commander of our Navy. Lieutenant, do as I tell you!”

“Huh, yes sir!” replied the junior officer before saluting again and leaving the office. Fenton, both stunned and furious, shot a black look at Langemann.

“You can’t do that! Who the hell would replace me anyway?”

“Someone with a good head on her shoulders.” Replied coldly the Chairman of the High Council.

CHAPTER 14 – A WOMAN IN CHARGE

14:44 (New Dawn Time)

Wednesday, January 6, 2332

**Command conference room, Executive Deck
A.M.S. NOSTROMO, in orbit over Providence
Alpha Centauri B System**



Janet Robeson

Tina, along with Janet Robeson, Dana Durning and Spirit, got up on her feet when Karl Langemann entered the command conference room of her ship, accompanied by a small retinue of aides and bodyguards.

“Welcome aboard the NOSTROMO, Mister Chairman.”

“Thank you, Tina! Aah, I see that everybody I wanted to see is here. Excellent! First off, I must congratulate you for your prompt and effective actions against those invading Predator ships. You probably saved Providence from destruction at the hands of those monsters, on top of saving the survivors of our battle fleet.”

“I only did my duty as best I could, Mister Chairman.”

“Please, simply call me Karl, Tina: we have been working hand in hand for over sixteen years now.”

Langemann, along with his aides, then sat down at the conference table, facing Tina and her own team.

“Now, let’s get to the meat of things! This morning, I fired Admiral Fenton from his posts of Minister of Defense and of Commander of the Navy. He showed poor judgment in accepting Vice Admiral Ramsay’s attack plan with next to no scrutiny or tactical analysis. He also failed to prepare adequately our navy for the fight against the Space Predators and wasted precious time by not prioritizing the retrofit of our battlecruisers, something that must have heavily contributed to our defeat in the TOI 1231 System. After reviewing the actual chain of command of the Navy this morning, following my firing of Admiral Fenton, I was not, to say charitably, much impressed by the list of potential successors to Fenton. Most of those admirals have little to no combat experience and, while technically qualified, could be called a bunch of desk-flyers and paper-pushers. As for the position of Minister of Defense, I now realize that it was a mistake to cumulate two such important positions under one man. Fenton may

have been good at the political and budgetary sides of the job but that detracted from his need to properly lead the Navy. I have thus decided to separate the two functions from now on, for good.”

“A wise move I must say, Karl.” said Janet Robeson. “Our navy has grown way too bureaucratic to my taste during the last couple of years.”

“An opinion I completely share, my dear Janet. As for who could best fill this position now, the answer was obvious to me from the start: you, Janet!”

“Me? But I retired from politics two years ago and now live on the NOSTROMO.”

“I know, my dear, but I can’t think of a better candidate right now for the post of defense minister in this critical time for the survival of the Spacers’ League. You led the Spacers’ League through the war for independence from the Terran Federation, then guided its expansion through the stars closest to the Solar System. You would be perfect for the job.”

Janet Robeson took a deep breath, then nodded her head once.

“Alright! Gerald is going to kill me for this but I accept your offer. Could I name an assistant-minister to help me in the job, Karl? I am not sure that I can truly count on the bureaucrats presently populating the ministry. There are a lot of Fenton toadies in place there. Also, could that assistant-minister be also the head of the Navy, or must that position be an actual admiral?”

That last question surprised Langemann, who hesitated for a second.

“Huh, I don’t know, to be frank. I would have to check the legalese about that.”

“The position is customarily held by a serving flag officer, generally meaning the most senior and highest-level admiral in the service, but nothing in the charter of our navy makes that a mandatory fact, Mister Chairman.” then said Spirit’s avatar, surprising about everyone. “Historically, the old British Navy was led by what was called the First Sea Lord, who was not always an admiral. Winston Churchill is a historical example of such a civilian First Sea Lord and he served as head of the Royal Navy during World War One.”

“Oh! I didn’t know that. Thanks for the information, Spirit.”

“You’re welcome, Karl.”

“So, Janet, who would you like to have as an assistant-minister and head of the Navy?”

"Spirit! Or rather Spirit's avatar." answered Janet. While Langemann was stunned by her answer, both Tina and Spirit made gentle smiles on hearing Janet. "Of course, this would be a temporary assignment only, until we could get out of the hole Fenton dug ourselves in."

Karl Langemann scratched his prominent chin for a moment while thinking, then nodded his head and smiled to both Janet and Spirit.

"Agreed! When would you two be able to take your posts?"

"I could pack quickly and move to New Dawn tonight, to whatever residence you can offer me there, and could officially start my new job tomorrow morning." answered Janet Robeson.

"Excellent! My personal aide, Miss Wong, will help you in that respect. What about you, Spirit?"

"Me? I only need to pack a couple of bags and to move into one of the visitors' suites of the Navy Headquarters and I will be good to go. As the new head of the Navy, I would need to give a couple of directives right away, in view of the urgency of the situation."

"What would these directives be, Spirit?"

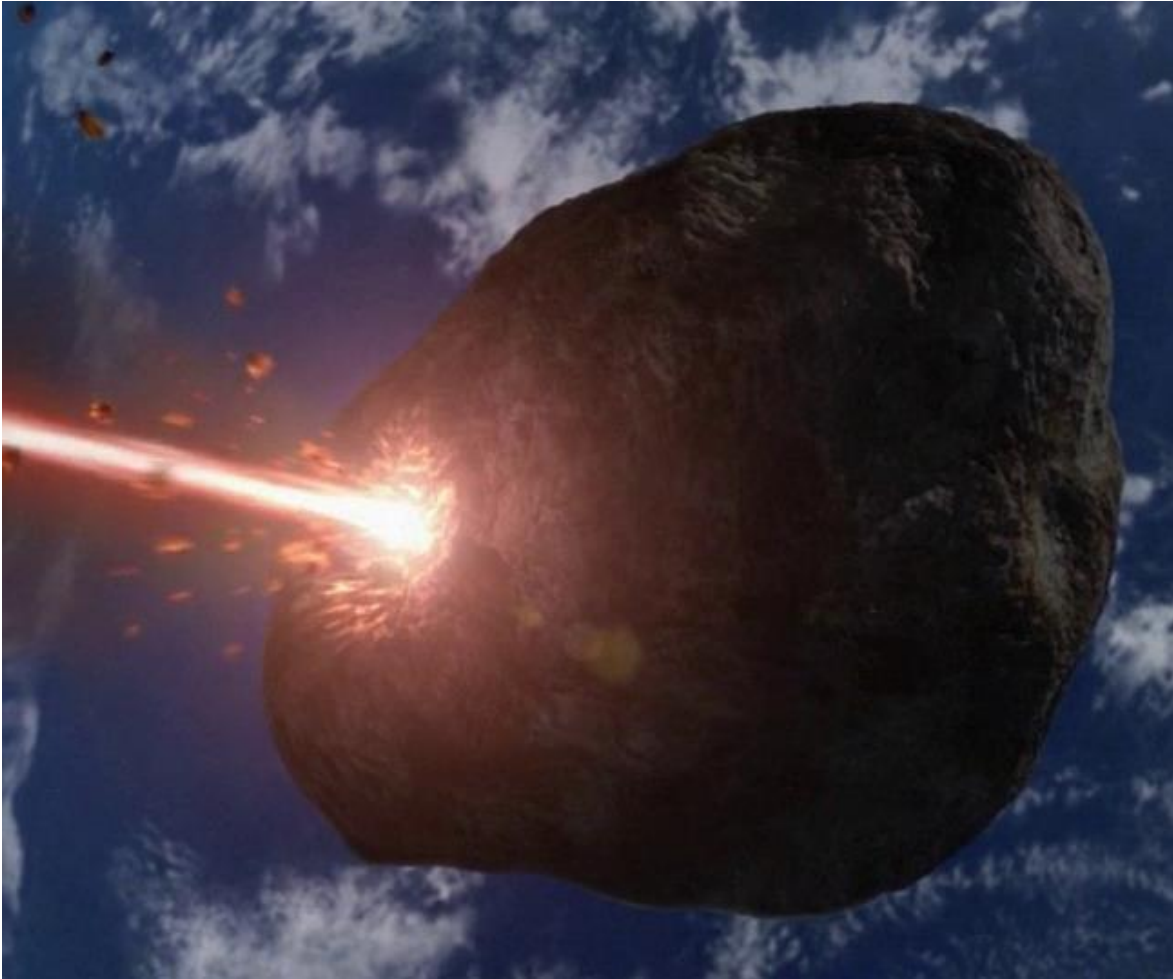
"First, with Providence now being directly threatened by the Space Predators, I will order the three remaining battlecruisers of our fleet, which are presently in other systems, to rally Providence, so that they could guard the system alongside the three Drazts cruisers of Admiral Dozna Wiss. Second, I will have the repair dock of the New Horizon orbital station made for ultra-heavy ships freed up, so that the NOSTROMO could enter it and be rearmed and refitted in it prior to going on its next combat mission." Langemann frowned and threw a look of concern at Tina, whose expression was an impassive one.

"Has your NOSTROMO suffered some battle damage during that fight with those five Predator ships, Tina?"

"Not a scratch, Karl. I simply need to refill my missile magazines and get a new paint job."

"A new paint job?!" could only say a flabbergasted Chairman of the High Council.

CHAPTER 15 – PAYBACK TIME



10:30 (Universal Time)

Sunday, January 10, 2332

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Pulling away from the orbit of Providence

Alpha Centauri B System

Tina had a last sad look at the New Horizon orbital station as her NOSTROMO started flying away from it: her two children and her husband had been left behind on the station, like all the other children, relatives and commercial associates which had been deemed non-combatants. The mission she was now starting was simply too dangerous and she and her crew would need to concentrate solely on it. Whatever would happen in the TOI 1231 System, at least little Janet and Misha would be safe, escorted by their

father. Normally, Michel would have been definitely considered as a combatant crew member but, as in the cases involving families with both parents being regular crewmembers, one of the parents had to stay behind and stay with the children. Once at a safe distance from the orbital station, Tina looked at her principal pilot, Frida Skarsgard.

“You can start accelerating away on main drive, Frida. Dana, get ready to jump on our precalculated destination.”

“Ready on my station, Tina!”

Satisfied, Tina then spoke on the radio frequency of the orbital traffic control center.

“New Horizon Traffic Control, this is the NOSTROMO. Do you have us on radar?”

Somehow, the usually prompt to react traffic controller took a few seconds to reply to her.

“Er, NOSTROMO, have you pulled away from the station yet? I don’t see you on radar.”

That response made Tina grin with satisfaction: the new mate black radar and infra-red absorbing coat of paint applied to her ship, along with the newly added electronic counter-measure pods attached to her ship’s hull, was doing its work. Furthermore, the mate black paint would also make the NOSTROMO very difficult to visually detect against the black backdrop of deep Space.

“That’s the way I want it, New Horizon Control. NOSTROMO out!”

“Course set and jump calculated, Tina.” said Dana Durning from her navigator’s station. “Jumping in ten seconds. Three...two...one, jumping now!”

A brief flash of orange light permeated the bridge sphere, signaling an interstellar jump via their Koomak Drive. The view on the holographic inner screens of the bridge sphere then changed completely. From having the orange ball of Alpha Centauri B and the blue ball of the planet Providence visible, the screens now showed the black of deep space, plus a distant, faint red ball behind them.

“Confirm position, please!”

“We are at the precalculated point, nine AUs behind the TOI 1231 primary, Tina. We can now reverse course and head towards that red dwarf star.”

"Frida, reverse course and adjust our trajectory towards TOI 1231 b. Accelerate to 0.002 c⁵, then continue on coasting. We will now stick to the three 'S' until further notice."

"The three 'S', Tina?"

"Yes! Slow, steady and stealthy." answered Tina, smiling, before switching on her ship-wide intercom. "Attention, all hands! We are now inside the TOI 1231 System but will be proceeding slowly and cautiously for the next twenty hours or so. Secure from battle stations and return to routine operations but be ready to react quickly to any warning. Catch as much sleep as you can and eat something while things are calm. That is all!"

Next, she looked at her bridge crew and passed her directives.

"The regular day shift will stay on. The rest of you: go rest! Dana, go rest as well, so that you can relieve me in six hours from now."

"Understood, Tina!" replied the buxom navigator and unofficial first officer before getting up from her station and leaving the bridge with two-thirds of the other crewmembers.

Tina had time to complete her day shift, go rest for six hours and then return to the bridge before something showed up on the ship's passive sensors as the NOSTROMO was about to pass through the asteroid belt of the system.

"Tina, we are now detecting a weak radar signal from our eleven o'clock. It is coming from inside the asteroid belt."

Tina immediately tensed up on hearing that from Minh Wa Hien, one of the bridge sensors operators.

"Is it a search or surveillance radar, Hien?"

"The frequency is too high for that, Tina. My guess would be some kind of navigation radar, and not a very powerful one. Also, its angular movement is barely discernable: either it is moving in the same direction as us or it is moving quite slowly."

"Hum, doesn't sound like a warship on patrol. Aim our main telescope on that radar source and see if we can identify it visually."

"On it, Tina!"

⁵ C : A unit measurement of speed denoting the speed of an object in relation to the speed of light. In this case, 0.002 c means a speed equal to 0.2 percent of the speed of light, or 600 kilometers per second.

Less than a minute later, Hien spoke up again.

"I have a moving object in sight, Tina. It actually looks like a closely coupled pair of large objects. One, while big enough, is dwarfed by the other object. Both are of irregular shape and appear to be glued to each other, with the smaller one ahead of the bigger one."

Tina thought for a moment, puzzled, before she had a revelation.

"A tugboat towing an asteroid! That's the only thing that would make sense in this case."

"That may well be it, Tina. What do we do about it?"

"In what direction are they heading?"

"They are roughly on course towards TOI 1231 b, Tina."

"Then, this may be a Predator tugboat towing an asteroid towards the planet. Try to read their body composition with our spectrometers."

"I read surfaces made of nickel-iron, typical of M-Class asteroids."

"The kind of asteroids the Predators use to turn into ships. This is definitely smelling like a tugboat bringing a fresh asteroid inside the system, so that it could be transformed into a ship. With the huge losses the Predators have suffered at the hands of our battle fleet, they must be eager to replace their losses with new ships. Frida, approach that pair from the rear while being careful to stay in the radar shadow of the towed asteroid. Then, you will be able to practice your tailgating driving from very close behind the bigger asteroid."

"And what told you that I like tailgating other vehicles, Tina?"

"Your piloting!" replied Tina jokingly, making many on the bridge laugh briefly or snicker.

"Alright, Tina: I will get close enough to read its license plate."

Frida Skarsgard then made the NOSTROMO make a wide, very progressive turn towards the port side until it was trailing the moving asteroids from afar, then slowly approached them. Soon, the main telescope, a powerful optical astronomical instrument, started showing more details about the moving asteroids.

"The trailing asteroid appears to be a raw one, Tina, but it is also quite big. It measures a good 3.6 kilometers in diameter and is at least eight kilometers-long. As for the leading asteroid, it is presently completely hidden by the mass of the bigger asteroid."

"Good! It will thus be impossible for the radar of this tugboat to detect us in our present position. Minh, deploy two stealth probes but leave them close to us, with just enough separation for them to be able to look ahead past this big asteroid. We will use those probes for our forward vision."

"Aye, Tina!"

"Electronic warfare, are you intercepting any signal other than that of the tugboat's radar?"

"We do hear a number of weak radio signals coming from the planet and moon ahead, Tina. They do not appear to be encrypted, so are probably routine communications links."

"Spirit, can you understand the Predators' language yet?"

"My translation base on Predator Language is still only at 26%, Tina, but I am working on improving it. I will keep you apprised if I make marked improvements to that."

"Thanks, Spirit! Reena, how long will it take us at our present speed and that of this tugboat to arrive close to that planet ahead?"

"About another eighteen hours, Tina. That tugboat is not that powerful and the asteroid it is pulling is truly massive."

"Eighteen hours?! Talk about a slow trip to Hell! Alright, the pilot, sensors and electronic warfare stations will start relief rotations every two hours, starting in one hour, so that we always have fresh and rested operators on duty at those stations. The other stations will now go at half-manning. If this tugboat and its load could hide us all the way to TOI 1231 bc, then I will be as happy as a pig in shit."

"Oink oink!" then said Patricia O'Neil, making everybody on the bridge laugh.

15:10 (New Dawn Time)

Navy Headquarters, New Dawn

Providence, Alpha Centauri B System

Spirit, sitting in the office previously used by Admiral Fenton as head of the Navy, was conversing via video link with Janet Robeson, who was in the Minister of Defense's office some two floors up, when someone knocked on her door. Then, before she could excuse herself with Janet and invite in whoever was at the door, two senior officers, one a commodore and another a rear admiral, entered and walked to her desk, stopping

close to it. With her video link with Janet Robeson still active and with her screen facing her and not being visible to her two pushy visitors, Spirit stared coldly at the two flag officers.

"Gentlemen, I do not believe that I invited you in. Your manners are quite cavalier, I must say."

"You find our manners cavalier?" replied the rear admiral. "What about the way you totally rewrote our proposed plan to replace our ship losses?"

"Rear Admiral Papadopoulos, I rewrote your plan because it was both deeply flawed and ignored the reality concerning the Space Predators. Your proposal to continue building at an accelerated pace more ships of the present COSMONAUT-Class was a recipe for a waste of our limited shipbuilding resources. We need to design a new, better class of battlecruiser that could hold its own against a Predator asteroid warship and win. The recent battle in the TOI 1231 System should have been enough of a demonstration about the shortcomings of the COSMONAUT-Class battlecruisers. It also highlighted some glaring shortcomings in the tactical training of our cruiser commanders and of our flag officers."

"And who the hell are you to say that? You are not a Navy officer! Hell, you are not even a Human!"

Her expression now severe, Spirit slowly rose to her feet and stared straight into the eyes of the rear admiral.

"I will tell you who I am, Rear Admiral Papadopoulos! I am the avatar of a ship's central AI computer with thousands of times the mental processing capacity of you and of all your staff combined. I, as the central computer of the KOSTROMA and then of the NOSTROMO, assisted Captain Forster in dozens of Space battles since 2315, often directing myself both weapons firing and ship maneuvering during those battles. I also proposed many times to Captain Forster tactical solutions to an oncoming fight, proposals that she accepted and applied nearly every time. I helped direct the actions of the KOSTROMA, then of the NOSTROMO, in three battles against Predator ships and we won all three of those battles. I know how to defeat Predator ships and also know what kind of ships we need to beat them and I firmly believe that your original rebuilding plan was a road to nowhere but to pure waste of time and resources. As for your criticism of me as not being a navy officer and not being human, I consider it totally irrelevant. I also consider your own service record to be less than impressive when it comes to justifying your criticizing of my judgment. For one thing, you never fought a

single Space battle, in any rank or capacity, so your own experience of combat is exactly zero, Rear Admiral Papadopoulos. Our ship rebuilding plan will thus stay as I rewrote it.”

“Then, expect the headquarters staff to block that plan of yours, miss. We will make sure of that. You are simply not qualified to overturn our advice.”

From hard, Spirit’s expression then became downright menacing and she spoke with as cold a voice as she could.

“You know what that means in terms of military justice, Rear Admiral Papadopoulos? It is called insubordination. When you threaten to lead the rest of your staff against me, then it becomes incitation to mutiny in a time of war. You want me to remind you of the punishment for such an offense? But don’t worry about ending in front of a firing squad. I will only relieve you and the toady following you of your respective command positions. I will personally direct from now on the work of our shipbuilding program office in your place, until I can find a more competent senior officer to lead it. Now, either you leave my office now and go clean your respective desks, or I will have you arrested for insubordination and attempted incitation to mutiny. Is that clear?”

While shaken by her firm response, Papadopoulos still made a last attempt at defiance.

“Nobody will believe you, you damn robot! It will be my word against yours.”

While still staring at Papadopoulos, Spirit pivoted around her computer, letting the two officers see the stern face of Janet Robeson on its screen.

“The Minister of Defense and the Chairman of the High Council will believe me. You just went one step too far, Admiral.”

“I agree, Spirit.” said Janet Robeson on the screen. “Rear Admiral Papadopoulos, Commodore Holsinger, you are both under arrest for gross insubordination and incitation to mutiny. Know that I have just recorded what you said to Spirit. A military police squad will soon arrive to pick you up. Leave Spirit’s office now and wait in the hallway outside for the arrival of our MPs.”

“So?” said Spirit when both flag officers hesitated and didn’t move. “Shall I personally throw you out of my office? I can guarantee you that I am strong enough to easily do that.”

That finally decided the two men to move and leave her office, leaving Spirit alone to speak to Janet via her computer video link.

“Janet, I believe that we will need to do some serious cleanup within the Navy’s command structure. If those two were typical of what I will have to work with, then we are in big trouble.”

“I am afraid that you are right about that, Spirit. I will have to speak with Karl Langemann about this. I will now close this link, so that I could order a MP squad down to your office.”

With the link now cut, Spirit reflected mentally about all the possible failings of the human ego, especially in men holding positions of power.

04:52 (Universal Time)

Monday, January 11, 2332

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Approaching TOI 1231 bc and still behind the towed Predator asteroid

Tina shook her head in disbelief as she looked at the image of the moon that was the homeworld of the Space Predators, now close enough to distinguish its surface features in detail.

“I just can’t believe that we have been able to get within 350,000 kilometers from TOI 1231 bc without being detected still. Our battle fleet must have hurt those monsters really bad for them to have become so lax in terms of security within their own system. Up to now, we detected the emissions from only two low frequency surveillance radars since we crossed the asteroid belt.”

“Well, our fleet may have lost nine battlecruisers destroyed,” replied Dana Durning, “plus the remaining three being so heavily damaged that they are now only good for the scrap heap, but they did manage to destroy 26 Predator asteroid ships in that battle. What those Predators won in this system was truly a Pyrrhic victory at best.”

“A Pyrrhic victory that will now cost them their shirt, with us now in good position to launch a surprise strike on their homeworld. Alright, call the crew to battle stations and have our heavy fighters ready to fly out. Our first target will be that Predator warship docked with that gigantic asteroid-cum-orbital station orbiting the moon. It is presently the only enemy warship visible on this side of the moon and apparently doesn’t have its force shield switched on. Once it is destroyed, we will continue with our Plan Alpha strike.”

“What about that tugboat we have been closely following during all those hours, Tina?”

“If it does anything but simply flee, then it will earn a missile for its trouble. Frida, be ready to raise our ship above the top of that raw asteroid being towed, just enough to clear the frontal firing arc of our cannons. Renée, fire our main battery in a concentrated fire against the mid-section of that docked asteroid warship the moment that you will have a clear shot. You will also launch at the same time our first missile mass salvo against the cities visible on the moon, while our heavy fighters will fly out and head for their designated targets.”

“Gee, it is nice to have Spirit available to help me with all that targeting work.” replied Renée d’Argenteuil, Tina’s weapons officer. The voice of Spirit then came over the speakers of the bridge, sounding amused.

“Help you, Renée? I already preregistered the targets for our first missile salvo and entered that data into our missiles’ guidance systems. What are you complaining about?”

“Alright, kids: we will split your marbles between you two once this is all over.” said a grinning Tina. Everybody ready?”

“Weapons aimed and ready to fire!”

“Our fighter squadrons are signaling ‘ready to fly out’.”

“Helm, ready to raise our ship over the top of that asteroid.”

“Then, here we go!”

Punching the button activating the ship-wide announcement system, Tina then nearly shouted in her microphone.

“To all the crew, this is your captain speaking: TORA! TORA! TORA!”

On that classic historical signal to attack given on the intercom by Tina, Frida Skarsgard made the NOSTROMO jump up by 2,000 meters, allowing the four giant disintegrator cannons of its main battery to have a direct line of fire on the docked Predator asteroid warship.

04:58 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the Space Predator tugboat SADAKA

Towing a raw asteroid being closely followed by the NOSTROMO

Nezal-Ka was happy that her long, boring towing mission was about to end. In a short while she was going to be able to deliver her load to the ZAR-KA-LOR orbital station, where it would be transformed into a much-needed new warship. While she hadn't been told much about the battle that had opposed the Race's fleet to a large alien attack fleet, she had heard enough to know that this alien opponent could be very dangerous if not dealt with quickly and decisively. As a female of the Race, Nezal-Ka had enough brain and intelligence to be able to judge correctly the parameters of a problem, contrary to the typical male drones, who were only good as hunters and killers in her opinion. Nezal-Ka was not the only female to think so, far from it. In fact, the Race had traditionally reserved the thinking jobs and positions of responsibility to females, while restricting male drones to the jobs of simple workers and warriors, and this for over a millennium. As a result of selective genetic breeding over the centuries, the females of the Race had developed a markedly superior average intelligence compared to that of male drones. In return for accepting that state of affair and acting accordingly, male drones could hope to couple one day with a female, while getting first pick on the fresh meat from their kills. All in all, both sexes of the Race found this arrangement plenty satisfactory.

Nezal-Ka was about to go wake up her three other crewmembers, who were presently sleeping, so that they could assist her in the delicate docking operation to come, when four thick, bright blue beams of energy shot past her tugboat, coming from the back of the asteroid she had been towing. Those energy beams then struck the docked cruiser at mid-body with big, blinding flashes. Without its force shields to protect it, the warship's hull was quickly holed through by the blue energy beams, which then started to vaporize the inside of the warship. Nezal-Ka needed many seconds to go over her surprise and stupor, seconds that were enough for the blue beams to go completely through the warship and then start digging through the sides of the ZAR-KA-LOR orbital station-cum-shipyard. She was finally able to go over her shock and shrieked a loud shout of alarm meant to wake up her crewmates. Next, not waiting for her mates to return to the bridge, she cut off power to the big electro-magnets which had been tying together her tugboat and the raw asteroid she had been towing, then started flying away from her load. However, unable to resist her curiosity about who was firing like this on the warship and orbital station, she moved her ship slightly to one side, enough for her rear-view sensors to be able to see what was behind the raw asteroid.

The sight of the huge, black alien ship flying very close to her asteroid filled her at once with a mix of horror and fear. That mix was then replaced by remorse and guilt when she understood that her tugboat and towed asteroid had involuntarily helped that alien ship approach her homeworld undetected. Looking back towards the orbital station, she saw that the enemy energy beams had by now dug all the way through its hull crust. Then, she had to close her eyes when four huge blinding explosions struck the sides of the orbital station. When Nezal-Ka was able to look again, it was to see that there were now four huge holes, each one big enough to let in her tugboat, in the hull of the orbital station, while what she could see of the inside showed utter devastation. Her remorse and guilt then were replaced with rage towards those aliens who had tricked her and were now attacking the Race. Accelerating at maximum rate, she then made her ship perform a 'U'-turn in order to face the alien ship and charge it. Her tugboat may have been unarmed but she still could use it as a weapon. Nezal-Ka had only a fraction of a second to mentally register the image of a small object that came at her ship before everything went out in a flash of light.

Pieter Nordlung felt excitement as his heavy fighter flew out of the NOSTROMO with 93 other heavy fighters: he was going to be able to personally help make those monstrous Predators pay for all the killings and destruction they had made. Following his squadron leader, he dove his heavy fighter towards the moon that was their primary objective, heading for the upper layers of its atmosphere. As he and his squadron comrades were diving, a series of huge anti-matter blasts smothered the moon's surface, each blast centered on a point of light indicating a Predator city or center of activity. Pieter felt pure elation as over 300 heavy missiles, each armed with a ninety-megaton anti-matter warhead, laid death and destruction across the Space Predators' homeworld. Normally, such a wide strike would have been described by most as 'genocidal' but, for Pieter, this was simply a self-defense measure, as this was clearly a 'kill or be killed' situation. He also knew that more was to come for the moon, as this was only the opening phase of the attack against the Predator homeworld. Right now, however, his squadron had another job to do before switching to the second phase of the moon's bombardment.

Entering the upper layers of the atmosphere of TOI 1231 bc at a shallow angle, the eight heavy fighters of Pieter's squadron, the HFS 22 SPACE PROWLERS, went

down to an altitude of 2,000 meters while flying westward towards the night terminator of the moon. Two minutes later, Pieter heard his squadron commander speak on their squadron radio channel.

"Heads up, Prowlers: two big bogeys are coming around the moon towards the orbit of the enemy orbital station. Each callsign is to prepare two missiles each, with one missile per approaching target. Program final micro-jump trajectories and maximum warhead yield."

"Katarina, prepare our missiles number one and two for launch, with final micro-jumps courses and yields of ninety-megaton. Be ready to lock on two approaching asteroid ships that are rounding the moon and heading our way."

"Missiles programmed and ready, Pieter." replied his weapons officer, Katarina Volkova, after a few seconds. "Am now waiting for final targeting data."

"Excellent! Tom, do you have these two asteroid ships on our sensors?"

"Not yet, Pieter." Answered Thomas Aquino, their sensors officer.

They then received more directives from their squadron leader.

"All Prowler callsigns, brake to a stop over this island we are about to overfly and keep an altitude of 500 meters, so that we become difficult to track on radar: we will wait in ambush there until we can target those two approaching bogeys."

Pieter soon stopped his fighter in midair over the said island while keeping a respectable distance with the nearest fighter: bunching up was definitely not a good tactic when facing heavy weapons. As he and the eleven other fighter crews waited for the Predator warships to come around in orbit, his copilot, Keiko Sumotori, suddenly pushed an exclamation of surprise.

"Hey, I see what looks like a large group of pink-colored creatures on that island. That looks like some kind of cattle farm down there."

"Who cares?!" replied Katarina Volkova. "We are after Predator warships, not cattle!"

"Wait! Did you say 'pink cattle', Keiko?"

"Er, yes!"

"Use our telescope and tell me what that cattle looks like. Also, link your telescope to my secondary display screen."

While a bit mystified by his request, Keiko obeyed him and was soon sending pictures to Pieter's display screen while describing what she was seeing.

"I see hundreds, maybe a few thousands of herbivores with pink fur and six legs. I am not sure from this far, but they also look a bit like the old centaurs of legend."

"Hell, these are not cattle heads: they are Kiryns, intelligent beings we recently saved from the Predators and who live in the Gliese 422 System. I have to pass this information at once."

"But, why distract ourselves with these things when we are about to engage two Predator warships?" objected Katarina Volkova, attracting a rather dry reply from Pieter.

"Those 'things' as you called them are sentient beings. What would you do if you saw instead hundreds of Humans corralled in a place as a reserve of fresh meat? Be assured that Admiral Forster will want to know about this. If it can reassure you, I will send that info via an encrypted datalink to the NOSTROMO."

Thankfully for Pieter, he had time to send a message with images attached to it well before Thomas Aquino signaled the approach of the two Predator ships, rounding the moon while in high orbit. Their squadron leader then gave a terse order on the radio.

"All Prowler callsigns, launch missiles now!"

"Missiles on the way!" said nearly at once Katarina. Pieter anxiously followed visually the 24 missiles now climbing at lightning speed to the near vertical.

"Come on, babies! Take those damn Predators in the ass!"

"The Predator ships are presently operating only their low-frequency, long-range radars." said Thomas Aquino, wanting to reassure his comrades. "Our missiles, coming from inside the moon's atmosphere, will probably take them by surprise."

"I hope to hell they will!" said Keiko Sumotori.

Some fifty seconds after missile launch, a dense pattern of gigantic explosions in orbit illuminated the sky, with Aquino shouting in triumph a few seconds later.

"Both Predator ships are breaking up in pieces! WE GOT THEM!"

Wild cheers filled the cockpit of the heavy fighter at those words. However, their squadron leader soon returned them to the reality of their tactical situation.

"Good shooting, guys, but remember that we have at least two more Predator ships roaming around."

One minute later, their squadron leader was back on the radio.

"Belay my last, Prowler callsigns: those bums from the STAR EAGLES and the SPACE DEMONS just destroyed three Predator warships. There are no major Predator

warships left in the system. We are thus free to go to Phase Two of our strike plan. However, the NOSTROMO has asked that a close air reconnaissance of that island below us be conducted, with our images to be retransmitted to the NOSTROMO. Prowler Five and Six, you're it!"

"Prowler Five, acknowledged!" replied Pieter Nordlung, happy to have been designated for that task.

05:43 (Universal Time)

Small craft hangar complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In low orbit over TOI 1231 bc and approaching the Predator orbital station

"GET IN QUICKLY AND STRAP YOURSELVES IN YOUR SEATS, GUYS: THE DESCENT WILL BE QUICK AND ROUGH!"

Jehanne then preached by example and firmly strapped herself in on one of the seats lining both sides of the assault barge's cargo cabin. Eve Silisca, wearing a tactical vest, helmet and pistol belt, sat next to her and smiled to Jehanne.

"I hope that you haven't forgotten the Kirynian you learned on Glyyn, Jehanne."

"Why do you ask that, Eve? You know that I can't forget anything, unless I decide to erase it from my memory banks."

"I know! I was just joking."

Jehanne made a point of showing bafflement on her face.

"Joking... That is one Human notion that I have some problem understanding. What is 'funny' in saying something illogical, nonsensical or stupid?"

"Well, when you will have interacted with Humans as long as I did, then you may understand. In the meantime, let's concentrate on saving those Kiryns down on the Predators' moon."

They then stayed silent during the next few minutes as their assault barge, part of a formation of six barges loaded with the androids of Jehanne's First Century, flew out of the NOSTROMO and started going down towards the surface of TOI 1231 bc. The formation soon entered the moon's atmosphere, which was quite similar to that of Earth, and continued on a steep descent towards the island reported by Pieter Nordlung. Both Jehanne and Eve kept their eyes on the display screen showing the view in front of and below their assault barge as it sped at low altitude towards a large, vegetation-covered

island. When they were some six kilometers short of it, Jehanne unstrapped herself and shouted orders at her androids.

“WE ARE ABOUT TO OVERFLY OUR OBJECTIVE! UNSTRAP YOURSELVES AND GET READY TO JUMP OUT!”

A few seconds later, the aft cargo ramp of their barge lowered open, to then become level with the deck of the cargo cabin, creating a maelstrom of cold wind inside. Jehanne, closely followed by Eve, stepped on the ramp, holding her disintegrator rifle with both hands and with her directed gravity drive internal system on. The moment that the island's surface started passing under them, Jehanne shouted another order.

“TIME TO JUMP! FOLLOW ME!”

She then ran down the ramp and resolutely jumped off its end. Eve and 99 other androids also jumped from the six assault barges, which had each been carrying much less than their maximum capacity, so that there would be place to load hundreds of Kiryns aboard them once the Predators to be found on the island would have been killed. Falling first in freefall, the androids used their gravity drives to slow down their fall once some 150 meters from the ground and then flew towards a small group of buildings situated next to a large, grassy plain where hundreds of Kiryns had been munching grass. There had been a few Predators guard towers with laser cannons around that plain, along a perimeter fence to keep the Kiryns in, but heavy fighters had already dealt with those towers, vaporizing them and the Predator guards in them with their disintegrator cannons. Giving a few quick orders on the radio, Jehanne sent twenty of her androids split up and land along the perimeter fence, to prevent any Predator from coming to hurt the Kiryns, who were now fleeing in panic, not knowing or understanding what was happening. Eve could well understand their reaction, as those Kiryns must have seen multiple flashes and heard distant but powerful explosions from the missiles which had rained down on Predator cities and industrial centers lining the coast of the sea on which the island was. She then decided to split up from Jehanne and the majority of the androids and flew down towards the nearest large group of Kiryns, while Jehanne continued towards the buildings of what must have been the equivalent of a cattle farm complex for the Predators. Landing softly some twenty meters from the nearest Kiryns, she immediately raised both of her hands and spoke in the elementary Kirynian language she knew.

“WE ARE FRIENDS! DO NOT FEAR US! WE ARE HERE TO SAVE YOU AND RETURN YOU TO YOUR HOMES ON GLYYN.”

Her words in Kirynian, along with the mention of 'Glyyn', made the Kiryns facing her stop and look at her with disbelief.

"You know about Glyyn?" asked one young male Kiryn.

"Yes, I do! I went there recently to bring back to their homes another group of your kind that we saved from those monsters. Once my people will have killed all the monsters on this island, we will then transport you all to our ship, which will then carry you back home."

A concert of cries of joy greeted her declaration and the Kiryns then started approaching her, now less afraid of her. Eve then decided to call the pilot of the leading assault barge via radio.

"Trojan Horse Leader, this is Eve: you may start landing on the grassy plain where the Kiryns are: we are now ready to load them in, over."

"Trojan Horse Leader to Eve, understood! I am on my way down."

As the kiryns looked on at the approaching assault barges, Eve gently smiled to them.

"Your nightmare is about to end, my friends."

06:49 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In orbit close to the gutted Predator orbital station

"Our android force has nearly finished loading up the last remaining Kiryns in their assault barges, Tina. Eve says that the evacuation will be completed in the next ten minutes."

"Excellent! I know that our missiles have already devastated the cities and facilities of the Space Predators on their homeworld but I believe that we have to make sure that they will never be able to be a threat against us again. Frida, deploy our landing legs, then land on the nose of that big orbital station: we are going to push against it, so that it slows down and falls from orbit. I believe that the impact of such a huge and massive object should trigger the kind of cataclysm that extinguished the dinosaurs on Earth some 65 million years ago."

"Tina, your deviousness sometimes scares me." replied Frida, smiling.
"Deploying our landing legs now!"

"This will be even more cataclysmic than the Chicxulub Asteroid strike, Tina." said Dana Durning, swiveling her seat to look at her captain. "While this Predator orbital

station is not as large as the Chicxulub asteroid, it is much denser and harder and a lot more massive. The Chicxulub Asteroid was made of carbonaceous chondrite, while this orbital station was carved out of a nickel-iron large M-Class asteroid. If anything, this station will probably penetrate deeper into the crust of this moon than the Chicxulub asteroid did when it impacted the sea next to the Yucatan Peninsula. I expect that no life will be able to survive on this moon after such an impact.”

“This may sound horrible but that is what I hope to achieve, Dana. The safety and survival of our race and of other sentient races in this part of the galaxy demands that those Space Predators disappear for good. They already butchered too many beings through their cruelty and disregard towards other lifeforms. And if some bleeding-heart asshole poo-poops me for that, then he or she will be welcome to discuss that subject with a Predator. They probably won’t be able to finish their first sentence before that Predator starts eating them alive.”

“Amen to that!”

Dana then directed Frida Skarsgard on where to land the NOSTROMO on the orbital station and at what angle from its orbit, in order to decelerate it to suborbital speed in the most efficient manner. Eight minutes later, the landing legs of the 3,000-meter-long cargo ship touched down on the asteroid orbital station’s bow section.

“Landing completed, Tina!”

“Then, start pushing in reverse with our gravity drive, Frida. Augment gradually the power of our drive and be careful not to overstress our hull: better make it slow and safe than fast and risky.”

“Got it, Tina!”

The bridge then fell mostly silent during the next hour, as the NOSTROMO pushed against the Predator orbital station, gradually slowing it down and making it lose altitude. Then, the station, along with the NOSTROMO, starting entering the moon’s atmosphere, at which time Tina gave a curt order to her pilot.

“Frida, switch to forward thrust and climb back to low orbit. This thing is now on its final trip. Dana, make sure that all of our craft and fighters are out of the moon’s atmosphere and at a safe distance.”

“All our embarked craft and fighters are already back in our hangars, Tina. We are now alone in orbit.”

“Good! Once this thing will have impacted the moon, we will stay for another day around, to make sure that no Predator could have survived. If we see any trace of residual Predator activity or sign of life, then we will lob more missiles down at the moon.”

Another couple of hours passed before the asteroid orbital station, now a huge fireball, fell all the way to the surface and impacted one of the four continents of the moon. Even from orbit, the scale of the impact's violence was breathtaking, with a huge shockwave then propagating around the impact point at supersonic speed, soon



passing over the whole surface of the moon. Then, a huge cloud of dust and debris rose, nearly attaining low orbit before starting to spread over the moon, turning its skies totally dark in what was called a 'nuclear Winter'. The bridge crew of the NOSTROMO, along with the rest of the crew and the rescued Kiryns, watched on in silence as the moon effectively died as a life-supporting world. The impact's shockwave had time to go around the whole moon three times before Tina spoke up in a subdued voice.

“Alright, people! Let's go adopt an ambush and watch position around that big gas giant planet and see if any Predator shows its nose in the next few days.”

CHAPTER 16 – A WELL-EARNED VACATION



House in Domrémy-la-Pucelle, France, where Joan of Arc (Jehanne de Domrémy) was born in 1412.

09:05 (France Time)

Friday, May 06, 2332

Nancy Regional Airport, Province of Lorraine

France

Jehanne's level of attention rose as she stepped out of the airbus that had flown her from Paris, where she had first landed on Earth. That enhanced level of attention was not due to a sense of imminent danger but rather to the level of interest she had about this first visit ever by her to Earth. The last three months had been spent by her on security duties aboard the NOSTROMO, mixed in with a few weeks spent on Glynn, either protecting the Kiryns from any possible remaining marauding Predator ships or helping them to rebuild their villages. Now that the Spacers' League had downgraded the Space Predator's menace to 'minor' level, Tina had offered a month-long vacation to her security androids, with her 800 androids splitting in two groups, so that half of them could stay on duty while the other half went on vacation. As the first security android to have been built, nearly four years ago, Jehanne had been named as part of the first half to go on vacation and had then received a substantial pay bonus, made both of a special

vacation bonus granted by Tina and of a combat pay and retroactive pay raise granted by the Spacers' League's Ministry of Defense. Now, Jehanne had plenty of money to spend on her vacation, even though she didn't need to spend anything on food and drinks, normally two of the biggest expenses, along with lodging, during a vacation as a tourist. Even lodging should not cost her much, as she could live in about any kind of weather without any undue hardship and as she had a small tent folded and rolled on top of her backpack.

It was thus a relatively small but definitively robust-looking late teenager with short black hair and pronounced tan, dressed in shorts, T-shirt and ankle boots, who entered the passenger terminal of the small regional airport, along with 31 other passengers. She had already gone through customs and immigration controls in Paris, so had no need to go through another official check in Nancy, a good thing when considering the initial hassle she had been subjected to on arrival in Paris in a runabout from the NOSTROMO. However, a more open and sympathetic French immigration agent had quickly replaced the first, rather obtuse French agent who had initially received Jehanne at the immigration and customs counters. The fact that the Spacers' League's embassy had applied some political pressure on the European Union before the arrival of the first batch of vacationing androids had helped a lot in that aspect.

Jehanne's first move once inside the terminal was to go find the tourism agency counter of the airport, where a young and pretty woman greeted her with a big smile.

"Good morning, miss! May I help you?"

"You may, miss! I want to go to Domrémy-la-Pucelle. What would be the best way to get there?"

"You are in luck, miss: Domrémy-la-Pucelle is a well-known and well-visited touristic destination in the region. We have a regional bus line from here to Neufchâteau, which is only twelve kilometers south of Domrémy-la-Pucelle. Once in Neufchâteau, you can take either a taxi or a local bus to get to Domrémy-la-Pucelle. A bus will depart for Neufchâteau at ten this morning. Our bus stop is in front of the terminal, next to the taxi stands. If you need a tourist map of the region and an information pamphlet on Domrémy-la-Pucelle, I can give you a copy of each."

"Please! That would be really helpful to me. Huh, where could I buy a bus ticket to Neufchâteau?"

"Right here, miss!"

"Excellent! I will buy a one-way ticket to Neufchâteau and will take a copy each of your map and your pamphlet. Do you know if the family house of Jehanne de Domrémy is open for visits, miss?"

"It certainly is, miss: it is one of the main regional touristic attractions and tens of thousands of persons visit it every year. Here is your map, pamphlet and bus ticket. It will be six Euros for the bus ticket."

Paying the woman and then grabbing her three items, Jehanne then walked out of the terminal and went to the well-indicated bus stop, which had a large transparent anti-rain shelter with a wooden bench. Taking off her large backpack and putting it down in front of her, Jehanne then sat next to a mature couple. From hearing their accent as the couple spoke to each other and from their exchange, Jehanne quickly pegged them as British tourists. Furthermore, they apparently were also headed towards Domrémy-la-Pucelle. She however didn't intrude in their conversation, not wanting to appear rude or impolite. It was actually the man in the couple, who was maybe sixty years old, who spoke to her first after looking at her big backpack.

"This looks like a military backpack, miss. Are you in the military?"

"Sort of, mister: I am a security officer aboard a merchant spaceship."

"Oh! So, you are a Spacer, I presume?"

"You presumed right, mister."

"When you say a merchant spaceship, do you mean one of those big star liners, miss?" asked in turn the woman in the couple. Jehanne replied with a gentle smile.

"Oh no, madam. I work on an ultra-heavy cargo ship. However, my ship also has lots of capacity for passengers. In fact, it can accommodate up to 20,064 passengers, on top of a cargo capacity of over twelve million tons."

Both the man and the woman opened their eyes wide at her answer, with the man exclaiming his surprise.

"Dear God! Your ship must be huge, miss!"

"It is! In fact, it is the biggest starship in existence today, with a length of 3,000 meters and a body diameter of 1,800 meters. I work aboard the NOSTROMO."

That name only redoubled the excitement of the couple, with the man grinning to Jehanne.

“Good for you, miss! The NOSTROMO has distinguished itself a lot lately, along with its captain, Tina Forster. The way it destroyed that Space Predator threat was epic! Then, you must have fought against those monstrous Predators, right?”

“I have, mister, but I would per to speak about it: I don’t want to appear to brag about my actions in combat.”

The man nodded slowly his head then.

“I can understand that, miss. To be brave is good. To be both brave and modest is even better.”

“Well said, sir! Did you serve as a soldier before?”

“I did, miss!” answered the man, beaming with pride. “I was in the British Army in 2316, when Zembelo’s thugs tried to occupy Great Britain. We stopped them cold and threw them out before they could enter London.”

The man’s reply made Jehanne grin in response.

“So you, an old British soldier who fought to stop invaders from taking Great Britain, is now going to visit the birthplace of a French heroine who fought to throw the English out of France. That sounds truly delicious.”

“It is, isn’t it?” replied the man, chuckling with his wife at Jehanne’s remark.

The trio then discussed more mundane things, like what they were hoping to see and visit in Domrémy-la-Pucelle, and that until the bus to Neufchâteau arrived at the bus stop. Giving her ticket to the driver, Jehanne then sat down in one of the frontmost seats, while the British couple sat in the same row, but across the central aisle from her. Seeing that Jehanne was eagerly looking out at the scenery they passed by as the bus rolled, the couple politely abstained from trying to speak with her during the trip to Neufchâteau, reasoning that they would have plenty of time to acquaint themselves better once at their destination. On her part, Jehanne eagerly embraced the local sights as they rolled, this being the first day she finally was able to look at Earth from its surface. The historical buildings she could see from time to time particularly attracted her attention and curiosity: in truth, nothing in the Spacers’ League dated more than about 240 years, the time when Humans had started to colonize the outer planets and moons of the Solar System, so each old church or medieval house she saw was truly a novelty for her. Once in Neufchâteau, she and the British couple and herself agreed to take a taxi together to get to Domrémy-la-Pucelle.

As their taxi approached their intended destination, Jehanne started sensing something furiously akin to excitement mount in her. While wondering if that could even be possible for her, Jehanne put that on her databanks working full time to dig every piece of data she knew about Joan of Arc, her life, her death and her subsequent fame as a French national heroine. By the time that their taxi stopped in the small square next to the medieval home that had been Jehanne's family home in Domrémy-la-Pucelle, the British couple still knew her as simply 'Jehanne', with the latter resolved to keep it that way. All three stopped for a moment to take pictures of the old home with single inclined roof and whitewashed walls. Next, they went to the entrance door of the house, where they paid the entrance fee before being allowed inside. Jehanne then found herself in a large, mostly bare room with a large fireplace against one of the walls. A door frame at one end of the room showed part of a smaller room, while a staircase in a corner near the entrance door led upstairs to the upper floor. Seeing a bronze statue set on a stone base in one corner, Jehanne and the British couple approached it to examine it.



"A statue representing Jehanne in her fighting days." said softly Jehanne before taking a picture of it, like the British couple. She then looked around the nearly empty room, a bit disappointed.

"I was expecting to see more than this in her family home."

A young tourist guide standing near the door smile to her on hearing her remark.

"This house is deliberately kept bare, to facilitate its maintenance and avoid damage to artifacts through wear. This house is over 900 years, after all. You will however be able to see a lot more historical objects related to Joan of Arc in the small museum situated just across the street."

"Oh! Thank you for the information, young man." replied the male British tourist. After a quick walkaround, the trio then exited the old house and crossed the street, entering the decidedly more modern small building housing the Joan of Arc Museum. There, they effectively found a small but interesting collection of medieval objects on display, along with a counter offering for sale books on Joan of Arc, both in paperback format and in electronic format. Jehanne selected the two most attractive books on sale

and bought them in both formats. However, she had a question to the sales clerk that took him a bit by surprise.

“Sir, if I can refer to this picture on the illustrated book I just bought, Jehanne used an arming sword while fighting the Englishmen. Is there anywhere around, or in France, where I could buy a good quality replica of that kind of sword?”

“Er, you won’t find this here in Domrémy-la-Pucelle, miss. After all, the local population counts less than a hundred persons. However, I once visited a medievalist shop in Neufchâteau that specializes in period replicas of costumes, banners and weapons. I don’t remember seeing an arming sword there but my last visit to that shop was five years ago, so it may now have one in stock, if you are lucky. It is called the ‘Antre du Dragon’, or ‘Dragon’s Lair’ in English. It is on the main street in Neufchâteau. If you don’t find such a sword there, then you will surely find a shop in Paris that would have one, along many other medieval weapons replicas.”

“Thank you very much, sir. You were most helpful.”

“It was my pleasure, miss.”

With her two new books now inside her big backpack, Jehanne went to speak with the British couple, which was still browsing through the displays of the museum.

“I am mostly finished here, Mister and Misses Farnsworth, and I don’t want to push you to go quicker, so I intend to go walk around town and take some pictures. It was truly nice to know both of you.”

“And it was nice to have met you, Jehanne.” said the woman before kissing her on both cheeks. Her husband then did the same and ended with a solid handshake.

“Have a nice vacation time around France, Jehanne.”

“Thank you! The same for you.”

Jehanne then left the museum-cum-sales boutique and, her backpack on her back, started walking around the old village, taking pictures of the nearby old Church of Saint-Rémy de Domrémy-la-Pucelle, where the historical Jehanne had routinely prayed. It didn’t take her long to look at everything worth a picture in the tiny village, so soon ended wondering what she would do for the rest of the day, as it was still only mid-afternoon. She finally decided to use this occasion to do something she hadn’t been able to do on the NOSTROMO: she started walking around the trails and dirt roads of the area, admiring the open nature around her and sniffing the smell of the various plants and trees growing around. By the time night fell, she was quite content with the

views she had seen and photographed. Finding herself alone in a small trail away from the village, she then took a decision and, activating her directed gravity drive system, flew off into the night, roughly heading West towards Paris, some 250 kilometers away.

14:18 (France Time)

Wednesday, May 11, 2332

Les Champs Élysées, Paris

Jehanne had been really enjoying her vacation time in Paris, a city full of history, monuments and some very old buildings, like the Notre-Dame Cathedral which, after nearly burning down in the 21st Century, had then been restored and subsequently carefully maintained and repaired to conserve its thousand-year cachet. While Jehanne couldn't really 'feel' enjoyment, excitement, happiness and other emotions, she had other means to measure the degree of interest or attraction she had towards certain objects, places and vistas. Things that brought forward in her electronic mind more questions, more search for background information and the desire to learn more about them were her way to measure how she 'felt' about something. In this optic, Paris definitely rose to the level of 'very interesting' for her. While she couldn't enjoy nor was attracted to one of Paris' prime touristic factors, gastronomy, Jehanne still could sniff and analyze the odors coming from the various open restaurant terraces and cafés lining the streets of the old French capital and could now rate that experience as amazingly diverse. A couple of times, Jehanne had stopped at a terrasse or small café to sip on a cup of strong coffee or a small shot of liquor, tasting and analyzing them with her olfactive sensors and artificial tastebuds. Then, she would go to the washrooms of the establishment, where she could discretely wash her mouth and throw out the little liquid she had stored in the small pouch down her throat which she used to simulate drinking. That apparently futile exercise for an android actually served two purposes: first, it made her appear more human to the persons around her; second, it added to the things she experienced and learned while visiting a place.

Jehanne had just visited a small café-terrace located along the wide avenue of the Champs-Élysées, where she had tasted a small shot of green mint liquor, and was now slowly strolling up the wide sidewalk towards the old 'Arc de Triomphe' while often stopping to browse the façades of the hundreds of boutiques and shops lining both sides

of it. She was about to arrive at a street corner where a much smaller side street joined with the boulevard when the sound of a gun shot from nearby made her stop, all her senses now on alert. Two French police officers, a man and a woman dressed in the blue coveralls of the French Gendarmerie, also heard that shot and immediately reacted to it, looking down the side street while the male officer briefly spoke on his pocket radio. Both police officers then started to run, disappearing behind the corner of a building bordering the Champs-Élysées while other passersby hurriedly ran away. Just then, a loud alarm bell started ringing down that side street. Jehanne immediately recognized what kind of alarm she was now hearing.

‘Anti-robbery alarm! A boutique or establishment is being attacked by armed robbers.’

She didn't hesitate one fraction of a second then on how to react to this: she had been built as a security officer, with her primary goals in existence being the protection of the innocents and the prevention and stopping of crimes and aggression. Activating her individual force shield generator implanted in her torso, Jehanne started to run and turned the street corner, following the two French gendarmes. Some fifty meters down the street, along the left side on which she was with the gendarmes, she saw the façade and advertising sign of a high-end jewelry shop. Then, before she could intervene, a man who had been sitting in a car parked in front of the jewelry shop opened his door and pointed a weapon at the two approaching gendarmes. A burst of automatic fire from a machine pistol then rang out and both gendarmes collapsed on the sidewalk, while some lost bullets ricocheted against Jehanne's force shield. Deciding that her first priority was to help the fallen French gendarmes, Jehanne braked to a halt next to them and crouched to examine them. She quickly found out that the male gendarme was dead, having received three bullets, including one that had hit him in the forehead and had exploded the back of his head. As for the female gendarme, she was conscious but was crying in pain while holding her right upper leg, which had been pierced by one bullet and was bleeding profusely.

“Hold on, miss: I'm going to help you. First, though, I will move you out of the line of fire of that bastard.”

“My partner...”

“I'm sorry, miss, but he is dead: one bullet through the head. Now, be strong: I will have to carry you behind that parked car and it could be painful.”

While in great pain and starting to show signs of shock, the female gendarme nodded her head and clenched her teeth as Jehanne scooped her in her arms as gently as she could, then lifted her from the sidewalk and carried her to the space between the two nearest parked vehicles, where she gently put down the woman on the asphalt. Thankfully, the gunman who had fired on her didn't fire more shots at them, probably judging that he didn't have to, so Jehanne was able to quickly apply an improvised bandage on the gendarme's bleeding leg, taking off her wool sweater and folding it in order to use it as a bandage. In the process, Jehanne ended up topless, as she normally didn't wear a bra, not needing one. However, she couldn't care less about that right now. She also used her leather belt to help keep in place the folded sweater and also took the right hand of the female gendarme, putting it on the sweater.

"Keep pressure on this, so that the bleeding can stop, miss. Have you had time to call for help?"

"Marc did!" answered the grimacing gendarme, probably referring to her dead partner.

"Then, stay here and wait for help. Here is your pistol, so that you can defend yourself."

The female gendarme took the pistol offered by Jehanne, then gave her a grateful look.

"Thank you, miss. You are a brave woman."

That compliment made Jehanne smile in response.

"It's in my nature, miss."

Not letting time for the wounded gendarme to ask what she meant by that, Jehanne then got up and walked back on the sidewalk, where she approached the dead male gendarme and grabbed the pistol he had held and which was now lying on the sidewalk near his body. Jehanne quickly checked that there was a bullet in the chamber of the pistol, a model with a twenty-round magazine capacity. The gunman sitting in the parked car saw that and fired a burst at her, making half a dozen bullets ricochet against her force shield. He didn't have time to fire another burst before Jehanne shot once, exploding the back of his head with a bullet between his eyes. Ignoring the dead man, she fired a second shot, this time aiming at the man sitting in the driver's seat and killing him as well. With that taken care of, Jehanne next walked to the glass door of the jewelry shop, where she could see a number of people inside. Some of them were obviously customers or sales staff but she could also see four men holding weapons and hammers, busy either threatening the customers and staff or smashing with their

hammers the presentation cases containing rows of expensive jewels and then grabbing and throwing into bags those jewels. All in all, a classic jewelry shop heist, but one done in a most violent and brutal way. One of the armed men saw her approach the entrance door and pointed his machine pistol at her but didn't fire. The reason for that became clear to Jehanne when she saw that the door was made of bullet-proof glass, something one could expect for a jewelry shop. She thus refrained herself from shooting until she had thrown open the door, beating the robber by a fraction of a second and killing him with a head shot before he could fire at her. The loud pistol detonation inside the shop was deafening and made the customers and sales staff scream and cower with fear, while the remaining three robbers all turned towards her while pointing either machine pistols or semi-automatic pistols at her. Using her android flash reflexes and ability to fire with an accuracy no human could equal, Jehanne then fired three more times in less than one second, killing all the remaining robbers with head shots before they could fire at her. Scanning quickly the boutique for more robbers, she saw a man lying in a pool of blood in a corner next to the entrance door. Approaching him cautiously, she saw that the man wore the uniform of a private security guard. His pistol was still in its holster and a large patch of blood stained his shirt at the level of his heart. Crouching next to him, Jehanne checked him for a pulse but found none. Next, Jehanne went around and collected the robbers' weapons before putting them on top of the counter, where the cash register was. Next, she gently smiled at the petrified customers and staff, who were staring at her with disbelief.

"You are now safe, ladies and gentlemen. Is any of you hurt?"

One female sales clerk answered her, showing her a man sitting against a wall and holding his bleeding mouth and jaw.

"They pistol-whipped our manager after he pressed the alarm button. I believe that his jaw is broken."

"Then, call for an ambulance now. Tell the dispatcher that there is also a wounded police officer outside, with a bullet wound to her upper right leg."

"Huh, right away, miss!"

As the female clerk hurried to her desk telecoms unit, a mature woman who appeared to be a customer looked up and down at Jehanne, some reprobation in her voice when she spoke.

"Why are you going topless like this in public, miss?"

"Because I used my sweater as an improvised bandage to help that wounded gendarme outside. Now, please keep quiet until the police and an ambulance could arrive."

It actually took only a couple of minutes before a police vehicle, its sirens blaring, screeched to a halt in front of the jewelry store, with two policemen then jumping out, pistols in hand. Jehanne, on seeing them arrive, put down on the counter the pistol she had used, then went to join the female sales clerk near the cash register, so that the newcomers would not mistake her for a robber. The two policemen entered the store with weapons pointed but soon stopped where they were at the sight of the four dead robbers and one security guard sprawled in large puddles of blood on the floor. One policeman then noticed the topless Jehanne and gave her a puzzled look.

"Did these robbers assault you, miss? And what happened exactly here?"

"I was passing by when I heard a gun shot and an alarm coming from this jewelry store. Two of your gendarmes also reacted to that but were shot by one of the two bandits waiting in a car parked in front of this store. The male agent was killed, while the female gendarme got shot in the leg. I then pulled that female gendarme out of the line of fire and used my sweater as an improvised bandage for her leg. That is why I am presently topless. Next, I grabbed her dead partner's pistol and killed the two bandits waiting in their getaway car before entering the jewelry store and killing the four criminals I found inside. I put their weapons, plus the pistol I used, on the counter next to the cash register. Apparently, those robbers killed the establishment's private security guard and pistol-whipped the store manager before I showed up."

The policeman stared at Jehanne for a moment, apparently having difficulties in believing her story, as more police vehicles arrived, disgorging more agents. The young sales clerk who had been looking after the store manager then spoke up.

"What this young woman said was the truth, officer. I can testify to that."

"Very well!" said the gendarme, lowering his pistol. "An ambulance is on its way and should arrive soon. In the meantime, I will ask you all to stay where you are and to not touch or disturb anything: this is now a crime scene."

As more policemen entered the store, pistols and submachine guns in hand, the cop who had been asking questions walked to Jehanne and, doing his best not to look down at her exposed breasts, nodded once his head at her in a sign of respect.

"Thank you for caring for our wounded officer, miss. Do you have some kind of identity papers on you, so that I could name you in my incident report?"

"I have my passport and my badge, mister."

"Your badge? What kind of badge?"

"I am a Spacer and work as a security officer on the Armed Merchant Ship NOSTROMO. I am presently on vacation and was touring France. Here are my passport and badge."

Taking both items presented by Jehanne, the gendarme first examined with curiosity her badge, which was actually gold-plated and bore the flag of the Spacers' League, plus the words 'Security and Law Officer' and her name and badge number. Next, he looked at her passport and frowned on seeing the date of birth mentioned in it.

"Activated July 20th, 2328? What does that mean, Miss De Domrémy?"

"That is the date I was activated after being built at the Avalon Space Yards, mister. I am an android."

The policeman's head snapped up in shock, while the other persons who heard Jehanne also stared at her with disbelief.

"You...a robot?" could barely manage to say the French policeman.

"Not a robot, but an android. As such, I am considered as a full-fledged citizen of the Spacers' League, with equal rights to those of the other, human citizens of the Spacers' League. The only main difference with Humans and other living beings is that I cannot reproduce biologically and don't need to eat or drink to survive."

"Huh, that may complicate this case, miss. I am not sure what the legal status of androids like you is in the European Union."

From friendly, Jehanne's expression changed to a warning one.

"Well, your European Union better treat me like any other Spacer's League citizen, or it will get trouble from my embassy. Look, mister. I gave assistance to one of your officers who had been shot, then stopped six violent criminals who were in the process of robbing this store after killing two men. Can't you consider these as positive points in my favor?"

Now assuaged, the French policeman adopted a more friendly attitude towards her and presented his right hand for a shake.

"I am sorry for my initial reaction to you, miss. You will understand that this is the first time that I deal with an android."

"There is a first time for everything, mister." replied Jehanne while shaking his hand. The young sales clerk then approached Jehanne while holding a light windbreaker.

"I believe that this should fit you, miss. Please accept it: you shouldn't need to have to keep going around topless like this."

"You are too kind, miss. Thank you very much." Said Jehanne, who took the light coat and put it on before looking back at the French policeman. "What's next, mister?"

"We will drive you to our police station, where you will be able to fill a statement concerning this incident before being allowed to go. However, there are possibilities that your presence will be required again as the inquiry in this progress."

"Inquiry? What kind of inquiry do you need to do? These criminals were caught in the act, in front of multiple witnesses, and are now all dead. There is nobody else left to inquire about."

"You are most probably right, Miss De Domrémy, but a magistrate will have to decide on that, not me."

At that moment, a senior police officer who had entered after the others and had then examined the bodies of the dead robbers, signaled to Jehanne's interlocutor to approach him. Both men spoke together for a moment before the senior officer came to Jehanne and shook her hand.

"Commissaire Genest, at your service, Miss De Domrémy. I just had a look at those dead robbers and I must congratulate you for your brave and prompt action: you just took out by yourself the Saint-Moritz Gang, a brutal and very dangerous gang of robbers formed by ex-mercenaries and renegade soldiers. That gang has murdered over 23 people while committing mostly jewelry store robberies during the last five years. You could well earn yourself a substantial reward from the European Jewelers Association."

"Well, if they do want to give me a reward, then I will pass it on to any association dedicated to helping the families of police officers killed in service: money does not interest me."

Genest could only nod soberly at that, suitably impressed.

"That would be most kind and generous on your part, Miss De Domrémy. I must say that I have met many people who showed less altruism than you right now."

That earned Genest a gentle smile from Jehanne.

“Commissaire Genest, my goals are to protect the innocents, prevent crimes and acts of aggression and stop criminals or anyone representing a threat to others. I simply did my duty. So, what will happen next?”

“I will drive you to my commissariat after we are finished documenting this crime scene, so that you could make an official deposition and then sign it.”

“I would like to go visit your female officer who was shot, once that is done: will that be possible?”

Genest nodded once, favorably impressed by her attitude.

“I will personally drive you to the hospital where she is being brought right now, Miss De Domrémy. We shouldn't be long here: you have already done most of the job for us. In the meantime, you can stay close to the cash register while we document the scene.”

The police team effectively took only some fifteen minutes to take verbal depositions from the other witnesses, while forensics technicians wheeled out the five dead men from the boutique, loading them in a van. The store manager was also escorted out by two paramedics and left by ambulance in the company of the female gendarme saved by Jehanne. Next, Jehanne was politely asked to sit in the back of a police car, which then drove her to the local police station. The police officers inside the station gave Jehanne curious looks as she was led to an interview room, the word about her being an android having probably been passed around by radio on the police net. However, Jehanne did not see any hostility in those looks, just curiosity. Entering a small room furnished simply with a small table and two chairs, she sat in one of the chairs, while Commissaire Genest sat across from her, then gave her an electronic pad.

“If you don't mind, miss, I would like you to write down in as detailed as you can what you saw, heard and did during that incident.”

“With pleasure, Commissaire Genest.” replied Jehanne, taking the pad offered to her. She then started typing her deposition at a speed that left Genest looking on in disbelief.

“Damn! My secretary would be jealous of your typing skills, Miss De Domrémy.”

“I guess so.” replied Jehanne while continuing to type at breakneck speed.

She was finished with typing her deposition, which went on for four pages, within less than a minute, following which she gave back the pad to Genest.

"Here you go, Commissaire! What next?"

"You sign it with this electronic pen, then I will quickly read it, to see if I would have to ask you any additional questions. However, in view of your incredible efficiency, that will probably not be necessary."

Jehanne took the electronic pen and signed on the pad, handing them to Genest, who took a couple of minutes to read carefully her deposition before nodding his head.

"Excellent! You could become a police drama writer, miss: I couldn't have asked for a more detailed and concise deposition. Let me go register this, then I will drive you to the hospital, so that you could visit our wounded gendarme."

"Can I leave this room now?"

"Of course, miss! Follow me!"

Genest then walked out of the interview room, Jehanne close behind him, and went to a room filled with over twenty desks, half of which occupied by policemen in either uniform or civilian clothes who were busy doing their paperwork. Waiting until Genest had given her deposition to a police clerk, she then asked him a question in a low voice.

"You said that the men I killed were part of a gang called the Saint-Moritz Gang. Did that gang count more than six men?"

Genest hesitated for a moment, apparently struck by her question, before frowning.

"A good question, miss. We actually don't know everything we would like to know about that gang, except that it recruited ex-soldiers and mercenaries, most of whom have fought in the past around Africa."

The mention of 'Africa' raised at once an alarm bell in Jehanne's mind.

"That gang, was it known for having ever used a disintegrator weapon while committing crimes? And was their leader part of the six men I killed?"

Genest swore to himself when he saw where she was going with her questions.

"Merde! Their leader, Karl Haussmann, was not part of the men you killed, so we can assume that is still out and around. As for using disintegrator weapons, we don't have actual reports about that. However, a number of presumed victims of Haussmann and his gang disappeared without a trace, with their bodies never found."

"Which means either that they have been well hidden...or were turned into dust, using a disintegrator weapon."

"Why did you raise the subject of disintegrator weapons, miss? I thought that only our military units possess some of them."

"Why? Because, some three years ago, my unit eliminated a sex slave trader based in the Sudan who was also trafficking in illegal weapons and drugs. That trafficker, named Selim Rakmadov, had also been trafficking in disintegrator weapons, whose design he had obtained from a corrupt European Union official. This Karl Haussmann sounds like the kind of man to be both interested in and able to get such prohibited weapons."

"Selim Rakmadov, you said? Let me check out something."

Still followed by Jehanne, Genest went to his private office adjacent to the common work room, where he sat in front of his computer and started searching through police files. Jehanne patiently waited while the man worked his computer, noting the growing air of frustration and worry showing on Genest's face.

"Is there something wrong, Commissaire?"

"You could say that, miss. Haussmann's mercenary unit is known to have operated from within Sudanese territory in 2328 and 2329 before being forced to disperse and disappear. One of the persons known to have employed his unit for a so-called 'contract' was your Selim Rakmadov. It is thus very possible that Haussmann is in possession of one or more disintegrator weapons."

"Which would make him a very dangerous man indeed."

"Indeed! Damn! Just thinking about what he could do with such weaponry makes me shiver. Thankfully, his gang members you killed today only had conventional firearms."

"Probably because jewels are not worth much when they end up being disintegrated." offered Jehanne, most serious. "I suspect that Haussmann would use such weapons only to assassinate a tough target. Do you know if my name could have been mentioned in the news medias after this failed jewelry store robbery?"

Genest stiffened and sat back on hearing her question, then pointed an index at her.

"Could you please stay in my office for a moment, while I check on something?"

"Of course, Commissaire!"

Genest barely had time to walk out of his office before he stopped and froze, his eyes stuck on the large holovision screen hooked to a wall of the squad room. The set was switched to the EuroNews channel and what appeared to be a video filmed by a passerby near the jewelry store showed a topless Jehanne, a pistol in her right hand resolutely approaching and then entering the jewelry store. What truly infuriated him was the comments then made by the two newscasters as the video played.

"...she then entered the jewelry store and killed in seconds the four armed robbers inside. Here is a surveillance camera video of what happened inside the store." Genest exploded with anger as a film obviously taken by the security camera of the jewelry store showed Jehanne as she entered it and then fired four shots with her pistol in less than two seconds, killing all four robbers with bullets to their heads.

"THIS RECORDING IS SUPPOSED TO BE A PIECE OF CRIME SCENE EVIDENCE! WHO THE HELL LEAKED IT TO THE MEDIAS?"

None of the policemen in the squad room dared answer him as the EuroNews newscasters commented that store video.

"...this shows a true killing machine at work. Despite looking like a pretty teenage girl, this Jehanne De Domrémy made short work of four dangerous ex-mercenarys who were members of the infamous Saint-Moritz Gang. In reality, she is an android, a robot with a human appearance, built by the Spacers' League to fulfill internal security duties aboard Spacers ships, notably on the famous cargo ship NOSTROMO, owned by the no less famous Captain Tina Forster. This android, along with hundreds of other similar androids, is said to have recently fought the dreaded monsters called 'Space Predators' and to have boarded and captured one of their ships in a daring operation in the distant 55 Cancri System, some 41 light-years away. Here is a video clip taken some four years ago, showing this Jehanne De Domrémy just after she had been built, armed and wearing a tactical uniform. Note that the 'woman' accompanying her is also an android."

The news channel then showed a short clip taken at the Avalon Space Yards, in which Jehanne was being led out of the robotics lab of the station by Eve Silisca. The fuming Genest then heard Jehanne's voice behind him.

"Falchi! I knew that he would continue to spread venom against us."

"Who is this Falchi, miss?"

"He was the head robotics expert at the Avalon Space Yards, where I was built and first activated. He was vehemently opposed to our android production project and ended up being fired by the owner of the Avalon Space Yards."

"Well, somebody else is now spreading venom about you, miss: the second video we saw was supposed to be used strictly as crime scene evidence, but was leaked to the medias, possibly by one of my own men. If I find that bastard..."

"I understand your anger about this, Commissaire, but we now have a larger problem: this Karl Haussmann, who may or may not be in possession of illegal

disintegrator weapons, now knows who killed his men in that botched robbery attempt. Is that Haussmann the vengeful type?"

Genest made a bitter smirk at her question.

"Vengeful? That man is a certified psychopath and sadist. He also happens to have a huge ego and often bragged about his 'exploits'."

"Do you have a picture of him, so that I could record his face?"

"Sure! Give me a minute, please."

Going back in his office and searching into one of his desk drawers, Genest then returned to Jehanne's side and handed her a sheet of paper bearing the picture of a hard-looking man and a short text.

"Here is a copy of the official 'wanted' poster of Haussmann. You can keep it. As I said before, he is a very dangerous man and should not be underestimated."

"Avoiding to underestimate your enemy is one of the cardinal rules of warfare, Commissaire. Well, if you don't need anything else for me, I will go continue playing the tourist around Paris."

"Wait! Wouldn't you want some police protection, miss?"

"So that I could become as visible as the nose in my face? Thank you but no thank you. And don't ask me where I am staying while in Paris: I believe that you have a leak problem to fix. I will call you if need be."

Jehanne then walked out of the squad room, heading towards the main entrance of the police station. Genest could only watch her go as misgivings about what could happen next to her filled him.

Once outside the police station, Jehanne's first action was to go inside a nearby boutique, where she purchased a T-shirt that would better fit visually with her short pants than the windbreaker graciously given to her by the jewelry store clerk, promising herself to return that windbreaker to that clerk tomorrow. Next, she took a taxi and went to the Paris embassy of the Spacers' League, where she knew that she could get a secure link with the NOSTROMO, which was presently in Earth orbit: she definitely needed to report this incident. Once at the embassy, she walked into its consular affairs annex and presented her badge to one of the space marines on guard at the entrance.

"Security Officer Jehanne De Domrémy. I would need to see your embassy's security officer."

"One moment please, miss: I am going to call him on the radio and will then escort you to his office."

"Thank you, Corporal!"

Speaking briefly on his pocket radio, the space marine then nodded to her.

"If you will please follow me, miss."

Going to the chancellery part of the embassy, the marine led Jehanne up to the third floor of the building, where he knocked on a door, getting a muffled invitation to enter. Pushing the door open, the marine entered and saluted a mature man wearing a civilian suit and sitting behind a work desk.

"Sir, Security Officer De Domrémy is here to see you."

"Thank you, Corporal. You may now leave."

As the marine left and closed the door behind him, the man got up and went to Jehanne to shake her hand.

"Paul Salinger, Embassy Security Officer, at your service. I just saw the reporting on EuroNews about your intervention in a jewelry store. That was a nice job you did there, miss."

"Yes, but that may also have attracted the unhealthy attention of a dangerous psychopath on me, Mister Salinger. I would thus need to send a report via encrypted means up to the NOSTROMO, which is presently in Earth orbit. Could you give me access to an encrypted communications station?"

"No problem, miss: I have such a link right here, on my work computer. Let me just unlock it and you will then be able to use it to contact the NOSTROMO."

"Thank you!"

Salinger needed only a few seconds to type in his personal password and unlock his desk computer, then left his chair free for her to use.

"Here you go, miss."

"Thank you again, Mister Salinger." said Jehanne while sitting down behind the desk. Opening a link to the NOSTROMO, she soon had Ahmed Jibril, the ship's security officer, online. Jehanne took a couple of minutes to tell him about what had happened today, then asked him a question.

"Ahmed, I know that I should normally return to the ship for my own safety, but I am loathe to cut short my vacations because of that Haussmann. I thus request permission to stay in France and complete my visit here. I am now fully warned about

the potential dangers to me and have plenty of ways to counter that psychopath if he ever attacks me.”

That left Jibril thinking for a moment before he nodded his head.

“Very well, Jehanne. I have confidence in your abilities. However, you may need to be better armed than what you have with you now. Can you pass me our embassy security officer?”

“He is right beside me, Ahmed. One moment, please! Mister Salinger, the NOSTROMO’s security officer, Ahmed Jibril, would like to speak to you.”

Jehanne then got up from the chair and let Salinger take place in front of the computer.

“Yes, Mister Jibril?”

“Would it be possible and legal for you to loan a disintegrator pistol to Jehanne?”

“It would! I have plenty of spare weapons at the embassy and Spacers’ League registered security and law officers can legally carry a concealed weapon inside the European Union.”

“Excellent! Would you also have a spare tactical pocket radio for her, so that I could contact her from orbit if needed?”

“I have that as well, Mister Jibril. I would only need to know on what frequency she could call you or receive your messages.”

Salinger quickly scribbled down the frequency Jibril gave him, then let Jehanne speak further with him while excusing himself in order to go fetch the requested weapon and radio.

Salinger was back a few minutes later, to find that Jehanne had already completed her call with the NOSTROMO. He put down on the desk a heavy disintegrator pistol, a spare energy cell, a miniature tactical radio with encryption capability and a large fanny pack of the kind tourists used while travelling.

“Here you go, Miss De Domrémy. I will now print for you an official weapon’s carrying permit, so that you don’t get in trouble with the local police.”

“Thank you again, Mister Salinger: you are very helpful.”

“A Spacer heroine like you deserves all the help I could give her, miss.”

“Me? A heroine? But I simply did my duty.”

“Alright, then: a modest Spacer heroine.” replied Salinger with a smile, making in turn Jehanne smile as well.

“I must say that you are quite good at complimenting young women, Mister Salinger.”

“Young and pretty girls always deserve to be complimented, Miss De Domrémy.”
fired back the embassy official. “That is one fine French tradition well worth preserving.”

18:06 (Paris Time)

Isolated country house, district of Choisy-Le-Roi

Southeast suburbs of Paris

“A fucking robot! I should have been there to back my men up.”

Karl Haussmann then continued to listen for a few more minutes to the EuroNews channel while scribbling a few notes when an information of interest was mentioned, then switched off his entertainment set and stayed silent for a long moment while still sitting on his sofa, thinking about what he had just heard on the news. That jewelry heist in Paris should have gone like clockwork and probably would have, if not for the intervention of that Spacer robot. He was originally due to lead that heist but had developed a fever and a cough from a flu virus two days ago and had put his lieutenant in charge of his crew for that job. Now, he had lost six of his best men, on top of not grabbing jewelry worth millions of Euros, all that because a young and pretty-looking robot! Getting up from his sofa made his head swim a bit and also made him swear at the inopportune virus that had made him stay in this safe house. Walking out of the lounge and into the nearby entrance lobby, he extracted a large, solid polymer case from inside the closet there, then carried the heavy case to the kitchen, where he put it on the dining table and opened it. He had a mean smile as he looked down at the disintegrator rifle and two disintegrator heavy pistols contained in the case.

“Time to do some robot thrashing! We will see if those babies are really worth the money I paid for them in the Sudan.”

18:45 (Paris Time)

Small 19th Century old hotel, 46 Rue Jacob 6th Arrondissement (District), Paris



Jehanne closed the link with the UniNet she had used on her laptop computer and thought for a moment, analyzing the information she had found about Karl Haussmann while sitting in the small room of her old, nearly antique hotel on Rue Jacob, in the Sixth Arrondissement near the center of Paris. Her hotel may have been old and in bad need of repairs, but it was situated close to many of the historical locations of Paris, like the Notre-Dame Cathedral, the Hôtel des Invalides, the Louvre Museum and the Eiffel Tower. Also, despite its ideal location but due to its rather decrepit state and tiny rooms, its room prices were actually quite affordable by the standards of Paris. It also was close to the famous Quartier Latin, a favorite of university students in Paris' Fifth Arrondissement.

Thanks to the notoriety of the infamous Karl Haussmann, Jehanne had been able to learn quite a lot about the man and his past. An ex-soldier of the French Foreign Legion who had served in many war-torn places around Africa, Haussmann had then recycled himself as a mercenary, assembling around him a collection of ex-soldiers with solid military experience and then selling his services around the World. Eventually, his excesses and human rights abuses had forced him and his group out of the private military business and had made him turn to robberies of jewelry stores and banks around Europe. Haussmann himself was widely described as a psychopath and a sadist to whom others' lives was of no import. More importantly for Jehanne, Haussmann was also known to be an expert sniper with high proficiency with firearms of all kinds, including many models of heavy weapons. He was also acknowledged to be a dangerous opponent in close-combat, being a trained martial artist and an expert at knife fighting. He was known to speak at least four languages and at being adept at mechanical repair and gunsmithing, so was no intellectual moron. Overall, while one could despise his violence and brutality, he was definitely an opponent to be taken seriously. With her having killed six of Haussmann's gang members, including his lieutenant, Jehanne could certainly expect the man to want to seek revenge on her. Unfortunately, Haussmann was not going to find it difficult to find her, as a rather uncaring and unscrupulous paparazzo had managed to find out in which hotel she was staying and had then sold that information to the medias. As a result, a good dozen reporters, photographers and paparazzi were now camped next to her hotel, waiting for her to show up and then pounce on her for some opportunistic reporting. No doubt that

Hausmann also knew her location by now, as that information had been passed on the evening EuroNews show. She definitely could now expect him to show up in some form, most probably at night.

21:12 (Paris Time)

Rooftop of building opposite # 46 Rue Jacob

Sixth Arrondissement, Paris

Karl Hausmann, having used the rear façade emergency fire exit staircase of the building on whose roof he was now cautiously walking on, further crouched down as he got close to the roof edge facing the hotel in which the robot bitch was said to reside in Paris. Using the low parapet as both a cover and a support for his weapon, the ex-mercenary unslung the leather rifle bag he had been carrying across his back, then took out his disintegrator rifle and set it up on its folding bipod before sitting behind it and grabbing its pistol grip and butt plate. He made a mean smile as he looked through the sighting scope of his weapon and scanned one by one the windows of the old, five-floor hotel. If he saw that robot girl, then he was going to have the pleasure to vaporize her, along with her whole hotel room. His first scanning pass didn't show him the girl but that didn't discourage Hausmann one bit: she was probably still touring Paris at this hour. However, she would eventually have to return to her hotel when everything would be closed for the night around Paris. He was an experienced sniper and was more than willing to spend the whole night here if need be in order to kill that robot. Hausmann then threw a contemptuous look at the crowd of paparazzi and photographers still camped outside the hotel he was surveying.

"The jackals are out in force tonight. It was to be expected. Soon, I may give them something to report."

Hausmann then did a second scanning pass of the hotel façade, in case his first pass would have missed his intended target. He was still concentrating in looking through his scope when Jehanne silently floated down under directed gravity drive from her ambush position, some 200 meters above the building facing her hotel. She had been waiting there since nightfall, silent, immobile and nearly invisible in the night sky, waiting for Hausmann to show up. Now, it seemed that her suspicions that he would try to snipe at her and her hotel room had been the correct guess.

Hausmann spotted Jehanne only when both of her feet landed on the roof he was sitting on, barely fifty centimeters behind him. He however didn't have time to react to her before she gripped the back of his neck in her right hand and squeezed, strongly enough to paralyze him with the pain of her grip but not strongly enough to actually crush his vertebrae. Lifting him off the roof without effort, she then extracted the disintegrator heavy pistol he carried at his belt and turned him so that he could face her.

"So, you wanted to kill me in front of that pack of jackals down there? Well, I will now give them something to report on prime night news. Die, you sadistic bastard!" Jehanne then violently threw Hausmann up with all her strength, making him fly up in a hyperbole before he started falling screaming towards the street and the front entrance of her hotel. With luck, he would then land on the head of one or more of those paparazzi. As soon as she had thrown the man upward, Jehanne crouched down, so that she would not be seen from street level, and started quickly dismounting the disintegrator rifle, getting at and extracting a vital component of its energy mechanism. Without that component, this rifle would now be totally useless. Pocketing the component, Jehanne then reassembled quickly the weapon before flying away into the night, Hausmann's pistol still in her possession.

Down on the sidewalk next to the entrance of Jehanne's hotel, the waiting reporters, photographers and paparazzi suddenly looked all up on hearing a scream from above. Two of them barely had time to hurriedly step aside before Karl Hausmann splattered himself on the concrete of the sidewalk, instantly killed by the impact from his 23-meter fall. Nearly all the witnesses to that at once started to frantically take pictures of the dead criminal, except for one reporter whose reflex was to look up at the rooftops around him. However, he didn't see Jehanne as she flew away, describing a wide turn before returning to a position over her hotel. Once there, she silently flew down and landed on the roof of her hotel before reentering it through the same roof hatch she had used to go out. Returning to her hotel room but avoiding to look down through its window, Jehanne then called the NOSTROMO, using the radio set given to her by Paul Salinger and getting Ahmed Jibril online.

"Jibril here!"

"Ahmed, this is Jehanne, in Paris. This is to inform you that Karl Hausmann is now dead: he unfortunately slipped and fell from a high rooftop, leaving behind a disintegrator rifle in sniping position facing my hotel. I extracted the energy converter

module from that rifle before leaving it behind on the roof. I also took from Haussmann a heavy disintegrator pistol, which is now in my possession. I believe that we can now scratch out the threat against me here.”

“Yes! Great job, Jehanne! What do you intend to do now, after this?”

Jehanne smiled to herself while answering Ahmed.

“Me? I will complete my touring of Paris and of France, then will go visit ‘Goddon’⁶ country. I am sure the original Jehanne would have loved to step in England, armed and free to roam around, during the Hundred Years War.”

⁶ Goddon : Nickname given to the invading English soldiers by the French during the Hundred Years War, due to the Englishmen’s habit of swearing by using the term ‘Goddam’.

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