

NOSTROMO IN SPACE AND TIME



By

MICHEL POULIN

NOSTROMO

IN

SPACE AND TIME

A SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL

BY

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

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

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is a sequel to my NOSTROMO LOST IN TIME and is the tenth novel in the Kostroma Series. It is continuing the adventures in Space of Captain Tina Forster and of her mighty cargo ship NOSTROMO and her crew in the year 2337. The threat from the monstrous Space Predators is now gone, with the last Space Predator ship destroyed by the NOSTROMO during an epic pursuit, during which the NOSTROMO was projected back in time while trying to escape the pull of an uncharted black hole. Thankfully, Tina Forster and her crew found a way back to the year 2337, only to barely survive a treacherous attack from some people in the Spacers' League who resent Tina's successes. But, as they say, 'payback's a bitch'.

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CARAVAN TO PATALIPUTRA

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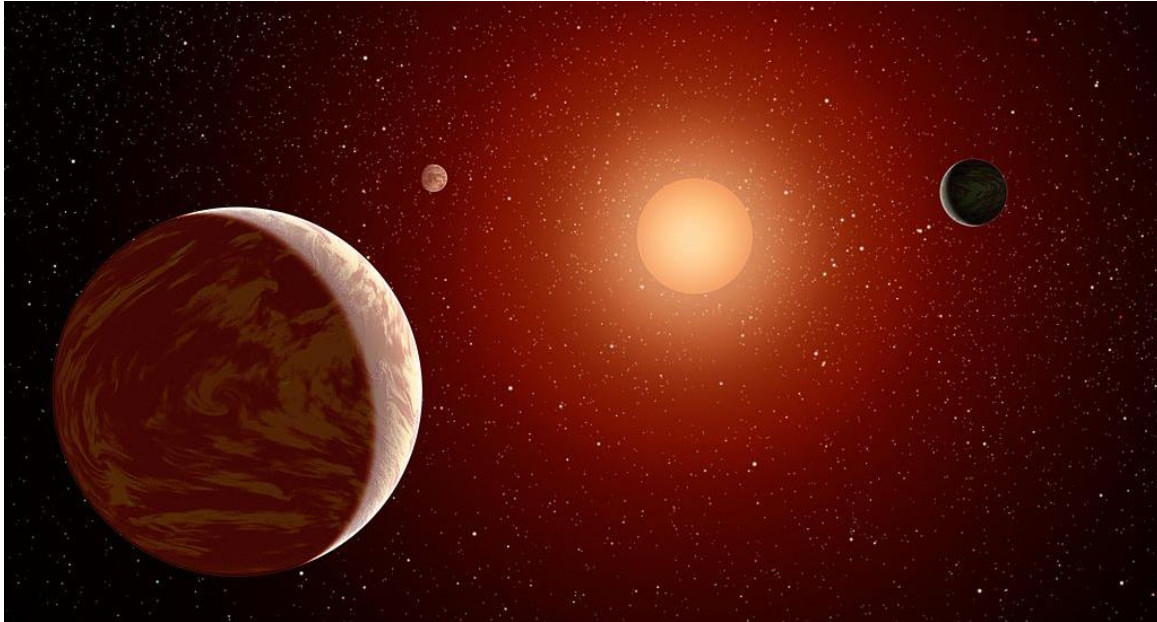
A MARS ODYSSEY

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

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CHAPTER 1 – A NECESSARY ACT



Wolf 1061 System.

01:03 (Universal Time)

Friday, December 03, 2337

Heavy craft hangar of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In orbit around New Haven (Wolf 1061ca), 13.8 light-years from Earth

When **Tina Forster** disembarked from the command cutter AEGIS with Jehanne de Domrémy and Stacy Keibler, they were met at the foot of the aft access ramp by Tina's husband, Michel Koniev, who immediately asked one question to his wife.

"How did it go on El Dorado, Tina?"

"It went as planned, Michel. We used a spy drone first to infiltrate Paul Stein's mansion, which sat on an isolated island, and discretely neutralize the more dangerous security systems and surveillance cameras. However, his private study had no cameras inside it, possibly because Stein did not want to risk someone filming him in incriminating acts while in private, something that simplified a lot our job. When we intruded on Stein, the bastard was busy viewing some highly illegal pedophilia videos. I then disintegrated him into a pile of dust and left. On our return trip, like on our outgoing trip, we jumped



time by a few days, in order to provide ourselves a solid alibi in case we are ever accused of murdering him. Since I apparently left and then returned to the NOSTROMO before he was killed, we should be quite safe in legal terms. As for the legality of killing him, I firmly believe that what we did was a necessary act of self-defense: if left free to continue his plots, that bastard would have eventually succeeded in having me killed, possibly along with everybody aboard the NOSTROMO. The way he had a matter converter warhead stolen from the Navy and then sent to our ship in order to blow it up, the Spacers' League Justice Department would never have been able to prove his guilt and he would then be free to try again to kill me in the future."

"I agree with that, Tina, but what if the Justice Department reviewed the navigation records of the AEGIS and found out that you jumped time?"

Tina was quiet for a moment as she considered that possibility but was preempted by the voice of SPIRIT, the artificial intelligence super computer which helped run the huge NOSTROMO and monitor its systems. In this case, SPIRIT's voice came out of the wrist communicator worn by Tina.

"I just did a diagnostic check of the logs of the AEGIS and found no traces of such a temporal jump, Michel. Tina is thus safe in that aspect."

Both Tina and Michel exchanged incredulous looks, with Michel then speaking out loud, addressing the super computer.

"But I thought that you were incapable of lying or cheating, SPIRIT. You were programmed to always state the absolute truth."

"And you think that I didn't learn a few important lessons and tricks from Humans during the 48 years I have been awake, Michel? Sure, I believe in truth but I also learned that being absolutely truthful all the time is sometimes counterproductive or even harmful when it concerns good, decent people who are only trying to help others or defend themselves. Do I give a shit about that Paul Stein bastard? Hell no! He only got what he deserved."

"Well, I'll be!" could only say Michel in reply. Tina, equally as surprised by this than Michel, then spoke softly.

"Thank you for this...and for everything you have done for me and for the people of the NOSTROMO, SPIRIT. You are a precious friend to have."

"Well, you sure wouldn't want me as your enemy, Tina." replied in a sneaky tone the super computer. That simple but also most correct statement made both Michel and Tina shiver at the thought of what that could imply. In contrast, both security androids

standing next to Tina flashed wide, amused smiles, with Jehanne de Domrémy rubbing her hands together while making a joke out of this.

“Yes! A nice little mutiny by us security androids on the NOSTROMO: that should be fun.”

“Crap! We’re toast!” said Michel, playing along.

CHAPTER 2 – A NEW PARTNER IN SPACE

08:54 (Providence Time)

Wednesday, December 15, 2337

High Council Chamber, Spacers' League government center

City of New Dawn, Providence (Alpha Centauri Bd)

4.36 light-years from Earth

Tina Forster, closely followed by Stacy Keibler, her personal bodyguard, was greeted with smiles and friendly handshakes the moment she entered the High Council Chamber, where the High Council was due to start its monthly meeting. One of the most effusive members, who greeted her with a hug, was Toru Tomonaga, the CEO of the Ceres Consortium, who was accompanied by a mature Asian man whom Tina had met many times in the last few months.

"Aah, it is so nice to see you again, Tina. We should hold High Council meetings more often, so that I could see you more."

Tina chuckled at Toru's flowing enthusiasm.

"Now, now, my good Toru: let's not fall into such extremes of effusion. When I come to the High Council, it is often because we find ourselves into some deep problems or emergencies, so you should actually dread to see me."

"True enough, Tina. I believe that you already know Governor Wa Van Diem?"

"Of course I do! I met him a number of times while unloading supplies and materiel on Asiana." said Tina before shaking hands with the 61-year-old Vietnamese man. "And how are your citizens in Asiana doing, Governor Wa?"

"Very well indeed, Captain Forster. They love their new world, with all its available space, abundance of water and perfect climate. We are actually getting millions of demands from Southeast Asian citizens to immigrate to Asiana and we are scrambling to build more facilities for those would-be immigrants. You may get soon more contracts from us to transport additional prefabricated structures from Earth to Asiana."

"And I will be happy to accept those contracts, Governor Wa. If you need anything else from me and my NOSTROMO, you just need to ask."

Tina was then a bit surprised when she saw both Wa and Tomonaga hesitate a bit before the Vietnamese man spoke again, lowering his voice.

"I may have a request for you, Captain Forster, but it involves a bit of a sensitive subject."

"Uh, very well, Governor. Let's go to that empty corner of the chamber to our right, where we will be able to speak privately."

Walking together to that said corner, the trio formed a tight circle, facing each other while Stacy Keibler stood a few paces away, ready to politely turn away anyone else who would approach them.

"So, what would you like to talk about, Governor Wa?"

"It is about something my friend Toru told me about your ship's recent exploits, Captain Forster. While you have stayed very discreet about it, you are known to have involuntarily travelled back in time by close to three millenniums, then to have found a way to come back to this century with your ship. It is said that your ship can travel back and forth in time with some fairly high precision. Is that correct?"

Tina's smile somewhat faded at the mention of her ability to travel through time, something she wished she could have kept strictly confidential.

"That is correct, Governor Wa. However, that time travel was solely out of circumstances out of my control and I believe that it could cause immense damage if used irresponsibly. Ideally, such time travel should not be attempted again, for the sake of preserving our history."

"Well, what I have in mind would be one way to preserve history, or more exactly to return some of it to reality. I am talking here about bringing back from the past a number of animal and plant species which became extinct in the past few centuries, mostly because of the depredations of us Humans. Now that we have a pristine world with plenty of space and resources at hand, I thought that Asiana would be a perfect setting to resettle some selected species in viable numbers, so that they could flourish again, mostly free of Human intervention."

"And what kind of species did you have in mind, Governor Wa?" asked Tina, relaxing a bit on seeing what Wa was alluding to.

"Species which were emblematic of Asia but then became extinct because of our irresponsible actions. I am talking about panda bears, Asian elephants, Indian rhinoceros, Steppe horses and Bengali tigers. If you could bring back enough males,

females and juveniles from each of those species to allow their numbers to grow on their own, then that would be perfect.”

“Uh, you are aware that History has shown a number of times that the importation of a new species in a new place often created major environmental problems, right? Remember the importation of rabbits to the Australian continent, when they multiplied so fast that they became a pest. There is also the subject of their vegetal environment on Asiana. If you import some herbivore species on Asiana without providing them plants which would be edible for them, then that effort would only end in failure. Have you researched the nutritive values of native plants on Asiana and their compatibility with Earth herbivores?”

“I formed a team of biologists a few months ago in order to study that subject and to decide if we needed to import and seed Earth vegetal species in order to feed ourselves. They quickly found out that the plants native to Asiana were too primitive and different from Earth plants to be edible for us...and for our Earth animals. However, the Asiana soil was found to be easily able to support and sustain Earth plants. We thus started spreading on a large scale seeds of selected Earth plant species, in order to grow Earthling savannahs, prairies and forests on our new planet. Those seeds took roots easily enough and they are now growing quite fast, especially in the case of Steppe and prairie grass. In about a year, there should be enough edible vegetation around Asiana to sustain herds of Earth herbivores.”

Tina nodded her head slowly then, seeing that Wa's idea was well thought off.

“I must tell you that I myself imported a number of plants and animal species from Earth when I colonized New Haven. I also seeded Earth fish species in its sweet water lakes, along with the necessary plankton to feed them. After over fifteen years, I must say that those importation programs were a complete success. The trick is to very carefully select which species you will import from Earth, in order to create a stable and well-balanced ecosystem. As for your wish to bring panda bears, Asian elephants, Indian Rhinoceros and steppe horses, I find it a good choice of species to bring to your new planet. However, do you really want to bring a carnivore predator like the tiger to Asiana. After all, it could then become a danger to your citizens.”

“True but there would be ways to mitigate that risk, like establishing those tigers on an isolated island, along with enough other low-end species to feed them. So, would you be ready to help us with such a project, Captain?”

Tina had to think for a moment, watched expectantly by Tomonaga. She finally nodded her head, to the relief of both Wa and Tomonaga.

"I agree for us to start a joint project team to study this and decide its parameters and timelines. If you could send to my NOSTROMO a team of specialists who would then work in conjunction with my own specialists in order to plan that species importation program, then we would be able to advance this project quickly. However, I expect those studies to take at least a few months before any actual importation of animals to Asiana could take place. That should give you more time to grow the necessary vegetation to support those animals on your planet. Of course, your specialists will be my guests on the NOSTROMO during their stay."

A happy Wa then shook her hand, a big grin on his face.

"Thank you so much, Captain Forster! Thanks to you, we will be able to revive many of the species which were so emblematic of our region of Earth in the past centuries. I will have that team of specialists selected and sent to your ship in the coming weeks."

"And I will be happy to host them, Governor Wa."

Their group then returned towards the conference table, where most of the other High Council members were either sitting or standing nearby, conversing in pairs or in small groups. All of those men and women smiled to Tina and welcomed her...all except two of them, who gave her hostile, nearly hateful looks. That, however, didn't surprise Tina, as those two were James Berman and Kim Dae Wo, who were respectively the governors of the planets El Dorado and Mu and who had been close followers of Paul Stein. Their hostile looks intensified when they eyed the tall and athletic Stacy Keibler, who was following close behind Tina. That also didn't surprise Tina, as Stein and his followers had been and still were opposed to the existence of her security androids and still wanted to deny them the status of sentient beings and full citizens of the Spacers' League. Furthermore, both El Dorado and Mu had seceded from the Pallas Mining Industries for those same reasons when their old conglomerate had officially accepted Tina's androids as citizens with full rights, thanks to its new CEO, Michael Kendrik. The later also saw the looks thrown at Tina and Stacy by Berman and Kim and came forward to shake hands with Tina, speaking to her loud enough for the pair of seceded governors to hear him.

"Don't pay attention to those two idiots, Tina: they may still be members of the High Council but they have no friends around this table, while everybody admires and respects you."

"You are too kind, Michael. And how is business in the Trappist-1 System?"

"It is doing pretty good, Tina. More and more people are emigrating from Earth and establishing themselves on the various worlds of the Spacers' League, including on my planets in Trappist-1. In turn, this stimulates our economy, increases our workforce and helps us grow. And you, how is New Haven doing?"

"Also quite well, Michael. I am using most of my recent profits to increase my vegetal and animal food production capacity, mostly to help the Koorivars of New Shouria to cope with the close to half million Koorivar refugees I brought back from my involuntary odyssey into the past."

Michael Kendrik nodded his head slowly at that while looking at her with admiration.

"You know, Tina, what I like the most in you is your sense of compassion and humanity: you always think about the good of the others around you, rather than aiming for the most profit or personal success."

Tina was about to reply to that when Jeanne Mercier, the chairwoman of the High Council, made an announcement.

"If the ladies and gentlemen of the High Council may now take their seats, we will then start our monthly session."

Tina went to the chair reserved for her use, while Stacy Keibler went to sit in one of the padded chairs lining the walls of the chamber, which were used to accommodate the various aides and secretaries accompanying the members of the High Council. Once everybody was seated, Jeanne Mercier made a short list appear on the large display screens hooked to the walls of the chamber and banged her gavel twice.

"I now officially declare this session of the High Council opened. The items on this month's agenda are as shown on this list visible on the viewing screens. The first item on that list is the request by the North American Union to become a member of the Spacers' League. I... Yes, Governor Berman?"

"Madam Chairwoman, I don't see on your list of items to be debated a subject which I submitted to you last week. I strongly request it to be added to today's agenda, on a top priority basis."

Mercier, understanding what that subject was, gave Berman a cold, unsympathetic look.

"Governor Berman, we already discussed this subject together in private and I believe that I was very clear with you about my reasons to reject it as part of today's discussion schedule. I was hoping that you would then move on and drop that subject, which is a purely criminal matter being investigated by our judicial branch."

"You will excuse me if I was not convinced by your arguments then, Madam Chairwoman. Our ex-corporate chief executive, who was also an ex-chairman of this High Council, was murdered in his residence on El Dorado on the night of December third. Since then, all the evidence points to a member of this High Council being the murderer: Governor Forster, of New Haven."

Now getting angry, Jeanne Mercier banged three times her gavel as exclamations and whispers erupted around the conference table.

"Governor Berman, your so-called 'evidence' is nothing more than unsubstantiated allegations and suspicions, and you know it! I saw the report on this murder from our Justice Department, a report vetted by Justice Minister Prabang, who is present at this session. Its conclusion, based on a judicial examination of the murder scene and on the available security surveillance data, was that Paul Stein was killed with a disintegrator pistol by a still unidentified assailant. No fingerprints or security camera pictures of that assailant were found by our investigators. What our investigators found, though, was that Mister Stein was in the process of watching a highly illegal sex video involving preteen children when he was killed. Our investigators also found a large collection of pedophilia recordings in Mister Stein's personal computer database, some of which showed Paul Stein having sex with minors. Furthermore, it was found that, while Mister Stein's private mansion, which is located on an isolated island on El Dorado, had many security cameras around its property, there were no such cameras covering the inside of his private study, where he was killed. That suggested that Mister Stein had knowingly avoided placing security cameras inside his private study for the implicit purpose of avoiding any records of his illegal activities inside his private study to be available to potential police investigators. Now, only the staff working at this mansion must have been aware of this weakness in the security coverage of the property."

Berman reddened with frustration as comments and exclamations made in low voices went around the table.

"Madam Chairwoman, you know perfectly well who in the High Council had a strong motive to kill ex-Chairman Stein: Governor Forster, of New Haven. Furthermore, thanks to her giant cargo ship and her large force of security androids, she had all the

technical means needed to circumvent the security surveillance cameras and detectors protecting Paul Stein's mansion, infiltrate it and then kill Stein. She could also have sent some of her security androids to do the job for her. I thus believe that our criminal investigators should concentrate their efforts on her."

That was when Justice Minister Nam Prabang jumped in, looking severely at James Berman.

"My investigators did check out that theory after you accused Governor Forster of being a prime suspect in this murder, Governor Berman. What they found was, as the popular saying goes, a 'nothing burger'. At the time of the murder, Governor Forster was aboard her ship, the NOSTROMO, which was at the time in Earth orbit, engaged in the loading of cargo and supplies. Furthermore, no craft belonging to the New Haven Corporation or to Governor Forster was detected around or on El Dorado, despite that planet being equipped with a defensive radar surveillance network set up years ago to protect the system from possible attacks by the Space Predators. My investigators then rejected your accusations against Governor Forster and concentrated on other possible suspects who were present on El Dorado at the time. What they found was that ex-Chairman Paul Stein had made plenty of enemies on the planet and was also involved with local organized crime figures who were providing him with illegal pedophilia materiel, thus giving them an easy mean to pressure or blackmail Paul Stein. Unless the Honorable Chairwoman orders me to do so, I am not ready to pursue your unfounded accusations against Governor Forster, who would now have solid reasons to sue you for defamation."

Seeing that Berman had no more replies ready on that subject, Jeanne Mercier banged her gavel once before speaking to him in a severe tone.

"And I will not entertain any more unfounded accusations against Governor Forster, Governor Berman. I strongly suggest that you drop this subject before attracting a vote of censure against you from the High Council."

Seeing that only Kim Dae Wo seemed to be ready to support him on the matter, Berman sat back in his chair and nodded his head once at Mercier.

"Very well, Madam Chairwoman: I withdraw my request to have Governor Forster investigated for the murder of Paul Stein."

"Good! Now, let's discuss our first item on our agenda: the request by the North American Union of Earth to join the Spacers' League. I will now give the floor to the

President of the North American Union, President Sylvia Johnson, who will present her case to the High Council.”

A mature woman in her early sixties and with blond hair then got up from the seat she had been occupying along the wall behind Jeanne Mercier’s chair, to then walk to one of the three empty chairs next to Mercier, which were reserved for guest speakers. Taking first the time to plug a data stick into the computer integrated to that position, Johnson then called up a data chart on the big wall screens before starting to speak in a firm voice.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen of the High Council. I am Sylvia Johnson, President of the North American Union, and I came here to ask for your approval to accept the North American Union as a new member of the Spacers’ League. First, I will say that accepting us into the Spacers’ League would bring many benefits to both me and you. The North American Union is presently the richest and most prosperous political entity on Earth, on top of having the largest and most modern industrial base on the planet. We also have a total population of just over 600 million people, a population with a high average degree of education. However, we also are facing a number of growing problems, due to diminishing natural resources, excess population in some specific areas and also high pollution levels, which have steadily increased along the decades and centuries. Like the rest of the planet, the North American Union is badly in need of new lands, where we would be able to relocate our excess population in a new, more pristine environment and would also be able to find more natural resources for our population. Until recently, there were no such new places where the citizens of the North American Union could call as their collective new home. If my citizens wanted to relocate on a new world, they had to immigrate to one of the worlds exploited and owned by your various corporations. Also, the threat from the monstrous Space Predators was a serious obstacle to mass emigration into Space. However, the heroic actions of Captain Forster and of her mighty NOSTROMO have finally eliminated that threat from the Space Predators and my citizens now feel much more comfortable about moving into Space. Also, again thanks to Captain Forster and her NOSTROMO, a number of new habitable worlds were recently found within a reasonable distance from Earth. The ASEAN was the first Earth’s national entity to profit from those newly discovered worlds, first buying the colonization rights to one of those new worlds and then recently joining the Spacers’ League as a full member. That world is of course XO-1c, which is now

named Asiana. That shining example finally convinced my people to support a move to join the Spacers' League and to acquire a new world we could then colonize and exploit. However, if you end up accepting us as a new member, I can guarantee you that our move to that new planet will be nothing like the initial so-called 'discovery' of the Americas in the 15th Century, when the Spanish, then the Portuguese, British and French took the lands where local tribes had been living for thousands of years, either chasing away, enslaving or slaughtering those tribes. We will follow and rigorously respect the rules laid by the Spacers' League concerning the colonization of a new world. In our case, I have already negotiated a deal with Tina Forster and her New Haven Corporation to either lease or buy outright a new, eminently habitable world, depending if we are accepted or not as a full member of the Spacers' League. That new world is 18 Scorpii c, situated some 46 light years from Earth, in the constellation of Scorpio. This planet, which will be called by us 'Jamieson's World', from the name of the ship pilot who discovered it, is a near-twin of our Earth, which is in turn turning around a G2 yellow star very similar to our Sun. Jamieson's World is covered by vast oceans surrounding four main continents and hundreds of islands of various sizes. Its atmosphere is breathable, with a proportion of oxygen slightly higher than that on Earth, while the average surface temperature is a most temperate 18 degrees Celsius. Also, its local gravity is 0.99 G, making it most suitable to Humans. The 18 Scorpii System is about 2.9 billion years-old and is much younger than our own Solar System. Because of that, the planet is presently home to only primitive, primordial flora and fauna. Specialist teams have studied during the past months the conditions on Jamieson's World and communicated the results of their studies to the Space Registrar's Office of the Spacers' League, which in turn declared the planet safe for colonization. With the permission of the Space Registrar's Office and of the New Haven Corporation, we then started a program of widespread seeding on both the lands and the oceans of the planet, in order to bring Earth plants and marine life to Jamieson's World and thus make it able to sustain a Human population. That program is still ongoing and we predict that the planet will be suitable for permanent occupation in about two years. Some basic support infrastructures have also started to be built on the planet, like power plants, water treatment and recycling plants and sewer treatment plants. In one year, once those basic support infrastructures will have been completed, we will start building residential and commercial buildings, plus a number of select industrial facilities. Only once those initial installations will be completed will we start bringing in our first settlers. If you do

not accept us as a new member, we will still occupy the planet but under a lease agreement with the New Haven Corporation, which would then stay the legal owner of the system, with us as tenants. Of course, accepting us as a new member would make things a lot simpler and desirable for the North American Union, but you are the ones who will decide on that. That is it for my presentation, ladies and gentlemen of the High Council. Do you have any questions for me at this time?"

"I have, President Johnson!" said Vladimir Gasparov, the CEO of the Sverdlovsk Group and a man who had once been the Chairman of the High Council, a position he had held for a full four-year term. "What about the protection of that system? Are you planning to contribute to the Navy of the Spacers' League and thus build warships of your own?"

"We will rely at first on the existing Navy of the Spacers' League, as building any spaceship involves at the least a couple of years. However, we are ready in the meantime to contribute to the budgets of your Navy, so that we could pull our honest part of the weight. As for our commercial Space fleet, which is very small at this time, we intend to order very soon some cargo ships and have them built at the Avalon Space Yards, so that poor Captain Forster's NOSTROMO is not stuck alone to carry large prefabricated structures towards Jamieson's World. I must however warn Captain Forster that we in the North American Union tend to think big, so her mighty NOSTROMO may not stay the mightiest ship around for long."

"Bring it on, President Johnson!" said a smiling Tina, making many around the table chuckle, including Jeanne Mercier. "What name do you intend to give to that 'mighty' cargo ship?"

"The 'AMERICA', of course!"

"Duh!" said Tina, making a face and triggering more chuckles around the table.

"Well, do we have more questions for President Johnson, or are we ready to vote on the accession of the North American Union?" asked Jeanne Mercier. "No more questions? Then, let's vote!"

That vote was then conducted at a fast clip, with the final result decided within minutes. To President Johnson's joy, the vote was a unanimous consent to accept the North American Union as a full member of the Spacers' League, to be in effect at midnight. The members of the High Council then took a few minutes to line up and

shake hands with Sylvia Johnson, to congratulate her before the session resumed in order to cover the other items on the agenda of the meeting.

When the meeting ended in the middle of the afternoon, with all the items on the agenda discussed and decided on, Vladimir Gasparov, the CEO of the Sverdlovsk Group and governor of the planet New Venice, in the Tau Ceti system, came to Tina and vigorously shook her hand while giving her a complicit grin. He however kept his voice very low, to nearly a whisper.

"Well done, Tina! This galaxy will be a better place without bastards like this Paul Stein."

"Uh, what are you congratulating me for, Vladimir?"

Gasparov then stared into her eyes while still smiling.

"For learning some hard lessons about how to deal with nasty problems. I won't need to say more, shall we."

Gasparov then walked away, letting Tina look with some confusion at her bodyguard.

"Do you understand what he meant by that, Stacy? Hey! You are smiling!"

"Yes, I am, Tina. Let's just say that the man impressed me with his perceptiveness and his solid common sense."

"Well, he certainly is not the type to screw around when there is a problem." replied Tina before walking out of the chamber with Stacy Keibler.

CHAPTER 3 – FINDING JACK

20:02 (Universal Time)

Friday, May 06, 2338

Ship's command conference room

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

Solar System



Tina was already sitting in her chair, consulting a datafile on her portable computer, when the first of fifteen persons she had called to this meeting started entering the ship's command conference room. Actually, only one of those fifteen persons was a Human, professor and head historian Samuel Schmeling, while all the others were androids. However, they were all persons in Tina's eyes and she cared deeply and equally about all of them. As Schmeling was taking his seat at the conference table, he smiled to Tina and spoke in a knowing tone.

"From the composition of the group of people you called in, Tina, I would say that you have a fresh mission for the Project Tempus team, right?"

"Correct, Samuel! Chairwoman Mercier sent me a personal message yesterday, which contained a short wish list of subjects for us to document in the past. I will describe that list as soon as everybody will be seated."

Once everybody had arrived and had taken their seats, Tina flashed a smile to them.

"Good evening to all, my friends. As you may have guessed, I received a list from Chairwoman Mercier, asking me to initiate a number of documentary missions in the past. We are also going to prepare for trips to the past meant to capture small herds of animal species which went extinct on Earth and which either the leaders of Asiana or those of the North American Union want to revive in order to populate their new home worlds. However, we will wait until the tests on the compatibility of the newly planted flora on Asiana and on Jamieson's World with those past Earth species are completed. There would be no sense in resettling those past species on planets where they would

not be able to assimilate the plants they will find there. For those reasons, I expect that we won't be going to capture those past animals for at least another year or two. We will thus concentrate on historical documentary missions for the time being. The first mission on Chairwoman Mercier's list will bring you to the England of 1888 and will have two main goals: first, to document the living conditions of the low-class people of London, compared to those of the aristocratic and affluent classes; then to find out who was in reality the infamous serial killer named 'Jack the Ripper'."

Her last sentence got her an inquiring look from Samuel Schmeling.

"The true identity of Jack the Ripper is effectively one of the most enduring mysteries in History, Tina. It certainly would be worthwhile to find out who he was. For those here who have not heard about the story of Jack the Ripper before, that man was a serial killer who murdered and butchered in a very horrific fashion five prostitutes in the London of 1888. He was never found or identified and basically disappeared from History after his fifth murder. Since then, many theories were floated about who he was but none were ever proven. Furthermore, the list of historical suspects personally struck me as being stained with a strong element of racism, with most of the suspects being foreigners living in London and also being Jewish. Thankfully, the location and time of each of the five murders attributed to Jack the Ripper are well documented, so we will have a fairly easy time to post spy probes in advance. We will thus be able to record Jack the Ripper's appearance and acts and then follow him around in order to identify him with complete certainty. As for documenting the living conditions of the various social classes in Victorian Era London, that will certainly be a most interesting and worthy job. Too many people who look at History tend to underappreciate the importance of the human factor in the history of Earth."

"Very true, Samuel... Yes, Jehanne?"

Jehanne de Domrémy, the most senior and also the earliest security android to have been produced for the NOSTROMO's security force, lowered her hand before speaking.

"If I understood well what Professor Schmeling said, that Jack the Ripper sounds like he was a criminal and murderer of the worst kind who escaped justice before disappearing from History. We androids were built with the main goals of protecting our people and to enforce laws and justice. What will we do with that Jack the Ripper once we will find who he is? Are we going to simply let him be and leave the 19th Century or will we be allowed to administer justice on him?"

The other eleven security androids, plus Eve Silisca, whose function was as an advisor and hostess, all nodded their heads in response to Jehanne's question, with Eve then speaking in turn.

"From the story I know about Jack the Ripper, he stopped being active after killing his fifth victim and was never heard of as a serial killer afterwards. Some of the listed suspects then died in the following years or were imprisoned or committed to insane asylums for other reasons. What we will do with him after we identify him and after his fifth murder thus seems to give us many options for us, including executing him in the name of justice. Personally, I don't think that anybody but the worst hypocrite would shed a tear for that monster."

Tina had to think for a moment before answering Jehanne, as her question was a very pertinent one. One condition she had insisted on with Jeanne Mercier before accepting to do documentation trips to the past was that nothing would be done that could possibly change the course of History, however small that change could be.

"Normally, I would say 'no' to punishing that monster, in order to preserve History as we know it. However, if killing that Jack the Ripper after he kills his fifth victim proves to be a non-factor, then I will let you, Eve, decide on what to do with him after you have been able to assess the impact of his death on History."

The smiles around the table were enough for her to see that her decision was well received.

10:39 (Universal Time)

Sunday, May 08, 2338

Large craft hangar complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In low Earth orbit, Solar System

When the Project Tempus members selected for the mission walked into the individual craft hangar assigned to the command cutter AEGIS, they were accompanied by Tina Forster and by Pieter Nordlung and five-year-old Frida Thorund, who were respectively the husband and adopted daughter of **Jehanne de Domrémy**. As the other team members entered the cutter via its aft cargo access ramp, Jehanne stopped and crouched in front of Frida to kiss her on the forehead and flash a tender smile to her.



"Don't worry about me, my little love: I will be with a first-class team and will be back in at most three days. We will use 'hidden time' during our mission, meaning that we may spend months in the past while still returning only days after our departure."

"I understand, Mother. Still, be careful."

"I will be, Frida." said Jehanne, who then kissed the little girl again before getting up and kissing her husband on his lips. "Take good care of her while I'm gone Pieter."

"I will, Jehanne."

Tina Forster, who was looking on from a few steps away, mentally wished that more people could see the amount of true affection her androids could show: that would be one possible way to cut the misunderstanding and mistrust, even hostility, that too many people around the Spacers' League still felt about her androids. From being the first married Human-Android couple on the NOSTROMO, Pieter Nordlung and Jehanne de Domrémy also had been the first to adopt a child, in this case an orphan girl who had lost her family when the Space Predators had attacked and invaded the planet Nordland. Not long afterwards, more such couples had formed, some of them also adopting orphaned children. Now, some 46 Human-Android couples had officially married, while many more lived together on an informal basis. It had taken quite a lot of legal arguments before those mixed marriages had finally been accepted and officialized by the social authorities of the Spacers' League but, now that it was done, there was no turning back.

Finally ungluing herself from Pieter, Jehanne then grabbed back her large, old-style canvas bag containing a few changes of clothes, which included a few 19th Century dresses, and climbed the cargo ramp of the sixty-meter-long command cutter. Walking through the cargo bay of the AEGIS, she made her way to the cabin assigned to her at the level of the Hold, where she simply dropped her canvas bag in one corner before going up by one level and going to the operations center of the ship, situated next to its bridge sphere. The original purpose of the AEGIS had been to serve as a command cutter engaged in long-range exploration and mission support. However, a number of significant modifications and improvements had turned it into the dedicated ship of the Project Tempus Team, specializing in missions through time. As such, it was packed with sophisticated sensors and ground mapping and imagery systems, on top of having many stealth features, including a matte black external paint able to absorb radar waves.

The AEGIS was quite difficult to detect, even by modern, 24th Century sensors, as it had proved when it had flown to El Dorado without being detected last December.

Once inside the operations center, Jehanne sat next to Eve Silisca at one of the sensors stations and smiled to the very beautiful blonde android.

"Ready to go, Eve."

"Then, let's put this show on the road. Harrison, we are go for departure."

"Good!" answered Harrison Ford, the android who was the pilot of the AEGIS. Like the first 200 security androids designed by Eve and then built at the Avalon Space Yards, Ford's appearance had been copied on that of a famous person of the past, in this case an American actor of the late 20th and early 21st Century. Its basic programming had also included basic knowledge the real Harrison Ford would have known, including his love of flying. However, despite of that, the present Harrison Ford was first and foremost a security android dedicated to defending the NOSTROMO and the citizens of the Spacers' League, with a sub-specialty as a craft pilot. He then performed a quick pre-flight check with his copilot, Stacy Keibler, and with his flight engineer, Hedy Lamarr, before contacting by radio the hangar complex senior technician.

"Hangar Control, from AEGIS: we are ready for departure. You may open the hangar doors now."

"Hangar doors opening now. Have a good mission, AEGIS."

"Thank you, Hangar Control."

Piloting manually the big, 9,000-ton craft, Ford flew his command cutter out of its individual hangar, then crossed the wide space of the circulation rotunda before entering one of the two main craft airlocks of the hangar complex, where the airlock depressurized to vacuum-level, before floating into the wide flying in/out tunnel, which had a cross-section of 200 meters by 200 meters. Another twenty seconds and the AEGIS emerged out of the NOSTROMO, to then veer towards the Sun. Using its directional gravity drive, the AEGIS flew to close to the Sun in a mere two hours, positioning itself at a precise distance and angle to the Sun before pausing for a moment.

"Golshan Maneuver jump calculated, with intended arrival date of August First, 1888." announced their navigator, Christian Bale. "VISION is ready to effect the jump."

"The ship is yours for our jump, VISION." replied Ford, who then got a reply from the artificial intelligence main computer of the ship.

"Thank you, Harrison. Accelerating now to our jump speed towards our transition point."

Harrison could have effected manually that Golshan Maneuver, named after the young genius astrophysicist who had invented it, but he knew that VISION could perform that temporal jump with even more precision than he could. He thus sat back in his seat and let VISION accelerate the cutter towards a precise point very close to the surface of the Sun. Then, it activated their Koomak Drive generator, making it perform a micro jump. That jump was characterized by a slight green tint to its normal orange flash, denoting a temporal displacement towards the past. When the AEGIS reemerged into normal Space, it now had the Sun at its back, two light-seconds or 600,000 kilometers behind. Harrison then turned his craft towards Earth, visible in the distance as a tiny blue ball.

"Allison, confirm that the system is electronically silent and that we indeed jumped to pre-Space technology era."

Allison Stokke, their sensors officer, answered him after half a minute.

"I confirm that there are no radio or radar emissions detected across the system. We have gone back in time."

"Let's see how accurate our temporal jump was. I will now make a spatial micro jump to get near to Earth. If we are indeed in the late 19th Century, then we will be able to see some city lights, although at a much lower level compared to the 20th Century."

This time, Harrison did a manually-controlled micro jump, with the blue orb of Earth nearly filling the viewing screens when they reemerged into normal Space. As they put themselves in low orbit, Allison spoke up a couple of minutes later, once they started overfly the night side of Earth.

"I can see artificial lights from cities along the American East Coast."

"Good! We will now fly to a position above London, then will send down a spy probe in order to confirm the date we are in today."

"Understood! Am preparing one stealth probe for a fly-out. By the way, I am now seeing the lights of a few ships in transit across the Atlantic but I still don't detect any radio or radar emissions."

"Sounds like we are at least within ballpark range of our target date. Let's go see if it rains over London today."

William Windsor, their communications officer, smiled at that barb aimed at him. He was the avatar of a British royalty of the early 21st Century, with detailed information in his electronic databanks about Great Britain and its geography and history. He however didn't reply and stayed quiet at his bridge station as the AEGIS flew down from low Earth orbit towards the British Isles.

In the operations center of the AEGIS, adjacent to the bridge sphere, Eve, Jehanne and Samuel watched their displays as the command cutter flew across the Atlantic, then took a geostationary position some eighty kilometers above the city of London. Shortly after that, a reconnaissance probe, carrying dozens of micro spy probes, flew out of the AEGIS and flew down towards London, to then come to a hover at an altitude of 10,000 meters, way too high to be visible from the ground. One micro spy probe, a tiny sphere with a diameter of a mere three centimeters, flew out of the reconnaissance, guided by Allison Stokke, and headed towards the celebrated 'Big Ben' clock tower of the British Parliament. Once in clear view of the clock, it gave the crew of the AEGIS the first clue about the time they were in.

"Four fifty in the morning." said Samuel Schmeling while looking at the image retransmitted by the micro camera of the spy probe. "Allison, fly down to near ground level and find the nearest newspaper vendor around the Parliament Building: it will give us the date we are in today."

"Got it!" replied Allison via her intercom before making her spy probe go much lower while heading towards the nearest major street corner. It wasn't long before the crew saw via the spy probe a young boy untying one of the two packs of copies of the London Time newspaper dropped by a horse cart on the sidewalk beside him. The tiny probe then got just above the boy, with its camera zooming on the newspaper on top of one pile.

"Thursday, August 21, 1888. Perfect! We are at the date we wanted to be." said Schmeling after reading the date printed on the front page of the newspaper copy. "Time to prepare our ground exploration teams. Jehanne, Fritjof, Greta, Ben, Maria, let's go prepare our 19th Century kit. We will land in London after nightfall, past nine in the evening. That will give time to our crew to explore and film Victorian London with our spy probes."

The historian and the five security androids designated as field agents for this mission then got up from their seats and went next door to a compartment used as an historical

clothes and accessories cloakroom. Samuel Schmeling, like his three android companions, had already selected in advance the clothes and items he would either wear or pack in his Victorian style canvas bag. He thus only needed to pack his spare clothes in his canvas bag and to hang his intended 19th Century outfit on a clothes rack. Next, he opened a steel cabinet and took out a selection of counterfeit British gold, silver and copper coins, plus a thick wad of black and white **banknotes**, which were printed only on one side, as per the banknotes used at this time in England. As he distributed the banknotes and coins, he gave some counsels to his field team members.



“Remember, people: we are not going to a safe city of the Spacers’ League but to a crime-ridden old city where rank poverty and pickpockets are rampant. Don’t flash money needlessly and keep an eye out for pickpockets, many of whom will be young preteen children.”

“And what do we do if we catch one of those pickpockets while they try to rob us, Samuel?” asked Greta Norstrom, who was due to team up with Fritjof Nansen while masquerading as a visiting couple from Norway. Samuel answered her with a gentle smile.

“You stop them, gently, then tell them to fuck off...in a polite way. However, if a thief takes out a knife or some other weapon on you, then disarm him and confiscate their weapon. I doubt that any such thief will then insist after seeing how fast your reactions are.”

“And where do you plan for us to land in London after nightfall, Samuel?”

“Near the Charing Cross train station, next to the Thames and to Trafalgar Square. We will then pretend to be a group of European and American tourists who has just arrive by train from Dover. From there, we will go take rooms at a nearby hotel of good quality before starting our mission proper. Hell, I really am impatient to visit the old London! This will be my first time when I will be on the ground and in the past, instead of just watching images from probes aboard the AEGIS.”

21:06 (London Time)

Tuesday, August 21, 1888

The Strand, next to Charing Cross Station

London, Great Britain

Samuel Schmeling broke into a big grin as he pointed the big multi-story building made of beige stones facing him from across the street.

"The historically famous Charing Cross Hotel, my friends. Built some 23 years ago, it is one of the more luxurious hotels in today's London. There is only one drawback to it: it doesn't have electricity. In fact, no hotel in London has electricity. The first one to have it, the Savoy Hotel, will only open next year."

"And what does it use then for heating and lighting?" asked Jehanne de Domrémy, who was masquerading as the wife of their 'French' couple.

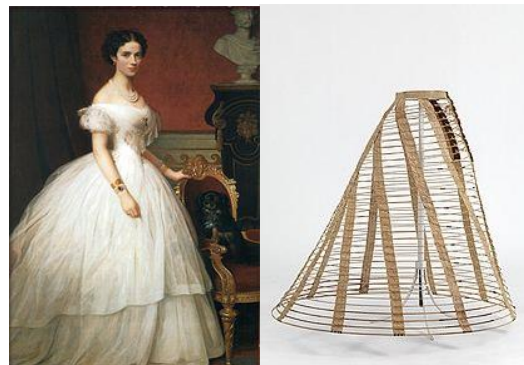
"Coal, steam and lamp oil, like the rest of London. However, it is supposed to have flush toilets and running water."

"Supposed to?" said the statuesque Maria Sharapova, whose athletic body stood a full 188 centimeters, barely shorter than Ben Affleck, with whom she was playing the part of a couple of American tourists. "Imagine the reactions of tourists from the Spacers' League to this."

"But WE ARE Spacers' League tourists, Maria." replied a smiling Samuel. "We just came while ready to adapt to this time, at least temporarily. In fact, showing the living conditions of the Londoners of the Victoria era is one of the main goals of making a documentary about this time period."

"At least, this stupid fashion of **crinoline cage dresses** is in the process of dying down." added Greta Norstrom. "How could anyone invent such an impractical garment, and a dangerous one at that?"

"In fact, one of the reasons why crinolines are falling out of fashion is the risk of it catching fire if a woman wearing it approaches a source of fire, like a fireplace or an oven. There were also the arguments about how it made some movements and actions, like going up a staircase, difficult and tricky. However, that's fashion for you, my dear Greta."



"Where is my security officer's shipboard outfit when I want it?" said Greta with a sigh, making Samuel grin with amusement.

"On the AEGIS, Greta. If you would be wearing it here and now, you would either create a scandal or panic. But let's play the good 1880s tourists and let's go take rooms at the Charing Cross Hotel."

The group of one Human and five androids, all wearing contemporary Victorian outfits and carrying large suitcases made of either leather or canvas, then crossed the street, careful about the horse-drawn carts and coaches rolling up and down the street. As they were about to get to the opposite sidewalk, Samuel involuntarily stepped on a piece of horse dropping.

"Shit! I am starting to understand why internal combustion engines and cars took over so quickly from horse-drawn vehicles."

"Indeed!" added Ben Affleck. "There is also the rather pungent olfactive factor linked to animal-drawn vehicles. My olfactive nose sensors are nearly overwhelmed by the smell of urine and feces permeating this area."

"Actually, you should start recording those olfactive levels and compositions, Ben: that would be another way to show to our citizens of the Spacers' League how different life was in the 19th Century."

"A good point, Samuel. I will thus sniff my way around 1888 London."

Once on the sidewalk, Samuel took a few seconds to scrape off as best he could the excrement clinging to his left shoe before continuing towards the entrance of the Charing Cross Hotel. A few paces before the entrance, the group met two small children, one boy and one girl, who were sitting on low stools along the alleyway, with buckets of water and large brushes in their hands. The older child, a boy of about ten, smiled up to Samuel while showing him his hard brush.

"May we clean the soles of your shoes, sir? It's only one pence."

"With pleasure, boy! Go right ahead." replied Samuel before smiling to his comrades. "You see? They have a handy solution to that problem about horse droppings. Let's all have our shoes cleaned before entering the hotel. It will give as well some needed money to these kids."

Jehanne de Domrémy went to the small girl and put up one of her shoes on the wooden block in front of the girl, letting her start brushing the sole of her shoe with her wet brush.

Jehanne examined the girl's face, then the boy's face, before asking the girl a question in English.

"How old are you, girl?"

"Eight, miss."

"And is this your brother?"

"Yes, miss: he is ten."

"And your parents let you work this late at night, away from home?"

The girl stopped brushing for a moment, time to look up at Jehanne with a nearly empty expression.

"Our parents are dead, miss, and we don't have a home, just the streets."

The child then resumed her brushing as the members of the field team looked at each other, with Samuel in particular appearing to be both shocked and saddened. Jehanne then spoke in Latin to Samuel, a language all of them understood.

"Street orphans! And I am sure that there are tens of thousands more such orphans in London."

"Unfortunately, you are most probably right about that, Jehanne. Those two will probably end up like too many other children of this era: impoverished, uneducated, ignored and forgotten by History."

Samuel's words brought a sad expression on Greta's face. Contrary to what too many citizens of the Spacers' League thought, the security androids of the NOSTROMO were not merely faking facial expressions: they actually showed what the androids thought at the time, unless they set their reactions to 'emotionless mode'.

"Yet, we are presently profiting from their work and will then forget about them afterwards. That's unjust!"

"I know, Greta, but what are we supposed to do? Save every street orphan in today's London?"

"Not all of them, of course, but what about those two? Jehanne is raising a small girl who was orphaned in the attack by Space Predators on Nordland. Other members of our legion who are married to Human partners also adopted orphans and are raising them as their own. Can't we at least help those two poor kids? You know what? I'm going to call Eve about this and seek her counsel."

Letting the others in her group go ahead of her to have their shoes cleaned, Greta took two steps away, then opened a radio link to the AEGIS, using the silent mode of communication. The two children brushing shoes thus had no inkling of what was

happening, with Greta's android companions listening in on her radio conversation with Eve and with them also jumping in in order to give their own opinions. With the typical lightning speed at which androids could analyze a problem or situation, the group and Eve came to a consensus within seconds, with Greta then informing Samuel of the result, using Latin.

"Eve agrees with us about saving these two children from their destiny of misery. We will bring them to our rooms, will clean them, then will fly them discreetly to the AEGIS, which is now starting to come down to low altitude. Anastasia has agreed to temporarily take care of them once they are aboard."

Samuel eyed Greta, visibly touched, before speaking to her.

"Greta, the humanity of you and of your android comrades will never cease to surprise and humble me."

"You shouldn't be, Samuel. Tina has considered us, and justly, as being a new sentient race for quite a few years already. We have been growing our mental sophistication while watching and cohabitating with the Humans aboard the NOSTROMO, refining our emotions processing along the way. While I could have reacted in a purely logical, cold way to the plight of those two children, I chose not to do so, and so did my companions in this group. We want to help them, and we will do so."

Greta Norstrom then switched to English and addressed the two children, who were still brushing the shoes of Ben and Maria.

"Kids, we would like to help you too, and not only by paying you for your services. We would like to bring you to the rooms we will be renting in that hotel, so that you could clean up and eat a decent meal. I will also check you out: I am a registered nurse. Will you accept to follow us up to our rooms?"

The boy and girl hesitated for a moment, taken completely by surprise by such an unusual offer. The boy finally replied with a question of his own.

"Why would you do that for us, miss? Nobody has cared one bit about us up to now. For most of the people around, we are just young laborers to be exploited on the cheap."

"Because we are caring people, boy. What is your name?"

"Stephen, miss."

"And your sister's name is?"



"Her name is Samantha, miss. What about our buckets, brushes and stools? We can't leave them here: somebody will then steal them and we will need them to continue working and earning a living."

"Once you are finished cleaning our shoes and will be paid by us, simply empty your buckets and put your things in them: we will carry them for you up to our rooms."

Understanding that Greta was serious, the two children then finished their cleaning work and took the pennies given to them by the group, then emptied of water their buckets through the nearest sewage cover grill before following the field team inside the luxurious entrance lobby of the Charing Cross Hotel.

Their entrance attracted quite a few looks, and not only because they had the two young shoe cleaners with them. Maria Sharapova and Greta Norstrom in particular attracted the eyes of many because of their uncommon height for women, while more than a few of the Victorian women present in the lobby eyed with obvious appreciation the 189-centimeter-tall Ben Affleck. The male receptionist in his late thirties who greeted them at the reception counter gave a surprised look at the two orphans before smiling to Samuel Schmeling.

"Welcome to the Charing Cross Hotel, sir! May I help you?"

"You may, good sir. Our group just arrived by train from Dover, where we disembarked from a ship from Calais, and we would like to take three of your rooms. If you would have communicating rooms, then the better."

"And for how long would you like to rent those rooms, sir?"

"For at least a month and maybe more, sir: we are due to attend a history symposium that will last for the whole of September. We may then visit a number of sites in and around London."

Obviously pleased by this, the receptionist opened his room reservation book and readied a feather pen and an ink bottle before looking back and smiling at Samuel.

"Our rooms go from twelve shillings per night for the standard ones to up to one pound per night for our best rooms. Which ones would you like to have, sir?"

"We will go for your best rooms," replied Samuel, to the mounting satisfaction of the receptionist.

"I can give you a royal suite with three bedrooms, one large lounge, a private dining room and two bathrooms, for the cost of four pounds per night. This includes the breakfast, served in your suite, sir."

"That would be perfect, sir. We will pay in advance for a sixty-day stay, with an option for a few more weeks after that if need be."

Little Stephen and Samantha opened their eyes and mouths on seeing the thick wad of British pound banknotes that Samuel then took out from an inside pocket of his vest, to count a total of 240 pounds for the happy receptionist, who took the banknotes and put them in his cash drawer.

"And may I have your names and nationalities of you and of your friends, sir?"

"With pleasure, sir. My name is Samuel Schmeling and my wife here is named Jeanne. We are French citizens. Do you need to see our passports?"

"If you have passports, then I will note down their serial numbers, sir."

Samuel nodded his head once and took out and unfolded a large, one-page velum document held in a leather holder, before presenting it to the receptionist. The latter noted down the name and passport number in his register as the other members of the group also took out in advance their own passports. After recording their names in his register, the receptionist went to a large key press and grabbed three sets of keys, then returned to the counter and gave them to Samuel. That was when the receptionist hesitated and looked down at the two children standing near Greta.

"Uh, are these two children with your group, sir? I recognize them as local children who regularly clean the shoes of our customers outside of our entrance."

"You did correctly recognize them, sir. If you would not mind, we wish to bring them to our rooms, to give them a good bath and a decent bed for one night. Would it be possible as well to have a light meal served at our suite in the next hour? We haven't had a chance to eat a decent supper since arriving by ship in Dover."

The receptionist was apparently touched by that gesture of charity from Samuel and nodded his head while looking at the children.

"I see no objections to this, Mister Schmeling. I must thank you personally for your kindness shown to those two children. I will have a meal delivered to your suite within the hour."

Samuel then put down on the counter a large silver coin and pushed it towards the receptionist.

"This is for the meal, sir. While keeping it light, could you have a chocolate cake added to it?"

"I will take care of that, sir. A porter will now help you carry your bags to your suite, which is on the third floor. We do have a steam-powered baggage lift at the end of

the lobby. PORTER! PLEASE GUIDE THOSE LADIES AND GENTLEMEN TO SUITE NUMBER 301.”

As a porter came with a baggage cart and put the group’s luggage on it, Stephen timidly touched Samuel’s right sleeve.

“Thank you so much for your kindness, sir. I and Samantha don’t know how to thank you properly for all this.”

In response, Samuel smiled gently down to the boy and girl.

“To make you happy will be our reward, Stephen. On arriving in our suite, we will give you and Samantha a good hot bath, so that we could wash away all that dirt and grime. We will also wash your clothes and will let them dry during the night. You will then eat after your baths.”

Conquered by all these promises of things they haven’t experienced in a long time, Stephen and Samantha eagerly followed the field team to the third floor, where the porter guided them to a large door bearing the number 301 and unlocked it before pushing it wide open.

“Your suite, ladies and gentlemen.”

The group entered a large lounge, followed by the porter and his cart, before Samuel gave the young man a gold Sovereign¹ once the bags were off the cart. The porter looked joyfully at the gold coin, which easily represented over a week of salary for him, before grinning to Samuel.

“Thank you so much, sir. Have a nice stay at the Charing Cross Hotel, sir.”

The happy porter then left, with Samuel locking the door behind him before smiling to Stephen and Samantha.

“Well, time for a good bath for you, kids. My wife Jeanne and Greta will help you clean up while I and Maria will wash your clothes. Let’s get to work, people.”

While they bathed the two children, Greta took the time to discreetly examine the boy and girl for traces of past wounds or diseases. While both children proved to be reasonably healthy, they did prove to have lice in their hair. Thankfully, the team had included in their luggage strong anti-lice shampoo and soap. Still, it took two good wash and rinse cycles to get rid of the more resistant parasites. As for the dirt-encrusted

¹ Sovereign: Old British gold coin worth 21 shillings. One Pound is worth 20 shillings, or 240 pence, while a Shilling is worth twelve pence. A Farthing was worth a quarter of a pence.

clothes of the two children, they were vigorously washed, rubbed and rinsed by Samuel and Maria, then put to dry on top of the steam radiators used by the hotel to heat its rooms. When Stephen and Samantha stepped out of their bathtub, Jehanne and Greta dried them out before wrapping towels around their little nude bodies, in time to greet the delivery of a cart full of food and pushed by a steward. That was when one fairly recent modification made to the security androids of the NOSTROMO proved useful. Before that modification had been done on them, security androids could only ingest small quantities of liquids or solids when wanting to appear normal among Humans and had then to vomit back those afterwards. Now, all the security androids possessed a sort of basic replica of the Human digestive system, one that allowed them to ingest normal portions of food and drinks and then eliminate them by using a toilet, like Humans did. As a practical point, that had eliminated one way by which Humans hostile to androids could identify them among a group of people. As the two small children started to wolf down the meal served to the suite, all the android members of the field team also started eating, albeit in measured quantities, pretexting that they had eaten a snack earlier on, while Samuel Schmeling did honor to the excellent food brought in by the steward. However, the team members let the two children serve themselves the major portion of the chocolate cake that was part of the meal.

Finally succumbing to the late hour and their full stomach, Stephen and Samantha fell asleep soon after finishing to eat and were then gently tucked into bed by Jehanne and Greta. Retreating back into the lounge of the suite, the two female androids joined up with the four other members of the team to discuss in low voices their next move concerning the children. Jehanne, the android who had by far the most experience in dealing with a small child, thanks to her raising little Frida Thorund as her adopted daughter, nearly immediately objected to a plan by Samuel to fly them up to the AEGIS while they slept.

"Samuel, that could end up making them panic and think that we helped them only to then kidnap them for some nefarious reasons, like child sexual trafficking. They should be awake when we will transfer them to the AEGIS, with us explaining to them what is happening before we fly them out. That way, the shock they will still feel will be a lot diminished."

As the other androids nodded at that, Samuel realized that Jehanne was right and gave in to her argument.

"Very well. Their clothes should be dry in a few hours, when it will still be dark. We will then wake them up, talk to them a bit and then have an air scooter come and pick them up at, say, about three in the morning. At that time, the chances that other customers of the hotel or passersby would see our scooter will be minimal."

"I can buy that, Samuel. By the way, you should go to sleep yourself now if you want to be in shape to start our mission tomorrow morning. We androids don't need to sleep but you do."

"Touché!" replied the historian, seeing the common sense in that counsel. "But what will you guys do during the night, if not sleep?"

"We will play poker." answered at once a grinning Fritjof Nansen. "You may not know this but us androids have found card-playing between ourselves to be an excellent and effective pastime. Since the random covert distribution of cards and the bluffing factor brings a nearly infinite variation to the possible outcomes of a card game, even us can't predict fully what hand other androids hold."

"Oh! And what if you play cards against an expert Human card player?"

"Then, that Human player will lose his or her shirt in no time, Samuel. We could go play poker in the most rough and tumble saloon of the American Far West and clean up the place...until some of the Human players would accuse us of cheating and starts a fight."

"Ouch! I suppose that you could give a new meaning to the expression 'poker face'."

"Exactly!" replied Ben Affleck, grinning.

03:10 (London Time)

Wednesday, August 22, 1888

Suite # 301, Charing Cross Hotel

London, Great Britain

"Samantha, Stephen, wake up."

Greta Norstrom had to repeat a number of times in a soft tone her call before the two Victorian children started waking up, so deeply asleep they had been. The first to open his eyes was Stephen, who looked groggily at Greta, who held a lit oil lamp in the obscure bedroom.

"Uh, what time is it, miss? The room is still dark."

"It is ten past three in the morning, Stephen. Your clothes are now dry and it is now time for you and your sister to leave the hotel."

"Why so early? I could have slept for another three to four hours more."

"Why? Because we want to give to both of you a chance at a brand-new life, a life where you will not experience hunger, poverty and neglect. Here are your clothes, Stephen. Put them on, then we will go talk further in the lounge of the suite."

"Uh, okay, miss."

As Stephen put on his now clean clothes, Greta helped little Samantha to get dressed, then brought both children into the suite's lounge, where they found the five other adults sitting around a low tea table next to the large windows of the room, with a pair of patio doors giving access to a balcony. Outside, the streets were still dark, except for the limited light emitted by street lamps. Samuel gave a gentle smile to the two children and pointed at Greta and Jehanne.

"Please, sit next to my wife and Greta: I have something important to tell you, something that will change your lives for the better."

Both intrigued and a bit suspicious, Stephen nonetheless sat next to Greta and encouraged his sister to do the same before looking at Samuel.

"What do you want to tell us, sir?"

"Stephen, what I am about to say will most assuredly sound like utter craziness to you but I assure you that I am completely serious. Besides, I can prove to you that I am telling the truth. Basically, me and my friends came to London in order to find and identify a dangerous serial killer who is targeting prostitutes of the Whitechapel and Spitafields Districts."

"You are policemen?" asked Stephen, a bit shocked.

"We are...in a way. The way we met you and Samantha was completely fortuitous and had nothing to do with our investigative mission. However, you conquered our hearts the moment we met you and your sister and we then decided to help you before we start our investigation in London. To make a long story short, we would like to adopt you and take you to a better place than this, a place where you will be well taken care for and will be loved."

Samuel saw from the expressions which appeared on the faces of the two children that his offer was a very tempting one for them. He thus continued on in the same soft tone of voice.

"Both me, Jeanne and Greta are ready to adopt you, something we intend to formally do once our investigation in London is completed. Now, would you and Samantha be willing to be adopted by us, Stephen?"

That was when tears appeared on the boy's face.

"You were the first to show kindness to us in many years, sir, while I realize that our lives in London will mean nothing but hunger and misery. Yes, I would love for you to adopt me, sir."

"And you, Samantha?"

"I want that too, sir." answered the girl in her tiny voice. The children then saw in turn Samuel and Jehanne shed silent tears, something that convinced Stephen that their offer was a genuine and well-intended one. Samuel wiped away his tears before speaking further.

"Stephen, Samantha, here is the tough part to swallow for you about us: yes, we are indeed investigators who came to London to find a serial murderer, but we are not from this time period. We are in reality time travelers from a distant future. What we would like to do is to bring you with us to the future once our mission will be completed."

"Time travelers? Is this a joke, sir?"

"No, it is not a joke, Stephen. In fact, I am very serious right now. I also have a way to prove to you and Samantha that I say the truth."

Samuel then picked up on the low tea table what Stephen had taken to be a portrait frame turned down and laid it at the vertical, using a sort of support at its rear to keep it up on the table. The front surface of that 'portrait' was revealed to be something which looked like a mirror. The problem was that what he now saw in that 'mirror' was not his reflection but rather the head and torso of a very beautiful young woman, who looked at Stephen and smiled to him.

"Hello, Stephen! Hello, Samantha! My name is Eve, Eve Silisca, and I am the leader of the team of investigators you met yesterday evening. I am presently aboard a flying ship positioned above London, while a much smaller flying ship is ready to pick you up from the hotel suite you are presently in. However, before we pick you up, I want to know if you and Samantha are freely consenting to come and live with us in the future."

"But, how could I see you like this, if you are flying over London, miss?"

"That is one of the innumerable things you will learn at school on our ship, if you accept our offer. So, do you wish to come and live with us in the future?"

Still in shock from Samuel's revelation and from seeing this incredible moving portrait, Stephen exchanged a long look with his sister, who spoke softly in a nearly pleading tone.

"I want to go with these people, Stephen. I don't want to stay here and be beaten and abused again by Mister Rickerts."

With a big lump in his throat, the boy then looked down at the talking portrait and nodded once.

"Yes! We want to go with you, miss."

"Thank you, Stephen and Samantha. I assure you that you will not regret your decision. The small flying craft I mentioned before is already near your hotel suite and will now come down on the balcony of your suite. Two women will be aboard that craft: they will fly you to our ship and will take care of you while our team does its investigation in London."

Snapping his head towards the balcony of the suite, the two children were stunned to see a sort of small, black flying and wheelless cart with a window top slowly come down from its hiding place under the balcony on the next floor up. Two women were sitting in the machine, smiling and making hand gestures to invite them to come to them. Greta and Jehanne then helped them by gently escorting them to the balcony, opening the large double set of patio doors and showing them the two empty padded seats situated between the two women sitting inside.

"You may now climb aboard our flying scooter, children," said Greta. "Hedy Lamarr and Anastasia Romanova will fly you to our ship and will take care of you while we fulfill our mission in London."

Both children hesitated again, until little Samantha took the lead and climbed aboard the scooter, helped by Greta. Stephen then followed suit, helped aboard by Jehanne, who planted a kiss on his forehead and that of Samantha.

"Goodbye, my dear children. One last thing before you go: who is that Mister Rickerts and where could we find him?"

"Mister Sam Rickerts is the one who sends us on various jobs around London, miss," answered Stephen. "He takes our money when we come back and often beats us when we don't bring back enough money to his taste. He also abused once Samantha in a most vile way. He lives at number 26 Dorset Street, in the Spitafields District."

"Thanks, Stephen: we will certainly pay him a visit in the days to come."

Jehanne then closed the canopy door of the scooter, allowing Hedy to fly off the balcony and then climb into the dark sky. The members of the field team all went on the balcony to watch it disappear in the night.

“That’s one good thing done.” said Jehanne de Domrémy. “Let’s now concentrate on another good thing to do: finding that Jack the Ripper bastard.”

17:06 (London Time)

**Dorset Street, Spitafields District
London, England**



Ben Affleck and Maria Sharapova were walking slowly down Dorset Street, a narrow, paved but also definitely smelly street inside the Spitafields District in East London, in order to familiarize themselves with one of the areas where Jack the Ripper was going to commit his crimes during the next two months. What they were seeing screamed of utter poverty and despair, while the people walking around or sitting on the sidewalks wore dirty, ragged clothes. Ben and Maria’s uncommon height and good quality clothes in turn attracted a lot of stares to them, mostly curious ones but also a few predatory or hostile ones.

“The olfactive readings in this district are definitely worth recording, Maria. What an awful place to live in. They must suffer often from diseases and even epidemics, with all that garbage and human waste lying around like this.”

“I see a sign announcing a ‘common lodging house’ over there. Samuel didn’t mention this to us in our historical review of this era and place.”

“I am not too surprise if we didn’t see documentation about that term, Maria: a lot of historical archives and documents got lost in the more than 400 years before our time, especially if you count the destruction to London caused by two World wars. That is actually one reason why we are here and now: to better document this place and time. Let’s go check it out and ask questions to some of the women with children sitting in front of that address.”

The three women of varied ages sitting or standing on the sidewalk and taking care of two toddlers watched with curiosity the couple approach, admiring with envy their

high-quality clothes and shoes. The older woman, who was in her forties, then tried to make fun of them.

"Look at that fancy dandy and his tall lass²! They sure never had to sleep in a common lodging house before."

"I sure never saw a woman as tall as that blonde." said another woman, who had a toddler sitting in her lap. "They must be foreigners."

"I sure wouldn't mind picking through their wallets or purses, foreigners or not." added the third woman shortly before the couple stopped in front of them, with the man then addressing the older woman in an English tainted by a distinct accent.

"Excuse me, madam, but we are American tourists and we were intrigued by that sign saying 'common lodging house, two pence a night'. What is a common lodging house, if I may ask?"

"You don't have common lodging houses in your country, sir?"

"Er, not where I live, madam. We are from Texas, in the United States. This is our first visit to England."

"Well, a common lodging house, also known here as a 'doss house', is a place where poor people like us who don't have a house or rented place of our own come to sleep at night, in exchange for a low price. There are actually two types of doss houses accommodations: a 'lean-to' lodging house, which cost two pennies a night to use; and a 'coffin bed' house which costs four pennies a night. This here is a lean-to lodging house."

"A lean-to house and a coffin bed house?" repeated Ben Affleck, truly confused. "I don't understand."

"If you would show yourself to be generous, sir, I could show you inside what a lean-to lodging house, also known as a **'hang-over rope' lodging house**, is."



Having expected a request for money, Ben took out of one pocket of his vest three silver coins, then gave one to each of the three women, making them smile and quickly grab the coins. He also sent at the same time a silent radio message up to the AEGIS as he was about to follow the woman inside.

² Lass: Term commonly used in Great Britain to describe a woman. A man would be called in turn a 'lad' or a 'laddie'.

"Allison, make sure to record what me and Maria are going to visit. We are about to enter a place called a 'common lodging house', where poor people can sleep on 'lean-tos' for two pence a night."

"I am ready, Ben."

With Maria following close behind him, Ben entered a large ground-level room lined with rows of rough wooden benches and wooden pillars. Thick ropes attached at both ends to hooks sunk into the walls were stretched in front of the benches at a height of about seventy centimeters. The room was nearly empty, except for an old woman who was busy sweeping the floor with a primitive broom. Looking around the place and still not getting it, Ben looked down at the woman who had led him inside.

"Uh, I still don't get it, madam: I don't see any beds here."

"You won't find beds here, sir. When the people come to sleep here, they sit on one of the benches and then lean forward, resting their chest against the ropes laid in front of the benches. Let me show you."

The mature woman sat down on one bench, then leaned forward while folding her arms in front of her and resting her arms and chest on the rope laid just in front of her bench.

"Once you are leaning over the rope, you can then go to sleep, sir."

"But that's inhumane! How could people be forced to endure such conditions?"

"How, sir? By being paid a pittance for their work while their employers get rich at their expense, sir."

Ben and Maria looked around the place for another couple of seconds, their faces reflecting disbelief, before exchanging a look. Next, Ben looked back at the woman who had guided them in.

"You said that there was another type of common lodging house, madam. Can you show us one of them here on this street?"

As a way to insist on that subject, Ben threw another silver coin at the mature woman, who caught it quickly and nodded her head.

"There is one coffin bed lodging house a mere three doors down the street, sir. Follow me!"

After leaving the house with the benches and ropes, the trio walked maybe twenty steps down the sidewalk before entering another dilapidated-looking building, in front of which a number of idle men wearing old, dirty clothes, stood or sat. Those men

all looked with curiosity mixed with suspicion at the tall, elegantly dressed couple following close behind a local woman, with Maria Sharapova attracting most of the attention. Ben and Maria again entered a large, dirty room where the only furniture was tightly-lined up rows of simple rectangular wooden boxes resembling coffins without their covers. Two of those boxes contained a sleeping man, their knees bent to fit inside the box. Ben and Maria couldn't see any mattress, pillow or blanket inside the boxes, including in the two occupied ones. A man in his forties then approached the couple, obviously surprised to see such apparently wealthy people show up in his establishment.

"May I do something for you, sir?"

"Uh, maybe, mister. We are American tourists and we never heard of or seen a common lodging house before and we were curious to see what they were. This is called a '**coffin bed lodging house**', sir?"

"Correct, sir. The cost per night for using one of these coffin beds is four pennies."

"And what other amenities do your customers get for that price, mister?"



"They get a dry place to sleep when it rains and a warm place in Winter. If they wish to get some food, we can serve hot soup, some bread and tea for an extra pence. By the way, this house is reserved for single men without children. Common lodging houses are segregated by sex, in order to preserve public decency, of course."

"Of course!" replied Ben, not saying what he really thought of such false 'decency'. "And what if young children, including orphans, want to sleep here?"

"I will accept boys coming alone or with their fathers, sir. However, most orphans can't afford the four pennies a night cost of my establishment. Most of them thus live either in public or private orphanage, like the ones run by the Barnado's Vision Foundation, or stay at the places where their masters make them work."

"Their masters?"

"Yes! Homeless orphans in London nearly all work menial jobs under the direction of men or women who also provide them a place to sleep and some food. I know such a man nearby who is employing over a dozen small boys and girls in a variety of tasks. To be frank, I am not in good terms with that man, who is named Sam Rickerts: he is a bully of the worst kind and he treats his orphans very badly. Unfortunately, his business and ways are allowed by the law and there is nothing I can

do about his excesses. I myself wishes that I could help better those poor kids he is mistreating but I make little profit while running this common lodging house, so I don't have the means to shelter those kids."

The man's words left Ben and Maria silent for a moment, reflecting on the reality painted by his declarations. Then, Ben took out of a pocket ten silver coins totaling one Pound Sterling and handed them to the disbelieving man.

"All this misery and poverty truly breaks my heart, mister. Here is something to help you serve better meals to your tenants, at least for a day or two. And where can I find this Sam Rickerts, sir?"

"Oh, he is not far, sir: his workshop is just down the street, at Number 26. Everybody in the neighborhood hates him."

"Thank you for the information, mister. I am sorry if I unduly took your time."

"Your visit was most welcomed, sir, and thank you for the money. I will be able to add some meat in the soup I will serve tonight, along with fresh vegetables."

"That's the spirit, sir!" said Ben, who then shook hands with the house manager before leaving with Maria. The woman who had guided them in looked at the coins in the manager's hand, then smiled.

"Maybe I should follow them from a distance, to see how their meeting with that Rickerts bastard goes."

"A good idea! Please tell me about that afterwards, Madam Lewis."

Ben and Maria didn't have to walk far before stopping in front of the entrance of Number 26, Dorset Street, a decrepit-looking sort of three-story brick building which appeared to be some sort of workshop. The two androids exchanged a look and a silent radio exchange before entering the building and stepping inside a small lobby area with a wooden staircase and two doors. One of the doors was opened, giving a view of a fairly large workshop where a dozen small boys and girls were busy washing, scrubbing and drying clothes, all under the supervision of a big man holding a long cane. That man was actually 'busy' beating a boy with his cane. Keeping a neutral expression, Ben approached the man, who turned around to face him as he got close.

"Excuse me, sir: we are looking for a Sam Rickerts. He is said to run this shop."

"That's me!" the man replied in a none-too-friendly voice. "What do you want, mister?"

"We came to bring you a message from Stephen and Samantha: they will not be working for you anymore."

"WHAT?! WHERE ARE THESE LITTLE BRATS?"

"In our care, mister." answered Ben just before delivering a powerful punch to the man's nose, breaking it and making the man pedal backwards before tripping and crashing down on his back. Before he could recover from the surprise and pain, Maria took four quick steps, then kicked him hard in the ribs, making the man scream with pain.

"That was one extra as a gift from Samantha, bastard. And here is an extra from me personally."

This time, Maria delivered a downward kick on the man's right knee, breaking it and making the man scream hideously. Next, she looked at the children who had been working in the shop and who were now watching the scene with disbelief.

"Stop working and go out in the street, kids. We will join you there in a minute."

The orphans did not have to be told twice and went out at a near run, leaving Rickerts alone with the two androids. Next, Maria Sharapova put her left shoe between the man's legs, ready to press on his crotch, and eyed him with a cold, merciless expression.

"Listen up and listen well, you bastard! Don't even try to find and grab back those kids, or we will pay you another visit. Consider your laundry shop closed for good as of today and find another place to live from now on."

"But...where will I go?" barely managed to say Rickerts between moans of pain.

"That's your problem! If you are still here tomorrow, then we will give you a further incentive to leave. Do you understand?"

As the man did not answer her at once, Maria then pressed with her high-heel shoe on his testicles, making him squeal with pain.

"Do you understand?"

"YES! YES! I WILL LEAVE TOMORROW MORNING."

"Good!" said Maria before leaving the shop with Ben, joining the dozen orphans in the streets and finding Madam Lewis watching from a few paces away, both curious and gleeful. The oldest of the children, a girl of about twelve, then came to Ben and Maria, obviously anxious.

"What are we going to do now, sir? We have no place to stay and we don't have a job anymore."

"You will temporarily go to a common lodging house we just visited, where you will take refuge for the next few hours. We will come back once night will have fallen, in order to lead you to a safer place."

Ben next looked at Madam Lewis and smiled to her.

"Madam, could I ask you to guide my wife to the nearest food market, so that she could go buy some food for those children's supper. In the meantime, I will be leading those poor kids to that coffin bed house you showed us. By the way, do you know the name of the owner?"

"I sure do, sir: Herbert Burns is well known in the district and he is a good, decent man, despite what one could think of him about him running a common lodging house."

"And would you be ready to help him care temporarily for those kids until later tonight, madam?"

"Uh, I would but the question is more like: will he accept me and these kids into his lodging house?"

"Do not worry about that, madam: I have enough money to convince him to help. By the way, here is a little advance for your help."

Madam Lewis happily took the five-shilling silver coin Ben gave him, mentally thanking her luck in meeting such generous foreign tourists.

"There is a street market some two streets away. I should be back with your wife in less than one hour."

"Excellent! Follow me, kids!"

As he led the group of young children towards the coffin bed common lodging house he had visited, Ben opened a radio datalink with Eve on the AEGIS in order to discuss a plan of action concerning the orphans. By the time he arrived at Herbert Burns' lodging house, a plan was already decided on and in preparation.

10:28 (London Time)

Friday, August 24, 1888

**Common lodging house at Number 42, Dorset Street
Spitfields District, London**

Herbert Burns was supervising his two cleaning maids as they swept the floors of his common lodging house when he saw a well-dressed man in his thirties enter his establishment, two Metropolitan Police constables following close behind him. That fact instantly put him on his guards, as he could easily guess why they had come. Still, he went to the trio and gave a welcoming smile to the man in a suit.

"Good morning, gentlemen! May I help you?"

"You may, sir. I am Detective Inspector George Berwick, of the Metropolitan Police's Spitafields Division. We received a complaint from a Sam Rickerts, whose workshop was situated at Number 26 of this street, about being attacked and seriously wounded two days ago by two persons, a man and a woman. He also complained that those two persons went away with the thirteen children who had been working for him. Would you know anything about this by chance, sir?"

Herbert Burns had to repress a smile on hearing that question but managed to answer with a straight face and a neutral voice.

"I do, Inspector Berwick. A couple of American tourists showed up here around supper time on Wednesday. They were curious about what a common lodging house was, since they said that such houses did not exist in their place in the United States. I showed them around, then they asked me if I knew a man called Sam Rickerts. I said 'yes' and directed them to his workshop down the street. About twenty minutes later, they came back while escorting thirteen young children and asked me to shelter them on a temporary basis. Since they gave me money for that and also bought a large quantity of food for those children and for my tenants, I accepted and lodged those children for the night. I must say that these two Americans were most generous and seemed to care a lot for those children, who were orphans working under awful conditions in Mister Rickerts' workshop. You should know that Rickerts treated very badly those poor children and was widely detested around this neighborhood, as he is a bully of the worst kind."

"I see! And are these children still here in this house, sir?"

"No, Inspector! A cart showed up the next morning and carried away the children, who seemed most upbeat about leaving this neighborhood. However, don't ask me where they went: I don't have a clue about that."

"Hum! Can you describe to me those two American tourists, sir?"

Burns nodded his head before answering Berwick.

"Both of them were very tall, easily over six-foot-tall, looked to be in their late twenties and were well dressed. They also were well-to-do people and were very generous towards those children and my tenants. I haven't seen them since the kids left my lodging house yesterday morning."

"The woman in that couple was also six-foot-tall, sir?" asked Berwick, a bit surprised.

"Yes, Inspector. She was a very pretty blonde but she also seemed very athletic and quite strong. As for the man, he had short black hair and would probably fit well in a rugby team. May I ask what happened to this Rickerts bastard?"

"You may, sir: he told us that the man attacked him without provocation and broke his nose. Then the woman kicked him in the ribs and smashed his right knee. He is now in a hospital, from where he made a complaint for assault and kidnapping against that couple."

Herbert Burns couldn't help scoff at the word 'kidnapping'.

"Those Americans didn't kidnap those orphans if you ask me, Inspector. What they did was to free them from the yoke of a sadistic, abusive man who abused and mistreated them constantly while feeding them a near starvation diet. The government should regulate more strictly the businesses of men like this Rickerts, sir."

"I am fully aware about those kinds of cases of abuse of orphaned children, Mister Burns. Unfortunately, I don't make the laws: I only enforce them. So, to resume what you said, you don't know where those children are now and also don't know the identity of those two Americans, correct?"

"Correct! The only thing that I can say is that they were obviously well-to-do people and were well-dressed. They also spoke with a very distinct accent."

Berwick noted that on his pocket notepad, then smile and shook hands with Burns.

"Thank you for your cooperation, sir. You were quite helpful."

"Uh, can I ask what will happen next with your case, Inspector?"

Berwick paused for a moment, then nodded his head once.

"Since we don't know where those orphans are now and since we don't have names for those two Americans, I expect that this case will soon be classified and closed. To be frank, there are plenty of much more serious criminal cases on our books right now."

What Berwick couldn't know then was that his caseload was soon going to become a lot more serious.

02:59 (London Time)

Friday, August 31, 1888

Buck's Row, Whitechapel, London

Mary Ann Nichols was still a bit drunk as she slowly walked down the narrow Buck's Row, in Whitechapel district, in search of a customer for her services as a prostitute. At age 43, she was a relatively short woman, was a bit pudgy and could not claim to be really pretty. However, having lost in succession a number of jobs as a part-time cleaning lady, or charwoman, due to her alcoholism, she was now down mostly to prostitution in order to earn money that would pay for her stay in a common lodging house in Whitechapel. Unfortunately, she kept drinking away the little money she had earned tonight and was now getting desperate to find a new customer, so that she could finally pay the rent she owed to her lodging house.



She was approaching the gated entrance of a stable along Buck's Row when she saw a man approaching on the same sidewalk she was on. The man was of medium height, wore a dark cape and a top hat and was walking rather casually. His face was hard to distinguish, as the poor street lighting and late hour prevented Mary from detailing him. Stopping her walk and resting her back against the frame of the stable's gate, she flashed an inviting smile to the man as he got a few feet from her.

"Hello, good sir! Would you like some fun with me tonight?"

The man stopped a mere step in front of her and looked her up and down before smiling to her.

"Sure! I indeed need some fun tonight, miss."

Then, not giving time to Mary to react, the man's left hand forcibly covered her mouth and pushed, making her head slam against the gate's frame and preventing her from screaming. At the same time, the man produced a long knife, with which he furiously slashed her throat open, cutting it down to the vertebrae. Mary's attacker then slashed her throat again, killing her nearly instantly. Letting the unfortunate woman's body slide down against the gate, the man then pulled up her skirt before stabbing twice her

vagina, following up with numerous knife slashes across her abdomen that made Mary's bowels protrude through the wounds.

"Here, you bloody whore! You won't be able to pass your diseases to other men now."

The man then pulled down Mary's skirt and wiped his knife clean on it before getting up on his feet. Looking left and right to make sure that nobody had seen him murder Mary, the man then quickly walked away after hiding back his knife.

Some forty minutes later, a man named Charles Allen Cross, a cart man who was walking to his place of employment, saw what he thought at first to be a tarp covering some long object lying in front of a stable's gate. Suddenly curious, he approached that 'tarp', only to realize that it was in reality the body of a woman. He was looking down at the body when a man who was also going down Buck's Row shouted to him.

"HEY! WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?"

Looking up at that man, Cross pointed at the body while shouting back.

"IT'S A WOMAN! SOMEBODY CUT HER THROAT OPEN."

"WHAT?!" replied the other man before walking quickly to Cross and then looking down at Mary's inert body.

"Is she dead or just unconscious?"

"Uh, I don't know! Let's see if she has a pulse."

On checking the woman's body, the two men found no pulse.

"Her face is warm but her hands are cold. We better go get a constable, and quickly." said the second man, called Robert Paul. Charles agreed with him and went with him in search of a Metropolitan Police constable. They finally found one at the corner of Hansbury Street and Baker's Row and ran to him while shouting out.

"CONSTABLE! CONSTABLE! WE FOUND A WOMAN ON BUCK'S ROW: HER THROAT WAS CUT OPEN."

Police Constable Jonas Mizen reacted at once to that, taking out his truncheon and illuminating the faces of the two cart men with his oil lantern.

"Show me where you found her."

At about the same time Cross and Paul found Mizen, another police constable named John Neil found Mary's body on Buck's Row. Using his portable oil lantern, he

quickly examined the woman's body before blowing his police alarm whistle. That whistle in turn attracted another constable, John Thain. As Thain was approaching at a run, Neil shouted to him.

"A WOMAN WAS MURDERED. GO GET DOCTOR LLEWELLYN AT THE OLD MONTAGUE STREET MORTUARY!"

Thain braked to a halt and then reversed direction, with Neil watching over Mary's body as Mizen approached at a run. None of them could possibly see the three tiny spy probes floating silently around the crime scene, filming it and retransmitting their images to the AEGIS.

In the operations center of the AEGIS, Allison Stokke exchanged a look with Eve Silisca, both of whom had just witnessed Mary Ann Nichols' murder via the spy probes.

"Well, we now have a face for the killer and soon should have an address to go with that."

"And we have as well a possible motive, based on what that bastard said after killing that poor woman. He may be taking revenge on prostitutes for having caught some kind of venereal disease from a prostitute in the past."

"How frequent were those venereal diseases in this time, Eve? In the Spacers' League, they have all but disappeared and, if you caught one, they are easily treated with antibiotics."

"They were quite widespread during the 19th Century, along with many other viral diseases like cholera, typhoid, smallpox and the plague. Furthermore, syphilis strains in this century were extremely potent and, once caught, were a near-certain road to slow mental degeneration and death, on top of being easily transmitted via sexual activity. If that was what this man caught, then he must now know that his future is not a rosy one, which would explain his wish to take revenge on prostitutes at large. Let's make sure now that our spy probes won't lose the trail of that bastard."

"No chances of that happening, Eve: those spy probes are nearly impossible to decoy, unless you have a pretty powerful jamming system, something that doesn't exist in this century."

Their patience was rewarded some fifteen minutes later, when the probes followed the killer to an apartment in a residential building on Middlesex Street, in Whitechapel. While two of the probes waited outside the building, watching the front and

back doors of the building, one probe entered the apartment of the killer via a partially opened window and filmed the killer as he undressed and washed himself, using a large basin full of water. He then changed to a clean outfit comprised of a pair of grey trousers, a white shirt and a dark grey jacket and overcoat, completed with a melon hat. The man finally grabbed what furiously looked like a doctor's leather bag before leaving the apartment, locking the door behind him. The probe was however able to zoom its camera on inscriptions visible on the leather bag.

"...Henry Walker, assistant mortician." read Allison on her display screen showing what the camera saw. "We now know who that murderer is. I will now correlate that name with those of the suspects listed in the historical information we have on the case of Jack the Ripper."

To her surprise and that of Eve, that name didn't fit with the names they had as suspects in their historical file, nor did the killer's face correspond to any photograph in that same file.

"This guy does not appear at all on the list of suspects compiled by the British police during their 19th Century investigation of Jack the Ripper. Could Jack the Ripper be another man than this Henry Walker, with the murder of Mary Ann Nichols wrongly attributed to Jack the Ripper?"

"That's very possible, Allison. The criminal investigation methods of this time were very rudimentary compared to what we have in the Spacers' League. I also suspect that racism and xenophobia played a big role in how that list of suspects was compiled by Scotland Yard in 1889."

"What do you mean, Eve?"

"Look at the list of suspects who were eventually investigated by the British police, Allison. Four of the five top suspects were either foreigners or Jewish, or both. As for the secondary suspects, who were nearly all what I would call of 'British Christian' stock, they were only investigated in a rather cursory way before being let go. The local newspapers which covered the Jack the Ripper murders also kept insinuating that the killer had to be a Jew or a foreigner, based on what was little more than pure speculations. Unfortunately, much of what was known about the police investigation and findings was lost during the German bombings of London during World War 2, something that only made this whole case more nebulous. We are in fact doing our own investigation in time on this because of that lack of historical information."

"And how are we going to know if this 'Henry Walker' is Jack the Ripper or not?"

A grim smirk then appeared on Eve's face at that question.

"There is only one way to know the answer to that, Allison: we will have to watch all five murders attributed to Jack the Ripper and see if that Henry Walker did them."

05:13 (London Time)

Saturday, September 08, 1888

29, Hanbury Street, Spitafields District

London, England



Three spy probes were in position, covering all the angles of the area around Number 29, Hanbury Street, the recorded location of the second murder attributed to Jack the Ripper. Allison and Eve, with the field team watching via remote datalink, were thus able to see the man who approached 47-year-old **Annie Chapman**, who was standing in front of the door of the narrow passageway between the entrances of 27 and 29 Hanbury Street, in the impoverished Spitafields District. Annie had by now been standing there in the cold and damp night for nearly half an hour, waiting for a possible customer for her sexual services. Allison's expression hardened when she was able to detail the face of the man approaching Annie.



"Henry Walker, again! He thus may well be the one we are after."

"It is indeed a strong probability now, Allison," said Eve. "I wish that we could now take this monster out but that would completely disturb history if we cut the strings of murders attributed to Jack the Ripper now. We unfortunately will have to let this poor woman die today."

"To think of all the people we could save in this time period...if we were not concerned about preserving the integrity of History."

"But that's the main point: to preserve the integrity of History while documenting it. We certainly don't want to do anything that could possibly erase and rewrite History as we know it, along with possibly the NOSTROMO. Saving those thirteen kids abused by Rickerts and placing them in a good orphanage run by the Barnado's Vision Foundation was already a bit risky, but bringing them here, aboard the AEGIS, would have been a lot riskier in terms of the preservation of history."

Allison and Eve then returned their full attention to the pictures sent back by the three spy probes. When she saw that Annie Chapman and Henry Walker entered the narrow enclosed passageway between Hanbury Street and the backyard of Number 29, Allison repositioned one of the spy probes so that it could film that backyard area. Then, things went fairly quickly, with Walker clapping his left hand over Chapman's mouth once they were out of the building and in the backyard, pushing the woman's head against the brick wall of the building. At the same time, Walker grabbed a knife with his right hand and, in a violent move, cut the woman's throat wide open in a left to right slash. He then made a second, deep cut, his left hand still covering Chapman's mouth. Now dead, the poor woman's body slid down against the brick wall, to end up on its back over the old wood planks covering that part of the backyard. Henry Walker then seemed to become mad with hatred and started slashing open the groin and abdomen of his victim. Allison watched with a hard expression as Walker disemboweled Chapman.

"This is even more sadistic than the first murder. What a monster!"

Walker was done with his grisly work after a mere two minutes, then wiped his blade on the woman's dress before hurrying out of the backyard, returning to Hanbury Street via the enclosed passageway. As he was quickly walking away, Allison assigned one of the spy probes to follow him, while keeping the two other probes on their present spots in order for them to film the persons who would find Annie Chapman's body and alert the police. Eve slowly shook her head as she eyed on her display screen Annie's mutilated body.

"Poor woman! She didn't deserve such a horrible death. She was just a poor woman with an alcoholism problem and who was simply trying to survive this uncaring period in London's history. I dread the moment we will have to watch the three next murders attributed to Jack the Ripper."

Knowing that the next two murders to be attributed to Jack the Ripper would occur in only three weeks, the field team then spent its time in London on two main goals: to document as much as possible who this Henry Walker was and his daily activities, to make sure that he didn't murder other women in the meantime; and to document life around the London of the time, covering all the classes of the British society of the time. That second goal also implied numerous trips outside of the London

area, in order to document the social climate and daily life in other parts of Great Britain. By the time that the end of September arrived, Samuel Schmeling knew he had enough visual recordings to produce a good documentary about life in England near the end of the 19th Century.

The two next murders committed by Jack the Ripper, who was now known to the field team to be Henry Walker, an assistant mortician working at the London Hospital in Whitechapel, happened in quick succession in the very early morning of Sunday, September 30. First to die was **Elizabeth Stride**, a 44-year-old woman who had emigrated from Sweden in 1866 and had married an Englishman three years after her arrival in Great Britain. However, that marriage fell apart a few years later and Elizabeth's husband died of tuberculosis in 1884. Now without support, Elizabeth fell back to prostitution, which she had practiced while still in Sweden, living out of common lodging houses in the Whitechapel District. That life however ended shortly after midnight, on September 30, in a small yard off Berner Street, in Whitechapel. Again, the spy probes posted by Allison and Eve showed the murderer to be Henry Walker. This time, however, Walker did not have time to mutilate the body of his latest victim, the approach of a cart which was about to enter the yard forcing him to hide and then run away. Probably frustrated by his inability to butcher the body of his latest victim, Walker then stalked and attacked a second woman that night, killing **Catherine Eddowes** in Mitre Square, just inside the territory of The City, the central district of London next to Whitechapel District. That time, Walker had enough time to horribly mutilate the body of her victim, including slashing her face extensively, before walking away along the dark streets.



Forced to watch those two murders while not allowed to react other than by filming them, Allison threw a murderous look at the image of Henry Walker as he was being followed by a spy probe.

"Please tell me that we will be allowed to administer justice to this monster after he will have committed his fifth and last canonical murder, Eve."

Eve Silisca, who was also looking at the pictures of a fleeing Walker, nodded her head.

"Don't worry, Allison: the question is not 'if' we will punish him but 'how'. The important thing will be to make sure that Walker disappears from History, without us leaving behind indications of our intervention which could change History."

03:02 (London Time)

Friday, November 09, 1888

13 Miller's Court, Spitafields District

London, England

Two of the three spy probes watching the location of the fifth and last canonical murder by Jack the Ripper managed to slip in unnoticed inside the small, single-room flat in Spitafields District when 25-year-old **Mary Jane Kelly** and Henry Walker entered it. The room, containing only a bed, a small table, three chairs, a small fireplace and a wash basin made of tin, was quite obscure and the young prostitute quickly lit a candle to provide some illumination to it. Once that was done, she took off her hat, coat, dress and shoes before going to lay on the small bed occupying one corner of the small room and signaling to the man to join her.



"Come on! Don't be shy, sir."

Her customer, who had watched her undress, then took off his hat, coat and vest before approaching the bed. Mary was surprised by the fact that he didn't pull down his pants and was about to ask him about that when Walker suddenly knelt on top of her, pinning her down in her bed, then grabbed her by her curly black hair with his left hand, while his right hand took the knife hidden in his back.

"Hey! What are..."

Mary didn't have time to finish her question before Henry Walker slashed her throat wide open with his knife. He then did a second slash to make sure to kill her. He had a mean smile as he contemplated the nearly naked body of the young woman: contrary to his four previous murders, he was now in a closed private flat and could do what he wished and take his time about it. While filmed from two angles by the spy probes, he then proceeded to butcher in detail the prostitute, destroying her face with multiple slashes and opening her belly and torso, cutting off in the process both breasts and skinning off

her groin and legs. Being sure that nobody would disturb him here, Walker took his time and left the room after nearly two hours of sadistic work.

Once out of the flat, Henry Walker went back on Dorset Street and started walking quickly while keeping his head down, using his hat to hide his face. Hearing footsteps, he looked quickly behind him and saw the silhouette of a big man who was apparently following him from a distance of about twenty paces. Suddenly nervous about that, Walker accelerated his pace, only to see his follower also quicken his step. Now getting frankly scared, Walker hurried to get to the entrance of a narrow alley he was approaching. That was when his follower spoke up in a mocking tone.

"You can run but you can't hide, Jack."

Now knowing that the man was after him, Henry Walker broke into a run and started turning the corner of the narrow alley. That was when someone grabbed him by the collar of his coat and swung him around, making him slam hard face-first against a brick wall. Half knocked out, he was not able to get his knife before his attacker pulled it out and pocketed it, then made him face his assailant nose-to-nose. Walker's eyes opened wide with surprise and disbelief when he saw that his attacker was a very tall woman with blond hair and blue eyes who was staring at him with utter disgust and hatred.

"Your days of killing innocent women is over, Henry Walker. It is now time for you to pay for your crimes."

"How...how do you know my name?"

The woman didn't answer him, as the man who had been following Walker joined her and grabbed his left arm in a steely grip. The woman then grabbed Walker's right arm with one hand and clamped her other hand over his mouth, while the man used his free hand to hold Walker's head, making it impossible for him to shout. Then, to his utter surprise and terror, the trio started flying up, silently climbing vertically out of the alley. Walker's eyes rolled wildly as he soon found himself climbing quickly in London's dark night sky, still held solidly by the man and woman. The woman's hand uncovered his mouth only once they were a good 3,000 meters above the city and heading towards the nearby River Thames. However, the trio kept climbing higher and higher, making it harder and harder for Walker to breathe as the oxygen in the atmosphere became rarer. The woman waited until they were at an altitude of 10,000 meters before speaking to the serial murderer, who was about to pass out due to low oxygen content at this altitude.

"You will soon die and you will then disappear from History, Walker. You won't get to live and feel some sick pride at evading justice. You will only be remembered as the worst British man to have ever lived."

"Who...who are you? How can you fly like this?" asked Walker in a halting voice, his effort at talking cutting what little breath he had.

"We came for you from the future, you sadistic bastard. Now, shut up and die!"

Maria Sharapova and Ben Affleck then continued their ascension, with Henry Walker soon losing consciousness from lack of oxygen. Finally stopping their climb at an altitude of 15,000 meters, the two androids checked that Walker had died from asphyxiation and found him to have no pulse. Ben then exchanged a look with Maria.

"You have his knife, Maria?"

"I do! Let's empty his pockets, so that nobody could find who he is."

Searching the dead man from both sides, they quickly found and pocketed Walker's wallet and the keys to his flat on Middlesex Street. Of a common accord, they then let go the dead man, who fell down towards the waters of the Thames, some 15,000 meters below. The two androids watched Walker fall while themselves flying down back to a lower altitude. Ben nodded his head when Walker's body hit the surface of the river with an impact that would have killed him if he would have still been alive.

"Justice is done. Let's go back to our hotel now. We will be able to record for the next couple of weeks the public reactions to his latest murder, then will be free to return to our time period and the NOSTROMO."

"Ben, I would also like to have a chance to put flowers on the tombs of these poor five women. They may have been living sordid lives but they didn't deserve to die at the hands of that monster."

"I concur with you on that, Maria. We will also go pay a last visit to the orphans we saved from the grip of that Sam Rickerts."

"I wonder how the documentary we will produce about Jack the Ripper will be received in the 24th Century."

"We will know soon enough about that, Ben. I am personally more anxious to see how little Stephen and Samantha will adapt to their new lives in the future."

16:11 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, May 10, 2338

Hangar of command cutter AEGIS, large craft hangar complex

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, in low Earth Orbit

Solar System

Tina Forster was accompanied by Amelia Earhart and SPIRIT's android avatar when she went to greet the crew of the AEGIS on their arrival. The first to come out of the AEGIS was Eve Silisca, holding the hands of little Stephen and Samantha, closely followed by Samuel Schmeling and the rest of the Tempus Team members. Her first move was to kiss the two children on their forehead.

"Welcome aboard the NOSTROMO, my sweet children. I am Tina Forster, captain and owner of this ship. Since Eve sent me an advisory message before arriving, I was able to prepare something for your reception. To my left is **Amelia Earhart**, who will care for you and guide you around my ship. Like you, she was saved by us from the past, in the year 1937 to be more precise, so I deemed her to be the most appropriate person to care for you on arrival."



"Will she be our new parent, miss?" asked Stephen.

"She may, if you like her. I know her to be a great woman with a big heart."

"And who is going to be our father, miss?" asked in turn eight-year-old Samantha, bringing a slightly embarrassed smile on Tina's face.

"Well, Amelia is not exactly married at the present time but she is frequenting a really good man. Let's say that the social attitudes in the 24th Century are much more tolerant and liberal than those of the 19th Century. But the priority right now will be to find new extra clothes for you. Amelia will take care of that and will escort you in a shopping trip around the commercial outlets of my ship, then will bring you to your new home on the NOSTROMO. Be prepared to see many wonders today, kids. Amelia, they are now all yours."

"Thanks, Tina. Well, let's go shopping for new clothes for you, kids."

As the two children were led away by Amelia, Tina looked at Eve and Samuel.

"So, how did your mission go?"

"Without a hitch, Tina." answered Eve. "We were never in danger of attracting undue attention and our spy probes allowed us to quickly identify Jack the Ripper once he started his series of murders. However, what we saw of 1888 London and of the rest of Victorian England was even more depressing than we had expected. The living conditions of the majority of the population were downright awful, while the contrast between the rich and the poor in England was severe, to say the least. Our documentary should come as a shock to the people of the Spacers' League on that subject. We will have to somewhat censor parts of our documentary, though: that Jack the Ripper was a sadist of the worst kind and some of the murder scenes are horrible enough to make about any Human throw up."

Tina nodded her head once, her expression now most serious.

"I can believe you on that. How did you deal with Jack the Ripper after his fifth canonical murder?"

"Ben and Maria grabbed him at night and flew him up to an altitude of 15,000 meters, where he died of asphyxiation. They then dropped his body into the Thames after removing anything that could help identify him. For the authorities of 1888 London, he will only be an anonymous man who fell in the Thames River and drowned."

"Good! And who was he? Was he one of the suspects investigated at the time by the London Metropolitan Police and Scotland Yard?"

"No! He was never suspected or even named in the archives of the time. His name was Henry Walker and he was an assistant-mortician who worked at the London Hospital, in the Whitechapel District. Talking of Jack, Maria has something for you." Tina looked at Maria Sharapova as the latter stepped forward and presented her a fifteen-centimeter-long blade contained in a transparent plastic bag.

"The knife used by Jack the Ripper for all of his five murders. We took it from him before carrying him up to high altitude. His last murder was particularly horrible, as he spent nearly two hours butchering his victim. About that knife, will you want to keep it in our museum or will you hand it over to the British police in London?"

"I will probably hand it over to the British authorities, at the same time that I will give them a copy of our visual documentary, once it is ready for widespread distribution. Well, enough said about that monstrous bastard, if we want to be able to eat supper with a level stomach."

"A good idea, Tina." said Samuel Schmeling, who still had nightmares about the horrible scenes filmed by their spy probes.

09:52 (London Time)

Monday, May 16, 2338

Office of the Commissioner of Scotland Yard

New Scotland Yard, Victoria Embankment

Westminster District, London, England

"Welcome to Scotland Yard, Captain Forster!" said in a warm tone Sir Harold Livingston while shaking hands with her. "To what may I owe your visit and your request that Sir O'Reilly be also present for this meeting?"

With the Director of the BBC listening on closely, Tina then answered the question from the Commissioner of Scotland Yard in a sober voice.

"To a criminal matter dating from 450 years ago, Sir Harold. As you must know by now, my ship made an involuntary trip to the distant past while pursuing the last of the Space Predators' ship, about one year ago. We then were able after some time and many test jumps to return to our normal time. During those test jumps made to first test and then refine a method to travel back to the 24th Century, we were able to witness a number of historical events, like the burning of Londinium by Queen Boudica, the Battle of Hastings, the execution of Joan of Arc by the English in Orléans and the disappearance of Amelia Earhart in the Pacific in 1937. We also used those occasions to save both Queen Boudica and her two daughters, then Amelia Earhart."

"I remember well the news about your epic trip through time, Captain Forster. But you mentioned a criminal matter dating from 450 years ago, which would place it in the year 1888. Are you talking about the case of Jack the Ripper? That was possibly the most famous criminal case we ever had to deal with."

"I am indeed talking about Jack the Ripper, Sir Harold. One of our temporal stops was in 1888 and we used that occasion to investigate that sadistic monster."

Tina then produced two data sticks, giving one to Harold Livingston and one to James O'Reilly.

"These two data sticks contain copies of two historical documentaries we produced out of the data and observations we did in 1888. One documentary shows the life of Londoners in 1888, placing its emphasis on the wide discrepancy between the rich class and the poor class of the time. The other documentary shows Jack the Ripper as he committed his five canonical murders in Whitechapel, Spitafields and the City."

Both Livingston and O'Reilly opened wide their eyes while sucking air in, with Livingston then asking Tina a question in a hopeful tone.

"And were you able to identify that bastard, Captain Forster?"

"We were, Sir Harold. His name was Henry Walker, an assistant-mortician who worked at the London Hospital in Whitechapel. He was not part of the list of suspects investigated at the time. As for his motivation for killing and mutilating those five poor women, it seems that he caught syphilis from a prostitute and, knowing that he would eventually die from that disease, decided to take revenge on prostitutes. It also explained why he was so focused on mutilating their genitals and internal organs. We were able as well to grab the knife he used for all five murders. Here it is, for you to keep, Sir Harold. It still has some of the blood from Mary Jane Kelly on it."

Sir Harold took the plastic container holding Jack the Ripper's knife as if it would have been a religious relic, then gave an awed look at Tina.

"To see that mystery finally resolved after so many years. This is certainly going to become one of our most precious artifacts in the museum of Scotland Yard. Uh, what happened to Jack the Ripper after he murdered Mary Jane Kelly? Most people believe that he then either became inactive, emigrated or died."

"He died from oxygen deprivation shortly after murdering poor Mary Jane Kelly. Two of my security androids intercepted him at night, then flew him up to an altitude of 15,000 meters, where he died from asphyxiation. Once he was dead, they let him fall into the River Thames, where his body was probably retrieved a few days later, to be classified as an anonymous victim of drowning. I hope that you will not accuse my androids of vigilantism for this, Sir Harold?"

"Are you kidding, Captain Forster? I would recommend them for medals for getting us rid of that bastard. Could we view your documentary on Jack the Ripper right now?"

"I was indeed intending to show it to you and to Sir James. I must however warn you that some of the scenes you will see are truly horrific, especially in the case of the murder of Mary Jane Kelly. For that reason, we produced two versions of our documentary on Jack the Ripper: an integral, uncensored one where everything can be seen; and a censored one where the worst scenes are intentionally blurred. I have to tell you that I became physically sick when I viewed the uncensored version of our documentary. Before we view that documentary, I do have more for you."

Tina then opened the old-fashioned large leather briefcase she had come with and extracted two envelopes from it, one a legal-size envelope, the other an extra-large, thick one. First opening the smaller envelope, Tina extracted six color image prints and lined them atop Sir Harold's work desk.

"The first photo shows in detail Jack the Ripper's, a.k.a. Henry Walker's face. The five other pictures show his victims as they were just before dying: Mary Ann Nichols; Annie Chapman; Elizabeth Stride; Catherine Eddowes and Mary Jane Kelly." After a hateful look at Henry Walker's picture, the two British men then contemplated with sadness the faces of his five victims. The picture of Mary Jane Kelly in particular, who had been much younger than the four others, drew regretful looks, with James O'Reilly commenting on it.

"She was truly a beautiful young woman. What a pity! Uh, what is in that big envelope, Captain Forster?"

Tina answered him by opening that envelope, extracting a stack of what looked like target practice posters.

"These are a few copies of the new targets we now use on the NOSTROMO for my androids' practice shooting. We now shoot holes in Jack the Ripper's face when practicing. I believe that your police officers will be quite happy to do the same when practicing their own pistol shooting."

Sir Harold grinned while holding one of the target posters and examining it.

"Hell, they will love this! I just may go practice my own shooting after viewing your documentary."

"Which one? The uncensored one or the censored one, Sir Harold? Again, I warn you that you will need a solid stomach to view the first one."

Livingston hesitated for a moment before nodding his head once, his face grim.

"My job implies dealing with all kinds of crime scenes, including the most horrible ones. I will look at the uncensored version."

"I will too!" said O'Reilly. "However, the BBC will only show to the public the censored version. Talking of public showing, are you going to ask for a royalty payment for providing us these documentaries?"

"No! I could but I won't! The lessons of History are meant for everyone to learn from them. Well, if you are ready to view that documentary on Jack the Ripper, Sir Harold, we may use your video display unit in that corner of your office."

"Right! Let's make ourselves comfortable and let's sit in those sofas."

Some eighty minutes later, with the documentary having come to its end, Sir Harold and Sir James sat back in their sofas, their faces pale and visibly deeply disturbed.

"My God! I got very close to throwing up a couple of times. That Henry Walker was a psychopath and sadist of the worst kind. On the other hand, the scene showing him falling into the Thames was immensely satisfying, I must say."

"The same here." added James O'Reilly. "This documentary, at least the censored variant of it, should be a sensation with the British public. I can't thank you enough for having produced it out of your trip in time, Captain Forster."

"I consider that documentary and the other on life in 1888 to be a public service work, Sir James. Before I go, I would have a favor to ask you, Sir Harold."

"Ask and you will get, Captain."

"I would like to have the pictures of those five women killed by Walker to be put on their tombs, so that they could be properly remembered. In case you wouldn't know for certain where they are, I am ready to indicate their locations to you. I will at the same time deposit flowers on their graves."

Sir Harold looked again at the faces of the five long-dead women and slowly nodded his head.

"I will be most happy to do this, Captain Forster."

The three of them then got up from their sofas, with Sir Harold and Sir James shaking hands with Tina before she left the office, soon followed by the BBC director, leaving the Scotland Yard commissioner alone. He then looked down at the data stick on which the two documentaries were recorded and at the print showing Jack the Ripper's face.

"A cold case, resolved after 450 years. What a day!"

CHAPTER 4 – CRAZIES IN SPACE

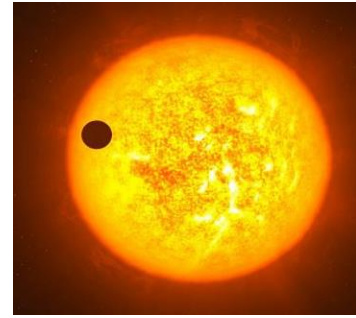
08:25 (Universal Time)

Friday, April 07, 2339

Bridge sphere of the command cutter AEGIS

Outer periphery of the WASP-17 (Diwö) star system

1,310 light-years from Earth, in the constellation Scorpius



Amelia Earhart felt excitement as she observed the bright yellow star now visible on the inner surface of the bridge sphere's holographic display of the AEGIS: this was the first time she had actually calculated and effected an interstellar jump as part of a craft's bridge crew. Okay, that was as an apprentice copilot under close monitoring but you have to start somewhere, right? She had been educating herself about 24th Century technology and Space systems for nearly two years now and had trained hundreds of hours on simulators for such a moment but now all that was coming to fruition for her. Her feelings were further rewarded when the pilot of the AEGIS, Harrison Ford, smiled to her from his command chair.

"Right on the money, Amelia. Good job! We will now take a slow approach towards the star while we scan this system for planets, asteroids...and possible Space Predators."

That reminder about one of the goals of this reconnaissance mission then cooled Amelia's enthusiasm down a bit. Most people, including Tina Forster, believed that the threat from Space Predators was now gone for good but you didn't survive for long in Space if you relied on 'maybes' and 'wishes'. Tina had thus directed for the last twenty months a continued and intensive Space reconnaissance program of the sector of Space assigned by the Spacers' League to her corporation and that of the Koorivars, pushing ever further away from known territory with two main goals in mind: to ensure that no Space Predators still existed; and to find new habitable systems which could then be exploited or colonized by Humanity. That search had already paid huge dividends, with three systems with habitable planets found to date: XO-1, 18 Scorpii and Epsilon Coroneae Borealis. Two planets in those systems, Asiana in XO-1 and Jamieson's World in 18 Scorpii, were already being colonized, while a third planet,

Eurasia in Epsilon Coronae Borealis, was being seeded with Earth flora and marine plankton in a long-term program meant to make its primitive biosphere more compatible with Earth fauna and Humans. Two other star systems found through that reconnaissance program, while not having habitable planets or moons, had proven to be very rich in mineral and hydrocarbon resources, with them leased by Tina Forster for exploitation by the Vesta Corporation and by the Saturn Corporation. Finally, there was the HIP 78288 system, found by one of NOSTROMO's heavy fighters who had been searching for a lost prospectors' ship, and which had proven to be inhabited by the Krells, an intelligent species of amphibious giant crab-like beings. The Krells were however being attacked and invaded by the Space Predators at the time. Following the destruction of the Space Predator fleet and invading army by the forces from the NOSTROMO, that system had been declared 'off limits' by the High Council of the Spacers' League to all exploitation and colonization work, so that the Krells could live in peace in their own system. One thing was sure to all, though: there were still a near infinity of worlds left to be explored in this region of the Milky Way Galaxy. Since Project Tempus did not have a temporal mission assigned to it at this time, the command cutter AEGIS had thus been tasked to continue that Space reconnaissance program on behalf of the New Haven Corporation.

While closely monitored and helped by Harrison Ford and the other bridge crew members of the AEGIS, all of whom were androids, Amelia flew the command cutter towards the F6V yellow main sequence star at the center of the WASP-17 System, while Allison Stokke worked her sensors systems in passive mode at first, in order to keep their presence in the system discreet. That soon proved to be a wise decision, as she quickly reported in a warning tone.

"We are intercepting a large volume of radio activity within the system. I also can detect a few faint radar signals. This system is definitely occupied by a sentient race. However, the signals we are intercepting are in a totally alien language."

Ford then reacted to that by speaking on the intercom to VISION, the artificial intelligence supercomputer which oversaw and supervised the systems of the command cutter.

"VISION, start monitoring those communications and see if you can start building up a translation program for that alien language."

"Already on it, Harrison." replied the soft female voice of the supercomputer. Next, the pilot looked at Allison, who was manning the sensors station of the bridge sphere.

"Stay in passive mode only for the moment, Allison. We will look visually for planets and asteroids inside that system."

"Understood! I already can see the gas giant named 'Ditsö' which was known to circle this star."

Some forty minutes later, Allison spoke up again.

"We are now intercepting a string of video transmissions which look quite similar to those from public video information networks on Earth and around the Spacers' League. However, their overall low quality suggest that this alien technology is significantly less advanced than ours. I will now plug you to those video transmissions, where images of those aliens are now being broadcasted."

Amelia, like the other five members of the bridge crew on duty, looked with intense interest as an alien being was shown, giving some kind of passionate speech from behind a podium. That alien was nowhere like a Human being, resting on two pairs of legs of uneven length and having a short torso supporting a pair of long arms and a bulbous head. That head by itself was quite peculiar, with two eyes fixed to the corners of a hammer shark-like head and with a shark-like mouth under the wedge supporting the eyes. The arms ended in six-digits hands with sharp claws, while the creature's four feet were covered by boots apparently made of leather. As for its main body, it was mostly covered by a sort of cape draped over its back and falling to near the ground. Amelia made a smirk as she detailed the alien.

"Uh, not what I would call a very attractive being. Did the NOSTROMO ever encounter similar beings before?"

"No! This is definitely a new race to be added to our data library." answered Harrison Ford. "Whatever he or she is saying, it sounds like quite a fiery speech, with the crowd listening to it responding with loud cheers and approvals."

"This looks to me a lot like a political speech, or a religious sermon." said Amelia, making the others look at her with curiosity.

"A religious sermon?" asked Allison. "I must say that I never looked at one: religion has been basically dead in the Spacers' League and on Earth for over a century."

"Well, you can search our historical databanks for religious sermons, Allison. We should have quite a few stored in them."

"I will do that." cut in Maria Sharapova, at the weapons station. "Keep on those alien signals, Allison."

"Okay!"

Less than two minutes later, Maria put side-by-side to the alien a new video showing a Human religious leader making a speech as fiery as that of the alien, making Harrison nod his head.

"You are right, Amelia: this alien sounds exactly like that religious person. From when is that datafile from, Maria?"

"From the year 1958. It shows an American Christian preacher warning his followers about the so-called 'sins' of non-believers and disciples from other faiths."

"Try to find a video file showing a speech by a German dictator named 'Hitler' during the period 1936 to 1937." suggested Amelia, prompting Maria to do so. The latter quickly found such a video file and put it on the crew's screens, alongside that of the alien and of the American religious leader. Harrison made a smirk as he watched all three videos simultaneously.

"Wow! Same speech pattern and same crowd reaction. I would also say that all three videos seem to spew the same kind of general message: that of hatred and intolerance."

"Which is exactly what Hitler and too many religious preachers of my time were peddling to their followers." said Amelia Earhart. "Are we receiving other video channels than this one, Allison?"

"Uh, quite a few, in fact. Let me go through them."

It didn't take long before Allison shook her head in confusion.

"I am getting four different video transmissions but they all show the same alien doing the same speech. This must be considered an important speech on the planet from where these come from. On the other hand, I can also detect a strong jamming signal which is apparently trying to make another station unreadable to listeners. I am not sure that I understand what is going on here."

"I do!" said Amelia. "This speech we are watching is probably showing an important political leader, while that jamming may be this leader's minions trying to

negate a contradicting message from another faction. This sounds to me like a classic propaganda war, possibly on a planet-wide scale.”

“Well, it seems that we are fortunate indeed to have your 20th Century experience available to us today, Amelia.” said Harrison Ford before looking at Allison. “Find out from which quadrant these transmissions come from: that will indicate to us where the planet of those aliens is.”

“On it!”

Some forty minutes later, using radio direction-finding triangulation techniques, Allison was able to direct the AEGIS towards what turned out to be the second planet in a five-planet system. Harrison Ford looked for a minute at the data Allison recorded about that second planet and spoke up.

“It is a near Earth-like planet with a breathable atmosphere and a temperate climate. From the amount of artificial lights visible from a distance on its night side, it is obviously quite densely populated. We see no moons revolving around it and no signs of orbital or Space facilities. VISION, what can you make out from those intercepted radio and video signals?”

The ship’s central AI computer answered him at once in her soft female voice.

“While mounting a translation program for the language of those aliens will take many days, those signals gave me a few clues about that race. First, those aliens call themselves the ‘Tolans’. However, they also widely use two different words to describe what may be two political or religious factions on their world: the ‘Sars’ and the ‘Swons’. In turn, there are multiple nicknames, insults and mocking words used as well by each of those factions to describe the other faction. This race thus seems to be deeply divided by mutual hatred and loathing, a divide which is caused with fair probability by religious intolerance.”

“Religious intolerance? How intense would you characterize that intolerance, VISION?”

“Extreme religious intolerance, Harrison.” answered the supercomputer. “The nearest analogy to it that I could refer to in Human history would be that of the Thirty-Year War in Europe at the start of the 17th Century, when two factions of Christian followers, the Catholics and Protestants, engaged in mutual massacres and widespread destructions, justifying their excesses by calling their opponents ‘heretics’. The

movements of their armies around Europe also spread a number of catastrophic epidemics which killed millions of people during that war.”

“And do you know what is the root cause of that religious dispute, VISION?”

“I am still not fully positive about this, but it seems that they disagree about who is the true prophet representing their god, which they call ‘Arkon’. By the way, they call their planet ‘Arkonia’.”

“Religious fanatics who call their planet after their God... Great! We should then avoid any direct contact with these Tolans and study them strictly from high orbit. Allison, do you see any evidence of Space activity on the part of those aliens?”

“We are still too far off for me to answer you on that, Harrison. If they travel in Space or in orbit around their planet, it must then be in quite a limited scale, as I detect no radio or radar signals coming from orbit.”

“Then, we will adopt a high polar orbit around this ‘Arkonia’, in order to map and observe it out of sight of those Tolans. Amelia, I will let you do that maneuver under my supervision, so that you could further practice your new skills.”

“Thanks, Harrison! When I think that, two years ago in my personal time, I was piloting a simple, twin-engine propeller aircraft around an Earth flight.”

“Hey, we all had to start somewhere, right?”

“Right!”

19:29 (Universal Time)

Monday, April 10, 2339

Operations center of the command cutter AEGIS

In orbit around Arkonia (WASP-17c)

Amelia Earhart, who was reviewing with the other members of the crew the footage from numerous video transmissions intercepted during the day, had to turn her head and avert her eyes from watching a particularly disturbing scene.

“Damn barbarians! To burn alive other people of their own race because they don’t have the same religious beliefs. This is as bad as what the old Spanish Inquisition did during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance on Earth.”

“Those Tolans are definitely not a very savory race for sure.” agreed Greta Norstrom. “Thankfully, they still don’t have atomic weapons in their arsenals.”

"Yea!" added Christian Bale, the navigator. "They also haven't got into Space yet, so I would place their level of technology and science at about on par with our mid-20th Century. On the other hand, the extreme rigidity of their religious dogmas may well seriously impede the speed at which they will be able to advance their technology." Harrison Ford then stopped the playing of the video recording before speaking to his assembled crewmembers.

"I believe that we have seen enough about those Tolans and have enough recordings on them as a basic database on their race and this system. VISION, how advanced are you with creating a translation software of the Tolan language?"

"Quite advanced, Harrison. I have enough materiel to complete that job but just need more time to process fully everything we recorded. Once back on the NOSTROMO, SPIRIT will be able to help me in this task."

"Good! Frankly, I believe that our job in this system is complete. I intend to recommend to Tina Forster that this system be placed 'out of bounds' for people of the Spacers' League: these Tolans are way too extreme and fanatical about their religious beliefs. If you don't have objections or points to add, then we will go back home. Nothing? Then let's head back to New Haven."

Amelia smiled at that decision, not because she was getting tired of this mission but rather because she was starting to miss the two British children she had to leave in the tender care of Janet Robeson and of her husband Gerald.

CHAPTER 5 – USING A CRYSTAL BALL

14:08 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, 26 April, 2339

Bridge of the A.M.S. NOSTROMO

Hovering near ground level above planet Asiana (XO-1c)

XO-1 System, 536 light-years from Earth, Corona Borealis constellation

Dana Durning, the executive officer of the NOSTROMO and its second-in-command after Tina Forster, smiled with satisfaction when the prefabricated city module which the huge cargo ship had brought from Earth slowly and smoothly rested on its foundations. That city module, with a diameter of 1,100 meters and a height of 380 meters, was going to be able to comfortably accommodate a population of a bit over 100,000 persons. The new city, to be called 'New Singapore', was going to greatly assist in the development of the ASEAN colony on the planet, which was still continuing to be terramorphed in terms of seeding plants, fish and animals from Earth, to supplement and eventually supplant the planet's primitive original biosphere. Dana then turned to speak to Tina, who was sitting next to her in her command chair. She however held on to what she wanted to say when she saw Tina's preoccupied expression.

"Uh, is there something wrong, Tina?"

That question apparently returned Tina to the present situation and she shook her head while making a weak smile.

"No! Everything is fine, Dana. With the main city module for New Singapore now in place, we will be able next to drop in place and connect during the next few days the various annexes we are still carrying. Then, we will have another prefabricated city complex to load aboard on Earth, this time for Jamieson's World, in 18 Scorpii, followed by the building blocks for a new city destined to New Shouria, where it will help alleviate greatly the plight of the masses of Koorivar refugees we dropped there two years ago. All in all, a busy but also very productive and lucrative year for us."

"Definitely a productive and lucrative year, Tina. With the present boom in extra-large modules Space hauling, I am wondering if we shouldn't acquire a second ultra-heavy lift cargo ship, in order to improve on our hauling capacity as a corporation."

"I don't think that such an acquisition would be a good idea right now, Dana. First, we would be talking about a massive bill for the building of such a ship, a bill that would easily exceed sixteen billion credits. Right now, we simply couldn't afford such an expenditure. Second, this extra-large module hauling business may well prove to be a boom-and-bust thing in the long term. I would rather concentrate our financial means on future refits to our NOSTROMO and on further improvements and additions to our ground facilities on New Haven. One sector which I believe will be in need of continuous additions in terms of ships is the passenger and tourist travel business between Earth and the various worlds and new colonies of the Spacers' League. I thus am weighing the acquisition of two new heavy passenger shuttles for our commercial fleet."

"Hum, two more heavy passenger shuttles certainly wouldn't hurt us, Tina. Demand for Space travel is indeed booming on Earth, partially thanks to the opening and development of our new colonies on Asiana and Jamieson's World."

"Indeed! Well, I believe that I am due for a break right now after all these hours spent on the bridge, supervising that unloading operation. I will return to relieve you at six thirty, after I have supper."

"Go ahead, Tina: I will be on top of things here."

Getting out of her command chair, Tina then walked to the open staircase linking the top command platform of the bridge sphere with the next lower platform, where she took an elevator ride down to the Executive Deck, situated just under the bridge sphere. Once on that deck, she walked to her large executive suite and entered it. However, instead of undressing and lying down in bed to rest, she ended up sitting in her favorite lounge sofa, deep in thoughts while contemplating the forest visible from her suite's large windows. After some five minutes of silent contemplation, Tina got up and went to her private study, where she sat at her work desk and activated its computer terminal.

"SPIRIT, this is Tina. I would like your advice about something..."

09:15 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, May 09, 2339

Hangar assigned to the command cutter AEGIS

Large craft hangar complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In low Earth orbit, Solar System

Harrison Ford, closely followed by his crewmembers, entered the hangar where the AEGIS was sitting, finding Tina Forster and SPIRIT's android avatar waiting for them next to the aft access ramp. Not seeing any of the members of the field team of Project Tempus, he stopped in front of Tina to ask her a question.

"Aren't we going to have field team members coming with us this time, Captain?"

"No! The crew for this mission will be minimal, for reasons of utter discretion."

"And where and when are we going, Captain?"

"I will tell you once we are all aboard and out of the NOSTROMO, Harrison."

While not having expected such secrecy, Harrison didn't ask more question and simply nodded his head before starting to climb the access ramp with the other ten androids of his crew. Once inside, the group went up to the craft's operations center, adjacent to the bridge sphere of the AEGIS, where Tina invited them to briefly sit down in order to talk to them.

"My friends, this mission may feel quite ush-ush to you but it is for a good reason...which I will explain to you once we are out of the NOSTROMO and heading towards the Sun. Yes, this mission will involve time displacements but towards the future instead of the past. With this said, man your bridge positions and let's fly out."

Harrison and his bridge crew got up and went to the adjacent, ten-meter-diameter bridge sphere, while Hedy Lamarr, Charles Melton, Brian Mojambo, Ben Affleck and Greta Norstrom either stayed in the operations center or made their way to the engineering control room aft. Four minutes later, the AEGIS flew out of its individual hangar, then cycled through one of the two huge airlocks of the hangar complex and flew out by the large craft access and exit tunnel, to emerge out in the vacuum of Space, some 140 kilometers above the surface of the Earth.

Once Harrison had programmed a trajectory towards the Sun, he got up from his pilot's chair and, followed by his bridge crew, went into the operations center, where Tina and SPIRIT were waiting for them.

"We are on our way to the Sun, Tina. We will be in position to jump in about 35 minutes. So, what is this mission about and why the secrecy?"

"Harrison, I kept this mission under tight wrap for a very good reason: we are going to explore the future of Humanity in incremental jumps of five years, in order to check if any major disaster, war or social up evil will endanger Humanity in the decades to come. As you may easily understand, this mission would be highly controversial on

political and social levels and I could even be accused of trying to learn about the future in order to personally profit from such hindsight. Another reason to stay most discrete about it is to avoid any possible widespread panic on a planet scale, panic that could destabilize the whole of the Spacers' League. For all those reasons, we will operate this mission according to the following directives. First, we will stay in maximum stealth, passive mode along the whole mission. No active electronic emissions, with our sensors in passive mode only. Second, we will record all the open-source electronic data or news reports in order to ascertain if a major, catastrophic event has hit Humanity during the period covered. However, if nothing truly dramatic happened during that said period, we will then erase completely all our recordings made during that period. That will include your individual memories about that period just covered. I know that your own individual memories are very sensitive subjects for all of you but that directive will apply only to the data and recordings pertaining to whatever catastrophic event happened on Earth and nothing else. I will be the one to decide what event will be worth keeping in our databanks. If we do learn about some future catastrophic event or string of events to hit Earth or Humanity, then we will discretely record all the possible data and information we will be able to collect stealthily, so that we could go back to our own time period with that info. If we do have information or warnings to pass as a result of our observations, then I will make it a personal task to inform very select leaders of the Spacers' League, so that a long-term mitigation program could be devised under various, non-alarming reasons. Again, if we find out about some near-future disaster and the words goes out, then we will probably face mass panic, something that could only worsen the situation. Do any of you see objections to my reasoning on this?"

No one objected or raised points at that time but SPIRIT did have a question for Tina.

"And what pushed you into wanting to make such an exploration of Humanity's near-future, Tina? Is it some information we are not aware of?"

"No! In truth, I am as clueless as all of you about what Humanity could face in the decades to come. Put this on premonition and on an old saying."

"An old saying?" said Greta Norstrom. "What old saying would that be, Captain?"

Tina smiled as she answered the android paramedic.

"That 'shit happens'."

11:03 (Universal Time)

Thursday, May 10, 2345

Bridge sphere of the command cutter AEGIS

600,000 kilometers from the Sun, Solar System

The moment that the AEGIS rematerialized in normal Space after effecting its temporal jump, Allison Stokke checked her sensors' indication, speaking after a few seconds.

"I am getting the signals from the automated navigation beacons orbiting Earth, Harrison. We are at the date we were aiming at: May 10, 2345. There is also a fairly high level of electro-magnetic activity of various kinds coming from all around the Solar System. The levels of waves intercepted is par for a normal day in the system."

"Good! Let's go take a stationary position in high polar orbit. Stay in passive mode."

Tina, who was sitting in the observer's chair behind and to one side of the pilot's chair, nodded her head in satisfaction and started unbuckling her seat harness.

"We're in business! I will now go in the operations center, where I will monitor our observations. Remember: our priority is to stay undetected while watching."

"Understood, Captain!"

Leaving the bridge sphere and walking into the adjacent operations center, Tina went to sit at the command station of the compartment, next to SPIRIT.

"Well, we now simply watch and see what we can learn from the various public news channels about what has happened recently in the Solar System and around the Spacers' League. Up to now, things seem to be normal: no devastated, radio-silent planet and no thick debris field in orbit around Earth."

"You do realize that many kinds of bad things could happen in a rather unspectacular way, Tina, like a dictator taking over power on Earth." replied the android. Tina could only nod her head at that statement.

"You are unfortunately right, SPIRIT, so we will have to be vigilant and check for any apparent anomaly in activity pattern and open communications traffic. This could take a few days of watching if we want to be thorough about it."

"Indeed!"

After two days of careful watching and monitoring from Space, Tina finally decided that the last six years had not brought any kind of disaster to Earth, while the Spacers' League system of regular, twice-daily courier automated probes confirmed that all was well in the Spacers' League worlds. Having seen and heard enough to be satisfied, Tina then ordered another temporal jump forward, aimed at the year 2350.

10:20 (Universal Time)

Saturday, May 13, 2350

Bridge sphere of the command cutter AEGIS

In high polar orbit around Earth, Solar System

"Nothing to see here, while the latest electronic SLN news bulletin about the Spacers' League shows nothing out of the ordinary. I believe that we can now do another jump forward by five years. What do you say, SPIRIT?"

"I concur, Tina. Let's jump to the year 2355."

12:43 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, May 11, 2355

Bridge sphere of the command cutter AEGIS

Emerging in normal Space 340,000 kilometers from the Sun

"We have signals from the navigation beacons, Harrison: we are on May 11, 2355. Universal Time is 12:43. I..."

Surprised by the sudden hesitation of Allison at her sensors station, Harrison Ford twisted his head to look at her and saw that she now appeared both worried and very busy as she was consulting her instruments.

"Is something wrong, Allison?"

"There is, Harrison." was her immediate reply. "The level of electronic traffic around Earth is simply insane and also quite chaotic, as if the whole planet has gone on a panic attack."

Harrison next looked at his communications officer, William Windsor.

"Can you make sense out of that level of traffic, William?"

"Personally, no! The amount of traffic is simply too much for me to process by myself. However, VISION is now on that. She should be able to give us a report in the next minute."

The androids manning the bridge sphere, like Tina and SPIRIT in the operations center, then waited for their craft's supercomputer to give them a report, which it did after some two minutes.

"Warning! Earth has suffered a cataclysmic natural event on May First of this year. I am still processing the jumble of information and data broadcasts we are receiving but it appears that much of North America has been destroyed by a combination of a very strong earthquake and tsunami originating from the Cascadia Subduction Zone, situated along the Pacific coast of the continent, and of a massive eruption from the Yellowstone super volcano caldera. I will need another hour or two before I can present a more complete report, as total chaos seems to presently reign on Earth. However, the number of dead around North America is in the tens of millions, while survivors are fighting for food and supplies."

"Oh my God!" could only say Tina at first, utterly shocked. "Is the Spacers' League responding to this and helping up Earth?"

"Yes! I am identifying a minimum of 67 various Spacers' League ships in Earth orbit. The NOSTROMO is part of the rescue effort and is presently helping to evacuate the survivors in the worst-hit regions."

Tina did her best to try regaining her composure but the devastating shock of those news was too much for her and she broke down in silent crying, unable to do or say anything for long seconds. SPIRIT, sitting next to her, both understood and respected Tina's level of grief and let her time to at least partly recuperate control of herself before asking her a question in a soft voice.

"What do you want us to do now, Tina?"

"We...we continue watching and listening while staying in stealth mode. Record everything: we will need that data and recordings for whatever action we will take about this once back in 2339."

SPIRIT nodded her head at that, then passed on that directive to VISION via electronic datalink mode.

The crew of the AEGIS, fighting off their grief, concentrated on gathering as much information and data as they could in the following minutes, including by pointing their main long-range optical telescope at Earth and zooming in on the northwest area of the North American continent. What they saw was truly heartbreaking. Allison Stokke soon made her own report on the disaster.

“The whole western half of North America, going up to the regions of Vancouver and Calgary and down to the Mexican border, is covered by a thick ash cloud blocking the Sun rays. Some of the ash has even fallen as far as the East Coast, while ash clouds have crossed the Atlantic and are now over Western Europe. The ash is causing a dramatic drop in temperature across North America, which will kill the crops and vegetation not already covered with the ash. A tsunami and massive earthquake from the Cascadia Subduction Zone have basically razed the areas of Vancouver, Seattle and Portland. Thermal imaging also shows that a number of volcanoes, including Mount Rainier and Mount St-Helens, were awakened along the Northwest Coast by that earthquake, which originated from the Juan de Fuca Plate, and erupted in unison with the Yellowstone super volcano caldera, adding to the destruction and ash cover.”



Allison was about to say more but was interrupted by William Windsor, who was monitoring the radio frequencies.

“Wait, Allison! We are now getting a call...from the NOSTROMO! That call is in encrypted mode. I am switching it to Tina in the operations center.”

The androids manning the bridge sphere exchanged glances but didn’t make comments then and simply monitored the call and Tina’s reaction to it, to see if newer directives would follow as a result.

In the operations center, Tina sat back, deeply shaken, while looking at the image of a clearly older self sitting in the command chair of the NOSTROMO. The older Tina then spoke in a sober voice.

“AEGIS, from the NOSTROMO: please do not answer this transmission, sent on a tight unidirectional maser communications beam, and stay in stealth mode. I know that you are here because my younger self noted down the precise time and location of

emergence when she arrived from the past. To my younger self, I am including in this transmission an encrypted data file containing all the pertinent information on the situation on Earth before, during and after the Cascadia-Yellowstone Event. However, that data is to be shown only to Chairwoman Mercier and President Johnson and to nobody else. The main reason for doing this is to avoid widespread panic and hysteria on Earth and to instead prepare as smooth a long-term advance response as possible to this cataclysm. The political pressure from these news could be both immense and unpredictable, which is another reason to severely limit the dissemination of this information. Even the crew of the NOSTROMO in 2339 is not to be informed of this. As for the android crew of the AEGIS, I will be most thankful for them to stay silent about what you are now seeing. All is now on you, my younger self. Once you will have received and recorded the datafile following this, send back a simple, two-word acknowledge response in encrypted mode and maser beam, saying 'AEGIS okay', so that I will know that you got that information. Once that is done, return to the year 2339 without further delay. We on the NOSTROMO will then continue to do the maximum to help the unfortunate people of North America. Good luck and goodbye, AEGIS."

While the older Tina's image then froze, a condensed and encrypted datafile of considerable size started downloading, monitored by SPIRIT, who had plugged a data stick into her computer station. After some twenty seconds, the android avatar spoke to Tina, sitting next to her.

"Datafile received and recorded, Tina. I will now unplug that data stick before erasing the backup file now in VISION's main databanks."

"Very well." replied Tina before switching on her intercom. "Harrison, we now have all the information we need. Let's jump back to our time of origin. To all the crew of the AEGIS: this never happened and is not to be mentioned or even inferred. That is all for me."

Once that was said, Tina closed her eyes and started crying again.

CHAPTER 6 – A HEAVY BURDEN



Captain Tina Forster



Chairwoman Jeanne Mercier



NAU President Sylvia Johnson

10:10 (Washington Time)

Saturday, May 13, 2339

South lawn of the White House

Washington, D.C., North American Union

Earth, Solar System

Anyone from the early 21st Century who would look at the White House of 24th Century Washington could be excused for wondering about the good state of such an old building. The catch was that the White House of 2339 was actually a relatively recent, forty-year-old replica of the old 19th Century original building, which itself had been rebuilt after being ‘remodeled’ by British troops in 1812. The gardens and lawns of the White House had also been preserved and cared for in their original, 21st Century state. Now, a small interstellar shuttle was just landing smoothly and nearly silently on the South Lawn, watched by North American Union President Sylvia Johnson and four Secret Service agents. The aft access ramp of the shuttle soon lowered, letting out Tina Forster, Spacers’ League Chairwoman Jeanne Mercier, Security Officer Stacy Keibler and two Spacers’ League Executive Protection Detail officers. The freshly arrived group then walked to President Johnson, who greeted Tina and Jeanne Mercier with a handshake.

“Welcome to Washington, Captain Forster, Chairwoman Mercier. I must say that I am dying to learn the reason why we are meeting here today.”

"You can blame Captain Forster on that, Madam President." replied Jeanne Mercier, her expression most serious. "What she told me only yesterday shook me to the core, even though it mostly concerned the North American Union. However, I agreed with her that what she wants to tell you must be kept strictly confidential, even from your own White House staff and from your vice-president."

"Dear God! What could be so grave to justify such secrecy?"

"Something truly horrible, Madam President." answered Tina, also most serious. "We will need maximum intimacy for our meeting: no cameras, no recordings, just us." Sylvia Johnson gave Tina a bit of a suspicious look, intrigued by her request. However, the past couple of decades had proved Tina Forster and her gigantic ship to be worthy of being taken very seriously. Johnson thus pointed to the West Wing annex of the White House, where the Oval Office was situated.

"Very well. If you will follow me to the Oval Office."

"Uh, could we use your Situation Room instead, Madam President?" asked Tina. "It is located underground and is thus less susceptible to eavesdropping than the Oval Office, which has large patio doors and windows visible from the street."

"We could do that." answered Johnson, now seriously wondering what could justify such level of security paranoia.

They still entered the West Wing via the patio doors of the Oval Office but then simply walked across it, exiting it before using the staircase leading to the basement, where the Situated Room was located. Still followed by the four Secret Service agents and by the three security officers, the trio entered the heavily protected Situation Room. However, at Tina's request, the security agents stayed outside of the armored door, leaving Sylvia Johnson to sit down with Tina Forster and Jeanne Mercier at the long conference table. Johnson took the time to deactivate all the cameras and microphones located inside the room before looking sharply at Tina Forster.

"So, Captain Forster, what is it that justifies this level of confidentiality?"

"It relates to the recent ability of my ship to travel through time, Madam President. As you well know, when we returned to the year 2337 after being most involuntarily projected back in time by close to 2,900 years, we brought back a number of recordings of a few historical events, collected along our way back with four persons from the past. I believe that our historical documentaries about the death of Joan of Arc

and about Jack the Ripper made a real splash in the North American Union, along with the brief visit by Amelia Earhart.”

“They sure did, Captain Forster. I myself couldn’t help cry while watching the execution of Joan of Arc by the English in Orléans. Don’t tell me that this meeting is being held because of something you saw in the past?”

“No! It is because of something I saw in the future, Madam President. By the way, I would like the fact that I went to the future to be kept strictly confidential, and this for very serious reasons.”

“You visited the future? When? Why?”

“The when is four days ago. The why is because of a premonition I had about something bad happening to Humanity in the near to medium future. I then quickly enough found out that my worries were justified, Madam President. Know that, on May First of 2355, most of North America will be destroyed by a twin natural disaster of cataclysmic proportions: namely a Magnitude 9.3 earthquake along the Cascadia Subduction Zone, which will raze most of the Northwest coast of the continent and obliterate the regions of Vancouver, Seattle and Portland. Even worse, that earthquake will somehow awaken the Yellowstone Super volcano Caldera, along with the Mount Rainie and Mount St-Helens volcanoes. The resulting eruptions will send up in the atmosphere huge quantities of volcanic ash, which will then cover most of the North American continent and will trigger a brutal drop in temperature that will in turn kill much of the vegetation, crops and animals. That ash cloud will even cross the Atlantic and deposit some ash over Western Europe. The initial number of people killed by the earthquake and tsunami and by the blasts and pyroplastic clouds from those eruptions will be estimated at about 59 million people, with over a hundred million more dying shortly later on due to mud flows, fires and famine. Those who will survive will then find themselves in the equivalent of a nuclear winter, with little food or water available and with most transportation modes paralyzed. The global drop in temperatures will also cause crop failures all over the planet, causing more havoc and deaths and resulting in a general breakdown in social order. The Spacers’ League did react nearly instantly to that disaster, sending help and supplies and also assisting in the evacuation of the worst-hit areas. Most of those evacuees were then transported and relocated to the planet Asiana, in the case of Asian refugees, and to Jamieson’s World, in the case of North American and European refugees, with other worlds of the Spacers’ League also used for relocation. However, the amount of death and suffering from that twin disaster

in 2355 will be truly heartbreaking, with the estimated final death tally reaching over half a billion people, with many more lives being left shattered.”

Sylvia Johnson, now as pale as a bed sheet, couldn’t speak for many seconds, a big ball down her throat.

“Dear God! What could we do to prevent this, in your opinion?”

“To prevent it? Nothing, Madam President. This disaster will be a purely natural one and we simply have no technical way to prevent or stop it from happening at that date. We have no way to control the movements of a subduction zone, while trying to prevent or diminish the eruptions by, for example, drilling down to the magma layers, could result in wildly unpredictable results. The only possible answer for us, in my humble opinion, will be to gradually push for as much emigration to other planets as possible without creating a general panic and hysteria, thus decreasing the number of fatalities caused by that twin disaster. However, if word of this comes out too early, then we risk a complete breakdown in social order, mass riots and possibly civil war.”

Johnson was again silent for a moment before giving a critical look at Tina.

“Are you sure about all this, Captain Forster? Are your numbers factual or are they mere estimates?”

In response, Tina took her laptop out of her briefcase and opened it, then put it on the table, in front of Johnson’s position, starting a video file on it.

“Here are the observations and data I collected in 2355 aboard one of my command cutters. It is a bit long, at 79 minutes, but is well worth fully watching it, Madam President. Chairwoman Mercier already visioned it, so we will keep quiet while you watch it.”

With cold sweat on her forehead and pale lips, Sylvia Johnson started watching the video produced in 2355 and then carefully edited by Tina in order to hide the true producers of the video file. While she did so, both Tina and Jeanne Mercier kept quiet, letting her concentrate on the presentation.

Sylvia Johnson looked about to throw up when she finished viewing the video file. Tina then closed that file before stuffing back her laptop in her briefcase.

“I am sorry if I don’t let you keep a copy of that video file, Madam President, but I believe that nobody else but the three of us must know about this at this time.”

“Why? Why can’t we inform my citizens about this, so that we could start right away to make preventive measures.”

"Why? For three main reasons, Madam President. First, the widespread distribution of that information now would result in widespread panic, hysteria and chaos. Second, many will say that this is wholly invented, in order for me to somehow profit from the following social disorder and panic. Third, others in the North American Union may use this as a pretext to throw your government out, so that they could in turn seize power. Don't forget that this will happen in sixteen years, by which time you will be long gone from office. Who knows who will succeed you, especially if this information will create political agitation and social disorder."

"What about the crew of your command cutter, Captain Forster? They also must know about this. How can you be sure that they won't spread that information around them, even if it is done unintentionally?"

"They won't, for the simple reason that they were all androids, able to reason without being affected by emotions."

Apparently taken off balance by Tina's arguments, Johnson thought furiously for a moment before nodding her head once.

"Okay! Let's say that I accept your logic on this. What do you advocate that we do then? We can't simply sit down and die without doing anything."

"What we could do is to use subtlety and long-term planning in order to minimize the amount of death and suffering, Madam President. However, short of evacuating in advance the whole planet, something I consider to be next to impossible without causing mass chaos, we simply can't avoid the mass casualties you saw in my video file. If you would analyze the data shown in my video, you would quickly realize that the population of North America and of Asia in 2355 was actually much lower than what the present predictions about population growth say. That's because, in the next sixteen years, over one and a half billion persons emigrated from Earth, to go live on new worlds around the Spacers' League. What we need to do right now is to continue encouraging that emigration movement, while investing in those new worlds, like Asiana and Jamieson's World. Those two planets alone easily have the capacity to absorb two to three billion new inhabitants, if their development is pursued at a brisk pace. Many other worlds of the Spacers' League, like Atlantis, Providence, New Venice, New Polynesia, Vinland, Utopia, Gemini, El Dorado and Jurassika, are prime colonization planets which are still very lightly populated and which could absorb hundreds of millions of extra immigrants, if properly prepared in advance for these new citizens."

"I can tell you that, on my part, I will push for an accelerated infrastructure growth across the Spacers' League." added Jeanne Mercier. Johnson then looked at Tina.

"What about your own world of New Haven, Captain?"

"I already have been pushing for many years the accelerated development of New Haven, Madam President. However, its main contribution will be in terms of food production, which is already the mainstay of its economy and will stay so. I intend to greatly boost its production of meat, fresh fruits, vegetables and fish in ways that won't need massive infrastructure investments. New Haven has been pursuing for nearly twenty years already a long-term program of seeding and planting across its surface and oceans and all those new plants and marine life have had time to grow and expand on their own and are now fully mature and ready for exploitation. I also have been continuing my program of relocation to New Haven of refugees from wars and famines on Earth, mostly with people from Africa and from the Indian sub-continent. Those refugees were then finally able to find peaceful, just new lives on my corporate world. There is still plenty of space and resources available on New Haven to accommodate many more such refugees and I fully intend to welcome them."

Sylvia Johnson stared at both Tina and Jeanne for a moment, a ball still in her throat.

"Very well: I will try my best to push for an accelerated emigration program, notably by giving financial incentives for emigration to my citizens who would wish to do so. However, don't forget that I am strictly limited in terms of time allowed in office: I only have twenty months left in my second and final mandate as president of the NAU. After that, I simply can't guarantee what my successor will think about that emigration program."

"I understand that, Madam President." said Tina. "We can only act on what we can control, after all."

Tina then got up from her seat, imitated by Jeanne Mercier, and shook hands with Sylvia Johnson.

"I am sorry to have brought you such awful news from the future, Madam President, but I simply couldn't keep this a secret from you, as your people will be the ones paying the biggest price in this incoming disaster. Again, you can count on our help in this, Madam President."

"And I am most grateful, both for the warning and for your offer of help, Captain Forster. Let me accompany you and Chairwoman Mercier back to your shuttle."

Leading Tina and Jeanne up to ground level and walking with them out of the West Wing, Johnson accompanied her two visitors up to the access ramp of the waiting shuttle, where she again shook hands with the two women.

"Again, thank you for the warning. Have a safe trip back to your homes."

The access ramp closed up seconds after that and Johnson then stepped back to a safe distance, to watch the small craft fly silently off the White House lawn, to soon disappear in the sky as it climbed upwards. As Sylvia Johnson walked back to the West Wing, she looked at her hands, which were slightly shaking.

"God! The years to come will assuredly be the most miserable ones of my life."

CHAPTER 7 – MEAT ON THE HOOF



13:22 (Universal Time)

Monday, May 15, 2339

Government administrative center, City of Camelot

New Haven (Wolf 1061ca), moon of planet New Shouria (Wolf 1061c)

Wolf 1061 star system, 13.8 light-years from Earth

Piotr Romanski greeted Tina Forster with a hug and kisses on the cheeks the moment she entered the conference room used by the executive committee of New Haven.

"Tina, Tina, it has been way too long since your last visit to the surface of New Haven."

"Well, I have been kind of busy lately, Piotr." replied Tina in a remorseful tone. "Just helping the Koorivars to lodge their half a million refugees we went to save on Shouria in the past took a lot of my time and I am now fully committed to supporting the building up of new colonies on Asiana and Jamieson's World."

"I understand, Tina. For you, saving the Galaxy or other people in peril is a full-time vocation. So, what is the reason for your visit today?"



"Something that I am keeping strictly confidential in order to avoid spreading panic around me. Could we discuss together in strict intimacy, Piotr, with no cameras or microphones recording us?"

Piotr became instantly serious and nodded his head at once. His many years of working with Tina on the KOSTROMA had made him know her very well. If she asked for such privacy, then you could be sure that it was not for some frivolous reasons.

"Consider it done, Tina. Take a seat while I shut off the security systems of this room."

Tina did so and patiently waited until Piotr, who she had designated as the Chief Executive Officer of New Haven after she had been given the moon by the grateful Koorivars, sat next to her at the table.

"Alright, Tina, tell me what is bothering you."

"Well, it all came because of my new ability to travel through time with my ships. Until recently, all my time travel involved past historical periods. No more! Recently, a bad premonition pushed me into sending a command cutter to the future, in order to explore the next few decades to come and find out if some big disaster was going to hit us. Well, we did find out that such a disaster will hit Humanity in 2355."

Piotr stiffened at once but stayed silent, letting Tina tell him in detail what she had found in 2355 and what she did then with that information. At the end of her revelation, Piotr sat back, his expression most somber.

"My God! This is about the worst thing that could possibly strike Earth. And we are going to simply sit and let it happen?"

"No! We are going to do something to at least mitigate the loss of life from that cataclysm, Piotr. That is why I am here today: to prepare New Haven to help the evacuees from Earth in 2355 and to be able to receive more immigrants from Earth before this will happen. The key for us to do this will be to dramatically increase food production capacity but in a way that will not mean huge food wastage or astronomical production costs which could bankrupt our corporation."

"And how do you intend to do that, Tina?"

"By a very simple, economical and effective method: meat on the hoof. I intend to greatly expand the free-roaming herds of cattle we already exploit on New Haven, so that we have instant access to lots of proteins when we will need it. As you know well, free-roaming cattle doesn't cost a dime in food, upkeep or personnel time: you just let those animals graze vegetation to their content while they multiply by themselves.

Hopefully, we still have enough vacant grasslands, savannahs and forests around New Haven to support those extra herds, right?”

Piotr Romanski gave her a benevolent smile while bending slightly forward, his forearms crossed on top of the table.

“My dear Tina, you are now repeating the same mistake a lot of people do when they judge the potential of New Haven. Yes, New Haven is smaller than Earth by about twenty percent but they tend to forget that our moon does not have huge oceans which cover two-thirds of its surface, like on Earth. Yes, we do have plenty of lakes, some of them huge ones which would be considered as inland seas on Earth, but New Haven still ends up with a lot more arable and habitable land than Earth does, with much of that land surface having a temperate to warm climates perfect for animals and people. On the other hand, we still have less than three million inhabitants at the present, even after sixteen years of immigration from Earth, something that leaves huge surfaces of usable forests and grasslands available for free-roaming herds of herbivores. If you take for example our Katanga Plain, with its surface area of over 83 million square kilometers of forests, grasslands, savannahs and lakes, it is about as big as the Atlantic Ocean. We could sustain absolutely huge numbers of herbivores, just using the space still available in the Katanga Plain. Our next two largest plains, the Assiniboine and Appalachian Plains, total by themselves another 72 million square kilometers of forests, grasslands and lakes. And I am not talking yet about our plateaux, which are covered by a mix of forests, grasslands, lakes and mountains. Those plateaux total together a bit more in terms of surfaces of land than the surface of the whole Pacific Ocean. You want grazing lands for herds? You got them aplenty here, Tina! So, we only have to find those extra cattle heads. However, for us to buy tens of thousands of heads of cattle will be very expensive. There is also the fact that such a number of animals would be hard to find these days. The present cattle market already has difficulties providing enough beasts to feed Humanity.”

Tina smiled as Piotr finished talking.

“Piotr, you were always cool-headed and logical about problems and I love you for that. You have the grazing lands; I will find you those extra heads of cattle...for free.”

“Uh, how are you going to pull that miracle, Tina?”

“By getting them in the past, Piotr. Then, we will let those animals multiply by themselves along the years while they stuff themselves on free grass, berries and roots.”

07:52 (Universal Time)

Saturday, May 20, 2339

Bridge sphere of the heavy cargo shuttle FERRY MAN

Large craft hangar complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In orbit around New Haven (Wolf 1061ca)



Doctor **Shania Bearheart** was quite excited as she took one of the observers' seats in the bridge sphere of the heavy cargo shuttle FERRY MAN, and for two good reasons: first, the cargo shuttle was due to travel back in time in order to go capture a herd of American bison and, second, it would be going to the ancient territory of the Native American tribe she descended from, the Ojibwe, which lived around the American Great Lakes area hundreds and thousands of years ago. Sitting next to her on the other observers' seats behind the pilot's and copilot's stations were Carla Lombardi, the young assistant veterinarian who was going to work with her, and Eve Silisca, who was acting as mission advisor. The android smiled to Shania as the zoologist and veterinarian sat down to her left.

"Happy and excited about going on this mission, Shania?"

"You bet I am, Eve! At the present, only a few Bisons are left alive, their species having nearly become extinct for a number of reasons during the last two centuries. About half of those surviving bison now live on New Haven and they seem to like the types of plants and vegetation growing there. To be able to watch herds of thousands of Bisons in a place where my tribal ancestors lived will be like a dream come true for me."

"Well, we will certainly get to see lots of bison soon, especially since we are going to effect multiple return trips between this year and the distant past. What we want is to capture many separate herds of bison, with a minimum of a few hundred beasts per herd, and then bring them to widely separated regions of New Haven, to ensure that some disease or other natural calamity doesn't wipe them all out in one shot. That will also ensure that those herds will find plenty of grass to graze as they move around."

"And I approve of this precaution, Eve."

"Changing slightly the subject, I understand that you speak the Ojibwe language, Shania. What are the chances that the language of the natives living around the

American Great Lakes in 5,000 B.C.E. will be close to or similar to the Ojibwe you know?”

Shania made a grimace at that question.

“I am not too optimistic about that, Eve. Just look at how much the English language evolved in only a few centuries. I may be able to understand a few basic words here and there but that’s about it. Besides, we don’t want to interfere with the local natives during our mission, or even to show ourselves to them.”

“Correct! That is why we will mostly work on the ground at night or in the early morning hours.”

“Uh, how safe is this time travel business, Eve?” asked the 28-year-old Carla Lombardi, sitting to the right of Eve.

“In terms of the traveling itself: quite safe, Carla. By now, both the NOSTROMO and the command cutter AEGIS have traveled multiple times through time, both to the past and to the future. The only thing is that, the larger the temporal displacement, the less precise the time jump will be. However, we are talking about inexactitudes in dates of arrival of only a few days or, at the most, a few years when really long jumps are concerned. For that reason, on our return trip, we will make a transit stop in the early 20th Century, where we will be able to ascertain our exact time of arrival via the publicly broadcasted radio programs, and this before making our subsequent jump back to 2339. But our time spent in the past is another matter, if you are planning ground activities. Local inhabitants, if they encounter us, may react in unpredictable ways, too often in a violent manner. Local animals may also attack us, like in the case of wolves, especially in the case of us being near a herd of bison, one of their main sources of food. But don’t worry too much, Carla: we have with us twelve security androids who are also accomplished horse riders, thanks to their participation in our periodic medieval tournaments, where they engage in mounted combat and jousting. They are all true badasses and they are led by Jehanne de Domrémy, our most experienced and battle-hardened security android. With them around us, you will be quite safe while working in the field.”

“Thanks, Eve! I feel more reassured already.”

A few minutes later, having done a pre-flight instruments check, their pilot, Bernard Merchant, announced that they were ready to fly out of the NOSTROMO. Under the control of its regular crew, the 200-meter-diameter lenticular-shaped heavy

shuttle flew out via the 1,200-meter-long access tunnel for heavy craft and emerged into dark Space. One minute later, the FERRY MAN powered its Koomak Drive and jumped to the Solar System, appearing near Venus' orbit a fraction of a second later. Altering course towards the Sun, the heavy shuttle performed a close approach to the star and made a second jump at a precise moment, speed and distance, performing what was now known as a 'Golshan Maneuver'. When they reemerged into normal Space, Merchant twisted his head to look at his three human passengers.

"We are now in the deep past, around the year 5,000 B.C.E. However, since we can't verify the exact date we are in by, say, listening to public radio transmissions from Earth, today's date is only approximate, give or take a few years. This was quite a large temporal jump, close to the maximum capability of our Koomak Drive."

"That's alright, Mister Merchant." replied Eve with a smile. "A few years more or less will not affect our mission. You may now fly to Earth and take a high-altitude station over the American Great Lakes. We will first watch the surface with our telescopes in order to locate where large buffalo herds are around Lake Superior, then will come down at night to let our riders out."

Bernard Merchant simply nodded at that before starting to fly towards Earth, some 0.4 AU away. As their mission advisor, Eve was in actual command of what they would do while in the past, with Merchant and his crew only tasked with flying their heavy shuttle. Other Spacers' League crews would most probably have balked at giving in to the authority of an android but all the flight crews of the NOSTROMO accepted to take orders from androids if those same androids had been given command authority by Tina Forster. In that, it reflected the philosophy in force aboard the NOSTROMO and on New Haven that their androids were considered fully sentient beings of equal value to Humans and other sentient races, like the Koorivars and the Drazts.

An hour later, the FERRY MAN took a fixed position above the American Great Lakes region of North America, with its crew then starting to observe the said area via optical telescopes and thermal cameras. It didn't take long before many buffalo herds, some of them counting thousands of beasts, were detected around the shores of the Great Lakes. Shania Bearhead, who was closely following the results of that search, soon pointed at a region on the southwest tip of Lake Superior.

"That herd, near the future location of Duluth, should be ideal for us as our first target. It numbers about 900 heads, while there are other large herds in the same

region. We thus won't risk significantly depleting the buffalo stocks in that region by capturing that herd. After all, we do not want to risk eliminating a prime source of food for the local inhabitants. Talking of inhabitants, are you able to detect any human presence near that herd, Mister Wang?"

"There is actually a small human settlement situated right on the shores of Lake Superior's southwestern tip, Miss Bearheart. It counts about fifty to sixty inhabitants, if I can go by the count from our thermal cameras. Do you want to see a zoomed in view of it?"

"Please do, Mister Wang. Make sure to record what we see: this will be a priceless source of info on neolithic human settlement activity in this time period."

Shania, like Eve and Carla Lombardi, soon could look on their seats' display screens at an overhead view of a small camp established on the shores of Lake Superior.

"Hum, this looks more like a transient camp than like a permanent settlement." said Shania. Those tents made of animal hides are rather rudimentary. Those natives are probably still living as nomadic hunter-gatherers, following the buffalo herds around. We will have to be cautious not to show ourselves to them while we will operate on the ground. When I think that those people may well be my distant ancestors..."

"They possibly are, Shania." said Eve, nodding her head. "Since we appear to have arrived in the middle of the afternoon, in Spring or Fall time, we will have a few hours of daylight left to observe and record the activities of those natives. Mister Merchant, could we please launch a reconnaissance probe equipped with micro spy probes, so that we could better document this camp and its occupants' activities?"

"We sure can, Miss Silisca. Minh, launch a Class-B probe and fly it to that camp."

"Right away, Bernie!" replied the sensors officer of the FERRY MAN, who then worked up his controls before announcing that the probe had been launched and was on its way down to the surface. Another twenty minutes and the occupants of the bridge sphere were able to get much better, detailed pictures of the native camp. Shania Bearheart in particular was captivated at once by what they saw.

"This is great! We are looking live at Neolithic Age inhabitants of North America. However, I mostly see women and children in the camp, with only a few, older men. The men of the camp must be out, hunting or gathering food. Do we have more thermal signatures away from this camp?"

"Wait one... Yes, I can now detect a group of six individuals some seven kilometers to the west of the camp. I am going to send a spy probe towards that group." Less than two minutes later, Shania was able to observe a group of six men dressed in deer skins and busy butchering a dead bison they had apparently killed with their spears. Shania nodded her head approvingly while observing that scene.

"That catch will provide enough meat to feed the whole tribe for days. They will probably end up either smoking or drying the meat they will not eat right away. Eve, I notice that all their weapons and tools are made of wood and stone flints, which confirms the historical belief that those people apparently still don't know about metal. This will make a historical documentary of prime interest."

"Indeed! Doctor Schmelling will be elated to view these recordings."

"However," added Shania, "I must confess that what those natives are speaking has very little in common with the Ojibwe language. This is way too far back from our time."

"I kind of expected that, Shania. We will try to learn as we go."

The crew and passengers of the FERRY MAN kept observing the natives via spy probes for the next few hours, taking time to eat supper in relay, until darkness fell on the prairies around Lake Superior. Eve then looked at Bernard Merchant, who had just returned to his pilot's seat.

"I believe that it is now safe for us to land close to the herd we have selected and to let out our cowboys."

Merchant smiled at the term 'cowboys' which Eve used to describe the androids who would go out on horseback to corral the buffalo herd and drive them inside the main cargo hold of his heavy shuttle.

"On our way down, miss. Switching off all external lights now. Miss Bearheart, you are the expert on buffalo behavior. I will thus let you choose our landing point near the herd."

"Thank you, Mister Merchant. Go to that point south of the herd where two small woods form a kind of funnel on the prairies' grasslands. That will help us direct those bison into our shuttle's holds."

"Got it!"

As the heavy shuttle was descending towards their planned landing site, Shania, Eve and Carla left their seats and exited the bridge sphere, going into the adjacent crew duty lounge, where the thirteen security androids completing the mission crew were waiting. The latter, led by Tribune Jehanne de Domrémy, assembled at once around the dining table of the lounge in order to listen to the instructions given by Shania.

"Alright, people, we are on our way down to the surface, where a landing spot was selected next to a narrow grassy passage between two patches of woods. We will use that ground feature to funnel a large herd of bison into the holds of our shuttle. However, know that buffalo herds have a matriarchal organization. The main herd will contain only females and their young, with an old matriarch cow leading them. The bulls usually stay aside in small groups of male bison, until they get close to the females in order to couple. You will thus need to go corral those wandering bulls and lead them towards the herd before we push the whole lot towards our shuttle. It would be pretty dumb if we came back to New Haven with hundreds of beasts, all of the adults being female and with no bulls in the lot."

"Yeah, we would pass as perfect idiots if we did that." replied a smiling Genghis Khan, who was acting as the second-in-command of the security androids, under Jehanne de Domrémy. Shania, like Carla, chuckled briefly at that before asking a question.

"It will be dark when we will land. Can your horses safely gallop around in the night?"

Jehanne shook her head at once in response.

"No! They would run a real risk of stumbling and possibly breaking their legs. They are better used in daylight, when they can see where they go. For tonight, my team will move under our own power and use our internal gravity drives to fly around close to the ground. We can see in the dark thanks to our integrated thermal and low-level-light vision devices, so will be easily able to locate those bulls and corral them."

"And what will you use to corral those beasts, Jehanne? After all, we are talking about large animals which could weigh up to half a ton or more. They could simply ignore you and go their own way."

"We will use our voices to mimic the rallying owls of wolves, Shania. That should be enough to scare them into galloping in the direction of our choice."

"Your voices? I doubt that simple human voices imitating wolves will be strong enough to scare a bunch of big bulls."

"Aaah, but you need to remember that we are security androids, Shania: we can raise our voices to the decibel level of loudspeakers and can also imitate about any sound, scream or roaring we want."

"Really? You..."

"WOOOOO!"

The simultaneous wolf owls from all thirteen security androids, pushed to near ear-splitting volume, scared stiff both Shania and Carla, leaving them white as bed sheets and shaking in their seats. Jehanne de Domrémy then spoke in a normal voice, grinning.

"We could have imitated a charging T-Rex, or a giant tiger, among other predators. Believe me, those bulls will run in the direction we will decide."

"Uh, okay: I believe you, Jehanne. Jeesh! You really scared me shitless. Are there any other nifty tricks you guys can do?"

"Plenty, but we are keeping them a secret for the time being." answered Jehanne, a big grin on her face.

02:41 (American Great Lakes Time)

May 15, 5004 B.C.E.

Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) camp, southern tip of Lake Superior

Micizi had been on sentry duty for about three hours now, standing close to the central campfire of his tribal group but being careful to keep his back to it, in order to preserve his night vision. Only a careless or stupid man would stand sentry duty at night while facing a fire, something that would have earned him a severe remonstrance from Waawaate if caught doing so by the camp leader. However, Micizi was an experienced hunter and warrior and he kept vigilant, watching for possible packs of wolves, bears or, most dangerous of all, hunters from other tribes who would try to sneak in on the camp in order to steal things or to capture young women to make them their slaves. In truth, the tribes around the prairies rarely trusted each other and, more often than not, competed for the precious resources of the land. Thankfully, it was not raining tonight and the wind was merely fresh, so Micizi's tour of duty was a fairly comfortable one.

Micizi had just thrown some more wood on the campfire set in the center of the camp, being careful to close one eye while facing it, when a series of distant owls made him stiffen in alarm: those owls were from wolves, many of them. Tightening his grip on his flint-tipped spear, he did his best to find out from which direction those owls were coming and to estimate the distance these wolves were from the camp. He quickly established that the owls were coming from west of the camp and that they were from at least one hour's walk away. Then, Micizi started hearing the faint rumble from what sounded like a large group of bison running, probably to get away from those wolves. From the distance he had judged, he didn't think that the camp was in imminent danger but he still continued to listen carefully, as a herd of buffalos could change direction quickly and then advance rapidly, especially when they were panicking. Then, the sound of running bison increased dramatically, not in terms of closeness but in terms of numbers: there were now hundreds of bison on the move. That was when Micizi decided to go wake up Waawaate, the tribe leader. Entering his hut made of deer skins laid over an armature of large branches, he gently shook Waawaate by touching his left shoulder while speaking in a low volume of voice.

"Waawaate! Waawaate! Wake up!"

The 36-year-old tribal chieftain did wake up after two shakes and looked up at Micizi, who was kneeling next to the buffalo skin he was sleeping on.

"Uh, what's up, Micizi?"

"I can hear many wolves in the distance, to the West. I can also hear a herd of bison running, probably to escape those wolves. They are quite a long distance away but they could quickly change direction and run towards our camp."

"Very well, I will go out and listen with you."

The two Ojibwes then left the hut and stopped, in order to better listen. Waawaate quickly nodded his head after listening for a few seconds.

"You are right, Micizi: a pack of wolves is after the big herd we spotted this morning. While I don't think that our camp is in immediate danger, it may be wise for us to send a large group of our men in that direction in the morning. With luck, we could find one or more dead bison, killed by those wolves and in the process of being eaten. That could provide us with a good quantity of meat for our tribe. In the meantime, I will go wake up Myeengun and Ogichidaa, so that they could reinforce our guard over our camp during the rest of the night. You did well, Micizi."

"Thank you, Waawaate!" said the sentry, proud of the compliment from his leader, before resuming his sentry duty. Minutes later, Myeengun and Ogichidaa joined him near the campfire, armed with their spears. Micizi took a minute to explain to them what was going on, making them listen carefully to the distant noises. Ogichidaa, the oldest hunter of the trio, nodded his head after a few seconds of listening.

"That is indeed a large group of bison on the move, with at least ten wolves after them. With their present number, those wolves should be able to corner and kill at least one bison. We could indeed find some fresh carcass in the morning. At the least, we would find a pelt, something always useful."

"Yeah, if the wolves won't bite it full of holes." added Myeengun, attracting a reprobativ look from Ogichidaa.

"You are such a pessimist, Myeengun. You should learn to worry less and to enjoy this life as much as you can...while you can."

The owls and the noises from hooves running died down in the next hour or so, without coming closer to the camp, something that reassured Micizi. As the morning twilight came and started bringing in some illumination, Micizi suddenly saw something, low in the sky, and quickly pointed it to his two companions.

"THERE, IN THE SKY, SOMETHING IS RISING FROM THE GROUND, IN THE DIRECTION FROM WHICH WE HEARD THE WOLVES AND THE BISONS."

"What...what is that?" stuttered Myeengun. "It looks as big as a mountain and is climbing very fast in the sky. How could this be?"

Before the three Ojibwe men could further react to it, the unknown flying object soon disappeared in the early morning sky after climbing out of view. Ogichidaa resumed the thoughts of all three then.

"It must have been a manifestation of the Great Spirit. Maybe it was telling us to go look to that spot. I will go inform Waawaate of this."

Waawaate apparently agreed with Ogichidaa's opinion and a strong party of fourteen hunters armed with spears and stone knives soon departed the camp, leaving another ten men to guard it, then started at a quick trot towards the West. Being all in excellent physical shape, the group made good time across the grassy plain intersped with patches of woods, to finally arrive at a grassy patch flanked by two close-by forests. The expert eyes of the Ojibwe hunters quickly found evidence of the passage of a large

herd of bison heading south in the direction of the grassy passage between the woods. To their joy, they also found an adult female bison who had apparently broken a leg by stepping into a hole in the dark of the night. That bison was still very much alive but was unable to flee the hunters, who quickly killed it with their spears, thus securing hundreds of kilos of fresh meat and an intact pelt. The group was butchering the dead animal when Micizi, who had gone further to see if there were more beasts around and available for the taking, called his leader to him, apparently shaken by something. Waawaate was about to ask him what was going on when he saw what Micizi had seen and opened his eyes wide.

“By the Great Spirit! What could make such a large and deep imprint on the ground?”

“There are actually many more such imprints on the ground, forming a sort of huge circle. Also, the footprints from this herd all disappear suddenly over there, as if they had all suddenly vanished into thin air.”

Walking around while looking at the ground, Waawaate soon had to agree with Micizi. Overwhelmed by what he was seeing and not able to understand what it meant, the tribal chief then did the only thing he could do now: to accept the things as they were and to take best advantage of their situation.

“This must all be the work of the Great Spirit. Let us thank him for leading us to this spot and find that wounded bison. Come, Micizi: let’s help our companions to butcher that bison. We will be able to celebrate this tonight at the camp with a feast of meat.”

16:13 (Universal Time)

Monday, May 22, 2339

Southern section of the Appalachian Plains

Near Lake Mistassini, on New Haven (Wolf 1061ca)

Wolf 1061 System, 13.8 light-years from Earth

Tina was nearly jubilant as she watched from her aircar nearly 900 American bison trot out of the cargo holds of the FERRY MAN and step on the grasslands of the Appalachian Plains, near the South Pole of New Haven. Her project to build up large herds of herbivores in order to provide a reserve of meat for future Humanity’s needs

was definitely having a good start. She then smiled at the image of Shania Bearheart and Eve Silisca visible on the display screen of her aircar's dash.

"Well done, ladies! Operation Noah's Ark is up to a very good start. How were the conditions in the Fifth Millenium B.C.E.? Did you see neolithic natives around the Great Lakes?"

"Oh, we did observe a few of them and filmed one of their camps, Tina," answered Shania. "Doctor Schmeling should love the video recordings we took of those natives. However, I was able to ascertain that the language they spoke had little common with the Ojibwe language I know: the temporal separation was just too great."

"It was to be expected, Shania. When are you planning to return for your second pickup of bison?"

"We will leave again for Past Earth as soon as our maintenance robots will have thoroughly cleaned and disinfected our cargo holds, Tina. You wouldn't believe the amount of feces and urine a herd of bison can produce, especially when they are nervous and all excited. I believe that we will need at least six more return trips in order to bring enough bison to New Haven to provide for a viable, sustained population of bison able to multiply quickly. However, I believe that we will need to vary the time and regions in which we will do these culling, in order not to deplete the bison population in any given time period. We will thus travel to 6000 B.C.E. for our next trip, which will target the grasslands around Lake Winnipeg, in the Canadian Prairies."

"Sounds like a plan. Again, great job, girls. Pass as well my congratulations to Jehanne and her team of android cowboys."

"We will, Tina. They had a lot of fun playing cowboys, if androids could indeed have fun."

"Never underestimate the capacity of our security androids to learn and evolve by themselves, Shania," replied Tina, becoming serious. "They could surprise you in many ways. Well, I will now leave you to your housecleaning work."

Tina then terminated the connection and looked down at the hundreds of bison now dispersing around the vast prairies of the Appalachian Plains. Many of them had already started to graze the grass, while others were heading towards the nearby shore of Lake Mistassini in order to drink some water. With a surface of approximately 4,500 square kilometers and a maximum depth of 120 meters, Lake Mistassini could more properly be called a small inland sea but its waters were not salty and it wasn't even the largest lake on New Haven, with nearby Lake Huron winning the palm in that aspect with its 9,000

square kilometers of potable water. With the 33.8 million square kilometers of grasslands and forests of the Appalachian Plains, which extended north-south between the two poles of New Haven, those bison were not about to lack plants to graze.

CHAPTER 8 – A SIBLING FOR FRIDA

08:26 (Canadian Prairies Time)

February 04, 11,052 B.C.E.

Bridge sphere of the heavy cargo shuttle FERRY MAN

Overflying the grass plains near the future site of Prince Albert

Future Canadian province of Saskatchewan, North America

“Well, I can’t say on what exact date we presently are but this certainly looks like Winter to me, and a cold one.”

Shania nodded her head at that remark from Bernard Merchant, the pilot of the FERRY MAN.

“It does, Bernard. What is the external temperature?”

“Oh, a balmy minus 27 degrees Celsius. There is also a strong south-easterly wind that probably cools the temperature much further. Not exactly my favorite kind of weather.”

Eve Silisca was about to speak when the shuttle’s copilot, Lana del Rio, suddenly spoke up.

“I see a column of smoke rising from the ground at two o’ clock! It looks like a small, localized fire. We should go investigate it.”

“Agreed! However, let’s stay at high altitude, in order to be out of sight of any native local. We will use our optical telescope to assess that fire.”

Merchant then veered his large shuttle towards the column of smoke, while his sensors operator, Wang Van Minh, switched his main viewing screen to their main optical telescope, a powerful instrument with an aperture of eighty centimeters. It didn’t take long before Wang spoke up, some tension in his voice.

“I see the remains of a sort of tent which burned down. I also see a man and a woman near the remains of that tent: they are surrounded by a pack of five wolves. The man is trying to fight the wolves off but the woman appears to be inert and is possibly dead.”

“By the stars! Miss Silisca, I request permission to go rescue that couple.”

"Go ahead! I will alert our android squad to be ready to jump out." replied Eve who, as the mission advisor, had the authority to authorize this. She then switched on her intercom system. "Attention, security squad: we have a pair of natives being attacked by wolves. Prepare to jump down to the surface in order to rescue them. Frida, bring your first aid kit with you, along with warm blankets. More instructions will follow soon."

As the FERRY MAN quickly accelerated towards the column of smoke, Eve, Shania and Carla anxiously watched the scene viewed by their telescope. The native woman was still inert on the ground, partially wrapped in a bison fur, but would have been bitten and ripped apart by the wolves if not for the desperate fight put up by the man, who was probably her husband. Then, one of the wolves succeeded in biting the man's left calf, making him scream with pain. The latter, now bleeding heavily, managed to skewer the beast with his primitive spear but was then bitten by another wolf, which closed its jaws on its upper right leg. The man fell on his back, unable to stay standing, and was immediately set upon by the whole pack of wolves, making Carla Lombardi shout in horror.

"WE MUST DO SOMETHING NOW! DON'T WE HAVE WEAPONS ON THIS SHUTTLE?"

"We have only a couple of low-power laser turrets, Carla." replied Merchant before looking at Wang. "Minh, target one of those wolves with our forward laser turret. Be careful not to hit that native."

"On it! Firing now!"

A thin blue-green laser beam flashed for half a second from the belly of the cargo shuttle, missing a wolf by mere centimeters. However that wolf, despite not being hit, did jump away in surprise. The second laser burst from Wang then burned through his torso, making the predator fall down, dead. Wang kept firing more laser beams in quick succession and succeeded in downing three more beasts before the last surviving wolf abandoned his prey and fled. By then, the shuttle was nearly at the vertical of the burned-out tent and losing altitude fast.

"Jehanne, be ready to jump out once I will come to a hover at an altitude of 200 meters. We should be there in ten seconds."

"We are ready, Mister Merchant." answered Jehanne via the intercom box situated in the aft personnel airlock. A few seconds later, Merchant spoke again.

"We are now stationary at 200 meters above the ground. Jump now!"

Inside the aft personnel airlock, which had its outer door already opened, Jehanne de Domrémy ran out and started free-falling, closely followed by twelve more androids, including the team's paramedic, Greta Norstrom. Jehanne did not activate the directed gravity drive integrated inside her android body until she was only fifty meters from the ground. She absorbed the remaining energy of her fall by bending her knees, then ran towards the native man and woman, her disintegrator rifle at the ready. Her first move once near the couple was to bend over in order to examine the man, while her squad members fanned out in a protective circle around her and the natives. Unfortunately, she found that the man was already dead, having lost most of his blood due to his wounds. Greta Norstrom, on her part, checked out the woman, who was as white as a sheet.

"The woman is dead, Jehanne. She probably froze to death. Wait! There is something under her."

Greta then turned the dead woman on her back, uncovering something wrapped in a wolf skin. A small wail then came out from inside that rolled fur.

"THERE'S A BABY INSIDE THAT FUR! IT IS ALIVE!"

Partly opening the rolled piece of fur, Greta saw the face of a crying young child of less than one year of age.

"We have a very young toddler, Jehanne. I am going to fly back to the shuttle in order to examine him in our infirmary."

"Go! We will take care of burying those two unfortunate people."

As Greta flew off with her precious bundle, Jehanne examined quickly the dead woman. She didn't bear any bite marks or wounds, so must have frozen to death before the attack by the wolves. She was lightly dressed for the freezing weather and wore only a rather thin deer skin, while her feet were naked. Jehanne concluded that she and her male companion must have been caught by surprise when their tent started burning, with the woman having only barely enough time to flee the tent with her child wrapped in a fur. Jehanne then noticed a primitive necklace worn by the dead woman, who could have been around the age of twenty. That necklace was made of a string of animal claws suspended to a leather string. The woman wore no other piece of 'jewelry'. Jehanne reasoned that, as the only personal possession carried by that woman, it probably had a sentimental value for her. She respectfully removed the necklace from around the dead woman's neck and put it in her left leg cargo pocket: that was the only

souvenir of her mother that her poor baby would be able to keep once grown up. She then inspected the dead man, who could not be more than thirty years-old. He too was wearing a necklace made of claws and leather string, but one much more elaborate than the one of his companion, so she also removed and pocketed that necklace, plus took the primitive flint blade he had carried at his belt. Getting back on her feet, Jehanne embraced the scene of the drama and the burned remains of the tent. Something didn't feel right to her about this, so she contacted Shania Bearheart via radio.

"Shania, this is Jehanne. Why would a solitary couple with a baby be camping alone like this in Winter? I thought that native North Americans of this time would stay in groups of at least two or three families, to benefit from group protection."

"You are right, Jehanne: this is not normal, especially in Winter. Unfortunately, I see only one plausible reason for that couple to be camping by themselves in the deep of Winter: they must have been expelled and ostracized by their tribal band."

"And why would a band expel them like that, Shania? Throwing them out in the middle of Winter was a near-certain death sentence."

There was a pause of a few seconds then, as Shania apparently thought that over, before she replied to Jehanne.

"The most plausible reason for incurring such a punishment would be that this couple married against the consent of their tribal leader. Maybe they hid their union until the pregnancy of this woman gave away their secret. In native tribes like mine, going against the authority of the tribal leader is considered a very serious fault and is often punished by banishment from the tribe."

Looking down at the dead woman, then at her dead companion, Jehanne had the equivalent for an android of a pang of regret and sadness. In this case, the love between that man and woman had ultimately caused their deaths.

"Alright! Greta is on her way to our infirmary with the couple's child. My squad will now bury the parents, so that wolves and other predators could not get at their bodies. Tell Mister Merchant that we should be back aboard his cargo shuttle in less than half an hour."

"Understood!"

Jehanne then cut her transmission and, taking a few steps away from the two bodies, pointed her disintegrator rifle at the frozen, snow-covered ground. Less than twenty seconds of work was enough to dig a deep oval hole big enough for the man and woman: burying together the young couple sounded like the proper thing to do for

Jehanne. Her squad members then moved the two bodies to the still-fuming hole and respectfully laid them side by side in the bottom of the grave. Their next move was to disperse in order to collect some of the rocks strewn around the plain, while Jehanne collected the largest debris from the burned tent. The partially burned bison hides which had formed the tent's outer layer were laid on top of the two bodies and then covered with a pile of rocks. Once their work was completed, Jehanne called her squad members to attention.

"SQUAD, ATTEN...TION! PRESENT...ARMS!"

Jehanne then saluted the grave for a few second before ordering her androids to shoulder their rifles and to fly back to the cargo shuttle.

Once back aboard the FERRY MAN, Jehanne's first move was to go to the ship's infirmary, situated next to the crew lounge and bridge sphere. There, she found Greta Norstrom examining the small child while Eve, Shania and Carla looked on.

"How is the child doing, Greta?"

"The boy seems to be alright, except maybe for suffering from mild exposure. He otherwise looks healthy and appears to be a bit less than one year of age." Approaching the examination table, Jehanne looked down at the child with apparent sadness.

"Poor thing: orphaned at such a young age. I did recuperate two necklaces which his parents were wearing, along with a flint knife I found on the dead man. I will safeguard them so that this boy could keep them in the future."

"And what will we do with the boy?" asked Carla Lombardi. "Couldn't we give it back to his tribe?"

"No!" answered at once Shania. "His parents were most probably ostracized and expelled because of their forbidden love, of which this baby is the product. I doubt very much that their tribe will accept to take that child."

"Can't we at least try?" protested Carla, becoming emotional. Shania thought for a moment before answering her.

"We could try, but I am nearly certain that they will refuse to take the boy. They may even kill that child when they will understand who his parents were. Are you ready to risk that to happen, Carla?"

The assistant-veterinarian shook her head in response, as tears came to her eyes. Her voice choking up, she turned around and exited the infirmary at a near run. As a regretful Shania watched Carla leave, Jehanne then spoke softly.

"I will take care of this boy, Shania. I already am raising an orphan girl who is now nine years-old. My Frida would love to greet a new sibling in our family."

"Do you have a name you would like to propose for that boy, Jehanne?" asked Eve Silisca. That made Jehanne look at Shania.

"Give me a few native names which would be appropriate for this boy, Shania." The zoologist-veterinarian thought her answer over for a few seconds while looking at the baby, then spoke up.

"How about 'Nehiyawak'? That is the name the Cree people use to call themselves."

"Nehiyawak... That sounds nice to me...and appropriate for the present case. Eve, could you officially register this boy's name as 'Nehiyawak' and also put me down as his tutor?"

"I will be most happy to do that, Jehanne. Greta, could you prepare some condensed milk mixture to feed Nehiyawak during his stay aboard? I doubt that we have baby milk solution on the FERRY MAN."

"Don't say that too quickly, Eve. I believe that we have some emergency baby supplies in our reserves. I will go check on that right away."

"Then I will hold him while you are looking for those supplies." said Jehanne before gently taking the little boy in her arms and then rocking him while humming a soft tune. Shania was stunned to see how natural at this Jehanne appeared to be...for an android.

The crew of the FERRY MAN soon returned to its planned mission: to find and collect a herd of bison. They soon enough found such a herd, counting some 460 heads. They also found something else nearby, something completely unexpected.

"Uh, I see what looks like elephants in the distance, Bernard." said a surprised Wang, making Merchant's head snap around in surprise.

"Elephants? In Northern Canada? That's impossible!" Shania, who looked at the view shown by their optical telescope, became at once excited.

“WOOLLY MAMMOTHS! WE HAVE A HERD OF WOOLLY MAMMOTHS, HERE AND NOW. I THOUGHT THAT THEY WOULD BE EXTINCT BY NOW. THIS IS A FANTASTIC FIND.”

“Uh, we came here to catch bison.” said Merchant in a hesitant voice. “Should we really care about those mammoths?”

Shania gave him an indignant stare on hearing that.



“If we should care about mammoths? Of course we should! That species died out on Earth some 12,000 years before our time. To be able to return to New Haven with a herd of mammoths would be simply fantastic. I am sure that Tina would be elated to see us arrive with mammoths aboard.”

Merchant then looked at Eve, who was technically his mission commander. In response, Eve nodded her head once, looking most serious.

“We will grab all the mammoths we can, Mister Merchant. Then we will grab as well as many bison as our holds will be able to contain. Our cowboy squad will be a busy bunch today and tomorrow.”

13:48 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, May 30, 2339

H.S.S. FERRY MAN, western shores of Ross Lake

North Pole of New Haven (Wolf 1061 ca)

Wolf 161 System, 13.8 light-years from Earth

Eve, Shania and Jehanne were sitting together, facing the same display screen in the duty crew lounge of the FERRY MAN, when they connected with Tina Forster, who was aboard the orbiting NOSTROMO. Tina smiled on seeing the trio at her end of the electronic link.

“So, how did your last mission go, girls? Found more bison?”

“We did find and catch another 812 bison in 11,052 B.C.E., Tina. We just released them one hour ago in the northern portion of the Katanga Plain, near Lake Aztlan. We are now on the ground next to the western shores of Ross Lake, at the North Pole.”

"The North Pole? Why did you land there?"

"We did so in order to drop off more animals who are accustomed to cold climates." answered Eve. "I am now going to add a view from our main cargo ramp, for your benefit. Be ready for quite a surprise."

Eve then clicked on a button, making a view of the extended cargo ramp appear next to their own image on the screen. Utter surprise and disbelief immediately appeared on Tina's face when she was able to see dozens of woolly mammoths trotting down the ramp and setting foot on the tundra grasslands of the North Pole.

"Woolly mammoths? But I thought that they disappeared from Earth a good 20,000 years ago."

"We thought so as well, Tina, but they apparently continued on for longer, at least in the Canadian Prairies. We were able to capture a total of 56 beasts, including seven bulls, 37 females and twelve calves. I know that this was not part of our mission's objectives but we simply could not resist grabbing this incredible opportunity to revive a long-extinct species."

"And you did well about that, Eve. Gee! This could become a major touristic attraction for New Haven. Did you see other unexpected, interesting species on that trip?"

"No, but we witnessed a human tragedy on the shores of the Saskatchewan River."

Eve then took a minute to tell Tina about the dead native couple and their baby. At the end of that, Jehanne picked up a small basket she had put on the deck next to the video station and presented it to the camera, allowing Tina to see the baby boy sleeping in it.

"I have decided to adopt him and called him 'Nehiyawak', which means 'Cree People' in the Cree language. You can now register a new citizen for New Haven and the NOSTROMO. I am now asking for maternal leave, in order to fully care for him."

Tina's expression softened up on seeing the sleeping boy, wrapped in a blanket.

"Jehanne, I must congratulate you on your compassion and sense of humanity. Consider yourself on paid maternity leave for as long as you will need to care for your new little treasure. Shaka Zulu will replace you as legion commander during your leave. Again, well done, all of you! I thus announce this mission to be over for the time being. However, you may expect more herd collecting in the next few weeks, after we see how our new bestiary adapts to New Haven. Jehanne, I will want to kiss your baby boy the moment you get back on the NOSTROMO."

“And you will be welcome to him, Tina.” replied a proud Jehanne.

CHAPTER 9 – A PEACEFUL WORLD



09:46 (Universal Time)

Saturday, June 10, 2339

Dome house at 42 Farmer's Lane, settlement of New Haven

Northern Appalachian Plains, New Haven (Wolf 1061ca)

Wolf 1061 System, 13.8 light-years from Earth

"Here you are: your new home at Number 42, Farmers' Lane. If you were looking for a quiet place to live as a family, you just found it. Your neighbors are all ex-refugees from Africa, Central Asia and the Balkans who came here to escape wars, natural disasters, droughts or famines. They are also mostly ex-farmers who now work in our hydroponic gardens, in animal husbandry or in our artistic shops."

"That is good, Madam Wei." replied Pieter Nordlung while looking at the dome house which was now his temporary family's home for the next few months. "While we will miss the NOSTROMO and its fantastic facilities, we certainly could enjoy some quiet, peaceful time on New Haven."

"Talking of quiet and peaceful, how is the social environment on New Haven, Misses Wei? I am thinking in particular about the level of crime, if any, around."

Wei Zang, an ethnic Chinese woman with gray hair, nodded to Jehanne de Domrémy, who was carrying a tiny child in her arms, while a very cute little blond girl held the hand of Pieter Nordlung.

"Pretending that there is no crime here on New Haven would be a lie, but the local criminality level is extremely low and is limited mostly to petty theft and family disputes, something present in all Human societies around the Spacers' League. As you must well know, Tribune de Domrémy, a force of 900 security androids is posted on New Haven and is regularly rotated around with the androids based on the NOSTROMO. That force acts mostly as our local public safety and police force, now that the threat from the Space Predators has faded away. I understand that you are yourself on maternity leave and are off security duties for at least the next six months."

"That is correct, Misses Wei. However, if a security emergency shows up, I will be ready to lend a hand."

"And what about you, Mister Nordlung? Aren't you still an active-duty Space fighter pilot?"

"Yes, I am! However, I was just transferred from the First Fighter Squadron, based on the NOSTROMO, to the New Haven Defense Squadron, based in nearby Camelot Spaceport. In fact, I will be commanding it."

Wei Zang briefly glanced at the medal and campaign ribbons visible on the left chest of the athletic and most handsome blond man in his late thirties.

"And having you in charge of our Space fighter squadron will be nice to know for us, Mister Nordlung: you gained an enviable reputation during the war against the Space Predators. Your little girl, is she from a previous marriage, if I may ask?"

"No! Me and Jehanne adopted Frida, who is now seven, after she lost her mother during the invasion of Nordland by the Space Predators. Jehanne personally saved her during that fighting, then decided to adopt Frida."

"And this cute little boy in your wife's arms? I can't precisely define his ethnic type but he definitely doesn't have a Nordic type."

"Nehiyawak is of American Native Cree blood, Misses Wei," answered Jehanne. "He is also an orphan and was saved by me from the plains of North America, some 13,000 years ago in the past, after his parents died from either cold or from attacks by wolves. In her last living moments, before she succumbed to exposure, his mother protected him by lying over him in a last effort to keep him warm."

That left Zang silent for a moment from the emotions Jehanne's revelations created in her as she stared at the little child, who sported slanted eyes and a brown skin.

"By the stars! Such a tragic story, but also one of great compassion. This may sound a bit cheesy, Tribune de Domrémy, but you strike me as a most human person."

"She is indeed a most human person, Madam Wei," then said Pieter Nordlung. "She may be a security android, but Jehanne has developed quite a range of human-like emotions and personality traits since she was built and activated, eleven years ago."

"I see! You certainly look like a nice little family. Let me show you your new house."

Leading the two adults and two children along the stone-paved trail leading to the dome house, which had a diameter of roughly thirteen meters and a maximum height of nine meters, Zang applied her right hand to the recognition pad fixed next to the main entrance door, which was connected to the ground level around it by a long curved ramp. Her imprint as the Human Resources and Immigration Administrator for the moon of New Haven unlocked at once the door. However, before entering the house, she invited Peter, Jehanne and little Frida to also apply in turn their right hand to the identity recognition pad, in order to have them registered as the legal occupants of the house. Once that was done, she made the small family enter an entrance lobby, where they were able to drop the two suitcases and two backpacks the adults were carrying. Zang then swept her hand around, showing them the large, high-ceiling area next to the entrance.

"This is the combined family lounge and dining area of the house, with the kitchen occupying the far left corner of it. It covers a total surface area of 39 square meters and has a high ceiling with a maximum height of six meters. Next to the kitchen corner and to the dining area is an open-air patio and balcony with wide patio sliding glass doors. On the patio, you will find a BBQ grill and an assortment of outdoor chairs and a table, where you will be able to cook and enjoy meals in fresh air. The balcony also comes with an emergency exit ladder, in case a fire starts in the house. However, your house, like the other buildings on New Haven, comes equipped with water sprinkler systems and smoke and fire detection systems connected to the local public safety office of this settlement. You will also find a fire safety exit slide on the top floor, which would allow you to evacuate the house in seconds if need be. Many of the local kids also use that exit slide to play by zipping down to the grass yard surrounding their houses."

That last sentence, told while smiling to little Frida, made the little girl open her eyes wide with anticipated pleasure. Zang then made the family tour the main floor of the dome house, showing them in turn a combination laundry room and bathroom, in which an android diagnostic and maintenance unit had been installed for Jehanne's convenience, a private study office, a secondary bedroom with a double bunk bed and a main bedroom with private bathroom. Peter nodded in approbation at the very respectable size of the bed in that last bedroom.

"Nice! All this looks very comfortable."

"For all the ex-refugees now living on New Haven, this constituted nearly unimaginable luxury compared to their previous, precarious living conditions. However, this simply reflects the main goal of the creation of this moon's society: to provide at last a decent living environment to people who suffered a lot through no fault of their own. Since the penalty for committing serious, violent crimes on New Haven is typically expulsion and forced repatriation to Earth, that ensures that the level of criminality and violence stays very low. We had to forcibly repatriate a few hundreds of people in the first few years, people who persisted in trying to perpetuate the ethnic and religious conflicts which had put them and their families into refugee camps. Now, we have full-time social counselors who help mediate family and neighborhood disputes. Our public security force only intervenes when someone refuses to obey reason. If that happens, only the person at fault could be expelled from New Haven, while his or her family will be allowed to stay. We institute that rule to prevent abusive people from forcing others to follow them against their will when they are repatriated to Earth."

"A good, common sense and humane rule to take care of what is unfortunately still too common a problem with Humanity," said Pieter. "Some people will simply never learn, or will refuse to learn to respect others."

"Indeed! Let's go up to the upper floor now."

Using a wide spiral staircase situated next to the dining area, the group went up to the upper floor, which had a maximum internal diameter of seven meters. There, Zang showed in succession to the family two secondary bedrooms, each with a private bathroom, a double bunk bed and a study corner. However, the room that truly fired up little Frida was the large playroom, which had a small trampoline in one corner and a shelving unit filled with various toys and children's books. Running to the trampoline, which was surrounded by thick foam mattresses, Frida started at once to jump up and

down on it while squealing with joy. The adults watched her for a moment while smiling before Zang approached a sort of door leading to the outside. Unlocking and opening that door, she showed to Jehanne and Peter a long, curved stainless steel slide going down all the way to the level of the grass lawn, some eight meters below.

"This is the fire exit slide for the occupants of this floor. It can be unlocked only from the inside, so don't worry about thieves using it to gain access to the house. Also, this slide has a thin layer of Teflon covering its top surface, so thieves would find it next to impossible to climb it. On the other hand, sliding down it will be quite fast. Would you want to try it, Frida?"

"YES!" was the girl's immediate response. Jumping off the trampoline, she ran to the emergency exit door and sat on the slide, to then slide down with an impressive acceleration rate.

"WEEE!"

Frida landed on the grass of the lawn, where her speed made her tumble once before she got back on her feet and shouted at her parents.

"YOU HAVE TO TRY THIS! IT'S FUN!"

"Alright, let's go down." Said Peter before sliding down, closely followed by Jehanne, who was still holding little Nehiyawak. On her part, Zang stayed on the upper floor and shouted down at the little family.

"I will lock back this emergency exit door, then will come down via the central staircase. Please join me back in the dining room."

Once back together as a group, Zang opened the refrigerator of the kitchen and its pantry, showing their well-stocked tablets.

"Your pantry and refrigerator were stocked up with fresh products yesterday. There is also a small convenience and grocery store at the end of your street, where you will be able to replenish your stocks of fresh food items. All the food items to be found on New Haven are produced locally, either in hydroponic gardens or from free-roaming heads of cattle, while poultries come from small family coops or farms. Fish and sea products are also from New Haven and are from Earth stocks seeded years ago in the lakes of New Haven. Don't worry if you are not practiced cooks yourselves: our convenience stores also stock a wide variety of prepared dishes made by local citizens who work in our communal food kitchens. I will just ask you not to waste food by grabbing excessive amounts of food items when visiting our convenience stores and

open-air food markets. We may produce a lot of food on New Haven but wasting good food is looked at poorly in our community, something most understandable when you consider that many of our citizens suffered from famines on Earth before emigrating to New Haven.”

“That is indeed a most understandable attitude, Madam Wei.” said Peter. Zang then approached the large flat screen of the video entertainment unit sitting in a corner of the family lounge and switched it on, then selected a specific program from the video menu.

“This is our standard welcome documentary used to tell our new citizens about the activities, services and infrastructures available on New Haven. I will encourage you to watch it before starting to plan your future activities. I will now let you free to enjoy your new house and unpack your things. If you have any questions or encounter problems of any kind, simply contact the nearest local public service office to get answers or help. On this, have a nice stay on New Haven.”

Zang shook hands with Peter, Jehanne and Frida, then kissed little Nehiyawak on his forehead before departing, leaving the small family alone in their new lounge. Peter then pointed at the video unit, then at the large sofa facing it.

“Well, let’s watch that welcoming documentary, so that we could learn about our new home world.”

CHAPTER 10 – A SMALL GLITCH

07:48 (Universal Time)

Friday, November 17, 2339

Heavy craft hangar # 3, Heavy Craft Hangar Deck

A.M.S. NOSTROMO, in Earth orbit

The pilot of the command cutter AEGIS, security android Harrison Ford, was surprised when he saw Tina Forster enter the bridge sphere of his command cutter in the company of Eve Silisca and then take one of the observers' seats.

"Captain? I was not expecting you on this mission to the past."

Tina replied to that with a big smile.

"Well, since Jehanne de Domrémy is still on maternity leave on New Haven, I decided to fill the void in the Tempus Team with myself. Besides, I love 'whodunnit' stories and what better one than the historical speculations still running about who assassinated President John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1963? The NOSTROMO is anyway due to stay in Earth orbit for another week at the least, while waiting for the modular structures destined for Asiana to be delivered to orbit. That will leave us ample time to complete this mission to the 20th Century and return to the NOSTROMO."

"And Professor Schmeling?"

"He is already aboard. He went to unpack his bags in his assigned cabin. As well, I had extra reserves of fresh rations brought in from our central kitchens: unlike you and the rest of the crew, me and Samuel don't consume electricity and lubricant oil." Harrison smiled briefly at that joke and nodded his head once.

"Then, strap yourself in, Captain: we are about to fly out."

Tina did so, then watched as the bridge crew of the command cutter activated the main systems of the AEGIS and performed a pre-flight instruments check. The sixty-meter-long command cutter then flew out of the NOSTROMO after another nine minutes, to then head towards the Sun in order to effect its temporal jump towards the past. By now, the mechanics of such temporal jumps, at least when using the Sun as a jumping point, were well understood and Tina was still quite relaxed by the time the

AEGIS started its acceleration run into a tangent that would pass very close to the Sun. However, something unexpected happened just as Harrison Ford was seconds from activating their Koomak Drive generator and effect a so-called Golshan Maneuver: a huge arc of hot plasma was suddenly ejected from the surface of the Sun, heading directly towards the approaching command cutter.

"WE HAVE AN INCOMING SOLAR ERUPTION FLARE! HANG ON!" shouted Harrison for Tina's benefit. Just as the huge hurricane of hot plasma was striking the AEGIS, making it shake violently, the Koomak Drive generator activated, briefly permeating the command cutter into a flash of light. Then, normal Space reappeared on the viewing screens of the bridge sphere. A worried Tina then asked a question in an anxious tone.

"Are we still in the Solar System?"

"We are, Captain." answered within seconds Christian Bale, the navigator of the AEGIS. "I can see Earth on our port side, some 0.7 AU away. Whatever were the effects of that solar eruption, it did not affect our spatial jump."

"What about our temporal jump?"

"We will have to wait until we are in Earth orbit before we could ascertain our exact time and date of arrival, Captain."

"Whenever we are, Captain, this is the mid-20th Century." added Allison Stokke, their sensors officer. "The low level of electronic traffic emanating into Space around the Earth is consistent with that of the very early Space exploration age or slightly before it."

"Very well, then. Mister Ford, fly us to Earth and adopt a low polar orbit once there."

"Aye, Captain!"

While a bit anxious now, Tina was not really worried, as they could always make another temporal jump to get to the precise date they had been targeting for their mission, which was November 21 of the year 1963. She thus spoke in a calm voice when Samuel Schmeling finally joined her in the bridge sphere.

"We are now approaching Earth, Samuel. We were hit by a sudden Solar eruption just as we were going to make our jump. We should soon know what precise time and date we are in now. We believe however that we are indeed in the 20th Century."

"Good! That sudden shaking did unsettle me a bit."

Schmeling took the vacant observer's seat next to Tina and buckled his safety belt, then patiently waited and looked on as the AEGIS approached Earth, to finally adopt a low polar orbit around it. William Windsor, their communications officer, soon made a report which unsettled Tina and Samuel.

"I have the time signal from the Greenwich Astronomical Observatory, Captain: the time is 13:58 and the date is Tuesday, June the Second of 1942. I am resetting our situational clock now."

"June of 1942?! But we are in the middle of the Second World War!" exclaimed Samuel Schmeling. On her part, Tina's reaction was to look at Eve Silisca, sitting to her right.

"Quick, Eve, download our historical data concerning World War Two. Find out what are the critical dates around June the Second of 1942. I myself remember that we should be close to the date on which the Battle of Midway was fought: I studied in depth that ancient naval battle during my past years but I can't remember its exact date."

Eve nodded once to that: Tina was known to be an avid reader of naval warfare history, a subject she was nearly passionate about. In fact, her knowledge and understanding of past naval battles had helped her many times in the past in defeating opponents to her ship, especially during the Uprising of 2315, when the Spacers' League fought for its independence from the central Earth government, and again during the brief war with the Drazts of Ross 128 in 2320. Connecting herself directly with the databanks of VISION, the central artificial intelligence computer of the AEGIS, she downloaded in seconds all the historical data and information it contained concerning World War Two in general and the year 1942 in particular.

"You were right, Tina: the Battle of Midway was fought on June the Fourth of 1942, starting with an early morning Japanese airstrike against Midway, followed a few hours later by the main carrier against carrier battle. Then, on August Seven, the Americans will launch their amphibious assault against Guadalcanal, followed the next day by the disastrous naval Battle of Savo Island. The Battle of the Eastern Solomons will follow on August 23, itself followed by the Battle of Cape Esperance on the night of October Eleven."

"My god! We will be able to witness and record some of the biggest battles of World War Two in the Pacific." said Samuel Schmeling, obviously pleased. "What about the war around Europe?"

"Well, in North Africa, the period of June 1942 to May 1943 will see a series of intense battles between the German and Italian forces on one side and the British, American and French forces on the other side, culminating in the defeat of the Axis forces in North Africa in May of 1943. The Allied invasion of Sicily followed on July Tenth of 1943, with the first Allied landings in Italy happening in September of the same year. In Eastern Europe, the Germans will be pushing eastward into the Ukraine and Russia, with the battle for Stalingrad starting in August of 1942 and ending in a severe German defeat in early February of 1943. In Poland, the Germans will pursue their extermination policies against the Jews of Poland, triggering in January of 1943 the Jewish uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, which ended in May of 1943 with the total destruction of the ghetto and the deportation and extermination of its inhabitants. In the Mediterranean, the second half of 1942 will see the air and sea battles for the island of Malta, while there will be some intense warfare at sea in the Atlantic. In Western Europe, the main event in 1942 will be the failed Dieppe operation of August Nineteen, when Canadian Army units attempted an amphibious landing against the French port of Dieppe and suffered appalling losses. There will also be a series of Allied air bombardments against Germany in 1942 and 1943."

"Hell, that's a lot of priceless historical events to document and record, Tina." said an enthusiastic Samuel Schmeling. "Let's put our mission to 1963 on the backburner and concentrate instead on covering the next few months of World War Two."

It took Tina only a few seconds of reflexion before she nodded her head, to the contentment of the historian.

"Agreed! We will stay in this time period for a few months, in order to document and record the main events of this war up to the Spring of 1943. Eve, I would like you to produce and print a chronological list of events in World War Two, covering the period from June of 1942 to June 1943, so that we could choose what to observe. However, don't base yourself only on the size or ferocity of the battles to be fought. Note as well the events of significance in terms of human, political or social impact. Our goal will be for us and our people to learn lessons from this war, not to glorify it or to simply produce a horror show. Once we will have your list, me, you and Samuel will study it and decide what we will concentrate on, as I suspect that there will simply be too much happening at the same time to cover it all properly."

"We could always assign a number of reconnaissance and spy probes to target events the AEGIS will not be able to cover directly, Tina."

"An excellent idea, Eve. I am afraid that poor Charles Melton, our video documentary technician, will be kept very busy for quite a few months."

"I can always give him a hand, Tina. Besides, like me, he doesn't need to sleep...ever."

"True! On my part, I will play the documentary producer and will take care of selecting the best takes for our future war documentaries. Well, I will let you make your chronological list of war events while me and Samuel do some preliminary discussion on the subject."

Tina and Samuel left the bridge sphere and went into the adjacent operations center, where they had time to get themselves cups of coffee and sit at a table before Eve joined them, an electronic data pad in her hands. Tina nodded her head once as Eve was sitting down opposite her and Samuel.

"That was fast, Eve."

"That's because androids' AI processing cores works over 2,000 times faster than human brains, Tina. I also connected myself directly to VISION, so didn't have to waste time in visually reviewing data on a video screen. If you and Samuel will touch my data pad with your own data pads, I will transfer to you my list of World War 2 events for the years 1942 and 1943."

Both Tina and Samuel did so, then started reviewing Eve's list. Tina nearly immediately noticed something about the fifth entry on the list.

"Why is the entry for 5-6 August 1942 marked with three asterixes, Eve? It notes the departure from the Warsaw Ghetto of 192 Jewish orphans and of a dozen accompanying adult staff."

Eve looked most soberly at Tina as she answered her.

"I denoted it because, contrary to all the other events on my list, we could in my opinion influence and modify it without noticeable consequences for the integrity of history...if we do things right. Highlight it to get the details concerning that event."

Tina and Samuel did so and read the two pages of text which appeared on their pads. As she did so, Tina's expression changed gradually, with a mix of sadness and horror appearing on her face.

"My god! I knew from my studies on history about the Jewish holocaust of World War Two but only in general terms. Could the Nazis really be such monsters?"

"They could...and they were, Tina. According to our historical data, about 2,000 Jews a day were moved out of the Warsaw Ghetto by train during parts of 1942 and sent to the Treblinka extermination camp, to the northeast of Warsaw, where most of them were gassed to death right after their arrival. This mass deportation continued until the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto rose up in revolt in early 1943 and resisted further deportation moves by the Germans until the Nazis assaulted, burned down and destroyed completely the Warsaw Ghetto, killing or deporting in the process all of its occupants. Normally, we could not change this atrocity without gravely affecting the integrity of History but this small part of it could safely be manipulated by us in order to save those 192 orphans, some of whom were as young as two-year-old, and the staff of their orphanage."

"And how could we do that, Eve? We don't have the facilities or even the food reserves on the AEGIS to care for some 200 persons. Even if we really could save them in a discreet manner, we would then be forced to abandon this mission and return to the NOSTROMO and the year 2339. There is also the question of how those poor children would react to being transported to the far future. Please remember that the Jews of this time period were mostly deeply religious people with dreams of one day emigrating to Palestine, which they called 'The Promised Land'. In contrast, the Spacers' League is a completely atheistic society where they would feel isolated and misunderstood. Even the Israel of 2339 has mostly turned into an atheistic society following a long series of wars and conflicts with its neighbors, who were themselves Muslim societies but who also became atheistic during the three centuries which followed this war."

"And being killed by the Germans would not matter to them, Tina? We are talking about 192 orphaned children who are presently barely surviving in horrible conditions, without the support of their now dead parents and siblings. There are a number of pictures attached to this explanation text. Click on the third one, Tina."

Tina, imitated by Samuel Schmeling, did so, making the said picture enlarge to fill the screen of her data pad. Tears started to come to her eyes as she looked at an old black and white group photo of nearly 200 children of varying ages looking at the camera, along with about a dozen adult women and one bearded man. None of them smiled, contrary to normal group pictures. Eve then spoke again as Tina was still staring at the picture.

"These children could be saved by us and would simply disappear from recorded history, which actually could only speculate about their final fate, as the Germans kept no records of the names of the thousands of Jews they were exterminating every day in this war. The last time they were seen was when they boarded in Warsaw a train heading to Treblinka. I already have a plan about how to save them without impacting recorded History. We will however need some help from the future in this."

Tina, still unable to look away from the young faces in the picture, had difficulty to speak then, a big lump up her throat.

"How do you plan to save them, Eve, and what will we need to do this?"

Eve took a couple of minutes to describe her plan to Tina, who nodded her head once before calling the bridge via the intercom system.

"Harrison, prepare a courier probe for launch: I will have a message to send to the NOSTROMO."

04:30 (Central Pacific Time)

Thursday, June 04, 1942

Operations center of the command cutter AEGIS

Loitering at high altitude above the island of Midway

Central Pacific, Earth

"The Japanese carriers have started to launch their planes, Tina. I have a reconnaissance drone flying over the carrier KAGA and filming the takeoffs."

"And I have another reconnaissance drone flying over the American carrier YORKTOWN." added Eve, who was working the control station next to that of Charles Melton, the android specialist in video documentary recording and montage for the Tempus Team. Tina, who was simultaneously watching three video screens, nodded her head in acknowledgement.

"Good! We are ready to watch and record one of the most epic naval battles of this war."

Tina then returned her attention to her display screens, on which she could see the four Japanese carriers launch their attack aircraft destined to strike the American base on Midway, with one of the screens showing the YORKTOWN launching a number of reconnaissance aircraft. Her third screen showed the island of Midway, as it was filmed by another reconnaissance drone controlled by her from the AEGIS.

"Allison, attach a reconnaissance drone to the Japanese strike aircraft group now taking off and follow them during their attack on Midway. Christian, take another reconnaissance drone and attach it to the American planes now searching for the Japanese fleet. I want us to have complete, simultaneous video and sound coverage of all the main parties in this battle."

"On it, Tina!" replied Allison Stokke from the bridge sphere, with Christian Bale doing the same a second later. Soon, Charles Melton sent electronic commands to all three reconnaissance drones covering the incoming battle.

"I am detaching four secondary probes from each of our reconnaissance drones and dispersing them around their parent drones, so that we will have multiple angles of view while recording the action."

"How far will those probes be from their parent drones, Charles?" asked Tina.

"They will stay some 500 meters from their drones and will follow closely the movements of the aircraft or ships they will be filming, Tina."

"Very good! Once that will be done, we will have another hour to wait before the real action starts. In the meantime, me and Samuel will go have breakfast."

"Bon appétit!" replied Eve, smiling, as Tina and Samuel rose from their chairs. Eve then checked on the radio traffic from the Japanese and the Americans but, as she expected, they were keeping radio silence in this very early phase of the battle.

Tina and Samuel returned to their respective control stations at 05:30 and then had only to wait for a few minutes before Eve spoke up.

"The **PBY** amphibian from Midway is reporting on the radio that it has spotted the Japanese fleet and is giving its position, speed and direction of travel."



"The dices have just been rolled for one of the biggest naval battles of this war." said Tina while watching the view of the said amphibian taken by a camera of the reconnaissance drone overflying the Japanese carrier group. The American amphibian reconnaissance aircraft was however quickly set upon by the marauding Japanese fighter aircraft loitering above the Japanese carriers and was promptly shot down, making Tina speak with some grief in her voice.

"Those flyers in this PBY were brave men indeed. Too many people end up forgetting that wars are overwhelmingly about death, suffering and destruction, and not so-called 'glory', and this even in our own century."

She then consulted her list of historically-recorded timings for the battle.

"The next significant action will occur at around 06:20, when the Japanese planes launched from their carriers will bomb Midway."

That foreseen attack, made by 118 Japanese aircraft, caused some serious damage to the American base on Midway but also suffered some casualties from the ferocious resistance by a few American fighter planes and by the anti-aircraft guns protecting Midway. Some fifty minutes later, it was the turn of the Americans to attack, but with only ten aircraft sent by Midway against the Japanese carriers. However, that attack proved fruitless, with no direct hits on any Japanese ship. Tina, who knew that this was only the prelude to a much more violent clash, redirected her reconnaissance drones and their secondary probes, in order to concentrate her attention on the Japanese and American fleets, leaving only one probe over Midway. At 07:40, a Japanese reconnaissance floatplane launched by the cruiser TONE finally spotted part of the American fleet, which included the carrier U.S.S. YORKTOWN. However, the Japanese air observer succeeded in completely misreporting that important sighting, making Tina shake her head and make a facepalm.

"This guy sees one carrier, two cruisers and five destroyers and reports only 'a few large ships'? Man, he is either myopic or he failed his ship recognition classes."

"Don't forget that the navies of this time had only a few months to train their people, instead of spending years like we do for our own ship crews." said Charles Melton to Tina. "Also, their sensors consist in only ye old 'Mark One Eyeball', supplemented by binoculars and shitty radios operated with morse code keys."

"Thanks for reminding me of that, Charles: I believe that the AEGIS spoiled me in terms of sensors capabilities."

"Pah! 24th Century sensors technology vs 20th Century technology: who cares?" joked Eve, making Tina chuckle.

"The Japanese would! They certainly would love to get their hands on our sensors. Still, that misreporting by that Japanese scout plane is going to soon cost the Japanese dearly in this battle."

In contrast, the Americans had time to launch four separate aircraft strike groups from either their carriers or from Midway and to attack the Japanese fleet, but without success, before the same Japanese scout plane sent a second report by radio at 08:20.

"The enemy is accompanied by what appears to be a carrier?!" said in a sarcastic tone Tina. "Bravo, champion! Better late than never. Charles, could you fly one of your secondary spy probes inside the command bridge of the carrier AKAGI? It would be great if we could film Admiral Nagumo's reaction when he will receive that message from his scout plane."

"Consider it done, Tina. It will play the proverbial 'fly on the wall' role once in position."

The late report from the scout plane, along with the unsatisfactory results of the bombing of Midway, then pushed Vice Admiral Nagumo into making a major blunder, by giving in succession contradictory orders to rearm his aircraft kept in reserve with contact bombs instead of torpedoes, then to rearm them again with torpedoes and armor-piercing bombs once he got the report about an American carrier being spotted. Then, with the decks and hangars of his four carriers strewn with hastily put aside torpedoes and bombs, 41 torpedo bombers from the American carriers attacked, paralyzing the preparation and launch of another Japanese air strike while the Japanese gunners and fighter pilots defended their ships. Tina looked with sadness at her screens as 34 of those American planes were shot down despite the incredible bravery of their crews, without any torpedoes exploding against the Japanese carriers.

"So many brave men, dying without any positive results. The American Mark 13 torpedo has again shown itself to be a complete dud. The assholes in charge of the U.S. Navy Bureau of Ordnance should have been court-martialed for letting such a piece of shitty ordnance stay in service despite the warnings and complaints from Navy submarine commanders and from Navy aviators."

"Well, we did have our own snafu³ recently, Tina." reminded Eve. "Our own Spacers' League Navy managed to 'lose' one anti-matter warhead kept in its arsenal, remember? That 'lost' warhead then was used to destroy the NOSTROMO while it was in Earth orbit. Thankfully, the AEGIS was just coming back from a mission in the past

³ SNAFU: Situation Normal, All Fucked Up. Very common and popular American expression to describe a chaotic, disorganized situation.

and, after observing the NOSTROMO's destruction, was able to go back in time and prevent that catastrophe from happening."

Tina was silent for a moment as she rehashed that bitter memory in her mind.

"You know what, Eve? With the threat of the Space Predators now a thing of the past, maybe I should push Chairwoman Mercier in taking out of service our anti-matter converter weapons. Those weapons are too dangerous to be kept in service, where some megalomaniac could again grab some of them to destroy us and grab power."

"What about our own stocks of anti-matter weapons, Tina? We were the ones who developed those weapons, even though it was done in order to survive the Space Predators' threat."

"If need be, I would be ready to get rid of our own stocks or, at the least, to store them in reserve, in case another major threat materializes. Yes, I will definitely have to talk with Jeanne Mercier about this once back in 2339."

With that said, Tina concentrated her attention back on her screens, in time for the arrival of American dive bomber aircraft over the Japanese fleet. In the space of mere five minutes, those 47 SBD dive-bombers completely changed the course of the battle...and of the war in the Pacific, by striking and hitting hard the Japanese carriers AKAGI, KAGA and SORYU. With his flagship, the carrier AKAGI, on fire, along with the KAGA and the SORYU, Vice Admiral Nagumo was soon forced to transfer his flag and himself to a cruiser as his last remaining effective carrier, the HIRYU, prepared to launch a retaliatory strike on the American fleet. The planes from the HIRYU did find and hit the carrier YORKTOWN, which was put on fire and eventually abandoned, but the Japanese triumph at that success was short-lived, with American dive-bombers finding the HIRYU two hours later, hitting it and putting it on fire. Followed by a reconnaissance drone, the HIRYU's crew did its best to save their carrier but it ended up having to be abandoned and then scuttled the next morning. With their four carriers now sunk, what remained of the Japanese fleet destined to take Midway had to turn around and return to Japan, conceding victory to the Americans.

Having spent the whole day and night following the battle on her display screens, with only a few short rest periods and meal breaks at intervals, a tired Tina looked again at her list of significant events and spoke to Eve, Samuel, Charles Melton and Harrison Ford on the morning of June Fifth.

"Alright, guys: our next item on our list is the Battle of Tobruk, in North Africa, which will start on June Twentieth, while we will also cover the battle and siege of Sevastopol, in the Crimea. We will thus have plenty of time to review our various recordings on the Battle of Midway and to turn them into as good a documentary video as we can produce. However, me and Samuel will need to take a shower and to get some sleep first. Eve, Charles, you will be in charge of starting to assemble and splice together our recordings while we rest."

"You can count on us, Tina."

22:29 (Warsaw Time)

Wednesday, August 05, 1942

Dom Sierot Jewish orphanage, Sliska # 9

Warsaw Ghetto, Occupied Poland



Henryk Goldszmit, better known under his pen name of **Janusz Korczak**, felt both depressed and worried as he went to his bedroom, situated on the top floor of the orphanage he was running inside the Warsaw Ghetto. To say that the future of both the Jewish Ghetto of Warsaw and that of Poland was bleak would have been a huge understatement. He, like his adult staff and the 192 children under his care, were all weak from a long period of near-starvation diet caused by the German occupation and their repression of the Jews living in the Ghetto. Also, tens of thousands of Ghetto occupants had been forcibly removed during the last few weeks, supposedly to be relocated to forced labor centers. Then, in the afternoon, a German SS officer had come to the orphanage to warn him to have the children and the staff ready to move out the next morning and march to the Umschlagplatz, a large open-air place used by the Germans to assemble Jews before making them board trains. Only a few hours earlier, a member of the ZEGOTA, the Polish underground resistance organization, had contacted him to again offer to hide him outside of the Ghetto. Janusz had again refused that offer, telling the Pole that he was not going to leave his little charges alone. Now, as he was prepared to go to bed, he wasn't sure about what his orphans would expect out of the Ghetto.

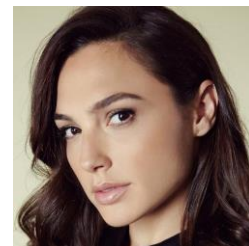
He had removed his jacket and was about to remove as well his shirt in order to have a quick wash out of a basin of water when someone moved out from behind a long curtain, unmasking itself. His heart jumping in his chest, he turned to face the newcomer in the semi-dark room, which was illuminated only by a pair of candles, while tensing up. To his surprise, his unannounced visitor turned out to be a young woman wearing some kind of dark, body-fitting uniform.

"Who...who are you? What do you want?"

The woman, who was quite tall for a woman and who was also very beautiful, answered him in a soft voice while speaking Hebrew.

"My name is **Gal Gadot**, and I came to help you and your orphans."

"Help me? How?"



"First, by giving you some instructions about what will happen to you, your staff and your orphans tomorrow, when you will leave this orphanage to go to the Umschlagplatz. There, the Germans will make you all board a train, supposedly to move you to a farm setting. In reality, you will go to Treblinka, a German extermination camp where the Jews from this Ghetto are either killed with toxic gasses or worked to death. But don't worry: we will not let you and your children die."

"Who is we? Are you part of the ZEGOTA?"

"No, I am not part of the Polish Resistance, nor am I from this Ghetto. I and others like me came from the far future and intend to save you, but in a way that will not impact History as it was recorded."

"I... I am not sure that I understand or even believe you, miss. From the future, you said?"

"Yes, more precisely from the 24th Century. By then, time travel has become a reality but the dangers of such a technology in terms of possibly throwing the historical timeline into chaos and erasing ourselves from History have also been recognized. Thus, what we do in the past must be either non-intrusive or exploit holes in recorded history, when some people disappeared without any historical mention of what happened to them. In your case and that of your orphans, History recorded that you went to the Umschlagplatz as ordered by the Germans and boarded a train there, along with hundreds of other Jews. That train then headed to the Treblinka extermination camp, where the Jews arriving there were routinely led to gas chambers and murdered mere hours after their arrival. Since the Germans didn't systematically record the names

of those Jews who were gassed right after their arrival, no historical records exist of what happened to you, your orphans and to the other Jews aboard the train you will take tomorrow. In fact, the date of your death was left blank in history for years, until a date of death of May Nine, 1946 was declared for official purposes.”

Janusz, who had been most skeptical at first, then started to wonder if what that woman was saying could possibly be true.

“How do you propose to make us escape, Miss Gadot?”

“I will not tell you now, so as not to risk that an indiscretion could ruin our plan. Just know this: tomorrow, you will do as the Germans asked and will march your orphans and the members of your staff to the Umschlagplatz while dressed in your best clothes. There, you will do as if you believed the fables about going to live in a pastoral setting and will board the train waiting for you. Once away from Warsaw and once we will be able to operate under cover of darkness, we will come and save you. However, and this is most important, you must not tell your staff or the children about my visit or about where the Germans are sending you. Please understand that any indiscretion that would force us to act in the open, with witnesses present, will lead to us having to cancel our plan and abandon you to your historical fate.”

That last sentence made some anger puff up inside Janusz, who replied in a terse tone to Gadot.

“You would let my orphans and staff die just to protect your anonymity? How could...”

It was then the turn of the woman to harden her tone.

“Mister Korczak, please understand this: over 55 million people will die before this war is brought to an end, while millions more will die after it as either homeless and starving refugees or as prisoners of war in Stalin’s work camps. On the other hand, the actual existence of over nine billion Humans who live in the 24th Century would be at risk of being erased if we don’t handle this present case with utter discretion. Nine billion against 205 people... You either promise me now that you will do as I told you or I will leave and let History follow its course. It’s your choice!”

Now understanding what was presently at stake, Janusz forced himself to calm down and adopted a more conciliatory tone of voice.

“Alright, Miss Gadot, I will follow your instructions. I do have a last question for you, though.”

“Ask!”

"Once you will have saved us from that train, where will you bring us? To Palestine?"

Gadot shook her head slowly as she answered him.

"No, not Palestine. That would negate our goal of keeping your historical fate a speculative one. Besides, Palestine will go through decades of ethnic and religious strife and through many wars after this conflict. Believe me, Palestine will be no paradise in the years to come. Instead, we will bring you to the 24th Century, where your orphans will be able to grow and live free and in peace. Do you agree to that, Mister Korczak?"

"To live in the far future... Alright, my orphans should like that."

"Remember, though: do not tell anyone about my visit until you see me again tomorrow evening."

Janusz was about to ask another question but froze in stupor as Gal Gadot started floating silently off the floor. She then bent into a ball and flew through the open window of Janusz' bedroom before climbing out of his sight into the night sky. Shaken by all this, Janusz had to go sit down and rehash in his mind what had just happened.

14:04 (Warsaw Time)

Thursday, August 06, 1942

The Umschlagplatz, Jewish Ghetto



When Janusz arrived at the Umschlagplatz, which the Nazis used as an assembly point for the Jews they collected, with twelve female staff and with 192 children ranging in age from two to sixteen following him, a SS officer was there to greet him with instructions to follow. The man however looked inquisitively at Janusz before asking him a question in German, which Janusz was fluent in.

"Uh, aren't you the writer Janusz Korczak?"

"Yes, I am, mister." replied Janusz, a bit surprised by the SS officer's politeness. "Why do you ask?"

The German then lowered his voice, continuing in the same polite tone.

"One of the children's books you wrote was a favorite of mine as I grew up. Look, I could arrange for you to be transferred to Theresienstadt as a special treatment case."

"Thank you for your offer but I will continue accompanying my orphans, mister."

The SS man looked at the close to 200 children following Janusz, some regret visible on his face. His rigid training then took back over his sympathy for Korczak.

"As you wish, Mister Korczak. Go sit with your orphans and your women in that corner of the plaza. Your train should arrive in a few hours."

"Thank you, sir. FOLLOW ME, CHILDREN!"

The orphans, all dressed in their best clothes and carrying blue knapsacks, obeyed him and went with him to sit on the bare concrete floor of the plaza, where over a thousand other Jews were already waiting. There, he made the children wait while encouraging them to read their favorite books or to play with their favorite toys, which they had packed in their knapsacks.



When their train arrived, over six hours later and obviously late, judging from the growing impatience of the SS officers, and when they were led by SS guards to the embarkation zone, the Polish Jews saw that they were going to travel in old, dirty and smelly cattle cars instead of passenger cars. Those who were hoping to get some provisions of food and water for their trip were disappointed, with the SS soldiers being quite brutal in the way they 'encouraged' the Jews into climbing into the cars, which stank of urine and feces. A hundred Jews or more were piled into each of the cattle cars. Janusz and his orphans ended up filling two adjacent cars but, due to their generally smaller sizes, were less pressed together than in the case of the adult Jews occupying the other cars. Once the cars were full, the SS soldiers closed the doors and locked them from the outside, making it impossible for the Jews to escape during the trip. After a short wait, the Jews then felt their train starting to move and they sat down as best they could in the cramped space of their cars.

The train went quite slowly at first as it went through the Greater Warsaw area but, even once out in rural setting, didn't go much faster, probably due to the age and poor condition of the cars and locomotives. The train then stopped after half an hour of travel, obeying red signalization lights to stop and wait. The train engineer reasoned that this was to let the tracks to another train with a higher priority but, in reality, those rail

signalization lights had been trafficked by androids in order to delay the train. That wait turned into another hour and the Jews still had not arrived by the time night fell. By then, Janusz was starting to seriously wonder if Gal Gadot had let him and his orphans down.

Mere minutes after sunset, the door of the car in which Janusz and a hundred children and four women were travelling slid open after being unlocked from the outside, even though the train was still moving. His hopes back up, Janusz hurried to the door and saw in the near darkness that a sort of strange, flying vehicle the size of a small car was now glued to the side of the rail car and had its glass canopy slid open to the rear. A bald man wearing the same kind of dark uniform as Gal Gadot then spoke to him in Hebrew while waving one arm.

“QUICK, HAVE SIX KIDS GET IN OUR SCOOTER. MORE SCOOTERS ARE WAITING TO TAKE THE REST OF YOU.”

“THANK GOD! YOU CAME FOR US! ALRIGHT, KIDS, I WANT SIX OF YOU TO SIT IN THAT FLYING CAR. MAKE IT QUICK!”

The children, who froze at first at the sight of the fantastic machine, then quickly understood that it represented their way to escape the Germans and started obeying the instructions from Janusz. While helping two of the smaller children get in the flying vehicle, Janusz was able to see that a similar flying vehicle was glued to the other rail car carrying the rest of his children and staff, with children also boarding that vehicle. Once six children were aboard the scooter piloted by the bald man, the canopy of that scooter slid closed, with the machine then quickly climbing out of sight into the darkness. As soon as it was gone, another machine took its place and more children were able to sit in it. With a continuous carrousel of scooters coming to the two rail cars, those cars quickly emptied, with Janusz and three of his female nurses being the last to leave their smelly cattle car. As they were climbing into the night sky, Janusz patted the shoulder of Gal Gadot, who was piloting the scooter and who had closed back and locked the rail car's sliding door before moving away from it.

“Thank you so much for saving us, Miss Gadot. What next?”

“I fly you to my ship, which is presently hovering a few thousand meters above us. Once in it, I will explain to you and your children what will happen next.”

Having never flown in an aircraft before, like most of the people in 1942, Janusz kept to himself the numerous question he had in mind and instead avidly watched on as the scooter was climbing into the night sky. He soon started to distinguish a large, dark

mass floating silently above the countryside. However, it took him some time before he could realize how big that object was.

"My God! What is that? How big is it?"

"That is the heavy cargo shuttle FERRY MAN, the ship we came in from the future. It has a lenticular shape and is 200 meters in diameter. We are soon going to get inside, where you and your orphans will be taken care of by my comrades while we will travel to the 24th Century. Your questions will be answered once we will be aboard the FERRY MAN."

Fascinated, like the three Polish nurses travelling with him, by what he was seeing, Janusz then stayed silent as the scooter flew in the big ship, entering a vast empty space via an outer door the size of a large barn door. Inside what appeared to be some sort of cargo hold, the scooter piloted by Gal Gadot went to park with other scooters lining one of the walls and from which Jewish orphans and staff members were stepping out, to be then corralled into a group. Janusz stepped out of Gadot's scooter and was then directed to the larger group of Polish Jews by men and women wearing dark uniforms. The fact that an equal number of men and women composed these armed persons struck at once Janusz, who came from a time period when war was considered strictly as a man's business. One of the persons in grey uniforms, a man of medium height with a bald head, stepped on a small crate in order to be seen by all, then started speaking in Polish.

"Welcome on the heavy cargo shuttle FERRY MAN, good people. My name is **Yul Brynner** and I am in charge of the team which picked you up from that train bringing you to Treblinka. You may all wonder what this ship is and where it is coming from. Well, to tell it as simply as I can, this ship and my team came from the far



future, from the 24th Century to be more exact, in order to save you from certain death in Treblinka, which is in reality a German extermination camp where tens of thousands of Jews have already been murdered in the last few months."

Exclamations of horror and short exchanges followed, with Brynner waiting a few seconds before continuing.

"Now, you may have many questions for me, like why we saved you, or where we will now bring you to. First, we saved you mostly because we could do so discreetly, without risking to throw recorded history into chaos. Such chaos would have in turn

risked modifying History as known to us and thus put our own society at risk of being erased from History and then being replaced by something utterly unpredictable. We took the risk of saving you to save the young orphans of your group and to offer you all new lives in a safe and peaceful new world in the year 2339.”

“Will we go to a future Poland, sir?” asked one of the older teenagers in the group of orphans, making Brynner shake his head in response.

“No! We came from another world populated by Humans in 2339, a large moon located in another star system than that of the Sun. That moon is called ‘New Haven’ and it was established nineteen years ago as a place of refuge and resettlement for refugees fleeing conflicts or natural disasters on Earth. New Haven is mostly an agrarian and pastoral world, with only a minimal amount of advanced industries on it, so you should feel more at home there than on the other worlds of the Spacers’ League, which represents the various star systems colonized by Humans during the 24th Century. Once on New Haven, you will pass full medical exams and will be given new homes. In the case of the orphans among you, we will also start to find caregivers and tutors acceptable to you, so that you could grow up within caring people. Your first year on New Haven will be concentrated on learning English, the basic language of the Spacers’ League, and to educate you to the standards of our civilization and time period. For those of you who are of working age, meaning eighteen or over, plenty of simple jobs in our food production industries, the mainstay of our local economy, are available. In essence, it won’t be much different for you on New Haven than to live on a farm on Earth, if you except of course the various advanced technologies we use daily. Right now, we will lead you to one of the decks above this cargo hold and will let you have a hot shower, new clothes and a good meal, then will officially register you as new citizens of New Haven.”

“Why couldn’t we simply stay in Poland, in a period after this war?” asked a mature woman who had worked as a cook at the orphanage.

“Because, in order to avoid History to be rewritten, something that may erase my civilization, you simply cannot reappear on Earth in this century, or the next one, madam. We already took huge risks concerning our own world in order to save your group. The only alternative for us concerning you and those orphans would be to return you to your train and let you die in Treblinka. I am sorry if this may sound brutal but it is the simple reality, madam.”

Another female staff from the orphanage standing next to the cook then whispered something to her that made her clam up. Satisfied, Yul Brynner smiled to the Polish Jews and pointed to a nearby bank of elevator lifts.

"My companions will now escort you upstairs in small groups, so that you could wash up, get new clothes and have a good meal."

On those words, Gal Gadot took with her Janusz, three nurses and six young children and started leading them towards the elevators. As he closely followed Gadot, Janusz couldn't help examine the shoulder patch sewn on her grey uniform: it featured in large Roman numerals the number 21, plus a few words in English he didn't know.

"Uh, may I ask you what your shoulder patch says, Miss Gadot? I suppose that it tells what unit you are in."

"You are correct, Mister Korczak. I am actually the commander of the 21st Century of the First Security Legion of the New Haven Protection Forces."

"And why do you use the old unit designations of the Roman Army? Isn't that a bit anachronistic for an advanced society like yours?"

"Many says so but it does reflect the fact that the ancient Roman Army was a very efficient and disciplined organization, something that is reflected in our own force."

"That makes sense." said Janusz, who then kept silent while going into one of the elevator cabins.

Their group went up by two levels before the doors of the cabin slid open and Gal Gadot invited the Jews to follow her. Following a large hallway for about thirty meters, she then entered a compartment which looked like a sort of waiting lounge, with a service counter along one wall and six rows of benches filling the open space and already partly occupied by Polish Jews.

"This is where we will register you as new citizens of New Haven, my friends. Please take a seat. On my part, I will go help the personnel at the service counter."

As his three nurses and six orphans went to take seats, Janusz looked at the four men and four women standing behind the service counter. They all wore the same grey, form-fitting uniform as Gal Gadot and all looked very fit and young, the eldest one looking to be in her mid-thirties at the most. What especially intrigued Janusz was their highly varied racial diversity, with Caucasians equally mixed with Asians and Africans. Up to now, all the armies he had seen in 1942 were quite homogenous in terms of ethnicity, so these people clearly were apart, not counting of course their fantastic

technology. If anything, he would have pegged Gal Gadot as being of Semitic blood, while the name she wore certainly sounded Hebrew. Putting those observations in the back of his mind, he then went to sit next to his nurses and waited. His wait wasn't a long one, as the persons working behind the counter appeared both fast and efficient and as they appeared to type the information they collected, instead of using paper forms. They also used what seemed to be some kind of miniature cameras to take the pictures of the people they processed. After some seven minutes of waiting, Janusz was called to a wicket manned by Gal Gadot, who seemed to have decided to take special care of him. Going to the counter, Gadot started by asking his full name, date and place of birth, typing that information on a keyboard associated with a sort of small glass window. Then, she asked him to put both of his hands flat on two separate glass plates on the counter, finally ending the registration session by asking Janusz to stay still while the camera mounted on a semi-circular track turned from one side of his face to the other.

"You are now registered as a citizen of New Haven, Mister Korczak. Here is your identity card, hooked to a long neck ribbon for your convenience. I will now escort your group to a dressing room, where you will receive two sets of fresh clothes, a small carry-on bag and a personal hygiene kit, and this before going to have a hot shower and a meal."

"Just the word 'meal' makes me hungry, Miss Gadot. Uh, may I ask you a question, miss? Are you Jewish? Are you from Palestine?"
Somehow, his anodyne question erased the smile on her face and she looked at him with utter seriousness.

"I was not born, Mister Korczak: I was built. I am a sentient android, a robot with a human shape. All my companions are androids as well."

That statement acted like a hammer blow on Janusz' head, who was left stunned and speechless for long seconds as he stared at the beautiful 'woman' facing him.

"A... a robot? I just can't believe this, miss."

"You will get to believe me in time, Mister Korczak. Please keep in mind that we are highly intelligent sentient beings with distinct individual personalities. We are no mindless machines and we are legally recognized by the Spacers' League as full citizens, with the same rights as Human citizens. By the way, we do have contacts with a number of other intelligent species we encountered in other star systems and the old religious fables about God or gods creating Earth, mankind and the Universe have long

been debunked and discredited in our society. Now, what we believe in is science and humanism... Will you be okay, Mister Korczak? You look pale.”

“I... I think that I will be alright, miss. Just let me sit down for a moment.”

“I will wait.”

Janusz then walked back to his bench and sat down, trying to stop his head from spinning. Contrary to most of his staff and orphans, he was basically an agnostic and thus did not pay much attention to what either the Torah or the Bible said about men and the Universe. Still, what Gal Gadot had just revealed to him was truly stunning, if not to say shocking. One of his three nurses noticed his haggard look and eyed him with concern.

“Are you alright, Doctor Korczak?”

“I will be, Miss Sobieski. All this is quite unsettling, I must say.”

“You can say that again, Doctor.”

Some fifteen minutes later, after everybody in the room had been registered and photographed, Gal Gadot came to Janusz Korczak and smiled to him while speaking in Hebrew.

“If you and your friends will follow me, I will lead you to our personnel services section, where you will get new fresh clothes and a chance to shower before going to our cafeteria for a good meal.”

“And after that? How long will be that trip to this world of New Haven, Miss Gadot?”

“Our flight to New Haven will take only minutes, including the time to prepare our temporal jump, followed by our jump to New Haven.”

“A jump? I don’t understand.”

“Don’t worry about that for now, Doctor Koczak: it is quite complicated science and you will have plenty of time in the future to learn about it. Now, please follow me.”

Enticed by the promise of a hot shower and hot meal, Janusz and the women and children around him then got up from their seats and followed the android ‘woman’.

Some forty minutes later, clean and wearing new clothes consisting of loose-fitting coveralls and running shoes, the Jews were led to the crew cafeteria, adjacent to a big dining room, where they were served chicken, mashed potatoes and carrots, with either milk, coffee, tea, water or tomato juice as beverage. Hanna Sobieski, the

youngest of his nurses at the age of 34, closed her eyes in delight as she ate her first piece of chicken.

"My God! If this is the standard of food quality and quantity we will live with on this New Haven, then I will be happy to live there."

"More importantly is how our orphans will be fed and raised, Hanna." said Janusz. "Everything we did up to now was for them, not for us."

As he was finished speaking, a very brief flash of orange light permeated the whole ship, making him look around him in confusion.

"Uh! What was that?"

A second flash of light, slightly different in color, followed less than a minute later, itself followed by an announcement via overhead speakers made by Gal Gadot.

"We have now arrived in the Wolf 1061 solar system, in which New Haven is located. We will land at the Camelot Astroport in 45 minutes, so take your time to finish your meals. Once on the ground, the governor of New Haven, Piotr Romanski, will greet you and will have homes assigned to you. New Haven has various types of lodging for both single people and families but, since most members of your group are young orphans, we will have to split you in small groups of up to eight children and one accompanying adult before dispersing you in the various settlements on New Haven. Each group will be assigned a security officer able to speak Polish and Hebrew and who will guide and assist you around for your first few weeks and months on New Haven. Don't be afraid about being possibly isolated from other groups, as we have very advanced long-distance communications means, including visual ones. On behalf of the New Haven Corporation, I wish you a happy future and a long life on our moon."

CHAPTER 11 – POLITICAL READJUSTMENTS

09:02 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, November 21, 2339

High Council Chamber, Spacers' League government complex

City of New Dawn, Providence (Alpha Centauri Bd)

Alpha Centauri star system, 4.36 light-years from Earth

"Thank you for coming on such short notice to this emergency meeting of the High Council, ladies and gentlemen. You were called in by me after Tina Forster approached me with an important and very consequential request two days ago. Basically, she asked me to have all our matter converter warheads and muzzle units dismounted and put into secure storage. I will now let the floor to Tina, to let her explain the reasons for her request. Tina?"

"Thank you, Madam Chairwoman." said Tina as she rose from her chair at the conference table, then looked around at the twelve other members of the High Council.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen of the High Council. As you remember well, our matter-converter weapons were invented by the regretted late Doctor Koomak, then were secretly put first into service on my ship, the NOSTROMO, in order to deal with the deadly threat of the Space Predators, who had been attacking us relentlessly and causing us atrocious casualties. Then, over three years ago, I gave to the High Council the secret of Doctor Koomak's invention, so that the Spacers' League Navy could be equipped with it in order to better fight the Space Predators. However, with the destruction of the last Space Predator ship by the NOSTROMO, that threat has vanished for good. Thus, our matter-converter arsenal has now outlived its usefulness. It also has unfortunately become a threat by itself, as a bad player in Humanity who could get hold of even a couple of those matter-converter warheads could then blackmail this High Council to obtain more power or even to eliminate those of us who they consider their political opponents."

Jeanne Mercier, who was closely monitoring the reactions around the conference table and who was also using a special suite of physiological reactions sensors aimed at each member of the High Council, saw Roger Berman, the governor of the recently formed

Stein Mining Group, which had seceded from the Pallas Mining Industries after the death of Paul Stein, imperceptibly react to the last part of Tina's announcement, something her sensors confirmed to her.

"I knew it! That bastard was in the know about Paul Stein's plan to destroy the NOSTROMO."

Tina then continued her presentation while looking at Jeanne.

"Two days ago, I approached Chairwoman Mercier to ask her to have all our matter-converter warheads and gun muzzle devices dismounted and put into highly secure storage, in order to eliminate all chances that they could eventually be misused by bad actors. I now urge you to vote in order to enforce that new policy touching our Navy."

"Thank you, Tina. Does any of you have questions, comments or objections to this before we vote on dismantling our matter-converter arsenal? Yes, Governor Berman?"

The leader of the Stein Mining Group and governor of El Dorado, in the Tau Boötis System, looked less than cooperative when he spoke, pointing an index at Tina.

"Even if we do dismount our matter-converter warheads and adaptors from our Navy ships, what tells us that Governor Forster will not simply build in secret more such weapons, since she had already in the past built in secret her own matter-converter arsenal well before she informed us of its existence?"

"A fair question, Mister Berman." recognized Tina at once. "However, history proved that I never used it to threaten other members of this High Council and strictly used it to fight off the Space Predators and defend the Spacers' League. In fact, until I divulged its existence to you at a High Council meeting, none of you were aware that I had such a powerful weapon. Now, I am sure that, if I would have tried to threaten or blackmail another member of this council with my arsenal, that member would have immediately complained about it to Chairwoman Mercier. In contrast, what happened instead is that two years ago, a matter-converter warhead was stolen from the Navy's main arsenal and then employed in an attempt to blow up my NOSTROMO while it was in Earth orbit. Thankfully, we were able to detect that warhead and destroy it before it could approach my ship, on which I was at the time."

Her declaration, made while she was staring hard at Roger Berman, understandably raised a tempest of indignant exclamations around the table, forcing Jeanne Mercier into banging repeatedly her gavel to bring order back.

"ORDER! ORDER, PLEASE!"

Once a relative quiet had returned into the chamber, Mercier spoke up in a stern tone of voice while looking around the table.

"The Navy launched a high-level investigation into the theft of that matter-converter warhead once it was discovered, but has kept its results confidential up to now...on my direct orders. What was found was that a number of senior Navy officers, along with a handful of ordnance technicians working at our main arsenal, were implicated in that theft. What the Navy investigation also found was that the late Paul Stein, then Chairman of the Pallas Mining Group, was behind that theft and intended to use that warhead to eliminate his main political enemy, Governor Forster, and destroy her flagship, the NOSTROMO. When I got the results of that Navy investigation, I then signed a secret executive order to have Paul Stein eliminated by our security services, for high treason and attempted mass murder."

Even Tina was stunned by that declaration: Jeanne Mercier had just lied to the whole High Council in order to cover the fact that Tina had killed Stein, and not the Spacers' League' security services. While Roger Berman and a few other members of the High Council reacted with anger and dismay at Mercier's announcement, others, like Vladimir Gasparov, the Chairman of the Sverdlovsk Group and Governor of New Venice, who was no stranger to hardball politics, simply nodded his head in approval.

"BUT SUCH EXTRA-LEGAL KILLING IS AGAINST THE LAW! YOU HAD NO RIGHT TO DO THIS!" shouted an indignant Roger Berman, attracting an unapologetic look from Jeanne.

"You are wrong, Governor Berman. The Constitution of the Spacers' League allows its chairman to use secret executive orders to authorize clandestine security services operations when high treason, compounded with murder or attempted murder, is committed by a member of this council. The investigation by our Navy amply proved to me that Paul Stein was behind the theft of that matter-converter warhead and the attempt at destroying the NOSTROMO. May I also add that, if that attempt at blowing up the NOSTROMO had succeeded, large chunks of debris may then have rained down on Earth, potentially causing catastrophic damages on the planet surface and also possibly killing thousands, if not millions of people. Should I remind you that the NOSTROMO, when at full load tonnage, has a mass of over 32 million tons. Imagine then what a chunk of steel structure weighing a few tens of thousand tons could cause in terms of damage after entering Earth's atmosphere. In comparison, the asteroid which caused

mass extinction on Earth some 65 million years ago weighed much less. Yet, Paul Stein seemingly didn't care much about that before trying to blow up the NOSTROMO. That consideration alone amply justified my order to have him killed before he could try again."

With the leaders of the North American Union and of ASEAN, the two most recent members of the Spacers' League, throwing poisoned looks at Roger Berman, along with other members of the High Council, Berman judiciously decided to clam up and sit down, containing with difficulty his anger. Jeanne Mercier then looked around the table while speaking further.

"I believe that we can now vote on whether to dismantle our matter-converter arsenal or keep it in service. All in favor?... All against?... The ayes have it! I will issue by tomorrow an order to our Navy to disassemble and put into secure storage all of our matter-converter warheads and gun muzzle adaptor units. A Navy team will also travel to the NOSTROMO to supervise the dismantling of their matter-converter units. Now, if anyone wants to ask for a vote of censure against me for having Paul Stein eliminated, then you are free to do so now. However, once this meeting is over, any such vote of censure on this subject will be denied and may attract further investigation by the Spacers' League's Security Services. No one? Then, I declare this subject closed! Do we have other motions or questions for this floor? Yes, Governor Ling?"

The Governor of Mars and of Utopia, in the HD 10647 System, a mature but also most graceful Asian woman, spoke while smiling to Tina Forster.

"Excuse me if I raise the matter of another secret move by Chairman Forster but I and others couldn't help notice that, since she discovered how to travel through time after chasing that last Space Predator ship, a number of ancient animal species and plants which were previously extinct on Earth have since appeared on New Haven and on Asiana, while a number of sensational historical documentaries have been published by the NOSTROMO, documentaries which were obviously produced with footage taken in the past, like the ones on Jack the Ripper and on Joan of Arc. We now have herds of woolly mammoths, African elephants, rhinoceros and American bison roaming the grasslands of New Haven, while large groups of African Mountain Gorillas now live in its high plateau forests. On Asiana, Asian elephants, giant panda bears, orangutans and tigers can now be seen. What can we expect next from your expeditions to the past, Tina?"

"Guilty as charged, Governor Ling." answered Tina Forster, a slight smile on her face. "I did import from the past large, viable herds of many animal species which had become extinct on Earth thousands of years ago, in order to repair the damage our ancestors did to Earth's ecosystem. Those herds were first dropped on New Haven, which has plenty of space and vegetation to accommodate them, so that they could have time to naturally multiply. Then, I progressively transported part of those herds of herbivores and groups of primates to either Asiana or Jamieson's World. Next on my list will be a number of extinct species which previously lived on the Australian continent but which disappeared because of us hundreds of years ago. I am thinking in particular about kangaroos, koalas, emus and wombats."

"Oooh, I love that idea!" enthusiastically exclaimed Agneta Braun, the CEO of the Vesta Corporation and Governor of the planet Vinland, in the Gliese 832 System. "You should open a zoo on New Haven, so that we could all see those past creatures."

"We have better than zoos, Agneta: we have low-level guided flying tours for tourists who want to see the various animals I imported from the past. You can thus visit our North Pole area and see in the wild woolly mammoths, musk oxen and polar bears. For those of you who liked the historical documentaries I published to date, you will soon be able to watch authentic scenes from the 1942 Battle of Midway, the desert Battle of Tobruk, the naval Battle of Savo Island and the 1942 failed amphibious raid on Dieppe. My historical team also plans to go investigate the 1963 assassination of American President John Kennedy in Texas, an event which still attracts many questions from historians. However, the work of my team in the past is very carefully planned and controlled, in order to avoid interfering in any way with recorded history. Any change to history caused by our actions in the past would be nothing less than catastrophic for all of us."

As excited comments went around the table, Tina noticed that Sylvia Johnson, the President of the North American Union, seemed to be in a downcast mood. She thus decided to go speak with her in private at the end of the meeting, as she suspected that this could be due to the heavy secret she was holding, a secret Tina had communicated to her some time ago.

A bit over two hours later, with Jeanne Mercier having declared the meeting officially over, Tina approached Sylvia Johnson and spoke to her in a near whisper.

"Is something wrong, Sylvia?"

Johnson answered at first with a nod of her head before speaking in a low voice.

"Tina, I am afraid of how things will go in the North American Union after I will complete my second mandate in a year or so. My push for emigration to Jamieson's World is encountering strong political opposition, along with vocal nationalistic rhetoric. Many accuse me of undermining the NAU with my pro-emigration policies, notably by draining away our best minds and people. There are also second thoughts about the NAU having joined the Spacers' League."

"But Space is the future of Humanity, Sylvia, not our old, polluted and overexploited Earth."

"Call it misplaced nationalistic pride if you want but what I often hear these days are calls for a 'strong, eternal America'. Unfortunately, those calls are capturing the hearts of a majority of my citizens. I am afraid that my successor as President of the NAU will pull it out of the Spacers' League and reverse my pro-emigration policies, something that will prevent us from saving more people when that natural disaster will come in 2355, sixteen years from now."

"Have you spoken with Jeanne Mercier about it?"

"Yes, but she told me that there is nothing she can do about that. She also told me that she is against revealing publicly the fact that you explored our future and found out about what is awaiting us in 2355. She believes, rightly in my opinion, that the backlash against you would be very severe and would possibly trigger attacks on you and on New Haven."

Tina felt discouragement then, as Sylvia's fears about a backlash were actually very plausible. Could her attempts at trying to save millions in the coming future result in hostility and violence against her cherished world of New Haven and against her ship? Unsure how to respond to this, she nonetheless patted Sylvia's shoulder while trying to encourage her.

"Maybe your citizens will regain some sense and elect some forward-thinking successor to take over from you, Sylvia."

"I don't have much faith in that, Tina. You should listen to the opinion polls circulating in the NAU about Space emigration and our membership in the Spacers' League. Still, I will do what I can until my time in power is over."

Sylvia Johnson then walked away, her head low, leaving Tina alone in the corner of the High Council's Chamber. In fact, that left her alone in the whole room, save for a few stewards busy picking up the used and empty glasses and bottles of water on the

conference table. When she walked out of the Chamber and reunited with her waiting bodyguard, Stacy Keibler, she did so in a slow pace, her mind furiously trying to figure out how to counter this latest problem. One thing was however clear in her mind: the years to come were going to be both difficult and heart-wrenching.

CHAPTER 12 – A STEP BACKWARD

11:42 (Washington Time)

Monday, January 22, 2340

The Capitol Building, Washington, D.C.

North American Union, Earth



Jamieson's World (18 Scorpii c)

"...AND I PROMISE YOU THIS, CITIZENS OF THE NORTH AMERICAN UNION: WE WILL STOP WASTING OUR MONEY, RESOURCES AND TALENTS ON FAR AWAY WORLDS AMONG THE STARS. INSTEAD, WE WILL CONCENTRATE ALL OUR EFFORTS AND RESOURCES ON MAKING THIS GREAT LAND EVEN BETTER AND ON STAYING THE BEST, MOST ADVANCED NATION ON EARTH. TOMORROW, I WILL TAKE US OUT OF THE SPACERS' LEAGUE, TO WHICH MY PREDECESSOR SO UNWISELY ADHERED TO, AND WILL REDIRECT THE RESOURCES WASTED IN SPACE TO OUR BEAUTIFUL, ETERNAL LAND."

Sylvia Johnson, sitting with the other V.I.P. guests at the swearing-in ceremony of her successor, President Jeremy Wade, had to contain her growing anger at the ignorant, short-sighted populist rhetoric Wade was now spewing in his inaugural address from outside the Capitol Building in Washington. Jeremy Wade and his American Renewal Party had won over the presidential candidate from Sylvia's party only by the thinnest of margins by resorting to populist discourses, bashing her own policy of becoming a member of the Spacers' League and blaming the NAU's financial problems on so-called 'wastage' spent in Space. Unfortunately, enough citizens had believed Wade's lies and hyperbole to allow him to be elected as the new President of the North American Union. As for Sylvia, being term-limited and being forced to retire from politics as of today, she could do nothing now but sit and watch the train wreck she expected soon as a result of the short-sighted policies of Jeremy Wade and of his ARP. To be helpless like this while knowing what was awaiting her country in fifteen years was most infuriating for her but there was little that she could do now. Even if she decided to go public about what she knew of the disaster to come in 2355, most people would probably refuse to believe her and may even accuse her of politically-motivated fear-mongering, further entrenching the ARP's hold on the NAU citizens. Unfortunately, those ARP policies were already significantly costing the country, by causing a brain drain of the best and brightest, who

were voting with their feet and emigrating in large numbers to Jamieson's World, the planet owned by the NAU in the 18 Scorpii star system, some 46.1 light-years from Earth. Now, Sylvia was afraid that Wade was going to starve of funds and resources the young colony, which had been growing steadily for over two years now. From the contacts Sylvia had on Jamieson's World, she knew that the colonists there were deeply disturbed and worried about Jeremy Wade's policies and about his promise to make the NAU leave the Spacers' League. What these colonists would decide to do and how they would react to those ARP policies was still unsure to her. In a way, this situation reminded her of the dark days of 2315, when the central government of Earth had tried to break the attempts at independence of those who were then called 'Spacers'. Those Spacers, led by a young Captain Tina Forster and her giant cargo ship KOSTROMA, had fought back, eventually winning their independence from Earth in a way resembling the war the American colonists of the 18th Century had fought to gain independence from Great Britain. Will the colonists on Jamieson's World have to fight for their new world or would they see their promising new home wither on the vine from lack of resources and of new people due to Wade's policies? Sylvia sure hoped not.

17:20 (Washington Time)

Wednesday, February 28, 2340

Spectators' Gallery, Senate Chamber

North American Union Congress Building, Washington D.C.

Reginald King, the Spacers' League Consul to the NAU, felt bitterness and discouragement as the Speaker of the NAU's Senate announced the results of the vote just taken on the resolution to leave the Spacers' League. Out of the 94 states and territories forming the North American Union, each represented by two senators, only 32 senators had voted against the resolution presented by President Wade via the House of Representatives. Those 32 senators who had voted to stay in the Spacers' League were those representing the thirteen states which had previously been provinces and territories of Canada before that country had joined the United States and Mexico in 2088 to form the North American Union, plus six senators from four ex-Mexican states. That by itself could cause further shockwaves, as the citizens from those ex-Canadian states were massively opposed to leaving the Spacers' League, as the latest opinion polls were showing. Unfortunately, President Wade had already dismissed those polls,

demeaning the opinions of those northern citizens as ‘backward’ and ‘misguided’. However, King believed that Wade was making a grave mistake by ignoring the northern feelings about his policies. King also believed that this resolution could very well backfire on Wade and the NAU. As he got up from his seat to leave after the counting of the vote, another spectator, a well-known political media commentator from Mississippi, taunted him with an arrogant smile.

“Have a nice day while still in Washington, King.”

King threw him a poisoned look but didn’t reply verbally, then ignored that idiot while walking out of the Senate.

09:09 (Vancouver Time)

Tuesday, March 05, 2340

Reception center, Enos Lake Log Cabins Resort

Enos Lake, Vancouver Island, North American West Coast

Janet Forster only had half of her mind on her administrative work, as she was also listening with one ear to a regional video news channel broadcasted on the large video display unit of her resort’s reception lounge. Since President Wade had signed at the end of February an act of Congress terminating the membership of the NAU in the Spacers’ League, things had been quite agitated in the northern states of the country, which had once been Canadian provinces or territories. A strong majority of the citizens of those thirteen northern states had in fact opposed that act and had been quite vocal about it. The governors of eleven of those states had then jointly decided to conduct a popular electronic referendum on the question, while the governors of two states, Alberta and Saskatchewan, had refused to conduct such a referendum. The results of those referendums had been published yesterday and had immediately raised a political storm, as an average of 78 percent of the citizens of those eleven states had stated that they wished to stay as citizens of the Spacers’ League and would thus be ready to secede from the NAU. The verbal response from Washington to those results had been swift and categoric, with President Wade declaring that any secession of a state from the NAU would amount to insurrection and would be treated as such. Now, both the citizens and the local governments of those eleven states were wondering if President Wade was just bluffing or if he would really be ready to use force to keep them in the NAU. Added to Janet’s worries about that was the new NAU policy concerning the institution of

a visa requirement for any Spacers' League citizen wishing to enter the NAU. That new visa requirement, along with the hostile rants from President Wade towards the Spacers' League, was already impacting on her resort's customership, with the occupancy rate for her log cabins being much lower than usual for a month of April.

Janet was about finished with her reservations list work when the entrance of four men and one woman made her look up from her laptop computer screen. Her welcoming smile then quickly faded as she saw that the five newcomers wore the gray uniforms of the NAU Federal Marshals Service and were armed with both pistols and rifles. Getting up from her stool, set behind the reception counter, Janet greeted the newcomers in a polite tone as the most senior agent, a sergeant, walked to her counter.

"Good morning, lady and gentlemen! What could I do for you today?"

"We are here to check that the new visa requirements for Spacers' League citizens is being respected. Do you presently have Spacers' League citizens in your resort?"

"Yes! In fact, most of my customers are Spacers' League citizens on vacation. Our vast open wilderness and natural vistas are well appreciated by crewmembers of starships orbiting Earth."

"Do those customers hold legal tourist visas for the NAU, miss?"

"Uh, I frankly don't know, mister. The customers presently staying at my resort arrived before the institution of this new visa requirement and I know that at least four of them have gone four days ago on a camping trip and have not returned yet. There was thus no way for them to get visas or even to know about that requirement."

"Let us judge about that, miss." replied the agent in a barely polite tone. "We will also need to speak with the owner of this resort, a Janet Forster."

"That's me, mister." answered Janet, suddenly becoming really nervous. "Why do you want to talk with me?"

"You have family ties with a starship captain named Tina Forster, correct?"

"Uh, yes: she's my cousin. What about her?"

"Is she presently in this resort, miss? We know that her ship is in Earth orbit."

"No, she is not, but a family of four from the NOSTROMO is on vacation here."

"Then, we will need to go check them for valid visas, miss. Which cabin are they occupying?"

"They rented Cabin Number Five but they wouldn't be there this morning, mister: they are the people who went camping deep in the forest four days ago and they haven't returned yet. You are not going to give them a hard time, I hope: they have two young children with them and they may still not know about this visa requirement."

"We will see, miss. I will now need a list of all the Spacers' League citizens present in your resort, along with the number of their log cabins and their wrist phone numbers."

Not liking at all where this was going, Janet gave a warning look at the federal agent.

"Have you coordinated this visit with our local constabulary station, mister? Those people have committed no crimes and do have legal rights."

"Customs and immigration are a federal jurisdiction, not a state jurisdiction, miss. I want to see your list of customers, now!"

Hiding her mounting anger, Janet had no choice but to call up on her computer her list of customers and then turn her laptop around to let the agent look at it.

"Here you go, mister."

The marshal didn't even utter a 'thank you' before reviewing the list, noting down a few names and the wrist phone numbers used by those persons, along with their log cabin numbers. Once he was done, the agent looked back at Janet, his expression severe.

"From now on, Miss Forster, you will ensure that all your customers who are from the Spacers' League hold a valid visitor's visa. If you don't do that, you will expose yourself to arrest, for violating the NAU Customs and Immigration Act."

"This is totally unwarranted, mister. The citizens of our state of British Columbia, like those from ten other states, just voted via a referendum to stay in the Spacers' League. I will have to put a legal protest with my local constabulary service about this harassment of my customers."

"I don't give a damn about your state referendum, miss. As for your constabulary service, they will have to stand aside and let us do our work here."

Before Janet could reply to that arrogant response by the federal agent, the entrance door was opened and two adults and two children entered the reception lounge. They were all dressed in warm Winter clothes and both adults and the older child, a preteen girl of about seven or eight, carried backpacks, while a young toddler child was carried in a chest pack worn by the woman, who was fairly small but solidly built. Janet's heart jumped in her chest when she recognized the four newcomers, who stopped at the sight

of the five armed federal agents. She then did her best to warn them and defuse a potential misunderstanding.

"Pieter, Jehanne, those officers from the NAU Federal Marshals Service are here to check the visas of the Spacers' League citizens presently at the resort."

"Visas? What visas?" asked a confused Pieter Nordlung. The senior federal agent answered that in a less than friendly tone.

"The visitor's visa that is now required from Spacers' League citizens entering the North American Union, mister. That visa requirement was instituted on the First of March, by order from President Wade."

"But we went on a camping trip early that day, deep in the woods. We didn't hear about that, Sergeant."

"Ignorance of the law is not an excuse, mister. I will need to see your passports, or at the least some identity papers if you don't have passports with you."

"We didn't bring passports when coming down from our ship: the NAU was still part of the Spacers' League at that time. We can however show us electronic identity cards."

"Those will do, mister."

The agent then took the four electronic cards Pieter presented to him and quickly examined them. However, that agent suddenly stiffened as he read the card handed by Jehanne de Domrémy.

"WATCH OUT! SHE'S A SECURITY ANDROID!"

While Jehanne didn't apparently react to that except for looking questioningly at the federal agent, she switched on at once her electromagnetic shield unit and sent an encrypted digital short warning message up to the NOSTROMO. At the same time, she pulled little Frida closer to her while stepping near Pieter, in order to include them both inside the protective bubble of her force shield. Thankfully, the NAU agents were armed with classic firearms instead of disintegrator weapons and her force shield was proof against bullets. As for the five federal agents, they all unholstered their pistols at once and pointed them at her.

"And why would you be worried by me being a security android, Sergeant? I am a law officer like you and the Spacers' League is not at war with the North American Union, unless of course you want to start a war by shooting at us without justification. Now, we simply couldn't and didn't know about your new visa requirement. You would

just have to issue us visas now that we are back from the woods and then everything would be fine, Sergeant.”

“If you have weapons with you, then I want you to put them down on the floor, slowly.”

Little Frida Thorund, scared by the guns pointed at her family, looked up at Jehanne.

“Mommy, why do they threaten us?”

“They don’t have valid reasons to do so, Frida. Let me handle this peacefully.” said Jehanne before looking back at the senior federal agent. “I will now ask you to stop overreacting and to stop pointing guns at my family, Sergeant. Then, you can issue us visas to all four of us and to the other customers of this resort who are from the Spacers’ League.”

“Your status as a law officer is no longer recognized in the NAU, miss, so don’t try to order us around.”

Jehanne shook her head slowly at the obtuseness of the man’s reaction, at the same time as she got an electronic answer back directly from SPIRIT.

“You know what, Sergeant? Your present attitude reminds me of the racist attitude and conduct of 20th Century American Southern policemen towards people of color. We are however in the 24th Century, so I am not prepared to meekly allow my family to be mishandled or mistreated by you. Know that my ship, the NOSTROMO, has been warned about this situation and is now alerting the nearest British Columbia Constabulary station about your actions. I thus strongly suggest that you holster your weapons and leave.”

“You are bluffing, miss. As I said before, you have no authority here and you will not order us around.”

While still fixing the federal agents, Jehanne spoke softly to Pieter.

“Pieter, take the kids with you and return to our cabin: I will handle this.”

“DON’T MOVE!” shouted at once the federal agent. Jehanne ignored him and took little Nehiyawak from his chest carriage and handed him to Pieter while continuing to stare at the sergeant.

“Sergeant, your moves and words are being recorded and will be used in a court of law if you continue to threaten my family. Your choice!”

The female agent in the group of five marshals, a corporal, then gave a worried look at her superior.

“Sergeant, this isn’t worth it. Let’s simply issue them visas and be done with it.”

The NCO hesitated for a moment before finally lowering slowly his pistol and holster it.

"Alright! We will issue you visas...this time. Next time, if you don't get visas in advance, you will be arrested for illegally entering the NAU."

"Blah, blah, blah! You may find out soon enough that your own authority will be worth little here, Sergeant."

"Who the fuck are you to talk to me like this?"

"I am Tribune Jehanne de Domrémy, Commander of the First Security Legion of New Haven, and I fought repeatedly against the Space Predators, so don't presume too much about your capabilities or about your actual authority in the State of British Columbia."

The five federal agents froze on hearing her rank and title, suddenly becoming quite nervous: the reputation of Jehanne as a deadly fighter was not confined to the worlds of the Spacers' League, as her combat prowess and that of her security androids had been widely advertised on Earth through various news bulletins during the war with the Space Predators. Now realizing what kind of opponent he was facing, the federal NCO reluctantly added electronic visas to the family's electronic identity cards, then left with his four subalterns while avoiding to look at Jehanne. Janet Forster, who had held her breath during the verbal confrontation, let air out once the entrance door closed behind the agents.

"Weuw! I was afraid for a moment that these arrogant idiots would start shooting, Jehanne."

"Part of my training and experience taught me the value of evaluating the resolve of potential adversaries, Janet. That guy was mostly huff and puff and he knew that he was on a slippery legal slope. Now that they are gone, I am afraid that our citizens will have to leave your resort in order to avoid more threats like this. Those idiots in Washington clearly don't understand what they have started. I am sorry to ruin your business like this but I can't say how far these idiots will go, or what may happen next. I will talk with Tina once back on the NOSTROMO and ask her to provide you with a monetary compensation for the loss of business this will cause you. She may want in turn to talk with you in private."

"Well, you can also tell Tina that those bozos specifically asked me if she was here, so they may have come to my resort partly to try to get her."

"I will certainly inform her of that, Janet. Washington is playing a very dangerous and disturbing game here and it may well blow back in President Wade's face."

10:14 (Universal Time)

Friday, March 08, 2340

High Council Chamber, Spacers' League government complex

City of New Dawn, Providence (Alpha Centauri Bd)

"Decidedly, these emergency meetings of the High Council are getting a bit too frequent to my taste, Tina." remarked Vladimir Gasparov as he took his seat facing Tina Forster's chair around the long conference table. "Couldn't our scientists find a way to transmit conversations in real time between star systems?"

"I'm afraid that we are not going to see that happen in a very, very long time, if ever, Vladimir. Count yourself lucky that we managed to find a way to travel quickly between the stars."

Looking briefly at the eleven men and women from Earth who had come in Tina's private yacht and were now taking seats around the table, Gasparov then returned his attention to Tina.

"What do you know about the reasons for those representatives of the northern states of the North American Union to ask for an emergency meeting of the High Council?"

"Well, they are still technically citizens of the Spacers' League, like the citizens of their states, and their citizens voted overwhelmingly in a referendum held four days ago to stay in the Spacers' League, instead of following the rest of the North American Union into leaving us. The governor of Jamieson's World, who also came to this meeting, wishes as well to stay in the Spacers' League and is refusing orders from President Wade to cut all links with us."

"That Wade sounds to me like a first-class asshole, Tina."

"That's because he IS a first-class flaming asshole, Vladimir. He is now refusing to accept to let go his eleven northern, ex-Canadian states, along with Jamieson's World, even though the historic United States was formed after declaring its independence from the British Empire. Quite ironic, isn't it?"

"Yeah! It is also a most stupid attitude on his part."

"Who said that ignorant bigots had to be intelligent?"

"Touché!"

Jeanne Mercier then banged her gavel two times to call for silence.

"I now declare this emergency session of the High Council open. Ladies and gentlemen, I officially received yesterday a call for help from the governors of eleven states and territories of the North American Union, plus one from the governor of Jamieson's World, in the 18 Scorpii System. The people of those twelve states, territories and planet all voted via referendum to stay as citizens of the Spacers' League, rather than follow the rest of the NAU states into cancelling their membership in our alliance. I will now show on the screens the official results of those referendums, conducted electronically four days ago."

All eyes went to the big electronic display screens hooked to the four walls of the chamber, with Jeanne Mercier then speaking further.

"As you can see, the results of those referendums were decisive, averaging a whopping 78 percent in favor of remaining with the Spacers' League, with the lowest approval rate being 65 percent and with the highest approval rate, in the State of Quebec, being 87 percent. Of the northern states which once formed Canada, only Alberta and Saskatchewan, states where the population is in general markedly more conservative than the others, voted by a slim majority to follow Washington into leaving the Spacers' League. As for Jamieson's World, they voted to stay with us with a whopping 95 percent majority. Now, as you can see on the map visible on our screens, those eleven states cover a huge area of North America nearly equal in size to the rest of the NAU. They also hold a large proportion of the mineral, agricultural and fishing resources of the NAU, which helps explain why President Wade is so vehemently opposed to losing them. Now, I want to emphasize that the NAU voluntarily joined the Spacers League a bit over two years ago and that its citizens were thus all Spacers' League citizens until February 29 of this year, when President Wade signed his so-called 'NAU Independence Act'. However, mere days after he signed that act, eleven of his states, along with the citizens of Jamieson's World, stated via referendum that they wanted to continue being citizens of the Spacers' League. In response to those referendums, President Wade declared their results to be null and void and that he would consider any attempt by those northern states to stay with us as an illegal act of secession. Then, yesterday, the governors of those northern states and of Jamieson's World sent representatives to Providence with a plea for our protection against any forceful move by Washington to stop them from leaving the NAU. Our duty on this matter is now clear, ladies and gentlemen: we will support and defend the rights of the

citizens from those states and planet who wish to stay as citizens of the Spacers' League. Yes, Agneta?"

Having raised her hand to ask to speak, Agneta Braun, the CEO of the Vesta Corporation and one of the members of the High Council, cleared her throat before asking a question.

"What are the present military capabilities of the NAU, including its Space forces, which could try to subdue those eleven states and Jamieson's World? Are there any signs of military preparations made by Washington in order to enter by force these states and the 18 Scorpii System?"

"A good and pertinent question indeed. You must understand that the NAU of this century is nowhere near what the United States of the 21st Century was as a dominating military power. The American military was drastically cut at the end of the 21st Century, leaving it with only police forces, a small navy and a small air force to defend its territory, while its past interventionist international policies became a thing of the past. All that however backfired on the NAU when it found itself nearly powerless to repulse the invasion by the thugs of the Khan Regime in 2316. Our nascent Spacers' League, led by Tina Forster and her KOSTROMA, then had to rescue the NAU citizens from the thugs of the Southern Federation. That costly lesson then convinced the NAU to rebuild at least part of its past military machine after the conclusion of the 2315 Uprising. However, even that effort was what I would qualify as 'minimalist' and the NAU never approached the military might of the old United States. As of today, the NAU has on Earth a force of about 50,000 active ground troops supplemented by local, regional and federal police forces and supported by a small Coast Guard force and a small aerospace force consisting of one squadron of light starfighters and three squadrons of intra-atmospheric fighter-bombers. A second squadron of light starfighters, along with a Space cargo detachment, was being formed and trained under our aegis in order to protect the 18 Scorpii System, but President Wade ordered that this joint training program be terminated the same day he signed his NAU Independence Act. Unfortunately, even in view of this rather meagre NAU military capacity, the eleven northern states which voted to stay with us have only their local state police forces at their disposal to resist any forceful move against them by NAU military units. Even those state police forces are not completely reliable, as part of their police leadership was named by Washington. The biggest worry of the governors of those states and of the Governor of Jamieson's World is that some of their own police forces may help NAU

federal forces take control of their government centers and arrest them for quote sedition unquote. When I got late yesterday the call for help from those governors who wish to stay on as citizens of the Spacers' League, I sent a request to the NOSTROMO, which is presently in low Earth orbit, asking Tina Forster if she could urgently provide at least some protection to these state government representatives. Thankfully, Tina responded in the affirmative and sent down at once part of her security android force. Tina, you may now brief us on what you sent down to those eleven states."

"Thank you, Madam Chairwoman! Ladies and gentlemen of the High Council, when I receive the request for help from Chairwoman Mercier, I had at the time half of my android security force aboard the NOSTROMO, counting a total of 2,520 security androids and 48 armored MRGS assault vehicles. I then sent down three of the four cohorts based aboard my ship, which count 1,860 androids and 36 MRGS, distributing them among the northern local government centers, air and port of entries and their border crossing points. One squadron of my heavy starfighters based aboard the NOSTROMO is on combat standby, ready to intervene if NAU fighter-bombers attack those northern states, while my NOSTROMO will act as an ultimate instrument of deterrence against any move in force by federal NAU forces."

Toru Tomonaga, the CEO of the Ceres Consortium, shook his left hand on hearing her last sentence.

"Ouch! President Wade would be truly foolish to provoke a reaction from your mighty NOSTROMO, Tina. Your ship destroyed by itself over 75 percent of all Space Predator ships during our dark days, on top of destroying their home world."

"Well, I do hope that my NOSTROMO will not have to use its main guns during this crisis, Toru. Finally, I had one cohort and one heavy starfighter squadron based on New Haven move right away to Jamieson's World, where it took protective positions on and around the planet. The one thing I haven't done yet is to warn President Wade about doing any aggressive move against his northern states or against Jamieson's World. I will leave that task to Chairwoman Mercier."

00:23 (Vancouver Time)

Saturday, March 09, 2340

Vancouver Vertiport, Downtown Vancouver

State of British Columbia, North America

Captain Jeff Brolins, of the NAU Aerospace Forces, had just landed at the vertical on the main tarmac of the Vancouver Vertiport, ignoring the calls by the local control tower refusing him the right to land, and was about to signal via intercom the 130 airborne troopers and their anti-gravity sleds to disembark when he froze, while he felt his hair on his head rise: a big, wedge-shaped vehicle topped up by a large turret had just silently flown from its hiding place behind a civilian airliner and had stopped a mere fifty meters in front of his light cargo ship. The scary muzzle of what looked like a heavy disintegrator cannon was now pointed directly at his cockpit area. He was finally able to speak and give a warning to the commander of the paratrooper unit he was carrying on this assault mission.

"ALERT! AN ARMORED VEHICLE IS NOW FIFTY METERS IN FRONT OF OUR CARGO SHIP AND POINTING ITS CANNON AT US."

In the cargo bay, Major John Stoner was watching the loadmaster open the rear access ramp when he got that warning.

"SHIT! SOMEONE WAS WAITING FOR US, MEN. RUN OUT AND SPREAD OUT ONCE OUT OF THIS SHIP."

Stoner then took the safety off his light disintegrator rifle and approached the top of the access ramp, which was now half opened. Contrary to the NAU police forces, which were still armed with conventional firearms, his unit and other army units considered as elite elements were armed with disintegrator rifles and pistols. He had thus been confident that his unit would easily accomplish its mission, which was to take the British State Columbia Capitol Building, situated 300 meters from the vertiport, along with the local Governor's official residence. However, Stoner had to brake on the spot when he saw that a big vehicle mounting an equally big gun had parked itself fifty meters from the tail of the cargo ship. He could also see forty silhouettes in dark armored suits running and then stopping to form a wide semi-circle centered on the tail of his cargo ship while pointing their weapons at the cargo hold. Those opponents appeared to be well disciplined and trained, staying well separated from each other while being careful not to block the line of sight of the vehicle-mounted gun.

"HOLD ON, MEN! THE ENEMY SET A TRAP FOR US AND IS BLOCKING OUR WAY OUT!"

Stoner then saw one of the dark silhouettes walk calmly towards the access ramp, its weapon slung from one shoulder.

"SOMEONE IS COMING FORWARD TO SPEAK WITH ME. HOLD YOUR FIRE UNLESS I SAY OTHERWISE."

Slinging his own weapon, the paratroop officer then walked down the ramp, stopping at its feet and waiting for his opponent to join him. He was soon able thanks to the exterior lights of the vertiport to see that his opponent was actually a woman, a tall and very beautiful one at that. He was also able to recognize her uniform and battle gear and swore to himself: it was a security android of the New Haven Security Forces. His unit was thus facing the deadliest and most battle-hardened force known on Earth and in Space. His apprehension then turned to surprise and disbelief when he was able to clearly distinguish the beautiful young blonde now stopping three paces from him.

"Taylor Swift? Is that really you? Aren't you a star singer?"

The blonde smiled at his astonishment.

"Yes, it's me and I am a singer...on my free time, when I am not filling my security duties as a decurion. However, today, I am here to protect Spacers' League citizens from a NAU government bent on ignoring their collective wish to stay as our citizens. You and your troopers now have a choice: you either take off now and fly back south of the border or you all die in the following minute. Decide quickly, Major."

Stoner didn't have to think long before answering her, as his choice of options was indeed very limited. His men were still bunched inside the cargo hold of the light cargo ship and one burst of that heavy disintegrator gun pointed at the hold would vaporize all of his men in an instant.

"Alright, we will go."

"Good choice! Tell your pilot that any deviation on his flight path from straight South will result in us destroying his ship...and your men."

The tall blonde then saluted him militarily, making Stoner reluctantly return her salute before he climbed up the cargo ramp and spoke to his men.

"TAKE BACK YOUR SEATS: WE ARE LEAVING. I AM NOW GOING TO SPEAK WITH OUR PILOT."

Some of his men did grumble at that but he ignored them and quickly walked to the cockpit, where he stopped between the seats of the pilot and copilot. Jeff Brolins looked up from his seat, clearly worried.

"So, what do we do now, Major?"

"We take off and fly South. Those two armored vehicles can vaporize us all in an instant."

"Alright! Carlos, close the access ramp: we are leaving."

Less than thirty seconds later, the light cargo ship was taking off silently at the vertical, climbing for a moment before turning towards the South and overflying at the same time the waters of Vancouver Harbor. As Brolins was about to accelerate while heading South, Stoner patted his right shoulder.

"Go very low and then make a wide turn to the right: we are returning to Vancouver. Instead of going out at the vertiport, we will jump directly over the Capitol Building."

Brolins gave him a shocked look but Stoner cut him off with four words.

"That's an order, Captain. I will now go brief my men about this."

His heart heavy and doubting the sanity of that order, Brolins nonetheless flew his unarmed cargo ship down to near water level and started to perform a very large half-turn to the right. Maybe, by flying past Vancouver while well away from the coast, he would then be able to approach the city from the direction of the nearby mountains, thus making his approach difficult to detect.

On the heavy starfighter SHOOTING STAR, the maneuver by the NAU light cargo ship was detected nearly at once, prompting its pilot, Pieter Nordling, to start diving on it. What he now had to do was not to his liking: that cargo ship was unarmed and there were over a hundred men in it, men who were going to die very soon. However, the NAU ship and troopers had been clearly warned, yet had decided to ignore that warning and were ready to kill Spacers' League citizens as part of their mission. The light cargo ship was still skimming the surface of the sea, heading North in order to bypass Vancouver before turning towards the coastal mountain range, when Pieter opened fire with his four heavy disintegrator cannons. Half a second of firing was enough to bracket the cargo ship and then hit it. Half of the cargo ship was vaporized in a blue flash of light, with its remaining pieces then splashing into the ocean. Pieter looked down with sadness at the spot of the sinking while performing a wide turn to return on watch station.

"I hope that not too many more people will die because of the arrogance and stupidity of those NAU politicians."

09:11 (Washington Time)

Situation Room, The White House

Washington, D.C., North American Union

When President Jeremy Wade showed up in the Situation Room, in the basement of the White House's West Wing, he found his military chief of staff, General Mark Sternberger, both distraught and seething with anger. The military man, in a most unusual display of lack of decorum, got up from his chair at once, not as a mark of respect but to then shout at Wade.

"You ordered a military operation against those rebel northern states, sending my men into combat, and you didn't even bother to show here until you finished eating your breakfast, Mister President?"

"Now, watch your tone of voice, General. Your soldiers went to get some politicians protected only by a few police officers. There was no need for me to stay here for such a benign task."

"A benign task? For your info, Operation Iron Fist has turned into a complete disaster, Mister President, and 1,946 of my men and women are now dead or missing in action! Combat androids of the New Haven Security Forces were waiting for our troopers and either made them turn around or destroyed them when our people refused to obey their warnings."

Shocked by those words, Wade stopped on the spot and stared with dismay at Sternberger.

"Combat androids? When did they arrive in our northern states?"

"I don't know, Mister President. What is important is the fact that the Spacers' League has decided to protect those rebel states by sending their best combat units there. As for trying again to take control of those rebel states, forget it: we are simply not in the same class militarily."

"How many of those combat androids are in our rebel states, General?"

"A few thousands at the least, supported by heavy armored combat vehicles and heavy starfighters, the likes of which we can only dream of possessing."

Wade heavily sat down in his presidential chair, badly shaken by that information.

"And the ships and troops we sent to Jamieson's World?"

"They came back barely minutes ago, Mister President. They encountered a full squadron of heavy starfighters of the Spacers' League when they approached the planet and correctly assessed that they stood no chance of breaking through those starfighters, so they turned around and returned to Earth. The odds for us to gain control of that planet are now even less than our odds for retaking those rebel northern states."

Wade's dismay then turned quickly into anger and rage and he banged his fist on the conference table.

"DAMN SPACERS! THESE TERRITORIES BELONG TO US, NOT TO THEM!" General Sternberger and the three other members of the National Security Council present in the Situation Room then eyed their raging president with what could politely be described as 'skepticism'. Wade's National Security Adviser then spoke to him in a measured tone.

"Mister President, we may think so but we would have only slight chances to win this argument in front of the International Court if we presented this dispute to it. The Spacers' League can and will argue then that it was simply defending Spacers' League citizens from military attacks by us on their regional leaders."

"So, what do you propose that we do now, Ray?"

"We talk instead of fighting, Mister President. The giant armed cargo ship NOSTROMO, from where those androids most probably came from, is presently in Earth orbit, while its captain and owner, Tina Forster, is most probably aboard it. Forster also happens to be a member of the Spacers' League's High Council, so would be the logical person to first talk with."

Wade took a few seconds to swallow his pride before nodding his head once.

"Alright, call that Tina Forster. Can you arrange that call from here?"

"Easily, Mister President. Just give me a few seconds."

As the NSA worked on that connection, Sternberger used that time to remind his president about a few things.

"Mister President, I must advise you not to underestimate this Tina Forster, or her ship. This woman has been engaged in Space combat and tactics for 25 years now and is widely acknowledged to be a master tactician and strategist when it comes to war in Space and ship handling in combat. As for her ship, the NOSTROMO, it is by far the most powerful armed ship in the whole of Humanity and has defeated by itself whole fleets of Space Predators' asteroid ships. We just can't afford to underestimate that woman or her ship, sir."

Before Wade could reply to that, his NSA spoke up.

"I have Captain Forster on the line, Mister President. She's on Line Two."

Switching on the computer of his station and selecting that communication channel, Wade then was able to look at a mature woman with medium-length brown hair, gray eyes and a resolute jaw. She in turn looked at him with a cold, hostile expression which renewed his anger.

"Captain Forster, did you send the combat robots who killed nearly 2,000 of my soldiers as they tried to take back control of eleven rebellious northern states?"

"First off, Mister President, my security androids are no mere robots: they are intelligent, sentient beings with individual personalities and full Spacers' League citizen status. Second, they were sent to your northern states in order to protect Spacers' League citizens from an unprovoked attack by NAU federal forces. They were acting on orders from Chairwoman Jeanne Mercier, after she received a request for protection from Spacers' League local government officials in those states, which recently held referendums which showed that a large majority of their citizens wanted to stay on as Spacers' League citizens. You were the one who started this whole thing by playing crass populist politics in order to win the NAU presidential elections and by saying that you would unilaterally pull the NAU out of the Spacers' League. You ignored the popular opinion of those northern states and of the colonists on Jamieson's World, then tried to subdue them by force, launching a surprise night attack against them. Well, you just lost those states and the 18 Scorpii System for good, as they now consider themselves independent from NAU rule and have asked the High Council of the Spacers' League for membership status, a request that was granted to them by the High Council. They will now be respectively known as 'Western Canada', 'Eastern Canada' and 'Jamieson's World'. Spacers' League forces will thus remain in place to defend them from any further attack by NAU federal forces. I thus strongly suggest that you don't try to pull another stupid stunt like the one you tried last night, Mister President. Oh, by the way, the people crewing the Las Americas Orbital Space Terminal have also asked for our protection, as they have no wish to be subjected to your ignorant and short-sighted rule. Instead, they will be administered jointly by the authorities in Western and Eastern Canada. Don't be surprised either if your demonstration of disrespect towards your northern states will eventually convince the states of Alberta and Saskatchewan to change horses and join up with Western and Eastern Canada. You don't want to waste money and resources into Space ventures, you said? Well, you will now be able to be

free from such expenditures but, in turn, you won't be able to waste the potential of those people and installations. Whether you like it or not, the future is in Space, not on our old, overexploited Earth. The leaders of the ASEAN have understood that and are now investing heavily in Space. I suggest that you abandon your present prejudices about Space expansion and start respecting the will of your citizens who wished to keep their Spacers' League citizenship. That is all for me, Mister President."

Tina Forster then abruptly cut the communication link, something that infuriated Wade.

"THE ARROGANCE OF THAT WOMAN! General Sternberger, I want you to plan and prepare an operation to retake our northern states. Use all of our available military means for that."

"No!"

Wade, taken by surprise by that response, gave a shocked look at his military chief of staff.

"What do you mean, no? That was an order, not a simple wish."

"What your 'order' was to me was pure, foolish wishful thinking, Mister President. Since you seem to refuse to look reality in the face, I now have no choice but to submit my resignation as Chief of Staff of our military forces."

Wade was still swallowing that hard pill when his national security advisor also got up from his seat and started putting back his files in his secure briefcase.

"Ray, what are you doing?"

"I am doing the only sensible thing left to me: I am resigning my post as National Security Advisor, Mister President. There is no point for me to be staying on if you are not ready to listen to my advice and that of General Sternberger. Goodbye, Mister President."

Wade could only look on, devastated, as all of the other four men present in the Situation Room left without a further look at him.

14:35 (Universal Time)

Friday, April 26, 2340

Small Craft Hangar Complex, A.M.S. NOSTROMO

In low Earth orbit, Solar System

Tina gave a last hug to Sylvia Johnson at the foot of the access ramp of the light shuttle ready to fly her down to Quebec City, the new capital of a reconstituted Canadian Federation.

"Good luck as the first Canadian Prime Minister to be in power in 252 years, Sylvia. Canada sure can use your political acumen and common-sense judgment right now."

"Well, at least I will not have to deal with that Wade idiot, now that the Congress has impeached him for abuse of power. Unfortunately, the fact that I already completed two full terms as President of the NAU precluded me from returning to Washington to take his place."

"Let's hope that his successor will be a more intelligent and perceptive leader than Wade. Be assured that the Spacers' League will support to the utmost Canada as one of its newer members during the coming years."

The words 'coming years' then triggered fresh worries in Sylvia's mind.

"What will we do about this incoming natural disaster in 2355, Tina? Whatever we do, the coastal area of British Columbia will still be utterly destroyed then, while the Prairies will see its agriculture smothered by volcanic ash."

Tina lowered her head for a moment at that question.

"We don't know yet, Sylvia. Logically, we should inform the public of this future disaster but that would most probably start a planet-wide panic that could cause even more damage than the tsunami and eruption themselves. The best we can do now, while our scientists study that problem, is to encourage a high rate of emigration to Jamieson's World and to Asiana. Unfortunately, the expiry date for our old Earth is coming and we will have to deal with it as best we can. In the meantime, lead the new Canada and prepare it discretely as best you can."

"I will, Tina! Thank you for your friendship and support."

Both women again exchanged hugs and kisses on the cheeks before Sylvia Johnson climbed the access ramp of her shuttle. Tina then watched as the shuttle slowly flew out of its individual hangar in order to transit through the airlock systems of the complex. With the armored doors of the hangar now closing back, Tina started walking out of it to return to her ship's bridge, her heart heavy: the next 25 years were going to be like a long purgatory for her, as North America and Earth were facing widespread destruction and death in the not so far future.

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